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Volume: Special Volume 8 (2020)

## Atmospheric Affordances and the Sense of Urban Places

*Vesa Vihanninjoki*

### Abstract

The places of our everyday lives constitute a fundamental condition for the sensibility and the meaningfulness of our urban experience. Such places afford us various things, and it is precisely the afforded uses and actions that remarkably affect or even define our experience of a place. It is, however, crucial to ask what makes certain place-based affordances visible to us while others remain invisible. Why do we experience and interpret a place as a “place-for-something,” and what is the role of aesthetics in this process? Not all place-based affordances are equally visible to everyone, and the meaning of personal and shared experiential history is essential here. Further, familiarity with a place and its particularity may be required to perceive certain atmospheric affordances that constitute the aesthetic character or sense of that place, giving rise to a possibility of a specific place-based urban identity.

### Key Words

aesthetics of place; affordances; sense of place; urban aesthetics; urban everyday

### 1. Introduction

The sense of place is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has been the subject of numerous studies among various disciplines, such as environmental psychology, human geography, architectural theory, and environmental aesthetics. However, because of the variety of theoretical frameworks, the

related research has remained rather heterogeneous and even incommensurable, thus substantially hindering or even preventing fruitful discussion between research traditions. The excessive amount of literature gives rise to a need to critically examine the studies themselves so that the underlying presuppositions and tacit emphases can be explicated, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon itself.

In a recent article, Raymond *et al.* attempt to tackle these issues by developing an affordance-informed approach to the sense of place, in order to further analyze the “fast” and “slow” dimensions of a place experience.<sup>[1]</sup> According to their view, the research on the sense of place has privileged the slow aspects, such as place attachments and place meanings, and disregarded the fast, such as the direct or real-time perception of place-based action possibilities, that is, the affordances of a place. They claim that typical approaches to the sense of place “rely on a high level of intellectual abstraction of cognitions, beliefs, attitudes, or other mental representations about the physical, social, or personal qualities of a setting; [hence] it remains unclear how the immediately perceived and sensory dimensions of sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch [...] contribute to overall place meaning.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Despite the apparent usefulness of their account—they insightfully illustrate how the sense of place has been approached in an overly abstract manner—they apply the concept of affordance merely at the level of the fast, focusing on the present and on the particular possibilities that place affords an agent at a specific moment in time. However, by disregarding the past, and the experiential history of various places that the agent necessarily carries, they do not succeed in providing an adequate account of the skills and practices that the possibility of perceiving the place-based affordances involves. Above all, these skills and practices take a remarkably long time to evolve and are thus slow. Hence, affordances themselves include elements that are both fast and slow, and, as such, the concept of affordance is also useful in addressing the slow dimensions that constitute a sense of place.

Indeed, the perception of certain possibilities for action in an environment is always a socio-culturally and temporally conditioned event, essentially manifesting the relationships that particular life-forms have with their material surroundings. More generally, perceiving particular affordances and not others in a concrete local environment is indicative of the diverse ways in which the material dimensions of a place unfold to a life-form in

experience; that is, they are not merely perceived as a collection of sensory stimuli but also interpreted as a meaningful context for action. On the basis of this, I argue that affordances are the key to understanding place-related experience, in general, and the meaning of places in the urban sphere, in particular. Further, I claim that places afford distinct types of experience and there are certain identifiable, place-based atmospheric affordances that specifically constitute the aesthetic character, or sense, of a place.

## 2. The place-based aesthetics of everyday urban life

In a fundamental sense, we live our lives in places. As corporeal and temporal beings, humans exist in a world that consists of places. The places of our everyday lives are not, however, mere perceivable and manageable objects of experience but constitute a more fundamental condition for the sensibility and the meaningfulness of our experience, in general. The specific quality of such everyday places has proven to be a vexed philosophical problem and has been assessed in terms of familiarity, openness and opening, and contextuality, to name a few possibilities.<sup>[3]</sup> What is common to all these approaches to the ontological-existential function of places is that they essentially rely on the Heideggerian conception of human existence as a placed being, as *Dasein*, literally translated as “there-being.”<sup>[4]</sup>

Such a placedness of our existence means that before we pay any conscious attention to the world and the things we encounter in it, we already have a pre-reflective and primordial relation to our place. Despite the fact that everyday places serve as the basic constituents of our lifeworld, they are rarely in our focus; quite the contrary, they are usually and, above all, *normally* ignored, as they do not announce themselves but remain, as it were, to the side. This means the places of our daily lives are something that are taken for granted so that other things can remain in the focus of our conscious inquiries. In other words, such places afford us various actions and experiences without themselves being acted on or experienced as such.

