The Creative Class Reconsidered

Urbanormative Standards and Rural Creative Space

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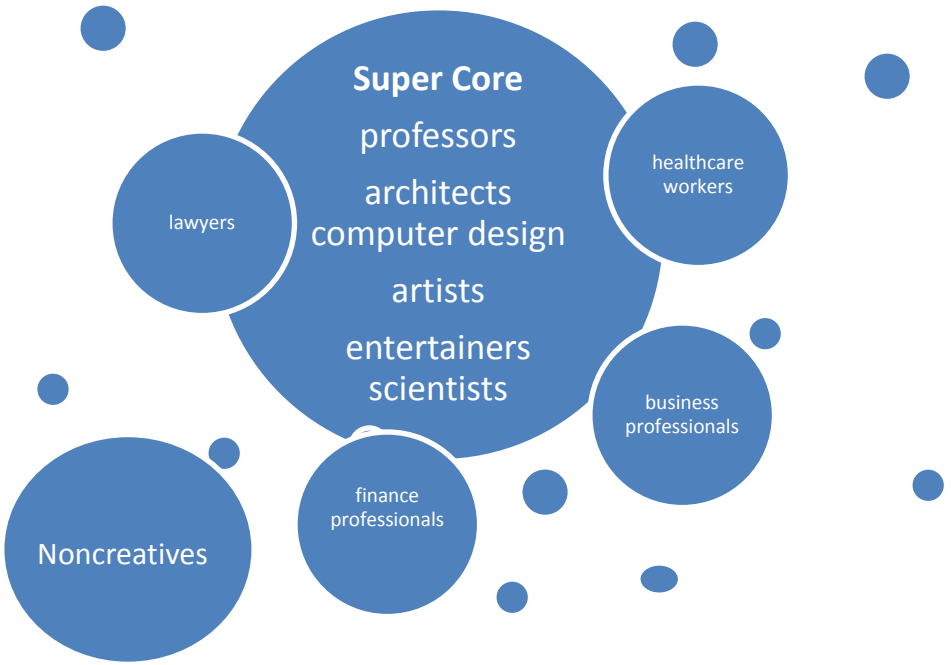
The Creative Class Hypothesis

According to Florida (2002), the global economy of the 21st century will be driven not by traditional means of economic production such as manufacturing or agriculture, but by knowledge and creativity production. He calls the people involved in these activities the "creative class."

The creative class concept has an implicitly hierarchical form:

- the super core: consisting of the most creative workers whose job it is to come up with new ideas and content
- the peripheral creative class: workers who must come up with new approaches to problems
- non-creative workers: those who are neither creating new ideas nor developing new approaches

To Florida, the latter category of "non-creatives" includes nearly every worker in the primary sector in agriculture and extractive industries, many in the secondary manufacturing sector, and a large chunk of tertiary sector service workers. Nearly all creative workers reside in urban areas, according to Florida.



The Clustering Force and Urbanization

Florida (2002, 2004, 2008) contends that creative professionals will have a desire to live near other creatives. Their co-presence will result in higher total creativity than the sum of each person's individual creativity. This is the foundation of the "clustering force" phenomenon that he suggests. Earlier scholars have called this phenomenon "economies of agglomeration" (O'Flaherty, 2005).

Florida (2004) further maintains that the clustering force will ultimately lead creative people to seek each other out in expanding creative urban enclaves, where the density of creativity is highest. He offers as an example of this, Silicon Valley, where such ideas as "Google" were invented. An earlier generation might have said the same of auto workers and Detroit.

