

Escaping Ann Arbor: Archery Club as a Liberating Getaway

by Sisir Potluri

Another World, Another Purpose?



In my left hand, I held a grey and beige bow that was polished yet archaic. In my right hand, I had a bright, neon arrow that I fastened to the powerful string. It was the first time I tried archery, and I was in the middle round of launching. *Come on.* I unleashed the vibrant arrow. In less than a second, it hit a target. It wasn't my target. *Oops.*

The bright arrow was out of my sight. I was left with a woody bow. Ann Arbor was also out of my sight. I was in a different world. Adam's Archery – the antithesis of Ann Arbor – was the place where I tried archery for the first time. Home to the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor is known for its bustling culture and dazzling atmosphere. The summer before I started school, I was most excited to participate in student organizations for the chance to immerse myself in this radiant city. Shrey Aggarwal, an in-state applicant for the Fall 2020 term, finds Ann Arbor to be a “vibrant community that’s a city within itself – campus merged with small downtown,” which “encouraged [him] to apply.” Most students, including myself, find this city-campus fusion mentioned by Aggarwal to be a prime factor in deciding to attend the University of Michigan, and they seek intriguing clubs that can facilitate engagement with the diverse urban cityscape.

At the moment I discovered Archery Club, I pictured myself with a bow and arrow and envisioned the precious heroism that was lacking in my mundane college life. My primary reference, a warrior prince I learned of through my Indian background, was the ambidextrous, mythological hero of archery from the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna. Taylor LeFevre, a member of Archery Club, asserted that “we all think Katniss Everdeen is a badass... I definitely want to emulate her,” expressing that characters in pop culture also influenced others’ initial admiration of the sport, and I realized that I wasn’t the only one making such wild parallels. The cliché that student organizations are where you explore the city, combined with my fantastical view of archery and Ann Arbor, prepared me for a fascinating and surreal experience.

On the evening of practice, I found Adam’s Archery – the place where Archery Club meets – on Google Maps. *Milan, MI. Huh?* That was my first surprise. Later that night, I was surrounded by animal heads and heard more swearing in a single hour than ever before. That was the hundredth surprise.

Up until that evening, I viewed student organizations as belonging to one of three cultures: crowded competitive zones of STEM prowess, buzzing indoor fields of athletic ability, and loud theatrical showcases of art and sound. Now, there was a fourth, and it was the only one detached from Ann Arbor. Driving to a cabin-style archery range with no other buildings in sight made me feel like I was on a road trip to a hunting village in woodland Canada. Adam’s Archery appeared like a gift store in a tourist-attracting forest. It was its own culture – a world of another era and nativity.

Despite the long excursion from campus, more and more students are interested in this club. An employee at Adam’s Archery, Brandon Booker, observed that “in the last year, [the club’s] grown in size to where they actually need to open up another night” reflecting on the recent increase in students’ interest towards the club.

So, I wondered. *Why Archery Club? Why traverse to this world so different than Ann Arbor and campus life when there are so many opportunities tied to the city’s identity?* Archery club is an antithesis to Ann Arbor. It’s the opposite of college. It isn’t a club about immersing in the campus town. In almost every way, it’s an escape.

This Side of the Frontier

Life at the University of Michigan campus is rapid and fleeting, much like a conventional competitive school. One degree of this is the academic environment – a student’s success is parallel with how much they can store in

their brain. Students sit in classrooms like sponges, absorbing a myriad of unrelated and mostly irrelevant information, so they can climb the ladder that leads to financial success. While this climb varies by student, the stress and sense of oppression it causes define the common student experience. The first time I felt this was in my first week of exams, when every five-minute session of scrolling through Instagram or walking to a new study space felt like the freedom after months of being held hostage. What's most unfortunate about this is that it never feels like it's over. The moment you walk out of one exam hall feeling accomplished, you go look for a seat at the school library to commence the dreaded journey again. It's like winning an Olympic medal and then being bashed for not getting a Nobel Prize with it.