The specific quality of such everyday places gives rise to a certain type of aesthetics that essentially exceeds the scope of an art-theory inspired and object-centered tradition of aesthetics, focusing on positive or negative reactions to something. Indeed, from the aesthetic point of view, the unobtrusive places are crucial in that they set the tone for our everyday dealings, making certain possibilities of use and action

visible, or even creating them. In this sense, the essence of such contextual aesthetics of place is thus not reactive but proactive, as they actively but often unobtrusively enhance or promote certain life-forms and their related values while simultaneously eroding the apparent contingency involved in the status quo.

Though aesthetics has primarily to do with the dimension of experience, the salient connections between action and experience should not be neglected or underestimated. Indeed, it is precisely the uses and action that a particular place affords that remarkably affect or even define our experience of it. Also, it is not at all trivial to ask why, exactly, we experience or interpret a place as a place for certain specific uses and actions, that is, as a “place-for-something.” For example, how public urban parks have been used has changed remarkably. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the Esplanade Park, located in the heart of Helsinki, was primarily a place for taking leisurely strolls and engaging in a rather regulated and formal social life. Today the park serves as a platform for far more informal activities, such as having a picnic, playing outdoor games, and even sunbathing.<sup>[5]</sup>

This unquestionable change in the ways places are used has an experiential or aesthetic correlate, so to speak. In our experience of a place, some uses are possible and appropriate, and some we may neglect or perceive as inappropriate; they are essentially out of place. To be sure, we are remarkably sensitive to noticing such changes in possible and appropriate uses, particularly in familiar places, even though the relevant differences in the socio-material surroundings would be extremely difficult to identify and specify in detail. Hence, one could speak of a skill comparable to aesthetic judgment or taste, which is the outcome of a lengthy process of becoming familiar with a place and learning about its character, in practice. Such experientially opaque amalgamations of equipmentality and aesthetics form the fundamental basis of place-based aesthetics in the urban sphere, as I have argued elsewhere, in more detail.<sup>[6]</sup>

Although various objectively verifiable physical restrictions and social norms necessarily condition our placed being, we can also ask how, exactly, these restrictions and norms manifest themselves experientially and in our experience of particular places, like in the case of Esplanade Park. Such investigation falls essentially within the scope of aesthetics of place, understood as a discipline that examines, among other things, the experiential quality or the sense of place as a historical phenomenon emerging from but not determined by the

dynamism of socio-material conditions. Aesthetics of place is thus not merely about the specific, sharply, and unequivocally delineated aesthetic values and meanings of *a* place but the constitution of our interpretative experience of the world in which we find ourselves placed.

### 3. The two dimensions of aesthetic quality in the urban sphere

How I understand the term 'aesthetic' here is similar to the way Ossi Naukkarinen deals with aesthetics while addressing another subdivision of everyday aesthetics, that of human appearance.<sup>[7]</sup> To be sure, despite some evident differences, the aesthetics of human appearance and the aesthetics of the built environment have much in common, especially since both represent phenomena that we cannot help encountering in our daily life; they both represent the aesthetics of the unavoidable. As an example of unavoidable everyday aesthetic phenomena in the sphere of human appearance, Naukkarinen gives the example of a typical "mathematician's look," consisting of "somewhat untidy hair, pale skin, metal-framed eye-glasses, a men's shirt of some subdued color, slightly too short trousers, and more or less worn-out shoes."<sup>[8]</sup>

The point here is that without knowing any case-specific details and despite the presumed lack of conscious effort from the mathematician's side, the stereotypical mathematician can be considered as having an aesthetic of their own: "Quite independently of how many such people really exist and how consciously created their style is, in other peoples' eyes they may form a group that embodies *a certain kind of aesthetics* that can be individuated and evaluated."<sup>[9]</sup> It is particularly important to note that an aesthetic is something that can be both individuated and evaluated, and a certain kind of aesthetics thus contains the two dimensions of aesthetic quality: the descriptive and the normative. The descriptive dimension of aesthetic quality refers to the aesthetic kind or the aesthetic character of a thing, that is, what comprises the particularity of the thing and what makes the thing identifiable in experience. The normative dimension, in turn, is based on comparisons of quantitative or even numerical aesthetic value; a thing can be of high or low aesthetic quality and, accordingly, either desirable or undesirable.