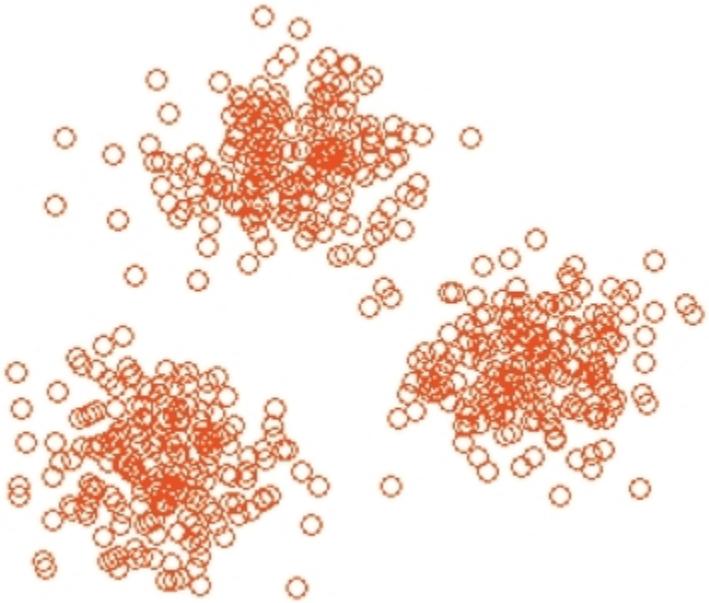


Figure. Clustering; Source: simseer.com

Figure. Silicon Valley; Source: startupphenomenon.com

Lifestyles of the Creative Class

Florida (2002) also claims that in addition to being drawn to one another's company, the creative class will wish to live in areas that offer a high level of stimulating experiences—what he terms "Street Level Culture." Such experiences may include visiting pubs or cafes full of artists and intellectuals, going to art galleries, musical performances, plays, musicals, and antique stores. Moreover, activities such as bike riding, mountain climbing, or white water rafting will be attractive forms of engagement as well.

Figure. Zip Lining; Source: wanderingtrader.com

Figure. Art Galleries; Source: http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au

Figure. Street Musicians; Source: pictureninja.com

Culture of the Creative Class

Another component of Florida's (2002) description of the creative class and the kinds of places they will find attractive has to do with culture. More specifically, he suggests that it is only in large urban spaces where there exists openness to diversity and pluralism that creatives will wish to live. Florida claims that small towns are typically less tolerant of difference and more prone to homogeneity. For example, Florida claims that cultural creatives are more accepting and inclusive when it comes to interaction with the gay and lesbian community. Small towns and rural areas in general are represented as being exclusive, insular, and intolerant.

In fact, one of Florida's metrics for gauging the level of creativity in a place is what he refers to as the "Gay Index," which refers to the level of openness to the LGBT population.

Figure. Gay Pride Parade Source: ny-pictures.com

Some Anomalies

Despite the attractiveness that the 'creative class hypothesis' holds for many scholars and practitioners, we identify a number of anomalies. First, since Florida suggests that urban areas are the hotbed of creativity and economic growth, one would expect urban enclaves to be the most desirable places to live. However, according to a recent Pew Research survey, it was found that the majority of Americans would prefer to live in a small town. This is in spite of the fact that those in suburban areas—part of the urban system that is not attractive to creatives—report being more satisfied with their communities. In any case, it appears from this survey that there is something more attractive about small towns or suburbs as compared to urban spaces. Next, we would note that many of the lifestyle elements—particularly the outdoor recreational variety—appear to be activities that are more typical of rural communities and small towns. Finally, if the clustering force is an urban phenomenon, why do we see signs of creativity in small towns? We return to this point later.

Figure. Rhinebeck Artist's Shop; Source: author.

Suburban residents most satisfied...
Levels of Community Satisfaction

	High	Medium	Low
	%	%	%
Total	33	36	32
Residents of:			
Cities	34	36	30
Suburbs	**42**	**33**	**25**
Small towns	25	38	37
Rural areas	29	35	36

...but more Americans would prefer to live in small towns

If you could live anywhere, would you prefer a city, a suburban area, small town or rural area?

