

Faculty of Arts
University of Helsinki

**THE AESTHETICS OF EVERYDAY
URBAN PLACES**
A POSTPHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses the question of the role of everyday places in the constitution of the contemporary urban lifeworld. The focus of the examination is on the aesthetics of places – understood primarily as the experiential quality and character of places – and on the interconnections between the abstract experiential dimensions and more concrete functional and material dimensions inherent in the mundane places of our urban life.

The theoretical framework of the thesis comes primarily from philosophical aesthetics, particularly from everyday aesthetics, and it is complemented by insights from the postphenomenological philosophy of technology and ecological environmental psychology. Certain ideas originating in human geography, planning theory, architectural theory and the theory of design are also applied. On this basis, the thesis introduces a postphenomenologically-oriented affordance-based framework for understanding the aesthetics of everyday urban places.

The thesis builds on a Heideggerian place-based ontology that acknowledges “placedness” as the general condition for human experience and existence. According to the Heideggerian line of thought, there is an ontological difference between places as ontic phenomena and places as ontological structures, referring to the difference between places encountered within the lifeworld and places as constitutive of the lifeworld. As ontological structures, places cannot in principle be encountered and thus thematized as objects of conscious experience. This distinction is not acknowledged adequately enough in common accounts of place, including certain forms of place-based urban planning and urban development, such as various design-led place-making policies and practices.

The thesis presents an alternative, affordance-based account of places and their experiential qualities that is helpful in understanding the speculativeness of the place-making project that operates at the level of “generalized subject” and “generalized place experiences,” thus ignoring the necessary idiosyncrasies inherent in every possible experiencing agent. According to the main argument, there are certain commonly recognized features in urban everyday places that make them “known” for many people from different backgrounds and with different experiential histories. Using the affordance-based terminology, such features comprise the canonical affordances of the places: they are *the* possibilities for use and action that first come into one’s mind when thinking of a well-known place in one’s home town.

Canonical affordances are normative in that they can be perceived and utilized either correctly or incorrectly, and they manifest the “normal way” of relating to the affordances present in an environment. The canonical affordances inherent in our daily environments largely define the contents of our everyday life, as well as our understanding of our everyday life. However,

normativity also prevails with regard to more nuanced and intricate place-based affordances, giving rise to the conventionalization of more personal and reference group-specific relations to a place and its experiential character. Thus the experiential character of an everyday place is, at least partially, the outcome of the processes of familiarization and canonization.

Such an outlook on the aesthetics of everyday places highlights the role that certain lesser-known and unrecognized experiential dimensions of mundane places may have in the constitution of the contemporary urban lifeworld. The central outcome of the thesis is that the idiosyncratic and often not-so-obvious experiential qualities inherent in the most familiar environments and places are crucial when looked at from the viewpoint of comprehensive well-being, thus forming a subject that requires more attention when trying to enhance the sustainability of our urban life-form from an all-encompassing perspective.

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Writing this thesis has been an interesting and inspiring but also challenging and at times even frustrating project that has included many phases. The thesis covers a variety of diverse but still essentially related themes. Bouncing back and forth between topics such as the theory of urban planning, philosophy of technology, design-led place-making practices and technologically aided ways of moving around (to name a few) eventually forms a complex and manifold ensemble that constitutes the substantive core of this thesis.

To be honest, it has not always been entirely clear even to the author himself how closely the sub-parts of this project are connected. However, from a retrospective perspective it is easy to see that the covered topics are deeply intertwined, and that they are all essential parts of a larger phenomenon that can be called the *everyday urban experience*. One could say that there has been some kind of guiding intuition about the relevance of the thesis that has helped in carrying through the diverse phases of the project. It also seems that the initial intuition has not been altogether mistaken, even though some doubts and uncertainties may have occurred at times.

Having said that, now it is time to thank those people and organizations that have contributed to the process and the outcome of the Ph.D. project during this memorable journey. First, I wish to thank my supervisors, Professor of Aesthetics at the University of Helsinki, Arto Haapala, and Professor of Strategic Urban Planning at Aalto University, Raine Mäntysalo. As the main supervisor of my work, Arto has been my primary guide in the academic world, and concerning the everyday dealings and bureaucracies related to academic work at the university. Over the years, he has provided me with numerous practical and theoretical insights, and I am very grateful. Arto has given me the space that a personal research project requires, but he has been there to tackle any challenges whenever needed.

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indicating that the thesis not only includes the necessary academic merits but also serves as a relevant starting point for further inquiries and academic research.