Certainly, because these two aspects of aesthetic quality are not distinguished clearly enough, there is often considerable confusion within aesthetic argumentation. Indeed, it is entirely common to speak of a high aesthetic quality, but this already involves some implicit assumptions about what kind of aesthetic



quality we are dealing with. These assumptions are usually context-specific and tacit, in that they are essentially built in the socio-cultural norms concerning the situations in which aesthetic concepts are applicable. In the most paradigmatic cases of aesthetic argumentation, the possibility of confusion may be relatively small or even negligible. For example, it is widely agreed that beauty is something desirable and valuable. One could even claim that the feature of desirability is inherent in the concept of beauty and, at least in contemporary Western society, it is quite unusual to speak about beauty in a genuinely negative sense. However, in a more contested situation, as in the case of urban environment, generally speaking, it could be very beneficial to separately assess the two dimensions of aesthetic quality. Thus, one should first specify the most central features of the intended aesthetic character and only then discuss whether or not such aesthetic character is desirable in the first place and for whom it might be desirable.

The apparent controversy over aesthetic matters in the urban sphere can be illustrated by examining some relatively common attributes of the urban aesthetic and their evaluation as either desirable or undesirable features of the environment. For example, the term 'brutal' refers to an aesthetic kind that largely provokes severe antipathies, though there are some proponents, too. It is relatively commonly accepted that brutal urban aesthetics, exemplified particularly by the branch of puritan architectural modernism, widely known as Brutalism, results in unsuitable habitats for people, giving rise to feelings of anxiety and alienation. Some people, however, think that brutal environments and the Brutalist style, in general, are truthful to the values and the (industrial) building practices of the modern era and thus valuable as a manifestation of the zeitgeist.

The sources of disagreements, however, need not be so extreme as in the case of the brutal and Brutalism. The presence of history and the related roughness and the sense of *patina* in modern surroundings also generates challenging disputes that have concrete outcomes for the development of the urban environment. In Helsinki, for example, the partially ruined warehouses from the nineteenth century that once belonged to the Finnish State Railways sharply divided public opinion. Some wanted to conserve the ruins as a visual reminder of both local and national history while others wanted to make room for new and "more suitable" urban structures. Though the official and final argument for eventually demolishing the remains of the warehouse was technical in nature—the ruins were deemed unsafe—there was a clear aesthetic undertone in the general discussion regarding their destiny.

For our present purposes, it is particularly interesting to note that the opposing parties, by and large, agreed about the aesthetic kind of the ruins while clearly disagreeing about the desirability of such a kind in the center of the Finnish capital. Indeed, they both regarded the ruins as a “break in the otherwise modern appearance of the place,” representing thus “a totally different world than the surrounding shiny buildings made of glass,” but such roughness was then considered either as a positive or a negative feature in the urban sphere.<sup>[10]</sup> Now that the ruins have been replaced with a new library building, the site has been publicly celebrated as a “modern Finnish landscape” made of glass, steel, and concrete, that is, essentially as a manifestation of an aesthetic presumably suitable for such a central location.<sup>[11]</sup>

#### 4. Aesthetics of the urban everyday and the notion of affordance

There is yet one critical remark to be made when applying the described notion of an aesthetic kind to the sphere of everyday environments; it relates to the role of conscious attention and actions in aesthetic issues. Indeed, Naukkarinen hesitates about positing an aesthetic to someone without having “good reason to suppose that the person in question really has paid *conscious attention* to aesthetic matters and *knows* that he [sic] is revealing something of them through his or her look.”<sup>[12]</sup> Such a statement reveals that Naukkarinen approaches everyday aesthetics from a specific, design-oriented point of view that emphasizes authorship in aesthetic matters.

In the urban sphere, however, many things have remarkable aesthetic relevance, even though the question of authorship might never be asked. On the contrary, the various elements of the urban everyday environment are simply present—they are taken for granted, as if they have always been there. In fact, the built environment is, by and large, anonymous, in that it does not reveal its origin. The planners, the constructors, and the financiers, and their ultimate interests, typically remain in the background. Despite this, cities are replete with aesthetic values and meanings, and various aesthetic means are systematically used in order to advance certain values or to inhibit the realization of other values.

The role of conscious effort may also be much less important in addressing the aesthetic dimension of our environmental experience than Naukkarinen seems to presume. For example, he describes our aesthetic relationship to our environment as follows: “it seems to be characteristic for the aesthetic that we approach environments in a dense and replete way: we really



*pay* [...] *attention* to every possible detail [...], and all the differences between different environments are important. This means *paying attention* to every environment's particularity."<sup>[13]</sup> What I find crucial here is the difference between "paying attention" to and "noticing" aesthetic aspects in an environment. When experiencing the environment, all the details and the differences are likely to be of great importance, but in a way that cannot be entirely reduced to the sphere of deliberate contemplation, as Naukkarinen seems to think.

