PLACEMAKING FOR THE CREATIVE CLASS
Emerging trends offer opportunities for landscape architects. By James Richards, ASLA

SAN FRANCISCO, Seattle, and Austin, Texas, have it. Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin want it. It’s the Creative Class, a term coined by social theorist and author Richard Florida to describe the software designers, scientists, engineers, architects, artists, writers—and yes, landscape architects—whose ideas are driving what many trend watchers see as a new, global economic order.

Florida isn’t alone. Futurist Tom Peters observes that American business, long driven by price and in more recent decades by quality, is now focused squarely on creativity and those who bring it to the table—what he succinctly calls “Awesome Talent.”

The dramatic advances in technology that have helped empower talent, the thinking goes, have also made workforces more mobile and less tied to traditional employment centers. This has enabled young, creative professionals to make place and quality-of-life issues their first priority in choosing where to live and pursue work. Indeed, as Florida notes in Rise of the Creative Class, place is “becoming the central organizing unit of our economy and society, taking on the role that used to be played by the large corporation.” Peters concurs, insisting that “to attract, retain, and obtain the best from Awesome Talent, organizations will need to offer up an Awesome Place to Work.” This implies more than a stimulating physical plant; it points to regions, cities, and districts where innovation and creative opportunity can flourish.

Some cities attract more of this growing talent pool than others. Florida’s research highlights this phenomenon through a measure he calls the “Creativity Index,” which ranks more than 200 regions in the United States based on quantitative indicators of their creative activity and opportunity. For example, San Francisco and Austin score very high in the Creativity Index, due to a confluence of attributes...
that include percentage of the workforce in creative occupations and patents per capita, among others. By the same token, Memphis, Tennessee, and Grand Rapids, Michigan, score low. Where a community ranks in the Creativity Index and how a city might better position itself to become the next Austin or Seattle are fueling an ever-growing number of debates in places ranging from academia to coffee shops to Chamber of Commerce meetings.

The response to these ideas from leaders of cities across the country and abroad has been remarkable. Attracting talent and creativity has become a driving discussion point for economic policy. Self-styled "creative city" initiatives such as Governor Granholm's "Cool Communities," Creative Cities, and Toronto's "Culture City of the Future" are good reasons to be optimistic.

A stimulus-rich environment: At Seattle's Pioneer Square, a preserved building, interesting details, delightful signage, and abundant dining contribute greatly to the public realm.

Cincinnati, and Vancouver's Creative City Task Force are springing up across the country and abroad. "Quality of place" is finding itself near the top of city and regional economic development strategies. Florida's work has produced its own crop of skeptics, to be sure, but this much seems clear: Creative ideas make the world go round, a handful of highly livable cities consistently attract the lion's share of creative talent, and these cities offer lessons in placemaking that others can learn from.

But the emergence of a "creative economy" challenges designers and planners to look at the intersection of place and human potential through a slightly different lens. If we are asked to view our aim as creating physical settings that foster human creativity, what kind of places would we propose to create?

The question calls for the type of qualitative observational research that landscape architects are particularly well suited for, and it became the foundation for my master's thesis for the University of Texas at Arlington. For a seasoned observer of cities, the self-imposed charge seemed straightforward: go to three of the creative hubs ranking highest in Florida's Creativity Index—Seattle, Austin, and Washington, D.C.—and try to determine the extent to which their physical planning and design attributes contribute to a culture of creativity. The

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Interview subjects were passionate on the subject of place and the culture it extracts. One Seattle transplant said, “It’s a very interesting culture—like the Wild West realized in an intellectual way. You can dream up stuff here and it can actually stick; people are open to new ideas and making things better. You can start up a small company, a theater group, a band, and the community is open to it and willing to support it. From that standpoint it’s a very nurturing environment.”

Other interviewees, including a writer in Austin, cited specifics: “We want to be able to walk and bike, not just to cafes and stupidly expensive clothing stores. Yes, we want cheap breakfast tacos and a corner store to buy smokes and a bar stumbling distance from home. But we also want it to be a real neighborhood with all the basic necessities of life. It’s not just traditional features like grid streets, buildings up front and parking in the rear, public spaces, and so on. Any place we flock to has to be cheap, needs to have some age and grit and decay, and needs to be as corporate-free as possible.”