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Vesa Vihanninjoki

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LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

This thesis is based on the following publications:

- I 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.
- II Sanna Lehtinen & Vesa Vihanninjoki, “Aesthetic Perspectives on 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 (Cham: Springer, 2021).
- III Vesa Vihanninjoki, “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: Officyna, 2020).
- IV Vesa Vihanninjoki & Sanna Lehtinen, “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).
- V Vesa Vihanninjoki, “Atmospheric Affordances and the Sense of Urban Places,” *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Special Volume 8 (2020) *Urban Aesthetics*.

The publications are referred to in the text by their roman numerals.

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AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE CO-AUTHORED ARTICLES

Article II: Sanna Lehtinen & Vesa Vihanninjoki, "Aesthetic Perspectives to Urban Technologies: Conceptualizing and Evaluating the Technology-Driven Changes in the Urban Everyday Experience."

Both authors have equally contributed to the article regarding the original idea, the structure, the writing, and the review process of the article. Concerning the contents of the article, Vihanninjoki has been primarily responsible for the sections 2. (Technologization of the Urban Everyday), 4. (Affordances and the Normativity of Everyday Practices), and 5. (Opening and Closing Affordances).

Article IV: Vesa Vihanninjoki & Sanna Lehtinen, "Moving in the Metropolis: Smart City Solutions and the Urban Everyday Experience."

Both authors have equally contributed to the article regarding the original idea, the structure, the writing, and the review process of the article. Concerning the contents of the article, Vihanninjoki has been primarily responsible for the section 4. (Technology-Induced Mobility and the Continuity of Urban Experiences) with the subsections 1. (Contemporary Wayfinding Tools: Increased Freedom of Movement or Spatial Illiteracy?) and 2. (Rail-based Public Transportation: from Commuting to Exploring?).

1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis addresses the question of the role of everyday places in the constitution of the contemporary urban lifeworld. The focus of the examination is on the aesthetics of places – understood primarily as the experiential quality and character of places – and on the interconnections between the abstract experiential dimensions and more concrete functional and material dimensions inherent in the mundane places of our urban life.

The theoretical framework of the thesis comes primarily from philosophical aesthetics, particularly from everyday aesthetics, and it is complemented by insights from the postphenomenological philosophy of technology and ecological environmental psychology. Also certain ideas originating in human geography, planning theory, architectural theory and the theory of design are applied.

This introduction to the thesis comprises seven chapters. The first chapter discusses the general features of place as a phenomenon and introduces the framework of everyday aesthetics. The second chapter examines the functions of the built environment and the connections between functionality and familiarity of human environments in more detail. After this, I will introduce the concept of the lifeworld: the focus is on the different horizons of the lifeworld, and on the relationship between the lifeworld and the everyday. I also address the role of places as the fundamental socio-material platform for the lifeworld.

The following chapter moves on to the theme of contextuality, scrutinizing the immaterial functions of an urban environment and the meaning of familiar things as the essential sources of contextuality that is characteristic of the lifeworld. Familiarization involves all the horizons of the lifeworld, which entails essential connections between the dimensions of sensory perception, functionality and cultural interpretation. All these dimensions have a role in our relationship to familiar things that, for their part, define how we interpret our environments. Further insights into the theme of “seeing through things” are gained from the postphenomenological philosophy of technology in the next chapter.

The mediating role of technological and other artifacts in our relationship to the world is an essential part of postphenomenological thinking, acknowledging the related contingencies and path-dependencies that stem from the historical nature of all functional items. Addressing the different modes of presence of various technologies in more detail is helpful in understanding the structure of our lifeworld, particularly concerning the taken-for-granted nature of our most familiar functional entities.

In order to emphasize matters of interpretative perception, the penultimate chapter introduces the notion of “affordance,” implying that the possible uses and actions that an entity may afford take place in a specific context and exist

for a particular experiencing agent. The perspective of ecological environmental psychology entails the idea that the affordance-based evaluation of different environments has its counterpart in the quality of perception, so that the most suitable environments tend to be preferred aesthetically.

The concluding chapter summarizes the main observations based on the various theoretical frameworks, showing that these diverse positions jointly provide a novel and seminal perspective on everyday urban environments and the places they consist of. Such an outlook on the aesthetics of everyday places highlights the role that certain lesser-known and unrecognized experiential dimensions of mundane places may have in the constitution of the contemporary urban lifeworld. The central outcome of the thesis is that the idiosyncratic and often not-so-obvious experiential qualities inherent in the most familiar environments and places are crucial from the viewpoint of comprehensive well-being, thus forming a subject that requires more attention when trying to enhance the sustainability of our urban life-form from an all-encompassing perspective.

