



COURTESY BLAKE GUMPRECHT

Camelot, aka the University of Oklahoma.

“College towns are unlike other places, but that’s a good thing.”

—Blake Gumprecht,
The American College Town

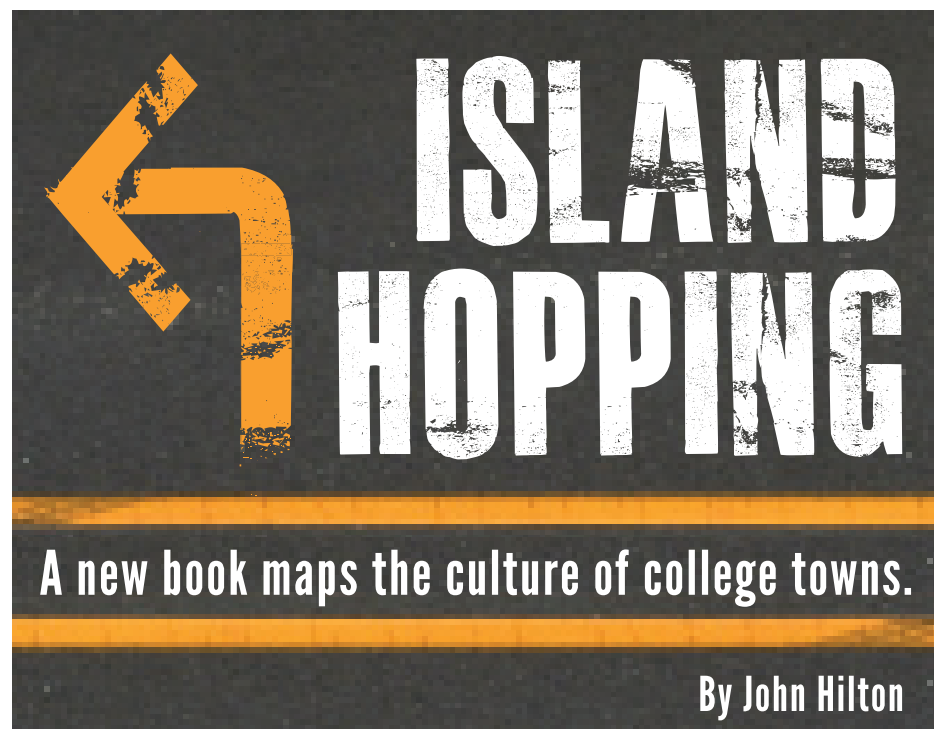
You can’t live in Ann Arbor long before someone tells you that the city is “twenty-eight square miles surrounded by reality.” Sometimes it’s said with pride, sometimes with embarrassment, but either way, it asserts the city’s unique character. So it’s a little deflating to learn that citizens of Boulder, Colorado, call their town “twenty-five square miles surrounded by reality.” Residents of Austin, Texas; Iowa City, Iowa; Ithaca, New York; and Madison, Wisconsin, do the same changing only the number of miles.

That kind of reality check happens a lot reading *The American College Town*. Blake Gumprecht has written a field guide to the leafy, left-of-center places so many academics call home—yet no others had ever studied.

Gumprecht, fifty, chairs the geography department at the University of New Hampshire. A former music label rep, librarian, and reporter, he’s a little leafy and left-of-center himself: he seems most engaged when writing about the progressive politicians who made Davis, California, a beacon of recycling and bicycling, and creative outsiders like the late Athens, Georgia, musician Vic Chesnutt. But he’s also a diligent scholar who identified more than 300 college towns, visited 150, and researched sixty before selecting eight to profile in his book.

Towns shaped by higher education, Gumprecht argues, are a distinctly American phenomenon. European universities usually were founded in large cities where students and faculty made up only a small percentage of the population. From Harvard on, in contrast, American college founders preferred smaller settings—“sequestered,” in the words of Princeton’s first trustees, “from the various temptations attending the promiscuous converse with the world.”

The towns that grew up around America’s colleges, Gumprecht writes,



have more in common with one another than with their urban neighbors. They’re better educated, of course, but also younger, more transient, more expensive, and more cosmopolitan. “In college towns like Ann Arbor,” he writes, “public radio listenership is so high that conversations around the water cooler are more likely to be about what people heard on *Morning Edition* than *The Howard Stern Show*.”