	%
City	23
Suburb	25
Small town	**30**
Rural area	21
DK/Ref.	1

Figure. Pew Research Findings; Source: http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2009/02/26/suburbs-not-most-popular-but-suburbanites-most-content/

Some Anomalies

Anomalies to the 'creative class hypothesis' are also found in the academic literature. Olfert and Partridge (2011) test the hypothesis in a sample of Canadian communities. They find that the hypothesis is "misguided" based on a number of observations. First, they test the cultural components and find no correlation between creative occupations and diverse populations, implying that openness to diversity is not a factor related to creative populations. In terms of the clustering force, they find that the number of creative jobs is quite stable over time, and therefore not growing as one would expect if creatives follow a clustering pattern. Finally, they find that the highest rate of growth in creative occupations is in non-metropolitan areas and particularly those rich in amenities and recreation, and not in urban spaces.

Based on similar findings, Petrov (2007) and McGranahan and Wojan (2007) maintain that the creative class needs to be reconsidered and reconceptualized in such a way that the inherent urban bias in Florida's discussion is not such a limiting factor. Wilson and Keil (2008) argue for an even deeper reconceptualization due to the inherent class bias of the creative class hypothesis . They contend that it is the poor and disenfranchised in society, particularly in the working class poor, who are truly creative as they negotiate survival strategies with very limited resources and innovate ways to "make it." The simple act of existing on minimum wage implies a high level of adaptation and creativity.

Figure. The "Real" Creative Class?
Source: business.time.com

Urbanormativity

We are concerned that the creative class hypothesis grows out of and in turn reinforces a broader ideology of urbanormativity (Thomas et al. 2011; Fulkerson and Thomas 2013). The basic idea that this entails is that urban life is normal and desirable and thus the standard, while rural life is deviant and abnormal as compared against the urban standard. This does not imply necessarily that those holding an urbanormative ideology will dislike all things rural, and quite to the contrary, may find the rural to be an object of interest and charm. Even when this is the case, the rural experience remains at the level of novelty, much like visiting an amusement park. This is a cultural theme that is playfully illustrated in the film, *City Slickers*, when a group of urbanites decide to embark on a cattle rustling adventure led by a gruff rural cowboy figure named Curly. The rural experience is in turn a wild adventure that pushes these urbanites to the limit and leads to a process of self-discovery.

Figure. The Rural Experience as Novelty;
Source: traveltoukraine.org

Figure. City Slickers; Source:
http://setthetrotline.com/2012/07/25/backpack-like-a-pro/

Rural Representation

The contention in Florida's work that rural areas and small towns are homogeneous, insular, non-creative, exclusive and closed to diversity grows out of broader cultural rural representation (Halfacree 1995; Haartsen, Groote and Huigen 2003; Miller and Luloff 1981; Thomas et al. 2011; Willits and Luloff 1995). These representations of rural life are generated by such popular cultural media sources as television and film, which include the iconic examples of the aforementioned *City Slickers*, *Little House on the Prairie*, the *Andy Griffith Show*, and the film *Deliverance*. Not all images of rural life are negative, but the most positive forms are generally associated with a nostalgia for the past, making contemporary rural life invisible or irrelevant, or in the worst case, scary and dangerous (Hayden 2013).

Figure. Little House of the Prairie; Source: walnut_grove.tripod.com

Figure. Deliverance Poster; Source: allposters.com

Rural Representation

Interestingly, the same rural representations that inform the ideology of urbanormativity—the same ideology that led Florida to the conclusion that rural people were not creative—are often manipulated by the very people living in rural places that cater to urbanites. For example, in their analysis of Cooperstown, New York, Fulkerson and Seale (2012) find several instances of rural simulations or simulacra. These include such things as a General Store, horse drawn carriages, and a full scale model of a 19th century agricultural village called the Farmer's Museum. The visitors to this community are almost all from the large urban areas located along the Eastern seaboard. Although they are primarily in town to see the National Baseball Hall of Fame, while visiting they consume as much of the rural experience as possible. Local businesses capitalize on this and depend on the romantic and charming image of rural life in Cooperstown so that they may sell enough goods and services to make it through the off-season. While rural simulacra are everywhere in Cooperstown, the community manages to maintain an image that also appeals to elites, as evidenced by the presence of a century old four star resort, The Otesaga. This creates an interesting tension pulling the community in two separate directions (Fulkerson and Seale 2012).