2 PLACE AS A PHENOMENON AND THE PERSPECTIVE OF EVERYDAY AESTHETICS

“Place” is a central concept in many disciplines. Recently, it has been addressed from the viewpoint of architecture, planning theory, economics, social sciences, human geography, environmental psychology and philosophy, to name a few. Hence, it seems that despite the increased mobility of people and commodities, and the rapid development of information technology that allows various forms of “distant presence,” the significance of stationary and relatively stable places has not altogether vanished. On the contrary, one could even speak of a small-scale renaissance of place-related research, and the number of recent research articles from different fields of study is already vast. This also pertains to urban studies and urbanism, where place and its relation to urbanity has been a salient subject of interest lately.

Despite the apparent topicality of the notion of place, it is not entirely clear whether the concept refers to a single well-defined phenomenon, or whether instead it catches a complex ensemble, consisting of multiple intersecting and overlapping phenomena. Place and its meaning can be, and have been, conceived in many different ways, according to the emphases and the conventions of the discipline in question. For example, one can approach place as a design problem (questions related to scale, form-giving and other details), place as a part of urban structure (questions of functionality, location and connections), place as a site of productivity (questions of attractiveness, creativity and monetary value), place as a manifestation of social order (questions of social justice and injustice, of inclusion and exclusion), place as home (questions of belonging and identity), place as a source of individual well-being (questions of health and happiness), and place as a way of being (questions of existence and experience). The variety of different angles is, indeed, so great that one has serious challenges in trying grasp what exactly is essential in the phenomenon of place.

The situation is similar with space: one can either examine different possible spaces (such as urban space, architectural space, social space or symbolic space) and their characteristic features, or one can focus on the phenomenon of spatiality itself (see e.g. Malpas 2012b). Also, just as spatiality is a basic condition for human existence and experience, so we can see that the same applies to place: while we are necessarily surrounded by space that for its part defines our current state of existence, we are always in a place that constitutes a firm ground for our being. In a very fundamental sense, spatiality presupposes places – space consists of the relations between places – and there is no real opposition between these two. The evident problem with space, and its counterpart place, is that they are such abstract phenomena: it is very

hard to say anything meaningful about spatiality itself without making references to examples of more concrete spatial phenomena (that hereby inhabit places, too).

We are thus forced to examine concrete places in order to gain some understanding of the general condition of one's existence as a "placed being": it is merely via particular case studies that we can access the more primordial meaning of places. A note of caution is, however, required since we easily go astray in getting involved in the idiosyncrasies of a particularly fascinating place too deeply, thus losing sight of the significance of more mundane, even banal places. It is undeniably tempting to analyze the rich details and the vivid history of, say, an ancient piazza, a medieval fountain, or a 19th-century monumental square, but these kinds of extraordinary urban places reveal very little about the structure and the realities of our present-day urban life. On the contrary, it is precisely the unobtrusive, trivial and sometimes quite uninteresting places that are of crucial importance to our daily well-being and to the quality of our everyday lives.

The fundamental role of such ordinary urban places is also a central question in the field of *everyday aesthetics*, a sub-discipline of philosophical aesthetics which focuses on experiential values and meanings that traditionally have not been considered as purely or properly "aesthetic." To be sure, there has been considerable debate within the discourse on everyday aesthetics, concerning the definition of the term "everyday" and thus the eventual aims of the field (see e.g. Highmore 2011; Leddy 2012, 2015; Melchionne 2013, 2014; Naukkarinen 2013, 2017; Saito 2007, 2017). Some claim that everyday aesthetics is, or ought to be, about *expanding* the scope of aesthetics to such aesthetically relevant phenomena that – mainly due to historical reasons – have not been adequately addressed before; others think that what is, or ought to be, central is a certain *mode* of experience and being that is characteristic of our everyday. The latter stance thus focuses specifically on the "everydayness" of our everyday lives, insisting that there exists an entirely different type or subspecies of aesthetic phenomena that we lose sight of if we merely broaden the range of aesthetics outside the traditional subjects (i.e. art and nature)¹.

To be more exact, the representatives of the latter stance claim that "everydayness" refers to specific types of *relations* to things that we encounter on a daily basis – to relations that, according to Ossi Naukkarinen (2013, sec.

¹ Art (including high-end architecture) and nature, without doubt, comprise an indispensable part of our everyday urban surroundings, particularly judging from the aesthetic point of view. Hence they cannot be left without attention when addressing cities and our experiential relation to them as a whole. The aesthetic relevance of art and nature is, to be honest, so obvious that many other aesthetically relevant phenomena have been by and large neglected until recently. This is why the thesis at hand deliberately focuses almost solely on aspects of urban environments other than art and nature, emphasizing the meaning of the more mundane and trivial dimensions for the constitution of full and vivid urban experience.