Interestingly, when asked to name their most cherished aspects of their city—what made it cool—no one pointed to the iconic works of modern landscape architecture in their midst. No Gas Works Park, no Freeway Park. Rather, interview subjects glossed over their interconnected preserves and greenways, their walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods, old buildings, good transit, cultural opportunities, and the coffee shops, al fresco tables, and bookstores that provide informal venues for meetings, conversation, and exchanging ideas.

What Makes A Creative Cityscape?

These were the most consistently observed physical attributes in the city districts most favored by interview subjects:

- A traditional, compact urban grid that maximizes walkability, connectivity, reach, choice, and corner locations for commerce.
- Distinctive, self-contained neighborhoods that provide a mix of uses within walking distance and instill a sense of ownership.
- A mixed-use urban village that provides essential services and enhances the architectural and social identity of the neighborhood.
- A range of visible transportation choices, including transit and private auto, that link districts, neighborhoods, and walkable areas. Street infrastructure is designed to be friendly to bicycles, scooter, and especially pedestrians.
- A vital realm of public spaces and walkable streets that fosters an active public life of socializing, dining, jogging, visiting, art, and engaging in impromptu conversations. The public realm is energized by activities in a vibrant mix of activity-generating uses.
- A wealth of “third places” distinct from home and work—coffee shops, internet cafes, pubs, bookstores, and the like—that foster a “soft culture” of informal gathering, converging, and exchanging ideas. The best of these are inextricably linked to the public realm.
- Old buildings and districts that lend character and authenticity and that provide lower rent options for creative entrepreneurs and urban pioneers.
- A range of cultural opportunities, preferably free, from live theater to formal galleries to street performance and public art, adding richness to the urban experience.
- A stimulus-rich environment of complexity, variety, and choices that engages both the senses and the intellect through elements such as architecture, public space design, open markets, sidewalk commerce, and signage that doubles as art.

Lively street scenes in his districts like Austin’s SoCo, above, challenge traditional notions of streetscape design. Funky is good. Districts and buildings with age and grit can offer lower rents to locally owned establishments, resulting in unique destinations attractive to creative clientele.
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an urban design pioneer and "toolbox of ideas" for mayors, planning commissioners, and anyone else interested in rethinking their cities with an eye to growing a culture of creativity.

For landscape architects, good placemaking is rooted from the realm of soft, fuzzy "quality-of-life" initiatives to hard-nosed economic policy. In counseling community division makers, the principles and design solutions observed in the funky neighborhoods, side streets, and greenways of Seattle, Austin, and Washington, D.C.,... can inform the serious work of producing growth policies, district and neighborhood plans, balanced mobility strategies, context-sensitive site planning, and skillful design of the public realm.

Thinking of cities as incubators of innovation and creativity gives landscape architects another way of thinking about the impact of our own day-to-day projects. While envisioning a creative city should begin at the policy level, the physical reshaping of our communities happens, in fact, one-designed project at a time. Every streetscape, infill, office plaza, or public park project either enhances diversity, choice, and creative opportunity or frustrates them. If part of our aim is to establish a creative milieu, we will make design choices that further that goal.

At the same time, for such an agenda to be successful, appropriate principles and strategies must be addressed comprehensively. As one interview subject stated, "It's more than just a case of, if you build the loft apartments, the hipsters will come." None of these issues exists in a vacuum; decisions and actions in one area affect many others. All should be considered in a comprehensive fashion.

The Creative Class truly driving a new economic order? Time will tell. Are the attributes of places they value, such as diversity, choice, and authenticity, worthy aspirations around which to shape cities? Halprin thought so. So do the growing number of business and community leaders who are reexamining their plans and growth strategies with the Creative Class in mind.

Kevin Lynch, author of The Image of the City, points out that "a highly developed art of urban design is linked to the creation of a critical and attentive audience." The political and business leaders of scores of cities are actively trying to determine exactly what it means to grow a city that attracts and nurtures human potential. They need inspired design guidance rooted in the careful observation of successful, creative environments. Landscape architects, by virtue of the broad range of issues and project scales we touch, are in a unique position to provide this guidance.

We love our attention-driven audience. We cannot afford to miss the opportunity...