Places of the Heart: The Psychogeography of Everyday Life

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Library of Science Book Club selection
***Discover* magazine "What to Read" selection**

"A really great book." —**IRA FLATOW, *Science Friday***

"One of the finest science writers I've ever read." — ***Los Angeles Times***

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

"[Ellard] mak[es] even the most mundane entomological experiment or exegesis of psychological geekspeak feel fresh and fascinating." —**NPR**

"Colin Ellard is one of the world's foremost thinkers on the neuroscience of urban design. Here he offers an entirely new way to understand our cities—and ourselves." —**CHARLES MONTGOMERY**, author of *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design*

Our surroundings can powerfully affect our thoughts, emotions, and physical responses, whether we're awed by the Grand Canyon or Hagia Sophia, panicked in a crowded room, soothed by a walk in the park, or tempted in casinos and shopping malls. In *Places of the Heart*, Colin Ellard explores how our homes, workplaces, cities, and nature—places we escape to and can't escape from—have influenced us throughout history, and how our brains and bodies respond to different types of real and virtual space. As he describes the insight he and other scientists have gained from new technologies, he assesses the influence these technologies will have on our evolving environment and asks what kind of world we are, and should be, creating.

Colin Ellard is the author of *You Are Here: Why We Can Find Our Way to the Moon, but Get Lost in the Mall*. A cognitive neuroscientist at the University of Waterloo and director of its Urban Realities Laboratory, he lives in Kitchener, Ontario.

Places of the Heart: The Psychogeography of Everyday Life Details

Date	:	Published September 15th 2015 by Bellevue Literary Press (first published January 1st 2010)
ISBN	:	9781942658009
Author	:	Colin Ellard
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From Reader Review Places of the Heart: The Psychogeography of Everyday Life for online ebook

Rob Christopher says

Entertaining, with a lot of food for thought.

L.A.B. says

Although the title of this book, Places of the Heart (Bellevue Library, 2015) might suggest a romance novel, it is not. Instead author Colin Ellard has written about why we seek out certain kinds of places and how the evolutionary roots behind our choices might be overturned by virtual reality. He calls this emerging science -- a melding of architecture and urban planning with behavioral psychology -- psychogeography. I found the book an amazing mash-up of lopsided and unanchored summaries of psychological research coupled with the skimmed highlights of genetics, set amid the author's opinions and warnings.

But what really struck me about the book were the paragraphs. They were about one page in length and averaged six sentences filled with so many dependent clauses that I almost had to diagram them to figure out what was being said. Lurking inside were some interesting things, like our preference for curved surfaces rather than straight lines, why big box stores all look alike and no one seems to care, why we seek stimulation over reality, and the difference video presentations are making in the teaching of science.

Courtney says

Essentially this is a 200+ page literature review. If you haven't suffered through academic research before that's a fancy word for covering everything that's already written on a particular topic. Special attention is given to Ellard's own work, the work of his students and collaborators. When I heard Ellard give an interview on NPR about the book is when it initially got my interest. And at points it delivered on that interest, but I had to wade through a lot of academic psychology in the process.

Meredith says

This book is generally about the psychology of place (referred to as psychogeography), though I feel Ellard strays in a few chapters that deal with technology. There are some interesting studies related here, both about how spaces affect us and how we're sometimes influenced by what we think we're supposed to like/want in a space (versus what makes us happy). A section on the use of paper maps vs lists of directions on phone or sat .nav. has me feeling vindicated about my championing of the importance of paper maps and map reading skills.

I do feel Ellard sometimes conflates an issue. Twice he talks about his children not being suitably impressed by a dinosaur bone but opting for the video of how the dinosaur looked when it was alive (also moon rocks) and this being an issue of devaluing of authenticity blah blah blah. Those are two totally separate things and I

don't think you can compare them. If they didn't feel any difference looking at a real dino bone vs a plaster mold, then that's an issue to talk about. Just like I'd rather see the pictures and footage taken on the moon by the astronauts than look at a moon rock in a case (vs in a room full of rocks and minerals I will gravitate toward a moon rock).

Pretty interesting book generally well written, though I felt it strayed from the stated purpose too often. Not the best of the popular science genre, but not the worst either.

Chuck Erion says

In The Margins book column for The Waterloo Region Record for Saturday, Feb 13, 2016
By Chuck Erion, former co-owner of Words Worth Books in Waterloo.

