

“Student behavioral issues cannot be divorced from the geography of housing in college towns.” – Blake Gumprecht, *The American College Town*

To: The Durham Planning Board / **From:** Joshua Meyrowitz, 7 Chesley Dr. / 17 August 2021

The extensive research literature on the characteristics and zoning needs of American college towns has not yet been considered in your review of Colonial Durham Associates’ Conditional-Use Site Plan for **Mill Plaza**. Below, I summarize the first book to detail the unique characteristics of college towns in the United States, [*The American College Town*](#), by geographer Blake Gumprecht.

Blake Gumprecht was a professor in the Department of Geography at the University of New Hampshire for fourteen years, and Department Chair for six years. One of his major areas of specialty was the social, physical, and psychological geography of college towns. He also studied how municipal decisions can help to preserve – or destroy – neighborhoods (as in his research on the destruction of Portsmouth NH’s [*Italian North End*](#)). Dr. Gumprecht’s efforts are now focused on the impoverished Alamo Navajo Indian reservation in Socorro County, New Mexico.

Gumprecht’s book on college towns was awarded the American Association of Geographers’ J. B. Jackson Prize, the most prestigious book prize in American geography. *Architecture Boston* recommended that the book “be required reading for the many architects and planners in Greater Boston.” Indeed, the book includes details that can inform decision makers about what type of planning and zoning is needed to *keep “town & gown” aspects of college towns in balance, so that the benefits of college town life are not outweighed by the disadvantages.*

“College Town” defined: Population ratio is key. “The best barometer of a college’s influence is the ratio of college students to overall population,” writes Gumprecht. “If the number of four-year college students during academic semesters equals at least 20 percent of a town’s population, then a collegiate culture is likely to exert a strong influence” (p. 2). UNH’s student population far exceeds 20% of Durham’s overall population.

The hundreds of college towns in the United States are, in essence, “an academic archipelago” (p. 2), argues Gumprecht. They tend to be very similar to one another, while also differing in fundamental ways from other cities and the regions in which they are located. “The attributes of the institutions located in college towns and the people who live in these places...breed unique landscapes – the campus, fraternity row, the college-oriented shopping district, and more” (p. 1). Gumprecht adds: “College towns are known for having lively downtowns, picturesque residential neighborhoods, unusual cultural opportunities for cities so small, ample parks and recreational facilities, safe streets, and good schools. They rank high on lists of the best places to live, retire, and start a business” (p. 15).

UNH dominates Durham. “Downtown Durham is tiny,” writes Gumprecht, and contains few businesses that would appeal to anyone over age twenty-five. Compared to other college towns, Durham is all college and no town” (p. 29). That situation shifted a bit by the time Dr. Gumprecht left UNH in 2017. Yet, his research suggests that the Durham Planning Board should prioritize diversifying the core of Durham and must certainly be careful not to further erode the parts of downtown that are oriented to diverse members of the community, including long-term residents.

“Perpetually young.” “The migration to college towns every fall of new students and the exodus

of graduates from college towns each spring makes college towns perpetually young,” typically, in Gumprecht’s research, about ten years younger than the median age for the United States (p. 4). In more than one-third of the towns he studied, residents on average were aged 18 to 24. “Because college town residents are young, they are also less likely than the general population to be married.” Moreover, because most of the college students in such towns are, for the first time in their lives, freed from parental supervision and not yet engaged in full-time careers, their behavior tends to vary from dominant social norms. “*College students living away from their parents will always experiment and test life’s boundaries*” (p. 345). When limited to a town’s “student domains,” much college student behavior is tolerated by university and town officials and residents. “College towns are typically more liberal than towns without prominent colleges. They tend to be more tolerant of unusual behavior and supportive of unconventional ideas” (p. 1).