There's nothing genuinely surprising about this though – no one truly cares about the grueling college experience other than the students themselves. However, a more intricate feature of the University of Michigan is its political situation. In *The Michigan Daily*, columnist Michael Mordarski describes Ann Arbor as a “fortified liberal bastion” with “an environment uniquely designed for the progressive students who populate campus” and indicates that “The University of Michigan’s liberal student body is readily known worldwide.” The campus is known for its demonstrations and political activism, and several students who aren't sharply opinionated on the political spectrum find this to be overwhelming. The freedom and ability to express one's ideas are valued by the University of Michigan, but the other side is never considered; many college students experience the tension between not being opinionated and experiencing adversity because of it.

A Road Movie

The perfect escape is one of liberation. Going to a meeting of Archery Club is like leaving behind the constricting Ann Arbor streets for a two-hour vacation. Despite the short span, its effects are monumental; it serves as an antithesis in almost every way, leading to a complete sublimation of campus thoughts.

Madeline Jackson, Archery club vice president and member for five years, mentions that in Ann Arbor, one “feels so stuck” and the city has lots of “light pollution” that can be avoided by leaving to this rural landscape, making it ideal as a place to stop feeling suffocated and dominated. It took just one trip for me to discover the healing powers of a rural drive, and it became clear how restraining Ann Arbor is in contrast. The journey to Adam's Archery, which is usually before it's dark, closely reflects a road movie, as if it's a

dramatic road trip with the excitement of uncertainty. Such road movies from the late-1900's depict "seductive horizons" along with a "compelling articulation of the frontier" (Laderman 14). This type of entrancing effect is very similar to what it feels like to drive to Milan, MI, and it's unattainable in the commutes to conventional University of Michigan clubs. Tropes from these road films, such as sepia tones and silence that makes any dialogue seem severe, can be felt throughout the hypnotizing journey away from Ann Arbor. Distancing myself from the city for the first time after starting school this year felt much more remedial than I could imagine. The uninterrupted and seemingly infinite drive starkly contrasts the congested streets of Ann Arbor, and I felt a sense of autonomy; it was as though *nothing* could stop me (a very rare emotion for a college student).



The way back to Ann Arbor is a different story. During my return trip, two young deer jumped onto the road and the driver behind us maniacally honked even though it was clear why we stopped. *Did he expect us to run them over?* The entire trek carried a hostile and unfamiliar persona, with an eerie and foggy setting much like *Riverdale* or *Twin Peaks*. Every flash of a light seemed like a surprise that carried both the capacity to instill fear and to reassure. Jackson mentions that "it's so dark... and your headlights don't even show" later in the evening, which makes it "really interesting." This contrasts with my experience on the way back because Jackson finds the ominous setting to be intriguing rather than off-putting like I did. Hearing her contradictory perspective, it made me wonder why passing through such an

eerie atmosphere might generate an appeal unavailable in Ann Arbor. Susan Heitler, a clinical psychologist, explains that in situations away from campus, such as “college students at the beach for spring break,” stimulation like the adrenaline rush that “readies us for action when we see danger” can explain thrill-seeking tendencies. In the scenario of driving from archery club, the danger of the night and the mysterious nature of the dark can propel this thrill – something that’s much more difficult to achieve in the secured and illuminated Ann Arbor streets. This thrill primes the traveler before they return to the swift and intimidating campus, building a sense of power and confidence that prepares them for the coming days in the city.

