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Going Home Again

By William Riggs

In Thomas Wolfe's 1940 novel *You Can't Go Home Again*, the main character, George Webber, writes a novel that depicts his hometown in an unflattering light, leading to death threats and exclusion of the author from his home community. More than simply a case of vigilante exclusion, Webber's severed connection with his hometown is part of his exploration of a changing America, about the relationship between city and country and the tensions that surround a rapidly urbanizing country. This nostalgic disconnect has entered our lexicon to refer to the line between those who have moved to the "sophisticated" metropolis from the rural backwater (or perhaps now the bucolic suburb or exurb), and for whom a return, as Susan Matt has suggested, might constitute a failure (Matt 2007).

Yet my inability to go home has nothing to do with culture, sophistication, or fear of failure. It has to do with the lack of jobs. The city I come from, Louisville, Kentucky, is hardly the fictional "Libya Hill" of Wolfe's novel, but rather a mid-size city in the middle of America. It may not make anyone's global cities maps, but it is a far cry from a small town. The town's rural dreams (reflected in the state song *My Old Kentucky Home*) are much less reality than they are romanticized. It is a fairly modern place with a surprising lack of jobs. And while one may argue that this lack of jobs is unsurprising given the economic crisis of 2009-2010, this is a problem that preexisted the downturn, and it is rooted, in part, in a decision to pursue one type of economic development over another.

For the better part of the past decade, Louisville, like many struggling cities around the country, focused on 'Richard Florida community development'—development which attracts young people and the 'creative class' through focus on 'play': new entertainment and cultural facilities mixed with edgy urban design and architectural interventions which produce the cool, hip environment that creative types are supposed to enjoy. This creative class, either retained from the general population or imported from other places, then spawns economic development and job creation. Yet if the numerous vacant storefronts, high unemployment rate (12.1% vs. 9.7% nationally in February 2010), and innumerable friends who have had to make the same unfortunate choice that I made (to move to another metropolis with more opportunities, better jobs, better pay) are any evidence, this development strategy has not worked.

And anecdotally, perhaps this is because they forgot about jobs—focusing more on ways to live and play rather than ways to work.

Work and Play, or Just Play?

This was not always the strategy in Louisville. While working towards my graduate degree in Urban Planning at the University of Louisville in the early 2000s, I worked for the Louisville Mayor at the time, Dave Armstrong. For Mayor Armstrong the live-work-play connection was a clear part of the conversation. The Mayor wanted to revitalize downtown areas with vibrant entertainment facilities, options for downtown living and increased business growth. He championed fun entertainment projects like a Tony-Hawk-designed skate park and a downtown pedestrian mall called *4th Street Live* along with condominium developments along the Ohio River waterfront. But complimenting these efforts, he maintained a distinct, almost “old-school” focus on job creation.

Drawing from example locations that fostered innovation and creative economies such as Portland, Raleigh-Durham, and the San Francisco Bay Area, Armstrong established a live-work-play downtown policy that was highly focused on jobs and business incubation in the downtown area. Much of it was based on recommendations from Harvard economist Michael Porter and his report for Louisville in 2002. Porter believed in business clusters; that the synergies between different job sectors could be strengths. In Metro-Louisville these clusters were technology and infrastructure upstarts which provided a backbone for the manufacturing and distribution sectors. This strategy focused on the strength of companies like Humana (healthcare sector) and UPS (warehousing and distribution sector) that were headquartered in the City.

Despite this economic development thrust, the City administration changed and so did the economic emphasis, more to the social capital emphasis of Florida (Florida 2003). I graduated with a Master’s degree in Urban Planning, looked for and did not find a job in Louisville and then moved to San Francisco, California, where like so many migrants from my generation, I found a job. Although I applied for many jobs that would have moved me back to my hometown, I could not find a position that matched my experience and qualifications.

Making the Creative Class

On paper, it is easy to see why so many cities have been swayed by the Floridian logic. There is no question that having talented people matters. As early as 2002, a Brookings Institute report *Beyond Merger* indicated

Louisville as having been guided by clear economic policy in the past but “. . . running into a general talent shortfall. . . . Talent powers growth; talent brings homegrown jobs, new companies, and higher wages. Yet the Louisville region lacks talent. It lacks the highly skilled minds it needs to move beyond its current status and go to the next level of competitiveness in the emerging economy (44).” Using creative class strategy, Louisville would simply focus on art, culture, streetscape and entertainment projects to draw in the creative class. It sounds appealingly simple, but on closer look combating this talent shortfall through streetscape and entertainment district design in a downtown fails for multiple reasons.