Indeed, what is peculiar about the particularity of an environment is that we can, and often do, notice it without paying any conscious attention to it. We can, and do, also perceive the aesthetic dimensions of an environment—its aesthetic character or aesthetic kind— when experiencing it in an *unfocused* and *unconscious* way. Such an unfocused and unconscious relation to our surroundings is not, in turn, unusual at all; one could even claim that this is most often the case, that is, whenever we have to focus on our everyday "concernful dealings," and not on the surroundings themselves.

In general, such noticing-without-paying-attention forms a specific mode of our environmental experience that is justifiable from an evolutionary point of view, as it is essentially an economical mode of experience. It is also likely to have much more aesthetic relevance than has been acknowledged thus far, especially concerning the everyday environments that simply cannot consist of various aesthetic spectacles demanding our attention. Indeed, evolutionary ecological psychology provides some helpful insights concerning the connections between the functionality and the appearance of an everyday environment. The fundamental hypothesis goes that we tend to aesthetically prefer such environments that afford us the things we need and appreciate, such as nourishment, shelter against weather and predators, opportunities for seeing without being seen, and the like.

A note of caution is required, however, when relying on evolutionary arguments concerning aesthetic matters, mostly because of differences in the presumed scope and scale of the arguments. While evolutionary and ecological theories aim at describing the potential meaning of aesthetic preferences at the level of species, the more culturally, and subculturally, sensitive accounts shed light on the highly context-specific questions of aesthetic meanings and values. In brief, universalist evolutionary accounts tend to be short on detail. This results, for example, in statements like "human beings generally appreciate savanna-like environments with the presence of trees and water," or

“people prefer vistas that promise more,” like a bend in a path or a view that is partially obscured by foliage.<sup>[14]</sup> Hence, it is not the case that we could somehow infer or deduce the nuanced aesthetic values of a contemporary urban environment from our evolutionary history. The extent and diversity of urban aesthetic values is simply too great for this.

The contributions of evolutionary and ecological psychology are, however, important, for they help us conceive the meaning of environmental aesthetics for the human life form, generally speaking. Above all, according to the arguments of these disciplines, the aesthetic dimension is essentially embedded in our experience, that is, in *all* of our experience, not merely in the experiences in which there is a specific and conscious focus on aesthetic issues. The following passage from Stephen Kaplan states the central claim in a concise manner: “Aesthetic reactions reflect neither a casual nor a trivial aspect of the human makeup. Aesthetics is not the reflection of a whim that people exercise when they are *not otherwise occupied*. Rather, such reactions appear to constitute a guide to human behavior that has far-reaching consequences.”<sup>[15]</sup>

The fundamental connection between the things that an environment affords and how it appears to us in experience also paves the way for assessing urban aesthetics anew. Such a possibility eventually culminates in the notion of *affordance*. The relationship between the environmental affordances and the aesthetic quality of an environment is not, however, straightforward or unproblematic, as there are notable challenges conceptually and at an empirical level.<sup>[16]</sup> This relates, above all, to the fundamental ambiguity regarding the concepts of aesthetics and perception: On the one hand, aesthetics seemingly comprises a particular dimension of individual environmental perception; on the other hand, aesthetics guides our perception in a more general way.

### **5. Sense of place and place-based canonical affordances**

In a recent article by Raymond *et al.*, the notion of affordance is applied to a closely related and aesthetically very relevant phenomenon, namely to the *sense of place*.<sup>[17]</sup> According to the authors, there is an excessive emphasis on the slow dimensions of a place experience at the expense of fast dimensions, meaning that sense of place is too often conceptualized merely in terms of highly abstract cognitions, beliefs, attitudes, or other mental representations. Even though the main argument seems justified, the apparent problem inherent in such a view is that the authors do not analyze systematically enough the

connections between the fast and the slow, that is, between the dimensions of perception-action and social construction, respectively.

To be more exact, the authors claim that “immediately perceived place meanings are both temporally and physically located and are influenced by a range of physical and social elements in one’s immediately perceivable environment and by socio-cultural processes.”<sup>[18]</sup> The level of immediate perception thus includes social elements and is influenced by socio-cultural processes but supposedly is still not socially constructed. On the basis of this, the sharp division of a place experience into dimensions of fast perception-action and slow social constructions may prove to be a false dichotomy that does not do justice to the nature of affordances as the ultimate but still temporal and dynamic foundation for the sense of place.

Indeed, immediate sensory perception and the long-term socio-culturally defined frameworks of interpretation cannot be separated too sharply, which is also crucial to our understanding of affordances. In order for an environment to afford a possibility of use or action for an agent, it first needs to afford an *interpretative experience* of this possibility. The possibilities inherent in or related to an environment first have to be interpreted experientially as such, that is, as relevant possibilities, *before* the agent can assess the adequacy of these in light of their present aims and intentions. This kind of preliminary experience of environmental affordances is direct, in that it does not involve computational or mental representations, but is still largely influenced or even conditioned by various socio-cultural practices.