Boundaries enhance tolerance of different populations. Yet, the tolerance of typical college-student behavior is dependent on college towns being “*highly segregated residentially.*” That is, “Faculty and other long-term residents seldom want to live near undergraduates because of the different lifestyles they often lead. For students, the college years represent their first chance to live relatively free from adult interference, so they, too, prefer to live among their own” (p. 71).

Thus, successful college towns are also characterized by boundaries that are meant to separate large-scale student activity (which often violates standard forms of “social decorum,” particularly late on weekend nights), from “normal” family life. For a college town to “work” as a family friendly environment, college student “exuberance” has to be at least somewhat isolated from the settings where young children are being raised and where long-term residents of non-college-student age are expecting quiet nights and where neighborhood lawns can be kept free of empty beer cans/bottles and other debris from college-student lifestyles (pp. 296-334).

Transient population. “College towns are transient places.... Every year, millions of American teenagers leave home to attend college. Students also move frequently while in school and usually leave college towns as soon as they graduate.... Moving vans and U-Haul trucks are probably a more common sight in college towns than in any other type of place” (p. 10).

This transience creates a tension between the “temporary” student residents, and those who live in the town full time, with the latter hoping for stability through the year and across the decades. Yet, college students operate on their own schedules, and often with less concern on their part about the impact of their lifestyles on the local community – because most of them will *not* live out their adult lives in the town in which they attended college. Gumprecht describes the troubles that arise when many students “invade” family neighborhoods, which suggests that careful zoning and planning are required to keep the special characteristics of college towns in balance, *with particular attention to the buffers that protect family neighborhoods from college-student behavior and from the unique pulse and rhythm of undergraduate social life* (pp. 312-334).

Alcohol exacerbates tensions. Tensions between college life and town life across the country are not new, yet their specific nature has evolved over time. In recent decades, “the freedom of students...has created many headaches for city and university officials,” as well as for year-round town residents in college towns. “Student drunkenness has grown” (p. 40). *After Congress enacted legislation in 1984 requiring states to raise the drinking age to twenty-one, drinking did not diminish; instead its locus of activity shifted.* Heavy drinking moved from bars and from campus dorms to off-campus fraternity houses and rental housing (p. 40 & p. 304). “Town-gown relations

deteriorated further as a result” (p. 306).

“Colleges have sought to regain some control over student lives by extending judicial codes to include off-campus behavior and notifying parents when minor students misbehave. College town governments have also employed a range of tactics intended to restrain undergraduate behavior, including noise ordinances, tighter liquor law enforcement, and restrictions on the number of people who can live in rental houses” (p. 40).

Delicate tolerance/enforcement balance. Ultimately, university and town officials tend to develop a careful balance of enforcement and tolerance, such as not strictly enforcing town nighttime noise ordinances in locations far from family homes. Late-night shouting and music-playing, although technically violations of the legal “quiet hours,” are likely to be tolerated by authorities if they do not generate many calls to the police. The same behavior close to family homes, however, leads to residents’ distress and complaints to authorities. Additional complications arise when student drinking and rowdiness occur on private property, where police authority to intervene is more limited than it is in public spaces (pp. 296-334).

Yet, for all the disagreement about what can and should be done about college-student drinking, Dr. Gumprecht’s research found that **“there is one point upon which students, townspeople, city officials, and university administrators agree – college students will drink regardless of the laws, penalties, and risks, they will get drunk and, when they do, they will disrupt the lives of others....** Student drinking has been the one constant of college life since the first universities emerged in Europe” (p. 313). As one town administrator told Gumprecht: “New students away from home will always test the limits of their freedom” (p. 312). “In the meantime,” writes Gumprecht, “student drinking and related behavior, more than any other issue, seem certain to keep town-gown tensions simmering in college towns” (p. 312). When large-scale student living is moved close to family homes, delicate balances are strained.