2), are “colored with routines, familiarity, continuity, normalcy, habits, the slow process of acclimatization, even superficiality and a sort of half-consciousness and not with creative experiments, exceptions, constant questioning and change, analyses, and deep reflections.” On the basis of this view, in a commentary on the recent debate, Kalle Puolakka (2018, sec. 1, emphasis added) describes the relationary view as follows: “The everyday is not constituted by a group of objects, events, and activities but rather by a specific kind of *attitude we take* toward the objects and events that surround us daily and the activities we perform regularly.”

Naukkarinen (2013) also uses the term “attitude,” and he uses it somewhat carelessly, largely as an interchangeable alternative for the term “relation.” Despite this, “taking an attitude” does not have exactly the meaning as “having a relation,” at least in this particular case. Why this is so important is that the main argument in this kind of relational everyday aesthetics is that we do not actively *choose* the everyday relation to things, but that we eventually *end up* having such relations. This has to do with the processes of familiarization and getting used to, and they are also of utmost importance when thinking of our relationship to our habitat and other environments that we visit regularly.

It is important to understand the role of choice correctly here: we may, more or less freely, choose our habitat, but we cannot freely choose our relationship to it. Whether we want it or not, in the course of time we get used to our habitat, be it of high or low quality, to our liking or not. Despite the fact that eventually we are attuned to our everyday surroundings and thus begin having essentially an everyday relation to it, the questions of quality and liking do, nevertheless, matter. A high-quality environment notably enhances our well-being² (see e.g. Cooper, Burton & Cooper 2014), and the possibility to live

² Defining “well-being” is a very challenging task, as it could well be the most disputed concept in the field of social sciences. Such ambiguity becomes a problem especially when trying to analyze those factors and mechanisms that generally either increase or decrease the amount of well-being, as there are no universal ways of measuring such changes. This is also an evident challenge in the field of such environmental studies that focus on the relationship between environment and well-being. For instance, in a review article discussing the connections between urban environmental quality and human well-being, van Kamp *et al.* (2003, p. 16) end up stating that “neither a generally accepted framework, nor a coherent system to evaluate aspects of and trends in environmental quality in relation to well-being, has been developed.” In the same vein, in the summary of a reference guide on well-being and the environment, Cooper and Burton (2014, p. 664) point out that “one of the main issues is a lack of definition or consistency in the concept of wellbeing. This is an issue that extends beyond built-environment research, but this field presents particular challenges.” Having said this, it is clear that finding an informative and inclusive but still univocal and brief enough definition for well-being falls outside the scope of this thesis. Hence we must settle for a more general-level tentative description of well-being, emphasizing experiential and thus “subjective” dimensions. An apt candidate for such a description is a formulation by the What Works Centre for Wellbeing (n.d.), which implies that our personal well-being comprises “how satisfied we are with our lives, our sense that what we do in life is

in one's preferred area is an essential part of self-expression, and a basic constituent of a meaningful and satisfying life. The main problem here is that unfortunately we can, and relatively often we do, also get used to low-quality environments that do not properly fulfil our criteria for a decent habitat.

To exaggerate slightly, one could even say that this is exactly the case in most contemporary cities that are planned and constructed in the era of passenger car – in cities that neglect the scale of human being, prioritizing the needs and desires of cars over those of people (see e.g. Newman & Kenworthy 1989, 1999, 2015). The norm of the automobile-oriented city is still influential, and we do not even necessarily fully realize the apparent downsides before we experience an alternative living environment. While many urban environments are ill-fitting from the viewpoint of human well-being and flourishing, we have attuned to them, we take them for granted and thus try to manage our everyday lives in them, even though this does not reduce the detrimental effects that such environs have on us.³

The fact that we end up having everyday-kind of relations to a plethora of things in our social and material environments also marks the starting point for everyday aesthetics as a *positive* and *change-promoting* enterprise: only by acknowledging the existence of everyday relations in the first place, can we address matters of everyday quality, and eventually try to effect a change. We cannot change something that we are not aware of or understand. This also enables the use and misuse of power. The built environment is, to be sure, replete with obvious manifestations and more intricate symbols of power and related ideologies, though we often do not see them as such, but view them more as a mere neutral background or framework for our everyday lives that is simply there (see Dovey 1999). However, these are central questions when trying to increase the social and cultural sustainability of architecture, urban design, urban planning and urban development more generally (see e.g. Robinson, Dale & Duschenko 2012; Williams, Burton & Jenks 2000).

worthwhile, our day-to-day emotional experiences (happiness and anxiety) and our wider mental wellbeing.”