Indeed, our experience is opaque in that it does not reveal the cumulative historical sediments that essentially form the basis of our experience. We inevitably carry with us the heritage of our personal, shared, cultural, and even species-wide history of experience, though we are not aware of this. In addition, previous generations keep guiding us through the material dimension; certain deeply rooted artifacts and their related conventionalized practices give rise to a sense of intergenerational continuity, also in terms of experience. It is precisely such temporally developed and developing amalgamations of the material and social dimensions that tend to be problematic for the affordance-based theories of human environments, as Bloomfield *et al.* point out:

The ‘affordances’ of, say, a chair, a post-box or a cigarette are not reducible to their material constitution but are inextricably bound with specific, historically variable, ways of life. We

therefore need to better acknowledge what lies beyond the here-and-now timeframe adopted by most analyses conducted in terms of affordances. Often the only other timeframe invoked in such analyses is that of evolution, the long process of mutual attunement between the natural environment and the human sensorium. Yet, the emergence and ongoing transformation of the made environment, including whatever we might mean by 'culture', falls between those two temporal frames.<sup>[19]</sup>

The shortcomings of recent affordance-based psychological studies might have something to do with the fact that they seem to operate at the level of *canonical affordances*, without being aware of it. Canonical affordances refer to "the conventional, normative meanings of things, notably in relation to human artifacts. For example, a chair is for sitting upon, even if no-one happens to be sitting upon it, or someone else is standing on it in order to change a light bulb. In such cases, the affordance has indeed become 'objectivated' or, better, 'impersonal': one sits on chairs."<sup>[20]</sup> Thus, in a sense, canonical affordances are a phenomenal description of our mundane experiences regarding the various functional things in our habitat. In our everyday life, we perceive *de facto* the chair *as* something to be sat upon, not as a coincidental piece of material or even as an artifact with certain symbolic values embedded within it.

Even though canonical affordances are impersonal, in the described sense, they necessarily and implicitly refer to an experiencing agent, as affordances by definition exist *for* someone. In the case of canonical affordances, this someone is a kind of generalized subject, supposedly exemplifying a particular way of experiencing that is specific to a particular life-form. The generalized subject manifests an average experience of an average member of a culture, though it is questionable whether such experiences and experiencers really exist in the first place. Hence, if empirical environmental psychology operates at the level of canonical affordances, it loses sight of personal and reference group-specific variations in experience and, above all, of the lengthy socio-cultural processes that the formation of the urban environmental affordances necessarily involves.

## **6. Background-like affordances and the contextuality of everyday places**

The undeniable fact that certain affordances have specific canonical quality, that they really are canonical to us, means that we experience them in a particular manner and that they are present to us in experience in a specific way. Related to places, the canonical affordances of a place are such that they

remain in the background in our everyday experience of that place. According to Don Ihde, these kinds of background relations to the affordances have “atmospheric characteristics,” in that we do not relate to them explicitly but yet we “live in their midst, often not noticing their surrounding presence.”<sup>[21]</sup> Such background-like affordances are thus constantly available to us, though we might not be aware of them; experientially, they comprise a form of “present absence” or “absent presence,” being in any case “part of the experienced field of the inhabitant, a piece of the immediate environment.”<sup>[22]</sup>

In order to shed light on the complex relationship between affordances and their atmospheric features, it is crucial to understand the difference between direct and focused perception. The perception of an affordance may indeed be direct, in that it does not involve any mental representations, but it need not be a focused perception in that the affordance would be paid any conscious attention. Here, I find the term ‘peripheral perception,’ put forward by Juhani Pallasmaa, very useful; many features of the environment are recognized peripherally, without any consciousness of the particular features or of the act of recognition itself.

The relationship between peripheral perception and the atmospheric features of an environment is indeed of fundamental significance: the terms ‘peripheral perception’ and ‘atmospheric perception’ seem, by and large, to be interchangeable, and the perception of an atmosphere seems to comprise the archetypal case of peripheral perception. Pallasmaa describes the perception of an atmosphere as follows: “We grasp the atmosphere *before* we identify its details or understand it intellectually. In fact, we may be completely unable to *say* anything meaningful about the characteristics of a situation, yet have a firm image, emotive attitude, and recall of it.”<sup>[23]</sup>

I further argue that we perceive the presence of certain affordances in a similar manner, that is, peripherally or atmospherically, particularly those that are familiar and canonical to us and remain absent in the background in our everyday experience. Above all, we do not *have to* pay any conscious attention to such affordances in order to understand their essence, that is, what they afford to us, and we have to focus on our everyday affordances *merely* on special occasions, such as when we have to adopt new ones or when the existing ones cease to function as supposed. <sup>[24]</sup> The background-like canonical affordances of a place still essentially contribute to



our experience of that place, eventually comprising the taken-for-grantedness of a local environment.

