Topophobia: Landscapes of Fear by Jon C. Malinowski, Ph.D.

Geographers often talk about mental maps, an individual's image about a place based on experience and impressions. Within geography, much of the research on mental maps has been conducted by behavioral geographers. More often, scholars have focused on places that people like, such as favored recreation areas or preferences for certain neighborhoods or communities. A strong, positive bond between a person and a place has been called *topophilia*, or love of place. Most of us have favorite places and can fondly remember special places from our childhood, such as a fort or treehouse.

Scholars such as Yi-Fu Tuan have written a great deal about topophilia, but also about *topophobia*, or fear of place. There are many ways to think about the geography of fear and places of fear.

In ancient times, humans feared the wilderness and clung together in walled or protected settlements. Yet today, our society seeks the wilderness as a place of recreation and generally sees many urban environments as scary or dangerous.

Modern fear of urban spaces, for example, can be based in fact because of the possibility of crime, or in irrational fears based on racial stereotypes, rumor, or incorrect information. What places in your community are avoided by some citizens because of fear? Are the fears justified? Will the answer change based on who you ask?

Men and women also can see environments in different ways. On college campus, many women fear places that men might find acceptable because of fear of sexual assault, which is most often directed towards women.

Studies with children have found that kids often love to play in places that their parents find scary or dangerous. Do parents simply have better information about the realities of life, or do they overestimate the risk?
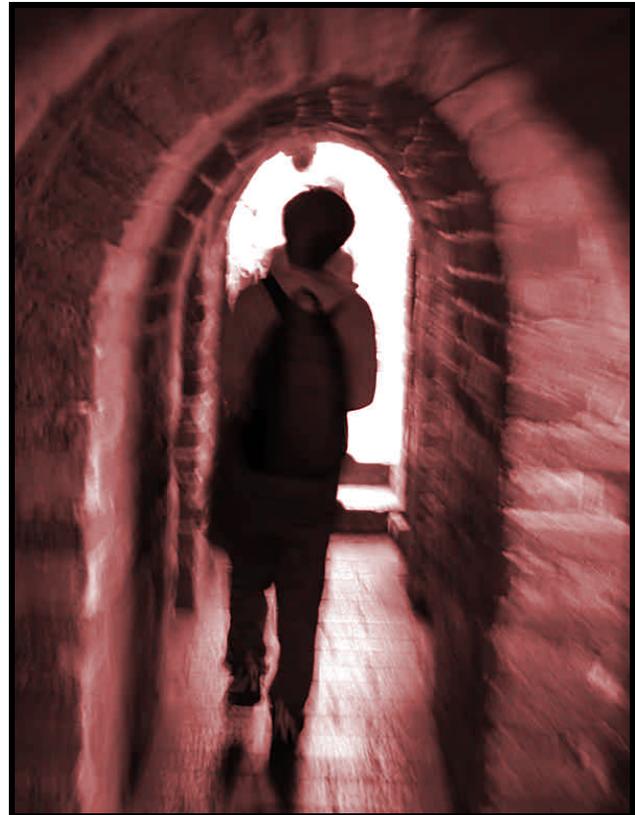
While the geographer's interest in places of fear is partly academic, politics and economics can be greatly affected by geographies of fear. As SARS cases became more common across Asia, many people in North America stopped going to Chinese restaurants and businesses based on irrational fear of getting SARS.

Public policy is often shaped by environmental fear. Urban development projects are often designed to minimize or alleviate citizens' fears of certain parts of a city. The increase in gated communities can be seen as one way in which suburban residents have tried to shield themselves from environments they consider unsafe.

Further Research

1. Read Yi-Fu Tuan's classic, *Landscapes of Fear* (1979), available in most university libraries at schools with geography programs.

2. For more on fear and gated communities, you might check out *Privatopia* by Evan McKenzie (Yale University Press, 1996).

3. Do a survey on your campus or in your community to find out what places in the area cause the most fear in your friends and classmates. Can anything be done to alleviate these fears?