Thus, the case of Cooperstown reveals a high level of rural creativity as local business owners, artists, and professionals find a way to make a year-round living from a four-month tourist season. Our exploratory examination of the creative class hypothesis builds on this case study, and we seek to find out if the strategies employed by the rural creatives in Cooperstown are common, and how different types of communities might identify alternative strategies but still make room for creatives.

Figure. The Farmer's Museum, Cooperstown, New York; Source: Author

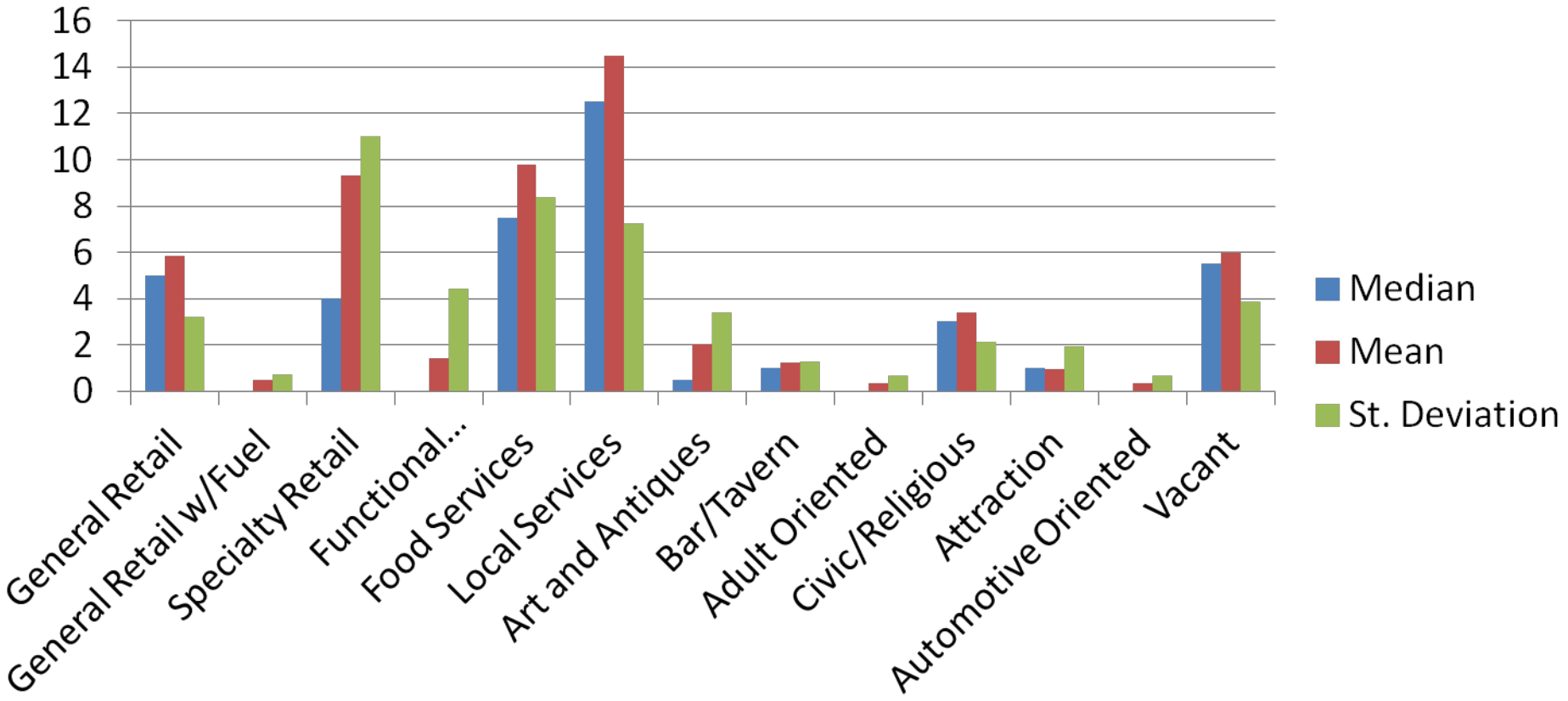
Empirical Explorations: The Study

It is against this background of reconceptualization that we conduct an analysis of the creative class hypothesis in rural and small town contexts. Our sample includes 32 villages with populations between 600 and 6,000 in 2000; they are located in central and eastern New York State. The list of communities is provided in the table shown here. The data collection involved a combination of primary data obtained through visits to each community where we coded the storefronts for the categorical types of establishments or vacancies where they existed. In addition, visual data was collected on establishments that may qualify as "creative."