First, the talent and economic growth produced through creative class strategy takes time to manifest itself, especially if the goal is to attract the creative class from other locations as implied by Florida. In the meantime cities must maintain ample jobs in existing employment sectors or face losing in native-born residents and home-grown talent. The policy implies that working class job creation and social equity policies are needed to retain existing jobs while working toward the long-term progress of gentrification—an idea not too distant from Forrester’s 1960s “urban dynamics” model which encouraged communities to make themselves “unattractive to the poor and unemployed rather than providing ameliorative programs (Reese and Sands 2008).”

While Florida acknowledges social equity issues, he suggests little other than the ethereal duties of civic engagement to remedy them (Florida 2005). The fact that the new creative class is served by the remnant of the non-creatives gets little discussion other than the idea that creatives have the duty to assist the non-creatives. As Peck describes there is no room for politics or policy in this egoist philosophy (Peck 2005). “Certainly, there is no space here for ‘obsolete’ forms of politics, like unions or class-aligned political parties, all of which are breezily dismissed . . . (746)” If balance must be maintained (at least in the interim) to manifest a creative economy, one cannot sustain such an explicitly classist economic development strategy without difficult to implement and historically shunted social equity policies.

A second failure arises in the embedded lack of employment variety in current creative class strategy. Mary Donegan from the University of North Carolina argues that creative class strategy results in imbalance and inequality between creative class jobs and the greater urban economy, and that the risks of this imbalance outweigh the potential rewards of the policy. She makes the case that the homogeneity implied in creative class strategy is not ultimately a benefit because it lacks stability and resilience (Donegan and Lowe 2008). Furthermore, in a separate article Donegan illustrates (through a series of regression models) agglomeration error in Florida’s theories about creative occupations, how it omits important

job groups (Perhaps, land use planners?) and finds that attracting the creative class “is no substitute for traditional strategies such as investing in quality education, upgrading the skills of the workforce, creating new businesses, or expanding existing industries (Donegan et al. 2008).”

Lastly, it is in the area of education and workforce development that creative class strategy as currently implemented seems most to flounder. The current creative class strategy uses the idea that the creative class is a static body, a fixed number of people that need to be fought over with fixed type of creativity.¹ The strategy frames these people exclusively as imports rather than an expandable and renewable resource that needs to be nurtured and produced. It assumes that the creatives are products of the new instable economy on a search for tolerance and creative culture with deference to geography and connection to local economic clusters—that creatives exist vs. that they are made. This is a fallacy that deemphasizes one of the most important functions of a local economy—growing talent—educating, training, making and retaining the next generation of creative leaders. In Louisville and cities across the United States making more creative and innovative people does not come from having something ‘cool’ to do at night but by having the educational and employment resources at hand to make dreams and aspirations achievable without moving to New York or San Francisco.

Going Home

The “Great Recession” has highlighted the jobs problem in America. There has been double-digit unemployment even in hotbeds of the new economy like California. But with struggles in the housing and manufacturing sector, the failed creative class strategies of urban areas are not being questioned—and given the buoyancy of cities like New York and San Francisco, the strategies may even incorrectly have their failures masked, leading to the assumption that they have worked. As can be evidenced clearly by place like Louisville, the social-capital-type economic development strategies and play-related entertainment projects that have been the focus of many mid-tier cities in the past 10 years are not ‘game changers’ on their own devoid of traditional economic development. Retaining the best and most highly-skilled laborers is simply not going to happen.

The current situation in Louisville makes one think of early company towns like Pullman, Illinois, the automotive steel towns of the rust belt

1. Peck (2005) describes the current version (“tonic”) of urban creativity as “a remixed version of this cocktail: just pop the same basic ingredients into your new-urbanist blender, add a slug of Schumpeter lite for some new-economy fizz, and finish it off with a pink twist (766).”

or the many mining towns in the Sierras, all of which dried up after the decline of a principle employer. Yet the story of Louisville, and many second tier cities like it, is not the rapid boom and bust of frontier capitalism, but rather a steady decline and a continued hemorrhaging of the young and the talented, and not because there are no hip art galleries or professional teams or because the race track is old or the stadium is shabby. These are not game changers, nor do they birth, grow and retain creative people.

And as a parallel to Thomas Wolfe's lead character, George Webber, I am still in the position of many working professionals around the country—unable to go home again, unable to raise my kids near their grandparents or in a culture similar to the one I grew up in. When adequate job opportunities are not present there is simply no foundation for people like me—who might sustainably support an entertainment economy, who might sit in those coffeehouses or go to the stadium to watch a game—who might get involved in the entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity which is a core (but not singular) driver of our economy. I cannot afford to live and play in a town where I cannot work, and as such, I cannot go home.

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