It seems that the peripherally perceived sense of a place refers to the *contextual nature* of that place, essentially and effectively escaping and opposing any attempts at reductive objectification by the means of conscious and focused attention. The contextuality of the place, in itself, consists of the place-based existential intentionalities, and the related contextual aesthetics has to do with the revelation of these existential intentionalities and their material basis, as such.<sup>[25]</sup> Peripheral perception of a place is thus the key in understanding how the environment and its place-based affordances are present to us, that is, how they present themselves to us *as* something meaningful, and how places eventually reveal themselves to us *as* places-for-something.

There is, however, notable reciprocity and dynamism between the peripherally perceived character or sense of a place and the particular place-based affordances. In general, peripheral perception does not take place in a void but in the presence of certain environmental affordances that essentially affect how we perceive our surroundings, consciously and unconsciously. The following example of the Waterfront Walkway in the City of Espoo illustrates this.

Before the construction of the rather contested Walkway, the maritime waterfront of Espoo was relatively inaccessible and very few citizens could enjoy the seaside vistas, even though the city owned many of the shoreline properties and they were open to anyone, in principle. The evident problem was that the experiential character or sense of such relatively remote places resembled more that of a private backyard than a publicly accessible park. For instance, the reporter of a local newspaper describes her visit to one of the most debated construction sites as follows: "If the Waterfront Walkway will not be built to its designated site, providing thousands of people with recreational amenities, the publicly owned land will be used only by very few. At the moment it seems like a backyard of beautiful houses. I visited the site, and I was *ashamed* of sneaking around."<sup>[26]</sup>

When the Walkway eventually was completed, the sense of the described places entirely changed: the affordance of accessing the waterfront relatively easily, by using a clearly designated pathway, made the places public, so that people would not feel uncomfortable spending time there. Such a change in the overall character or sense of these places, in turn, had remarkable effects on the perception of other, perhaps more

abstract and intricate place-based affordances that had existed even before the constructed Walkway. Now that people could access the shoreline, and they did not have to be ashamed of “sneaking around,” the affordances of, say, observing coincidental passers-by, beautiful sailboats, and the seaside nature also became more perceptible to more people. From the viewpoint of canonical affordances, this means that certain new environmental affordances have become canonical. These particular affordances are now objectivated, and they are generally perceived as the objective features of the surroundings.

The point here is that providing a new, clearly *functional* affordance, such as the pathway, can have notable influence on the experiential character or sense of a place; this, then, makes certain “new,” perhaps more *atmospheric* affordances, such as enjoying the presence of other people and maritime nature, more perceptible, contributing once again essentially to the sense of the place. To summarize, one could say that because of the complex and ongoing interaction between the functional and atmospheric affordances, the place eventually affords to us certain place-based experiences that eventually constitutes the particularity and the sense of that place.

## **7. Conclusions: Atmospheric affordances and the question of place-based urban identity**

It must be noted that the canonical affordances underlying the overall aesthetic character and sense of a place are, in principle, canonical to *us*. There are plenty of other perspectives available, and the same material environment can afford various different characters or senses to different people with different backgrounds. In this sense, the aforementioned atmospheric affordances can be seen as second-order affordances that stem from but are not determined by first-order functional affordances and their material bases. It can be thus claimed that certain atmospheric second-order affordances of a place may exist merely to those people who perceive the place and its first-order functional affordances in a particular way, that is, as an essential part of a particular, historical, and locally bound life-form, and perhaps from a specific perspective of an insider.

Indeed, especially the places of our everyday urban life rarely give rise to canonical place experiences, as might be the case with certain well-known cities and their most distinctive places, and they do not consist solely of most typical canonical affordances. Some of the place-based functional affordances certainly give rise to canonical interpretations: A bench is usually recognized *as* a bench, and it is relatively easy to identify a park

as a park. There is, however, in addition to these, a plethora of affordances that relate to locality and familiarity with local surroundings in a special, much more detailed way. These may have to do with enjoying the intricate details of the seasonally changing views from the bench, or with a local social order regarding what kind of people use the park, not to mention the varying kinds of auditory and olfactory sensations the park may afford at different times of day or year.