List of Communities, Nearest Metro Area, and Rural/Urban Classification

Community	Nearest Metro Area	Rural/Urban
Bainbridge	Binghamton	Rural
Ballston Spa	Schenectady	Suburban
Boonville	Rome	Rural
Camden	Rome	Rural
Canajoharie	Schenectady	Rural
Cazenovia	Syracuse	Exurban
Clinton	Utica	Suburban
Cobleskill	Schenectady	Rural
Cooperstown	Utica	Rural
Cornwall (Firthcliffe)	Newburgh	Suburban
Delhi	Binghamton	Rural
Fayetteville	Syracuse	Suburban
Greene	Binghamton	Rural
Greenwich	Glens Falls	Rural
Hamilton	Utica	Rural
Hancock	Binghamton	Rural
Highland Falls	Newburgh	Suburban
Kinderhook	Albany	Rural
Lake George	Glens Falls	Exurban
Lake Placid	Glens Falls	Rural
Margaretville	Kingston	Rural
Middleburgh	Schenectady	Rural
Monroe	Newburgh	Suburban
Morrisville	Syracuse	Rural
New Paltz	Poughkeepsie	Exurban
Old Forge	Utica	Rural
Port Henry	Glens Falls	Rural
Rhinebeck	Kingston	Exurban
Schoharie	Schenectady	Rural
Tannersville	Kingston	Rural
Waterville	Utica	Rural
Woodstock	Kingston	Suburban

Average Number of Establishments



This bar graph shows the average number of establishments for the coded categories in the downtowns of the communities in our dataset. We would note from this that the highest frequency category of establishment type is local services—many of which include creatives such as lawyers, accountants, and medical or financial professionals. After this are specialty retail and food services, less commonly viewed as creative occupations. Less numerous were bars/taverns or art/antique establishments. Thus at one level, while creative occupations show up, the creative lifestyle attractors are typically low but highly variable and not normally distributed. The categories with highest standard deviations can be interpreted as being the most variable from one community to the next.

Rural Creatives

In visiting our sample of communities, we wanted to find if there were visible traces of creative occupations or other instances of cultural and recreational activities that might be attractive to the creative class as described by Florida. Our visual analysis reveals elements of both, but the story is more complex since some communities had a robust presence of creative occupations—lawyers, financial specialists, medical professionals—but were missing any visible signs of cultural and recreational activities. In other communities, we found the opposite: an abundance of cultural and recreational activities that might be thought of as creative, but saw few signs of creative occupations. In fact, some of the communities that had a high level of recreation and cultural activity options were clearly attempting to appeal to tourists. To the extent that members of the creative class are drawn to other members, this does not occur only in urban settings.

Figure. Mari Kirkwood Design Studio
Source: Author

Figure. Seventy Main Yoga Center
Source: Author

Rural Creatives

Our next thought was that creative occupations might be cast in a more rural light as suggested by the case of Cooperstown. In fact, we found a number of instances of rather chic creative professionals that lacked any kind of rural hue. We entered and spoke with some of these professionals and found them to be mainly thirty-somethings or older and articulate, intelligent professionals. It would not be a stretch to claim that these individuals belong to the creative class as discussed by Florida. Some of them had lived in a larger urban area, such as New York City or Boston, but found the cost and pace difficult to surmount. The lower rent and slower pace of small communities became selling points. The key is that such professionals—be they artists, interior designers, or yoga teachers—had to have a potential clientele. As long as that was sufficient, these individuals were quite content in the smaller setting, and were quick to bemoan the difficulties associated with living in the big city.

