

THE AMERICAN COLLEGE TOWN

Blake Gumprecht,
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Reviewed by Mirela Newman, Ph.D.,
Independent Scholar, Plymouth, CT,
newmanmirela@yahoo.com

This original, richly documented, highly readable, well-structured book is the first one to ever be published about the American college town. Anchored in both archival research and fieldwork — including field observations, interviews, and photography — as well as in the author's personal experiences, this brilliant book explores one of the fundamental topics in the contemporary field of urban studies, mainly the typology, characteristics and functions of the American college town. It focuses on the analysis of the American college town as a “unique type of urban place, shaped by sometimes conflicting forces of youth, intellect, and idealism, that has been an important but overlooked element in the American life,” and shows that “college towns are exceptional places worth knowing about.”

A fundamental question in academe highlights the major contribution of this original book: why have we had such little research conducted about college towns, particularly when so many authors and scholars live in such places? This book seeks to redress the “past neglect: of this subject” by creating, in a compelling way, a pretty accurate portrait of the American college town. In researching, defining and explaining the main characteristics of the American college town, the author chose college towns with large universities and focused on sixty case study towns carefully selected from all over the United States, representative of the diversity of college towns.

One main virtue of this book lies in the manner in which the author structured the conceptual framework for his research and organized the book chapters. Neither fully historical, nor entirely geographical, neither landscape-oriented, nor fundamentally typological, this book transcends over all by skillfully employing the thematic approach that incorporates all of those distinct approaches. The thematic approach embraced by Blake Gumprecht appears to be the key to this wonderful, original book as it seems to not only reflect the author's personal experiences but also capture the way in which he approaches the study of places in general and the study of college towns in particular.

Specifically, this book is organized in ten, well-organized, vividly illustrated, scholarly-written and yet easy to read chapters. The introduction skillfully sets the tone for the entire book. This first chapter clearly defines the American college town as “any city where a college or university and the culture it creates exert a dominant influence over the character of the town,” presents the different types of college towns in a simple yet logical manner, and captures the distinguishing characteristics of American college towns including: youthfulness, diversity, high education, affluence, high quality of life, high cost of housing, transience, cosmopolitanism and

unconventionality.

The following eight chapters explore a theme that is, in the author's view, a "substantial feature of college town life," and together these chapters manage to masterfully capture the essence of what makes the American college town distinctive. The eight chapters topics include: an approach to the campus as a public space, a discussion of the fraternity rows and the student ghettos, a review of the role played by the campus corners and "aggievilles," an interesting foray into the things that are "right and relevant" to college towns, an interesting discussion of the college town as a "paradise for the misfits," a discussion of the stadium culture in college towns, a perspective on the university as an agent of economic development and high tech Mecca, and a vivid, interesting discussion of the "town versus gown" issues.

Finally, the last chapter is anchored in a discussion centered on the future of the American college town, centered on the author's belief that "time, tradition, geography and culture seem to have cemented in place" the most fundamental features of college towns. The author argues that while "college towns will continue to grow incrementally" the characteristics that make them "unusual and compelling" are likely to persist as he believes "the American college town will remain a place apart, a unique type of urban community that has been a critical but under-recognized part of the American life."

Another virtue of this book lies in its lively, original, easy to read, cohesive form and presentation reflecting the authors' approach to both the American college town and the study of places. The author manages to successfully document the unique characteristics and features of the American college town by employing the case study analysis, based on sixty carefully selected American college towns.

The consistent use of well-selected photographs taken by the author allows the reader to understand and visualize the relationship between college town elements and their role in establishing a high functionality of the town, while the easy to relate to tone of approach and writing allows the reader to understand and relate to the college town characteristics and way of life.

Based on both its original writing style and thematic-based approach, as well as on its lively, richly detailed, and profuse use of illustrations with original maps and photographs and historical images, this is a highly important book that firmly establishes the college town as an integral part of the American experience. The reviewer strongly recommends this book as a useful teaching and research tool in the fields of urban studies, urban geography, urban morphology, urban planning, urban design, urban architecture and urban policy. I agree with the author of this book that learning about the American college town and its distinct characteristics is an important step in not only furthering research on this topic, but also in understanding the essence of the American experience. Furthermore, in addition to good maps and photographs, this book also provides important clarifications regarding the nature, functions and typology of the American college town, which are useful in examining and understanding the characteristics and evolution of American towns in general, and the American college town in particular. Finally, for scholars, researchers and decision-makers, this book can be used as a reference work that assembles fundamentally important concepts and ideas about the American college town.

The American College Town demonstrates Gumprecht's power of recognizing and telling the yet untold story, and offers important insights into understanding the vital and unique char-

acteristics of the American college town. As the first ever published book about the American college town, this is clearly an important contribution to the field of urban studies in general and the urban morphological and functional analysis in particular.