Familiarity with a place thus means perceiving certain specific aspects in the canonical affordances of that place, and the meaning of time and cumulating experience is crucial in learning to perceive such relatively abstract affordances that comprise distinctive local identity and character. The environmental psychologists Rachel and Stephen Kaplan, and the landscape architect Robert Ryan, describe this very well:

What constitutes distinctiveness can be a tricky issue. [...] Without [previous] experience of a place, its unique aspects are difficult to recognize. Experience can make a substantial difference. With familiarity one learns to distinguish patterns in what seemed to be disorder. What at first seems to be an unexciting, undifferentiated area, can, in time, become rich in special features and memorable distinctiveness.<sup>[27]</sup>

In short, it is precisely the affordances that give rise to feelings of belonging and locality that are, very often, if not by definition, invisible and nonexistent to an outsider. To be more exact, the material basis of such an affordance, and the related functional first-order affordances, may be visible and thus exist to a larger crowd but the atmospheric second-order affordance itself exists merely for a significantly smaller number of people.

Thus, an apparent agreement on the material and functional dimensions of an environment does not guarantee agreement on the two aspects of aesthetic quality, regarding both the aesthetic character and its value to us, and a single environment can give rise to either “thin” or “thick” aesthetic interpretations for different people, depending on the “degree of locality.”<sup>[28]</sup> Such a mechanism can, indeed, have significant “communal function,” engendering a community of, and in, experience.<sup>[29]</sup> This means that the related individuals experience the local environment in a manner that is similar enough to provide them with a more or less imaginary sense of identity and belonging together, no matter how loosely, but nevertheless acknowledging the importance of the shared site for their daily lives.<sup>[30]</sup>

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Vesa Vihanninjoki (MA in Aesthetics, 2015, University of Helsinki) is a salaried Doctoral Candidate at the University of Helsinki. His doctoral research examines the role that aesthetics plays both in urban everyday life and in the diverse forms of present-day urban development. With an academic background covering also various fields of technology, like civil engineering and urban planning, Vihanninjoki aims at providing a multidisciplinary approach to urban aesthetics.

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## Endnotes

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[1] Christopher M. Raymond, Marketta Kyttä & Richard Stedman, "Sense of Place, Fast and Slow: The Potential Contributions of Affordance Theory to Sense of Place," *Frontiers in Psychology* (2017), vol. 8, article number 1674. The notion of affordance originates from the ecological perceptual psychologist James J. Gibson in the 1960s, though he put forward the most well-known formulations in his 1979 book, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1979).

[2] Raymond et al. "Sense of Place, Fast and Slow," p. 5.

[3] For familiarity, see Arto Haapala, "Strangeness and Familiarity in the Urban Environment," in *The City as Cultural Metaphor*, ed. Arto Haapala (Lahti: International Institute of Applied Aesthetics, 1998); "On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness, and the Meaning of Place," in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, eds. Andrew Light & Jonathan M. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); "The Everyday, Building, and Architecture: Reflections on the Ethos and Beauty of our Built Surroundings," *Cloud-Cuckoo-Land. International Journal of Architectural Theory* (2017), vol. 22, no. 36, pp. 169–182. For openness and opening, see Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006); *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place: Explorations in the Topology of Being* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012); "Placing

Understanding/Understanding Place," *Sophia* (2016), DOI: 10.1007/s11841-016-0546-9. For contextuality, see Vesa Vihanninjoki, "Urban Places as Aesthetic Phenomena: Framework for a Place-Based Ontology of Urban Lifeworld," *Topoi* (2019), DOI: 10.1007/s11245-018-9601-1; "Experience Machines and the Standardized Aesthetics of Place," in *Moving from Landscapes to Cityscapes and Back: Theoretical and Applied Approaches to Human Environments*, eds. Beata Frydryczak, Arto Haapala & Mateusz Salwa (Lodz: Przypis, 2020 [in press]).

[4] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [1927], trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, 4th edition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978). About the translation of the notion, see e.g. Abraham Olivier, "Understanding Place," in *Place, Space and Hermeneutics*, ed. Bruce B. Janz (Cham: Springer, 2017).

[5] About the history of the Esplanade Park, see e.g. Maunu Häyrynen, *From Scenic Parks to Reform Parks: Public Parks and the Park Policy of Helsinki from the 1880s to the 1930s* (Helsinki: Helsinki-seura, 1994).

[6] Vihanninjoki, "Urban Places as Aesthetic Phenomena."

[7] Ossi Naukkarinen, *Aesthetics of the Unavoidable: Aesthetic Variations in Human Appearance* (Lahti: International Institute of Applied Aesthetics, 1998), p. 50.

[8] Naukkarinen, *Aesthetics of the Unavoidable*, p. 50.

[9] Ibid., p. 51, emphasis added.