Figure. Creative Occupations Shown on Signs
Source: Author

Figure. Michael Devine home (Interior Decorating)
Source: Author

Rural Creatives

Our observations did in fact reveal that a fairly common theme in rural creative businesses—particularly in tourist communities—is the exploitation of urban romantic ideas of rural areas, or rural representations. The words “country” and “wilderness” become symbols of a particular design style that draws from rural representations. This would be appealing to urbanites owning rural vacation homes that they wish to decorate in idyll country charm. Even symbols of wilderness and nature, such as trees, are used to this same effect. Tourists may wish to bring a memento of their rural experience, and rural creatives are poised to meet that demand.

Figure. Wilderness Interiors (Interior Decorating); Source: Author

Figure. Cedar Mountain; Source: Author

Rural Creatives

Our street level observations of creative establishments revealed that in rural settings it was not uncommon to incorporate rural representations, typically within the wilderness theme (Thomas et al. 2011). Therefore we see art galleries with lots of rural imagery incorporated, or design services that promise to bring rural elements into your home. While rural representation was often used, this was not always the case and we found in other instances more standard or mainstream galleries . In these cases, the rural context comes through in more subtle forms of simplicity. While not parading around images of farms or wildlife, the rural character of these establishments is more subtle. Making use of formerly residential homes was fairly common and this created another element of rural charm. The real challenge for many rural creatives is to find a way to exploit rural representations without doing so in an obvious and therefore “chintzy” or “cheesy” way.

Figure. Hudson Valley Pottery; Source: Author

Figure. Painted Loon; Source: Author

Conclusions

Based on the strictly quantitative data of creative establishments our study suggests that creative occupations exist in fairly large numbers. However, other creative lifestyle or culture types of establishments, such as bars/taverns and art/antique establishments, were less frequent though highly variable. While the quantitative data suggest their presence is variable, the visual analysis reveal a more textured understanding of the rural creative. This class can express itself in a variety of ways. In some cases, in the image presented by establishments, rural representations were manipulated in order to attract potential customers or clients. This could be done in obvious—with glaring images of nature—or more subdued ways. In other cases, the rural creative businesses seemed as though they could be transplanted to a sidewalk in a busy urban neighborhood and fit in seamlessly. Such establishments were often run by relocated urbanites.

We noted that the more tourist-driven communities were more likely to make blatant use of rural representations in order to appeal to urban visitors. In such places we were more likely to find art galleries with wilderness images, and creative services such as interior design that used the rural theme as a selling point. In less touristy locations, signs of rural creative businesses and occupations were still available, but typically in less stereotypically rural forms. In some communities, there was an apparent agglomeration of services that fit within Florida's category of "peripheral" creatives. For example, we found one downtown that was inhabited almost exclusively by several different law offices. There were almost no other establishment types that would appeal to creatives in this location. Therefore, rural creatives do exist but the processes involved are more dynamic than has been appreciated to date. On a fundamental level we challenge the inherent assumption that the creative class is exclusively an urban phenomenon.

In sum, this exploratory street level examination of small cities and hamlets provides a look at rural creatives in a way that is far more nuanced than the rather narrow view of creatives that Florida provides us. The creative class hypothesis has heretofore been limited by an urbanormative bias. Although Florida may be using the term "creative class" to refer to an ideal type of occupational category, his terming of the class as "creative" is value-laden and contributes to rural marginalization through implication and conceptualization.

Paradoxically, the same cultural urbanormativity behind the creative class hypothesis is the object of manipulation for most rural creatives. Playing off of this bias, rural simulations by artists and professional are provided to enhance the charm and romantic qualities of creative goods and services that they in turn sell to urbanites. This is similar to the dynamic involved when gay men manipulate general cultural stereotypes in order to enhance sales of such services as hairstyling and interior design. This is an act of turning a stereotype against the culture from which it originates in a way that benefits the intended target. In this case, rural stereotypes are turned on urbanites by rural creatives in order to make a living.

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