Gumprecht sees college towns as an “academic archipelago” within American society. A happy island dweller himself, he describes arriving in Norman, Oklahoma, where he lived with his then-wife and young son in the 1990s while earning his PhD at the University of Oklahoma:

The drive from Oklahoma City to Norman is obscene in its tackiness. Once we exited Interstate 55, however, then drove east toward campus, the houses grew older and the tree cover thicker. By the time we reached home, it felt like Camelot. College towns, even ones as conservative as Norman, are comfortable yet cosmopolitan. Norman was equally tolerant of cowboys, storm chasers, and Rudolph Anaya theorists of ambiguous sexuality. I could get into an argument in a bar about almost anything....I could see the number one-ranked college football team in America five minutes from my door or hear a singer from the Metropolitan Opera. But I could also lie on a campus lawn with my son and watch the clouds drift by or wade knee-deep in a river with nobody else around....Nowhere but in a college town could I find such a mix of sophistication and simplicity.”

No Ann Arborite has said it better. But Gumprecht also turns a geographer’s analytical eye on the towns he loves, particularly at how their neighborhoods reflect their social structure. College towns, he points out, “are highly segregated residentially”—while adding quickly that it’s a voluntary and entirely understandable division: “Faculty and other long-term residents seldom want to live near students because of the different lifestyles they often lead.” Quiet reading and writing clash with all-night beer pong parties next door.

Every college town, it seems, has an academic neighborhood like Burns Park and a student ghetto of beat-up rental housing. And it’s not just in Ann Arbor that the residents’ conflicting lifestyles turn the boundary between the two into a political battleground.

Gumprecht admits he almost eliminated the chapter set in Ann Arbor. Titled “High-Tech Valhalla,” its focus is university-driven economic development—a subject he found demoralizing.

Ann Arbor’s debate a few years ago about limiting rental conversions in South Burns Park, it turns out, was minor compared to the decades-long power struggle in Newark, Delaware. Gumprecht describes how a home owner-dominated city council progressed from limiting the number of people allowed to share a rental unit (eventually settling on three, half Ann Arbor’s limit) to requiring eviction of tenants repeatedly convicted of noise offenses or disorderly conduct. When that failed to stem the tide of University of Delaware students moving out from campus, he writes, the city passed “an ordinance that prohibited new student rentals within a specified distance (usually 500 feet) of existing student rentals in single-family neighborhoods.”

While moving legally to limit the student ghetto, Newark, like Ann Arbor, also pressed the university to build more housing, and approved large new apartment buildings close to campus. Reflecting similar pressures and opportunities around the country, Newark’s University Courtyard complex was created by the same national company that last year opened the Courtyards on Plymouth Road in Ann

Arbor—reusing both the name and the architectural style.

Because they face so many of the same issues, politics in other college towns often plays out as a sort of alternative political reality. In both Ann Arbor and Boulder, for instance, city leaders tried to ban old couches from student front porches—but while Ann Arbor’s effort failed, Boulder’s passed.

What made the difference? For one thing, U-M students mobilized effectively to fight what they saw as an encroachment on their way of life. For another, students at the University of Colorado inadvertently promoted the law by repeatedly dragging couches into the street during post-game celebrations—and setting them on fire.

As enthusiastic as is he when writing about other places, Gumprecht admits he almost eliminated the chapter set in Ann Arbor. Titled “High-Tech Valhalla,” its focus is university-driven economic development—a subject he found demoralizing. “I recognize the importance of economics to understanding places,” he explains, “but I hate money and what it does to us.”

Gumprecht stopped by the Observer when he came to town doing research in 2001. Even then, he was disappointed in what he was seeing. It turned out he’d come into town from the south, through the generic commercial area around Briarwood.

“High-Tech Valhalla” begins with an extended account of that trip. Starting in the office parks and shopping centers on I-94, he passes through central campus, then moves on to the north side. Shadowed by security vehicles as he walks the boundaries of the Pfizer complex, he grows dispirited: “High-tech Ann Arbor,” he writes, “is your punk rock buddy who grew up and went to work for a bank.”

By the time the book was published, of course, the punk-rock buddy was out of work: Pfizer had closed its entire complex, eliminating 3,200 jobs. Ann Arbor’s one great example of university-driven economic development was gone.

Gumprecht couldn’t help the timing. Still, he won no fans in the economic development establishment by including a persuasive explanation of why college towns, for all their intellectual power, rarely spawn major companies: U-M grad “Larry Page could have started Google in Ann Arbor,” he writes, “but it is doubtful the company could have recruited enough workers there to grow as fast as it did.”

In an email last spring, Gumprecht lamented that his book had elicited “zero media attention” in Ann Arbor. But with Pfizer’s sale to the university, Ann Arbor is more emphatically a college town than ever—and that makes *The American College Town* that much more timely. If Gumprecht’s insightful and candid study undercuts Ann Arbor’s self-image as a unique place, it replaces it with something richer and more realistic: the kinship of an extended, widely scattered, and somewhat eccentric family. ■