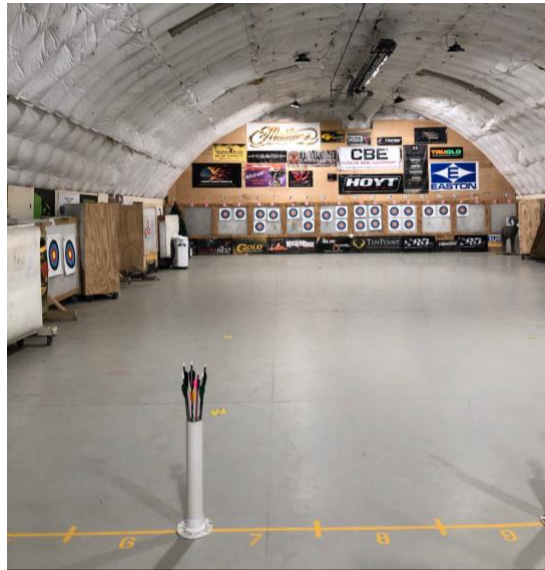
The entire journey feels like a ritualistic experience, and doing this every week would be like a repeated pilgrimage. It’s ideal and exact, even though the benefits are purely circumstantial and based upon the location of Adam’s Archery. Beyond the obvious contrast from brimming lights and braking tires, the trek to and from Adam’s Archery carries a “null spirituality” that’s absent in the politically and ideologically commanding campus. It’s an expedition into blankness, analogous to the mental decluttering the traveler undergoes.

Psychosomatic

The religious aspect of this escape extends beyond the drive; the actual sport is an embodied experience that detaches the archer from their thoughts and takes them into a new realm of meditation and physical liberation. Before every arrow I launched, I remembered the advice I collectively obtained from the previous failed attempts. *Balance your weight evenly. Align the string with your face. Aim lower than the target.* It was like posing in a photoshoot for a gymnastics magazine. Wearing my oversized sweater and slanted glasses, I struggled to appear divine. It was at that moment that I realized archery is unlike other sports – every launch of an arrow is like becoming a physical work of art that needs complete and perfect alignment. Deciding when it’s the right time to launch feels like a meditative penance in which an aura – the sense of confirmation – must traverse the entire body and return to your eyes. At that moment of complete unification and total control, the archer becomes confident enough to let go. After standing for what felt like an epoch, I launched. I hit my target.

This meditative and embodied experience from launching an arrow extends beyond just me; Jackson indicates that some club members joined to experience the “spiritual” aspect of archery and reference its depiction in

Japanese media. I discovered that Japanese Archery “evokes thoughts of spirituality or ... [a] close relationship with Zen spirituality” and that archery is a recurring theme in manga and Japanese anime (Shoji 2). This explains how archery is religious to some members, evoking a mental escape from Ann Arbor through mindfulness, while still being meditative to other members who lack Japanese media knowledge.



A form of archery that focuses on the “Zen” is Kyudo, which is intriguingly similar to the form practiced at Archery Club; according to an article in *The Washington Post*, “Kyudo is a form of moving meditation, a way to examine the self, the mind and the moment” (Alderdice). Zen Buddhism, the inspiration for Kyudo Archery, “can help people enhance their psychosomatic well-being,” which translates to a unified balance of the mind and body, similar to the aura that I felt prior to launching (Lomas, Etcoff, Gordon and Shonin). An article in *The Huffington Post* explains how some students at M.I.T. engage in a yoga-based gathering, called “Art of the Living,” in which they practice meditation to “harmonize the body, mind and emotions” (Herreria). The article highlights how “meditation not only helps the brain manage stress,” but that “it can be effective in relieving symptoms of anxiety and depression.” Collectively, this article reveals how other competitive schools engage in forms of meditative practice in a way very similar to Archery Club. The common point between my experience, Zen-based Kyudo archery, and the meditative club at M.I.T. is the focus on unifying the body and spirit, which is essential to freeing a hyper-stressed mind.

This is where the distinction from campus life becomes clear; studying for college and attending lectures involves solely mental exertion, and a student is frequently defined by their capacity to critically reason. The religious experience of archery club – one of cognitive *and* physical spirituality – creates a mental liberation through the immediately gratifying feedback from launching an arrow that evaluates one's ability to balance their mental and visceral selves. Practicing the art of control and unification starkly contrasts the college environment in which autonomy seems extinct. Just a few rounds of shooting can generate an immediate learning curve that's absent on campus where accomplishment is continually defeated by the competitive compulsion to get better.