³ Despite this, it is quite burdensome trying to see the asphalt-coated parking lots and avenues, or the cast concrete ramps and overpasses of a car-oriented city in a truly *positive light* if one happens to be an advocate of more humane and small-scale urban environments. This tends to be so even with regard to certain details of the automobile environment, such as sculpture-like bridges or near-sublime multi-level intersections that could in isolation be seen as masterpieces of architecture and engineering science, even in the eyes of a “car-hostile” person. However, having experienced an environment that has been planned and constructed with an emphasis on human well-being, one may begin seeing the automobile city more clearly in a *negative light* – i.e. as unfit, unsatisfactory and ugly. For a more thorough account of such “negative aesthetics,” see e.g. Berleant (2010, 2011).

3 THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND ITS FUNCTIONS

From the viewpoint of everyday aesthetics, the built environment is, indeed, of utmost importance with regards to the constitution of our “urban normalcy.” This is particularly due to the relatively stable and long-lasting nature of buildings and various other urban structures, and due to their tremendous yet subtle power to change, steer and limit the realities and possibilities of our lives. As a material entity, the lifespan of a building may well extend over centuries, even though the functions and uses that the building enables might vary considerably over time. Hence it is difficult to grasp the overall essence of an environment or a building merely by analyzing its functional dimension, for there is always a remarkable contingency involved in matters of function. Roger Scruton (1994, p. 43, emphasis added) has, for example, pointed out that functions may alter quite drastically, which undermines attempts to define the essence and the quality of a building on the basis of its functions:

Of course, particular buildings have particular functions: but their ability to satisfy these functions, while it may explain their existence, does not describe their essence. Function may be the *least important*, and in any event the *least permanent*, feature of a building. What was once a factory becomes a museum or an apartment block; a church becomes an assembly hall, or a market; and so on. Buildings of the past – at least those that persuade us to preserve them – have lent themselves to functional transformations, and have developed under the influence of changes which were never foreseen by their architects.

It is clear that Scruton is criticizing, above all, a certain modern functionalist conception that largely builds on the visions of the architect-designer, emphasizing the meaning of pre-defined uses and the importance of knowledge-based anticipation more generally. Such modern “functional puritanism” does not apply merely to buildings but also to a variety of urban structures – such as streets, squares, etc. – and perhaps the most influential manifestations of modern functionalism have taken place at the level of spatial planning, resulting in a strict and inflexible functional categorization of the city.

However, the ambiguity related to functions pertains even more to larger urban entities, such as neighborhoods and entire districts. The recent development of cities expanding to various brownfield sites, like former harbors, airports and other industrial areas, is a tremendous example of this. Even in the field of spatial planning, where the pivotal ideas of functionalism have largely been integrated into legislation and thus have enormous influence over the development of cities, the realities of urbanism have proven the

functionalist doctrine to be far too idealistic. The tendency of modernist architecture and urban planning to conceive the notion of function in an overly narrow sense seems to be the stumbling block of modern thinking: if one emphasizes too much a single predefined function of a building or an urban environment, one simply fails to acknowledge the essence of cities as constantly and continuously evolving and ever-renewing entities.

Dismissing the varieties of functions is characteristic of, but does not pertain merely to, the modernist line of thought. Even though the diversity and certain open-endedness of functions in urban environments is acknowledged nowadays, the notion of function is still often understood from a traditional and reductive perspective. While primarily addressing the shortcomings of modernism, Scruton (1994, p. 43, original emphasis) makes observations that are relevant even today, pointing out certain relatively common difficulties that are related to dealing with matters of aesthetics and the experiential quality of an environment:

A building must have *a* use: the problem is in specifying *the* use. The use of a building is always something which the building itself creates. The use is therefore so little separable from the context which the building provides, that it cannot serve as a criterion whereby to distinguish the essential from the accidental. There has been a tendency in modern “design theory” to regard function as the premise of design, aesthetic quality as its consequence. In truth it is function which is consequential; aesthetic quality is the major premise from which function derives.

Here we have at least three different yet interconnected arguments that deserve closer examination. First, there simply does not exist *the* function of a building, but perhaps *a* function that currently happens to take place in the building (or, which is more likely, a *selection* of possible functions depending on the perspective from which we approach the building). Secondly, the potential use(s) of a building essentially depend on the kind of *context* that the building gives rise to. Thirdly, the *aesthetic quality* of the building has a crucial role in defining the uses that it enables.

What is particularly interesting here is that Scruton points out the crucial yet not-so-evident connections between use and context on one hand, and between use and aesthetics on the other. Accordingly, there is no sense in addressing the questions of use without paying attention to the context in which the potential uses are about to take place: it is the context that defines the possible, appropriate and desired uses. There are, to be sure, contexts of many different levels, from concrete material surroundings to more abstract entirities of established practices and the culture-specific ways of living and valuation. As Scruton states, a single building has the capacity to provide a context for action and use – mainly at the level of material framework, but nevertheless complying with the pragmatic conventions and eventually manifesting the prevailing values of the culture.