Places of the Heart, Colin Ellard, Bellevue Literary Press, 250 pages, $27.95

Colin Ellard has been a professor of psychology at University of Waterloo since 1991 who specializes in psychogeography – how we experience places and spaces. His Urban Realities Laboratory conducts research in urban settings, including Toronto, Mumbai and Berlin. As a neuroscientist, he focuses on ways to measure our response to both the built environment and nature. His first book looked at mental mapping (Where Am I? Why We Can Find Our Way to the Moon but Get Lost at the Mall, HarperCollins, 2009). Places of the Heart: the Psychogeography of Everyday Life, his second book was released in mid-2015. It is being translated into several languages and published around the world.

Why does this matter? Aren't architects and urban planners trained to design buildings and cities? Why should a psychologist have a say in this? Because Ellard brings tools to the design board that should help ensure more positive responses to urban environment, from the mundane of alleyways to the awe-inspiring cathedral or city hall. Early in the book, he shows that the layout, sound and light design of casinos is purposed to make gamblers stay longer and spend more. Long stretches of blank walls, the streetscapes of some stores and office building, are BORING – but what does this do to pedestrians and residents? Ellard suggests that vandalism, addictions and other petty crimes may result. On the other hand, frantic traffic patterns increases the cortisol/stress levels of city dwellers with long-term exposure leading to poor health. He cites a Vancouver survey where participants reported loneliness as their most significant issue in urban life, before economics or lifestyle. We spend increasing hours trolling Facebook but have fewer real friends, i.e. confidantes. Increasingly, the digital world is part of our urban experience.

In the chapter on places of awe, Ellard probes what makes us feel 'meta-physical' in a cathedral or on a mountaintop. His lab includes Virtual Reality helmets where participants can experience such settings, figuratively well beyond the walls of the lab. One experiment showed a digitized version of the participant's hand, extended on a super long arm and moving in tandem to their real arm. This led to 'out of body' experiences, indicating that our sense of physical boundary is malleable, an instance of neuroplasticity. When you consider the far reaches of space and time, your eyes roll upwards. The same eye roll can accompany intense spiritual experiences, meditation or hallucinatory trances. Our eyes are drawn upward by the columns and arches of a Gothic cathedral. "…This upward focus of attention activates an extrapersonal information processing system that primes us to focus on the faraway, the distant or even the infinite."

The closing chapters of Places of the Heart explore the many ways that digital technology is shaping our experience of the urban landscape. GPS on our smartphones means almost never getting lost but, if we follow online recommendations, never discovering a restaurant, store or offbeat neighbourhood firsthand. The next wave of the digital revolution, the Internet of Things, promises to monitor and adjust our

environment so that our every movement is tracked and our choices are subtly controlled by Google and its advertisers. I just saw a photo on Facebook of a plaque on a building where George Orwell had lived. Next to it was a CCTV camera! - Ironic photo in an ironic setting. Big Brother is definitely watching.

Ellard concludes with a warning. “…We run the risk of cheapening the real by blurring the distinctions between the precious, unique, fleeting authentic experiences of our lives with convincing, easily duplicated facsimiles. It’s hard not to think that this will take a metaphysical toll on us.” Amen to that. Places of the Heart should stimulate debate about how our cities are shaped and how they shape us.

Du says

This was a struggle. I wanted it to end almost as quickly as it began. That said, I think the timing was my problem. This is a text book and a dry one at that. I should have left it for a reading period other than vacation when I am not looking for text books. I liked most of the topic chapters and found use in each one, but felt that it took too much effort to find that use.

Raj says

This book reminds us how profoundly we are affected by our built environment -- whether we realize it or not.

The last few chapters on digital "places" are less focused and insightful than the rest of the book.

Nurlan Imangaliyev says

How do certain places, cities, buildings and devices affect us, our perceptions of ourselves and our lives? You can find some great research-based answers in this book.

Jessie B. says

Interesting ideas though it does ramble a bit

Iren Udovenko says

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Herve Tunga says

Very informative and researched. I learn few unexpected things though did not find what I was looking for. Still a great read.

Art says

"This is an insider's view of the human response to a place," wrote Colin Ellard, who describes himself as a design and architecture groupie while working professionally as an experimental psychologist. In part, he wrote, this is the psychology of architecture.

For example, solitary wanderers strolling through an art gallery experience deeper and more frequent moments of engagement with works of art than do those who travel as couples or groups. While that seems obvious, Ellard's thoughts and documenting of the phenomenon bring it front-of-mind. But his musings also explain why I prefer quiet visiting of galleries and museums when they open, to avoid the distracting crowds that will arrive later.

