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Interview

Friederike Meier-Burkert

An interview with Richard Florida

Our cities will be efficient shared platforms and our transportation systems just-in-time

Richard Florida is Professor at the University of Toronto and at New York University as well as Senior Editor of The Atlantic and founder of the Creative Class Group, a consulting company with a team of renowned researchers, communications specialists and management consultants. Florida has made his mark on the development of the city environment and is regarded as one of the world's most renowned urbanists. His research links the fields of economics, culture, urban theory, technological innovation and demographic trends. His theories serve worldwide as guidance for explaining and predicting changes in regions, nations, companies and communities. Florida likes to provoke and inspire with his visions, to develop visionary strategies and thus to contribute to solving global problems.



Richard Florida
Photo: Jaime Hogge
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In the interview with the Audi Urban Future Initiative Richard Florida talks about the future of cities and cars and outlines his ideal mobility scenario. On Monday, the 10th of November 2014, four teams from around the world will propose their ideas for the future of mobility in Berlin at the Audi Urban Future Award 2014 and a live stream will be available starting at 10am CET (4am EST).

Mr. Florida, how significant are mobility systems for the development of cities?

Cities have always been shaped by transportation infrastructure. A long time ago we lived in small villages shaped by narrow trails. With the invention of horse-carriages streets became larger and they became even larger with the invention of cars. But the mobility systems we use define not only the structure but also the boundaries of the places we live in. The mobility systems we have built have contributed to enlarge the cities and in the same time increased their velocity. Cities are by the way the only form of biological or social organism where, as they grow, their metabolism gets faster.

Does this mechanism still work?

We are now at a point where we have to rethink our mobility and to redesign the system in which we move around. In a city with five or six million people, the traditional growth model of outward suburban growth based on roads doesn't work anymore. The roads get so congested,

that the metabolism of the city breaks down. Unfortunately there are still many urban planners out there, who want to spread out cities, not regarding the traffic problems caused by their approach.



Seoul

Will cities be the next frontier of innovation and efficiency?

What is the biggest defiance for urban mobility?

The big challenge of the 21st century is to make our cities much more effective. Look at the history: for ages, the majority of people worked on farms, then we made farms incredibly efficient, now 1 percent of the workforce of the advanced countries works on them, but we still produce a great deal of food. In the 20th century, the majority of people worked in factories or industry. Nowadays only five to six per cent of the people in the advanced countries work in factories. The social and economic organizing unit of our time is the city. That's why the next era of innovation is the city. The advance of capitalism, its underlying economic logic suggests that our cities are the next frontier of innovation and efficiency.

What solution do you propose?

To create really great megacities, worth living in, we need different urban planning models, we need different mobility strategies and we have to unify urban and mobility planning.

As we move towards a knowledge economy based on innovation and creativity, we need people

being more densely packed into cities, we have to reinvent the ways we work, the ways we live and the ways we get around. The city has to become a shared platform and the transportation system has to become just-in-time.

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Richard Florida

Richard Florida comments on data, urban mobility and the Audi Urban Future Award 2014

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Which role will the car play in such a system?

In the future for many communities, automobiles will still provide a part of mobility solutions; but the car will shift from being a necessity to becoming more of an elective mode of transit. You might not use it to get to work every day, you will use it in combination with other modes of transport and you will use it essentially for leisure. Car sharing will increase as will digital delivery service. In the future we will probably even take more trips, but not necessarily in a car that we own.

What will the car of the future look like?

In my vision, the car will become something more joyful and experimental. Performance and design will become even more important. There will be a growing segment of premium automobiles. As the car will become less a necessity good and more a leisure and luxury good, it will be more often bought for reasons like identity, performance, speed, comfort, luxury or tradition. Car makers with a legacy of quality and performance will have a big advantage in this setting.

What are the requirements for more efficient mobility solutions?

Data is critical to making systems more effective and sustainable. It's just like in a factory. When we gave data to the workers we empowered them to understand their statistical efficiency, and they themselves started to innovate. When we arm citizens with data, they can start to understand and adopt their behavior. The more data we have, the better we understand. With more data available, we could use the city as a platform of innovation much more effectively.



Boston

For Richard Florida the car of the future will become something more joyful and experimental.

This years' Audi Urban Future Award is very much about is data-driven mobility as well. To what extent can such an award contribute to solving mobility problems?

To solve these problems we need not only just public sector regulations we also need innovative and progressive thinking from the private sector. Progressive automotive companies coming to the table is quite a good sign. Personally I am a big fan of award programs, as incentive and as a spotlight on innovative solutions that hopefully can be picked up and replicated elsewhere. Now the question is: Which cities will have the first mover advantage with systematic planning?

What would your ideal mobility scenario look like?

I want to get off the plane and hit my smartphone and the car can track me exactly where I am. We don't have the time to park our cars; we don't want to cue for trains arriving anymore.

Tomorrow there will be much more trains and also a bunch of cars, with drivers or driverless, and a bunch of people meeting up with one another.



Toronto

Transit and traffic is the main issue for the mayor election in Toronto.

How long do have to wait for that?

If you had asked me 10 years ago, “will transit and traffic be the main issue in a city like Toronto?” I would have said no. But that’s the case today. So I think the time frame is accelerating. We underestimate how fast the systems resets are especially in a time of economic crisis. I think it will be in the order of one generation. In 2040 the city will look much denser, people will live in more shared places, people will have most of the things they need delivered to their homes. We will have driverless cars providing a lot of these services. We will have trains connecting urban areas. Our cities will be efficient shared platforms and our transportation systems just-in-time. I am quite optimistic.