The aesthetic quality of a building, in turn, can be seen to have a considerable influence on what kind of context it eventually provides. Here the aesthetic quality does not mean primarily matters of style, decoration and visual pleasure, but it has been seen as referring to the more general processes of sensing and interpretation. For Scruton, “aesthetics” has to do with the intermingling of sensory data and the cultural interpretations we constantly make, in that the apparently straightforward appearances of things are always full of subtle meanings to us: “We see things: but we also see the *meaning* of things; and the meaning *saturates* the appearance” (Scruton 1994, p. xvi, emphasis added). Hence the aesthetic quality of a building can have a decisive role in interpreting the building from the perspective of potential uses. Aesthetics is about how all the possible uses of a building become conceivable to us, and it also is about which of those plentiful uses appear as most suitable and preferable.

The connections between uses, contexts and the aesthetic quality of the built environment are crucial from the viewpoint of everyday aesthetics and the constitution of our urban normalcy. In the course of our everyday life, we do not pay any specific attention to the particular uses that familiar buildings in our familiar surroundings provide: we are simply too attuned to them to be able to examine critically their existing and established uses, or to invent any radically new ones. We thus have a special relationship to such buildings and their surroundings *as contexts*, for they are the particular contexts that, by and large, define the content of our everyday and thereby remarkably influence our way of life and even our identity (see Haapala 2003, 2005).

We also have a special relationship to the aesthetic quality of familiar buildings and their vicinities: we are so used to the appearance of our neighborhood that questions related to its appearance even become trivial. Typically, we have a sort of half-conscious relationship to our nearest-and-dearest environments, and it might be surprisingly difficult to describe their essential features to a stranger – at least when compared to depicting the vistas, soundscapes, smells and the overall character of a destination one has just arrived from.⁴ In such cases there is a notable correspondence between the environment and the experiencing agent, as they have a shared history. The apparent correspondence even reaches the level of bodily gestures in that one knows the details of the environment by motor coordination, thus enabling us to act smoothly and effortlessly.

The ideal case of such familiar environments is *home* (Haapala 2005, Lehtinen 2015). Thinking of the aesthetic quality of home environments, familiarity with various things tends to give rise to certain feelings of coziness, ease and security. One could say that homes – or other home-like

⁴ This is a central topic in the discussion concerning the differences between a visitor’s and a local’s perspective on an environment (see e.g. Haapala 1998; Relph 1976; Tuan 1974, 1977). The specific attentiveness to the various details of a strange and unforeseen environment has been addressed under the rubric “tourist gaze” (see Urry 1990).

environments, such as hotels⁵, for that matter – generally represent a specific kind of aesthetics that is characteristic of reliable and unsurprising surroundings. What is particularly interesting and noteworthy in the case of such “homely aesthetics” is the kind of relationship that we have to the various items and devices that for their part comprise the functionality of the surroundings.

At home we usually know very precisely the whereabouts of our everyday utensils, and the spatial arrangement is such that we do not have to pay much conscious attention to our daily chores.⁶ At home in one’s kitchen, one does not have to make many gestures to brew a cup of coffee. However, the setting changes remarkably if, say, there is no ground coffee left or someone has cleaned the coffee maker and put the parts to dry in a strange place. In such a situation one is required to stop the normal course of one’s actions and *reflect* on the steps one is about to take.⁷

⁵ The arrangement of things and the choice of materials is – particularly in the publicly accessible commercial homely environments (i.e. hotels) of the Western world – astonishingly universal and homogeneous, and one really has to make an effort to find an accommodation that daringly breaks the prevailing norm of “homely aesthetics.” Hotel rooms generally tend to be arranged in such a way that we are familiar with them even when we have not been there before. The variations between different hotels in different countries are more or less marginal, so that we spot and recognize the central items of the hotel room at a glance: there is the bed, there is the TV, and there is the minibar that provides one with a welcome refreshment at the “moment of despair” in a strange city in a foreign country.

⁶ It must be acknowledged that the idealized descriptions of home as the most familiar environment provide us with an imaginary archetype that may not have a real-world equivalent, or that has at least a limited scope of application as such. For example, anyone who has shared their home with other inhabitants – be they fellow humans or non-human animals – knows that things are not always exactly where one has left them, and sometimes one’s home may begin to remind one of chaos, even if one tries to maintain a desired order. In addition to such relatively harmless occasions that have to do with sharing the home space with friendly cohabitants, there are more serious circumstances, in which the ideal of home remains a distant goal. Homelessness and oppressive domestic relationships, for instance, are regrettable phenomena, but their existence does not altogether undermine the general significance of home and the related aesthetics of the familiar. Indeed, the archetype of home may still prove to be very useful in that it helps us understand the salient idiosyncrasies of our relationship to the most familiar environments – that is, in comparison to environments that we visit more rarely or merely occasionally – thus revealing the existence of a significant phenomenon that would otherwise remain neglected.