That's one example of the human experience in places we like, what Ellard calls Places of Lust, which includes Las Vegas. But his strongest chapter deals with boring places and what makes them boring, then what could enliven them.

To open that chapter, a Whole Foods store occupies a city block in the Lower East Side of New York City. Ellard describes the blank wall of frosted glass where pedestrians pass by quiet and passive. But in the next block they become lively and engaged, thanks to an interesting streetscape.

People walk quickly past blank facades to get past the monotony, according to Jan Gehl, an urbanist, quoted here. On a good city street, the walker should see an interesting site every five seconds, he says. To that, Ellard adds that the prudent design of city streets and buildings require visual complexity for good public mental health.

Meanwhile, here, too, on our own East Side, Whole Foods built a store with a long wall of glass fronting an otherwise busy and interesting urban street of pedestrians, bicyclists and transit. In the next block, the public library built a new branch. It, too, put a long wall on the busy city street. Looking across the street gives an interesting view, but looking up and into the elevated library and Whole Foods gives views of people eating, reading or online. But these two prominent wall facades represent a lost opportunity, which cannot be repaired until those buildings come down in a hundred years or so. The design of these two buildings at street level favors the view and experience of people inside looking out over that of people looking in and walking by. Accommodating the two perspectives could have yielded a more interesting engagement with the street.

The thinking-through of experiences like these made the book worthwhile..

Ellard loves gps and geotracking for what they reveal, a psychogeography. I am one of those privacy people who keeps those features turned off.

Ellard, through his virtual reality lab, focuses on how built settings influence behavior, with the human response to geometry and textures at every scale. But we all come from the African savannas seventy thousand years ago. Maybe that's where our core aesthetic of the natural world began, Ellard muses. His virtual reality research finds that scenes of nature can work as a supplement to anesthesiology during

surgery, ameliorating the pain and stress. But that also explains why scenes of nature can calm a workplace while making it more productive.

Ellard adds interesting and useful comments to his seventeen pages of notes and bibliography. I was more intrigued by his real-world thoughts and findings rather than by the theoretical arguments in the book. Also, the overlong paragraphs throughout needed more variety.

The author is a cognitive neuroscientist at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, and director of its Urban Realities Laboratory.

As a fourth-generation Chicagoan, I moved to Milwaukee thirty-eight years ago. The front windows open to the Milwaukee River, while the front door opens to an arterial street. I like living in a big city while getting a good dose of nature everyday as the river and its wooded banks change through the seasons. And that's part of the psychogeography of my everyday life.

Neira says

Great reference book about psychogeography in modern day cities.
A thing that stayed with me was the comment about the Holocaust monument in Berlin—that kind of perception, if you know it you know it.

Laurie says

Psychogeography is, in Ellard’s opinion, how our surroundings affect our moods and behavior. How plants make any place seem better- and make people less apt to destroy things. How featureless concrete expanses make a person nervous and unwilling to linger. How surroundings can awe, suffocate, sooth, or tempt a person (think the insides of shopping malls). He explains how and why people have these reactions, and how they can be used to manipulate people. He also goes into how digital technology is changing things, and how it could be used to alienate or integrate.

This is important stuff for any architect, designer, or city planner. It’s also helpful for just about anyone who wants to understand why the feel the way they do in certain environments. One part I especially liked was when he wrote about Temple Grandin’s slaughter house designs that keep cattle calm instead of panicked as they go to their deaths- this is manipulation at its most obvious. How many places do we frequent that affect us in a similar way without our ever being aware of it? The book is technical but easily readable. Recommended.

Jon says

When I finished this I thought that I must've missed something. The intersection of architecture and neuroscience that the title promised and the author believed he delivered just wasn't there.

Given his credentials, Ellard must be a smart guy. Unfortunately, his writing makes him sound like one of those people who expend a lot of effort trying to *sound* smart.

This hit on neuroscience. It hit on architecture. There was even a bit of overlap, but not enough to deliver. Mostly, it was rambling through loosely related subjects squeezed through an unnecessarily over-academic sieve.

And I'm fine with academic, but this feels like the bad retail manager trapping you in the break room and giving you "life lessons" when all you want is to drink your coffee and stare out the window.

And how can I possibly take any text seriously that mentions advances in "dildonics."

I had high hopes for this book, but to quote Skwisgaar Skwigelf's time-travelling android clone from the future, "This book is dildonics."