Animal Heads



The University of Michigan's curriculum creates an unhealthy mental oversaturation for students, but what's even more overwhelming are the domineering campus politics. Jackson mentions that she witnesses a dangerous campus situation in which people are "called out" for "not agreeing on someone's political views or seemingly not caring enough about an issue." Her peers "vehemently state that if you're not posting about XXXXX issue, then you are the problem," and Jackson indicates that this campus environment pushes her to "care about everything... almost feeling forced to." This is when she finds Archery club as an ideal getaway to "get [her] mind off of" Ann Arbor and to experience a "nice escape from reality." She also mentions that Archery Club members "don't have strong political views unlike a lot of the people that

go [to the University of Michigan].” This reveals how archery club creates a judgement-free political environment in which not being opinionated is fine. It’s analogous to emigrating to escape prosecution or political turmoil, and even though the scale is much smaller than international relocation, the concept isn’t dissimilar. Connecting this to my key observations of the archery range, like the almost constant surfacing of swear words and daunting dead animals, it becomes clear how this is an antithesis to the politically dramatic and culturally refined city of Ann Arbor. By no means do swear words and upholstered heads equate to anti-liberalism, but the traditional, “country,” and “hick” – the latter two being connotations mentioned in interviews of Jackson and LeFevre – ambiance of Adam’s Archery surely generates a retreat from the oversensitive and hypercritical campus politics.

As indicated by an article in *The Michigan Daily*, college students are “always undergoing change” and find themselves in an environment “shifted out of its place of normalcy to a place of obscurity,” with nostalgic activities being a way to find the “comfort of familiarity” (Szuhaj). Adam’s Archery conveys all the tropes of a countryside retreat building, with sepia walls, piles of weapon accessories, and wildly disarranged wall décor, generating a true “retro” ambiance that satiates students’ desire for nostalgia. If there’s something that’s motivated me to return other than the meditative nature of the sport, it’s the allure of the building’s interior – an authentic feature that’s both nostalgic and intriguing.

American Colleges

Many students at the University of Michigan find themselves facing a dilemma of deciding the line between when engagement and acceptance in college is healthy and when it can be unnecessarily hypersensitive and demanding. This perception is often hidden beneath the flashy depictions of college that highlight its myriad of opportunities and commitment to freedom. After enough time is spent understanding the campus and its political situation, this reality becomes clear. When asked about her overall perception of politics in the University of Michigan campus, Jackson indicated that “the politics here [at the University of Michigan] are too in your face for my personal taste, so I enjoy the reprieve [through Archery Club].” Many students also hold this perspective, especially since most are more interested in avoiding activism despite it being so pervasive.

This trend isn’t limited to the University of Michigan; colleges throughout the United States are experiencing a “renaissance of student

activism,” as put by Alia Wong, education writer for *The Atlantic*. This alone isn’t the issue we face – whether or not students have the right to be vocal is a separate matter. However, the intensity and critical nature of this student protest that can infiltrate social and mental health is what motivates students to leave the college campus for a retreat to peace. According to Sam Gill, a vice president at the John S. and James L. Knight foundation, this generation of college students struggles “with very deep questions about how to be a pluralistic society and a pluralistic campus” (Chokshi). Essentially, the stereotypical perception that the diverse ideologies and political groups in a college campus facilitates growth and new knowledge might be true only to an extent, and there is clearly a point of oversaturation, at which an escape is critical. College can overwhelm students with their larger-than-life offerings and opportunities for advocacy, and many students – both current and incoming – fail to realize that just because an institution has a plethora of options and an active environment, it doesn’t mean that they will always seek or even be able to tolerate that fleeting world. It’s at these moments that escaping is most essential.

Archery club offers just this. It’s an escape from the rapid and crowded city. An escape from the demands of college life. An escape from ideological commotion. But mostly – it’s an escape from what might eventually be inescapable.

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