⁷ This is a classic example of the breakdown of an *equipmental relation*, bringing forth the normally hidden in-order-to structures of an equipmental entirety. According to Heidegger’s well-known analysis of equipmentality presented in *Being and Time* (published originally in 1927, see Heidegger 1978, particularly pp. 97–100; see also Heidegger 1982, pp. 292–293), single pieces of equipment – i.e. separate tools – exist merely in relation to other pieces of equipment, and to the equipmental whole (the coffee maker essentially belongs together with ground coffee, filter papers, coffee mugs and fresh water that, for their part, comprise the equipmental whole of a kitchen). To be more exact, they exist *as* pieces of equipment – i.e. *as* tools – and not as proper material objects due to their referential and “directed” nature: every piece of equipment involves a directed reference to other relevant pieces of equipment and

The coffee maker and the related items then become visible and tangible to us in a very different manner. We may even have to remind ourselves of the color and the form of the missing parts in order to create a mental image so that we can start feverishly searching the shelves and cabinets in our kitchen for them. Normally, when the coffee maker and its parts sit in their designated place, they are almost invisible, remaining in the background of our daily activities. It is this difference in the *mode of presence* that is of crucial importance here: the coffee maker is present to us in both cases, but merely in a differing way.⁸

The fact that the coffee maker is still somehow present to us even when we do not pay any specific conscious attention to it reveals an important aspect about our environmental relationship and our way of existence in general. As worldly beings, we are always thrown in different situations with varying physical and social realities that give rise to more abstract cultural meanings. Being necessarily in the midst of things, plants, animals and other human beings, while trying to cope with them in struggling towards our objectives, is simply what constitutes the human condition. No philosophical speculation or thought experiment can alter this fundamental condition.

Regardless of the plentiful things around us, we are capable of focusing on a relatively small number of things simultaneously, so that many aspects of the surrounding reality must remain “aside.” While there is a certain regularity in what comes to the fore and what forms the background of an experience in the course of our everyday – just think of the coffee maker oscillating between being visible and invisible – certain dimensions of our lives persistently tend to escape any attempts at reductive objectification. In order to understand the operations of our conscious experience and the underlying mechanisms more thoroughly, let us introduce the concept of “lifeworld.”

eventually to the outcomes that the use of equipment enables (coffee maker and the associated items afford us the moment of break and refreshment amidst a busy day filled with tasks that supposedly help us achieve our goals and advance our existential projects). Equipment is thus essentially something that we use in-order-to do or gain something else. Under normal circumstances, they withdraw into their usefulness and do not require any attention, and only when something goes wrong, do we encounter them as objects in their materiality.

⁸ In Heideggerian terminology, when the coffee maker is present as a withdrawing tool, it is “ready-to-hand” (*zuhanden*), and when it is present as an observable object, it is “present-at-hand” (*vorhanden*) (see Heidegger 1978).

4 THE LIFEWORLD, EVERYDAY, AND THE ROLE OF PLACES

“Lifeworld” (*Lebenswelt*) is a rather technical term introduced by Edmund Husserl in his later writings.⁹ Despite the central role played by the concept in various phenomenologically-oriented disciplines (including many branches of philosophy, such as everyday aesthetics and the philosophy of technology, and different empirical social sciences, such as anthropology and sociology), its exact content has remained rather ambiguous and remarkably context-sensitive. This has to do with the general nature of the concept as referring to the sphere of “actual immediate experiences” (see Madsen 2002, p. 11), and with the fact that there is a plethora of varying understandings and definitions of “experience.”

The concept of the lifeworld does not, however, refer merely or even primarily to any singular experiences or any particular collection of such experiences, but to the more general conditions that the occurrence of meaningful experiences presupposes. Experiences do not take place in a void, but in a socio-historically defined context that has many dimensions. Such contexts have horizon-like qualities in that they serve as an unobtrusive yet necessary background for the focus of our conscious experiences. If we try to grasp the conditions of our experiences in their entirety, we are trying to objectify or thematize the context of our experience, which is impossible precisely due to the horizon-like quality of the context. In accordance with the metaphor of a horizon, when we try reach the “edge” of such an experiential horizon, our current horizon moves along with us, and when we eventually reach the presumed “edge,” we already have a new horizon that redefines our field of view and the range of perceivable things.

The entire lifeworld can, in turn, be said to consist of multiple overlapping and intersecting horizons that in compound comprise *the* context of our experience. Madsen (2002, p. 8) has specified three different horizons as the central aspects or structural dimensions of the lifeworld: 1) the *perceptual horizon*, the immediate material framework of life; 2) the *practical horizon*, the functional organization of the everyday understood as meaningful activity; and 3) the *cultural horizon*, the general framework of interpretation. It is important to note that the horizons can be separated only for the sake of analysis, and in our experience they form a homogeneous amalgam that cannot be divided into clear-cut components.