[10] Ilona Turtola, "VR:n makasiiniraunioiden kohtalosta yritetään vihdoin päättää: muistomerkiksi vai kaatopaikalle?" *Yle News*, June 30, 2016, <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-8991421>; Samuli Launonen, "'Kaupunkilaisten toimintaa ei otettu riittävän vakavasti' – Tutkija: VR:n makasiinien muistoseinää ei pitäisi purkaa," *Ilta-Sanomat*, July 23, 2016, <https://www.is.fi/kotimaa/art-2000001223192.html>

[11] Unto Hämäläinen, "Oodi Oodille," *Helsingin Sanomat*, December 2, 2018, B13.

[12] Naukkarinen, *Aesthetics of the Unavoidable*, p. 51, emphasis added.

[13] Ossi Naukkarinen, "Aesthetic Footprint," *Aesthetic Pathways* (2011), vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 89–111, ref. on p. 105, emphasis altered.



[14] See e.g. John H. Falk & John D. Balling, "Evolutionary Influence on Human Landscape Preference," *Environment and Behavior* (2010), vol. 42, no. 4, pp. 479–493; Stephen Kaplan, "Aesthetics, Affect, and Cognition: Environmental Preference from an Evolutionary Perspective," *Environment and Behavior* (1987), vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 3–32.

[15] Kaplan, "Aesthetics, Affect, and Cognition," p. 26, emphasis added.

[16] An (environmental) affordance refers to the things that an environment affords for an agent, but the affordance is not a feature of either the environment or the agent, as it pertains to the relationship *between* them. Despite this, one is tempted to speak of the affordances *of* or *in* an environment, but such expressions are misleading as they erode the crucial role of the experiencing agent.

[17] Raymond et al. "Sense of Place, Fast and Slow."

[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

[19] Brian P. Bloomfield, Yvonne Latham & Theo Vurdubakis, "Bodies, Technologies and Action Possibilities: When is an Affordance?" *Sociology* (2010), vol. 44, no. 3, pp. 415–433, ref. on pp. 428–429.

[20] Alan Costall, "Canonical Affordances in Context," *Avant* (2012), vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 85–93, ref. on p. 90.

[21] Don Ihde, *Technics and Praxis* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979), pp. 13–14. Ihde, himself, representing postphenomenological philosophy of technology, does not speak of affordances but of technologies. According to the fundamentals of postphenomenology, technologies *afford* us various things, thus mediating our relationship to the world. Despite the apparent similarities between affordance-based theories and postphenomenology, the framework of affordances is applicable much more widely than to mere technological affordances. For more details, particularly from an aesthetic point of view, see Sanna Lehtinen & Vesa Vihanninjoki, "Aesthetic Perspectives to Urban Technologies: Conceptualizing and Evaluating the Technology-Driven Changes in the Urban Everyday Experience," in *Technology and the City: Towards a Philosophy of Urban Technologies*, eds. Michael Nagenborg, Margoth González Woge, Taylor Stone & Pieter Vermaas (Dordrecht: Springer, 2020 [in press]); "Moving in the Metropolis: Smart City Solutions and the Urban Everyday Experience," in *Architecture and the Smart City*,

eds. Sergio M. Figueiredo, Sukanya Krishnamurthy & Torsten Schröder (London: Routledge, 2020).

[22] Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld. From Garden to Earth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 109.

[23] Juhani Pallasmaa, "Space, Place and Atmosphere: Emotion and Peripheral Perception in Architectural Experience," *Lebenswelt* (2014), vol. 4, p. 232, emphasis added.

[24] Surely we can, and even relatively often do, pay attention also to such background-like affordances, but this is not the *paradigmatic* case of how they are present to us. What is crucial here is that *normally* we do not have to focus on them, and this is how I understand the meaning of the Ihdean expression "atmospheric characteristics."

[25] Vihanninjoki, "Urban Places as Aesthetic Phenomena."

[26] Päivi Punkka-Hänninen, "Taloyhtiö taistelee Espoota vastaan venesatamansa puolesta lirislahdessa," *Helsingin Sanomat*, August 19, 2007, translation by the author, emphasis added.

[27] Rachel Kaplan, Stephen Kaplan & Robert L. Ryan, *With People in Mind. Design and Management of Everyday Nature* (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1998), p. 15.

[28] Vesa Vihanninjoki, "Urban Aesthetics as a Trading Zone. The Conditions for Deliberative Planning and Cooperation in the Context of Urban Infill Development," *Architectural Research in Finland* (2018), vol. 2, no.1, pp. 75–93.

[29] See e.g. Arnold Berleant, "Aesthetics and Community," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* (1994), vol. 28, pp. 257–272.

[30] About "imagined communities" and their relationship to places, see e.g. Talja Blokland, *Urban Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

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