The pros & cons of close-to-campus family housing. Gumprecht details how the best attribute of some homes in college towns is the same as their worst attribute – proximity to campus. For many adults, living easy walking/biking distance from campus is a dream come true, especially if they work on campus, are seeking advanced degrees, or simply want access to a major research library, to plays and concerts, to public lectures and movie showings, to college sports events, as well as access to “green spaces on campus [that] act as parks for nearby residents” (p. 297).

At the same time, the closeness of some neighborhoods to campus also means that the general area is home to an ever-changing population of students who are not “permanent” town inhabitants and whose lifestyles often bring them into conflict with full-time residents. “Much of the conflict is the simple result of what happens when so many young people, free from parental supervision for the first time, descend upon relatively small cities” (p. 297).

“Erosion of Single-Family Neighborhoods” due to *location* of student housing. As Dr. Gumprecht writes, “student behavioral issues cannot be divorced from the geography of housing in college towns” (p. 312). *These problems are minimal in towns where the bulk of students live on campus or away from family neighborhoods.* For college towns to function smoothly, large-scale student housing needs to be kept separate from family neighborhoods (pp. 296-334).

College Town Zoning Matters. Careful zoning is critical because “students can make bad neighbors” (p. 297). *“The most persistent source of town-gown tension in college towns over the years has been student behavioral problems”* (p. 298). Family neighborhoods near student housing can become “battle sites in an undeclared but unresolved civil war” (p. 296). The biggest problems are from absentee-landlord neighborhood homes transformed into student rentals. Yet larger “managed” student housing near single-family homes also leads to students moving through family neighborhoods late on weekend nights. “On-site” housing managers rarely tamp down typical student rowdiness unless it rises to the level of criminal activity, and the managers certainly do not patrol adjacent family neighborhoods. “Loud parties rattle windows, and residents are awoken when students return home noisily from bars and parties” (p. 296).

Wrong behavior in the wrong place. Drunk students are known to urinate or throw up on family lawns as well as abandon articles of clothing or other items that speak to sexual activity. Residents who complain to police or write to newspapers may receive threats and find their vehicles or homes vandalized (pp. 310-311). In neighborhoods already filled with students, “there is the constant worry that home-owners will sell to landlords who will turn family houses into student rentals” (p. 297). “Convertible” homes may rise in value, as others sink. A tipping point can occur, where the loss of quiet enjoyment of life in a family neighborhood dramatically increases the number of families who sell and move. And then, a “family neighborhood” is no more.

When typical student behavior moves from “segregated” student spheres into family neighborhoods, complaints from residents increase, police are drawn in more – and even students balk (because of new restrictions). Moreover, crime statistics escalate dramatically, simply from tighter enforcement (p. 310). This and other types of town-gown conflict “has the greatest potential to undermine the quality of life for residents, young and old, permanent and transient” (p. 330).

The key to successful college towns. In the successful “residential mosaic” of college towns, writes Gumprecht, “young people are dominant, but they are not distributed evenly across the city. Undergraduates live apart from permanent residents, both by choice and because year-round residents do all they can keep them out of their neighborhoods.... Faculty and undergraduates work and play in close proximity, but they rarely live near one another, ‘by silent consent from both sides’” (p. 107).

In short, Gumprecht’s book echoes the wisdom that Durham residents exhibited in the first scientifically designed survey for a Durham Master Plan:

“The key to success...of student housing development would be its location.... The development of new student housing would be best directed to the west of the main campus [Mill Plaza is directly east of campus] in complexes specifically designed to house students. **This would permit student housing to be separated from town resident housing so that lifestyles don’t directly conflict...**” (p. 3-9). “Encourage the separation of future University-related housing from local resident housing” (p. 6-44). Adopted as [Master Plan](#) in Nov 1993.

In 2013, “broad public consensus” (per Council & Planning Board discussions) led to an [Ordinance](#) applying [Conditional-Use Zoning](#) to mixed-use with residential in the Plaza and CBD zone.

Please heed the lessons from research on college towns – and the wisdom of the residents of Durham – regarding the necessary “residential mosaic” for a successful college town.