

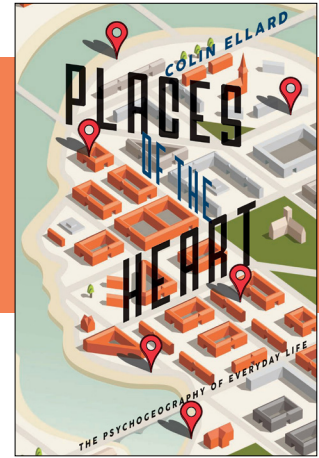


# Places of the Heart

## The Psychogeography of Everyday Life

by Colin Ellard

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### Library of Science Book Club Selection

“A really great book.” —Ira Flatow, *Science Friday*

“A great read.” —Rudy Maxa, *Rudy Maxa’s World*

“One of the finest science writers I’ve ever read.” —*Los Angeles Times*

“Delightfully lucid. . . . Ellard has a knack for distilling obscure scientific theories into practical wisdom.”  
—*New York Times Book Review*

### INTRODUCTION

Lust, fear, and awe are just some of emotions that our surroundings can arouse. From Stonehenge to twenty-first-century virtual environments, neuroscientist Colin Ellard explores the psychology behind our behavior in different settings, the ways marketers channel our emotional responses, and the developing technologies that promise to enhance the way we understand human psychogeography, while changing the future of architecture and design.

### A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I wrote this book both because I have a personal fascination with the way that life’s physical settings influence our feelings and thoughts and because I have a professional conviction that understanding these influences can help us to build better places. I’m also both excited and disturbed, in about equal measure, by the ways that new technologies like GPS, virtual reality, and smart, interactive environments will transform how we understand and use space. I hope that my book can help to focus public attention on issues that arise from the new science of place.

### CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. Everyone has a building that they love to hate. What’s yours and what don’t you like about it? What insights have you gained from reading the book about the reasons for your intense feelings about this building?
2. What do you remember about your first home? Try to draw a map of its layout. Now look closely at what you’ve drawn. Does it trigger any associations with old memories? Does it have any resemblance to the kinds of things you like about your current home or other places that you’ve lived?
3. When a new building springs up in the city, it often elicits strong reactions from people—either like or dislike—and one of the things that is often said is that the tastes and preferences of architects are out of kilter with those of the people for whom the building was designed. What do you think of this idea?
4. In the book, the author talks about something that most of us know well—that a refreshing interlude in a natural environment makes us feel good and may even improve our health. Given that we understand this so well, why aren’t all environments, especially urban ones, built with this well-established fact in mind?
5. Some architects worry that the application of scientific principles from psychology and neuroscience to the design of buildings will hamstring their artistic freedom. But unlike most other art forms, buildings are art objects that we use in our everyday lives. What’s more important? The artistic freedom of architects or having buildings and cities that work for our minds and brains? Can we have both?



6. Winston Churchill famously proclaimed that “we shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us.” Thinking of your own life and the ideas in *Places of the Heart*, can you describe any examples of this? In what ways have the physical settings of your life influenced who you have become?
7. In the book, Ellard argues that the advent of technology that makes convincing simulations of real places possible—virtual reality, for example—will cause us to devalue the precious here-and-now qualities of real experience. Do you share his concern? Why or why not?
8. More and more, the mobile devices that we carry with us—especially our mobile phones—keep track of where we are, who we are with, and what we are doing. One argument is that all of this data can help us to understand who we are and what we want. Is there a dark side to this as well?
9. The architect Rem Koolhaas has argued that cities and buildings with traditional designs rooted in our culture are exclusionary for those who may not share our culture—increasingly a concern in our more mobile and global society—and that built environments should be more like airports where everything is in a predictable and culture-free location. Would you like to live in such a world?
10. Some have said that the psychological blight of the modern world is boredom. The more predictable our environment is, the less there is to stimulate the senses and inspire the mind. Are there environments in your everyday life where you’ve experienced such stultifying sameness that your mind seems to shut down? What are they?
11. Advances in technology have made it increasingly possible for us to live in interactive environments that understand who we are, anticipate our every move, and act to nurture and protect us. What are the pros and cons of such interactive environments?
12. Recent scientific studies, described in the book, have suggested that visiting awe-inspiring places—cathedrals, monuments, ancient sacred sites like Stonehenge or Angkor Wat—can actually change how we feel and act. Have you experienced anything like this?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colin Ellard, who works at the intersection of neuroscience and architectural and environmental design, is the author of *You Are Here: Why We Can Find Our Way to the Moon, but Get Lost in the Mall*. Called “one of the finest science writers” by the *Los Angeles Times*, he has published scientific work in international journals in North America, Europe, and Asia and has discussed environmental psychology on NPR and CBC radio programs and with Discovery News, the *Guardian*, *USA Today*, *Time* magazine, *Travel+Leisure*, *Women’s Health*, and *Slate*.

A cognitive neuroscientist at the University of Waterloo and director of its Urban Realities Laboratory, Ellard regularly conducts his field research by leading urban walking tours and putting his data on display, often in museum settings, around the globe. For more information, visit [www.colinellard.com](http://www.colinellard.com).

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