On the basis of this, it is clear that the concepts of the “everyday” and the “lifeworld” are essentially connected, but they still have a different meaning,

⁹ Husserl elaborates the concept particularly in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, published originally in 1936. See e.g. Madsen (2002) for more details concerning the history of the notion.

at least in the field of everyday aesthetics. “Lifeworld” refers to the general structure of our experience as a system of horizons, whereas the “everyday” refers specifically to the *contextuality* of the relations to the everyday objects and events. The fact that everyday relations are normally “taken for granted” constitutes the essence of a lifeworld and its horizons as something that is “given”: routine everyday relations to familiar things eventually comprise the unquestioned and unthematized frame for our conscious inquiries and actions.

What is most important here is that many everyday objects do occasionally demand our conscious attention, but not all of them, and not at the same time. Even some established routines can sometimes be thematized and thus lose their status as a genuine routine, but this still does not compromise the basic structure and the “givenness” of the lifeworld. As Madsen (2002, p. 8) writes:

Everyday life is for immediate consideration a heterogeneous sequence of activities. Each of them, more or less, at the center of our attention at certain moments. Most of these activities are routine, and thus not thematic, but both routine, and what becomes thematic, take place in the frame of a broader context, the horizon.

To be sure, the routines and the horizons are in such a close interaction that they are occasionally difficult to distinguish from each other: some of our routines are so deeply rooted that we have difficulties imagining our life without them, thus verging on the status of a horizon. Such foundational routines have primarily to do with the very basic issues of our lives such as housing, nourishment and movement. For instance, if we have to move from our home even temporarily, if we have to alter our diet significantly, or if we for some reason are not able to walk, we really are forced to think the course of our everyday anew.

To summarize, “lifeworld” refers to the given context of our experience, and while certain profound aspects of our lifeworld (i.e. the deeply rooted routines) can occasionally be subjected to conscious scrutiny, we necessarily stay in the sphere of the lifeworld, as we cannot obtain a truly external point of view to the perceptual, practical and cultural horizons we inhabit. In other words, we always are more or less immersed in the everydayness of our daily lives, whereas the balance between the established routines and exceptions from the routines constantly varies.

The “degree” of everydayness in our urban everyday has proven to be the source of considerable theoretical debate, and there have been disagreements both among the theorists of everyday aesthetics and between the proponents of different disciplines. According to Puolakka (2018, sec. 4), for example, the described relationary view of everyday aesthetics involves a close-to-obsessive and somewhat unjustified tendency to subsume every possible encounter of our daily lives under the rubric of “everydayness”:

Everydayness becomes almost a kind of blanket that, in time, encloses all aspects of our daily lives as a result of acclimatization and, in a way, swallows up the sense of extraordinariness and vitality that some everyday factors might have had at first. [...] There is no reason why the general experiential quality of our everyday lives could not be considerably more nuanced than [the relationary views] on the everydayness of the everyday arguably leave room for.

Without going into the details of this particular debate, it seems plausible that there is more to our everyday than mere routines and half-consciously encountered things and events. There are, to be sure, numerous ruptures in the social, material and functional frameworks of our everyday life, and not all such discontinuities are detrimental in nature (see e.g. Naukkarinen & Vasquez 2017). For our current purposes suffice to say that the pivotal point in the relationary account is that every aspect of our lives includes a foundational *possibility* of becoming habitual and “normalized”: what at first may in our eyes seem very exceptional and groundbreaking, *may* over time become the new normal to us.

It is thus not the case that, given enough time, every possible thing in our surroundings *will* become familiar to us; the world around us fluctuates too much for such an outcome, and this is not what the emphasis on familiarity implies. Instead, what the relationary account states is that a certain amount of familiarity is, however, an absolute necessity for the human condition: without any habitual everyday relations, an outcome could not be identified as a meaningful experience but would resemble a chaos or a collapse of significances.

There exists, however, another kind of criticism of phenomenology and everyday aesthetics that has to do with the givenness of our lifeworld and its constituents – particularly places. In order to understand the critical points more comprehensively, a few remarks concerning the notion of “place” are needed. From the viewpoint of Heideggerian phenomenology, place has an essential structural role in the constitution of human existence and experience (see e.g. Heidegger 1978, 1982; see also Haapala 1998, 2003, 2005, 2017; Malpas 1999, 2006, 2012a). In fact, the relationship between humans and places is so fundamental that Heidegger uses the term *Dasein*, literally translated as “there-being” (see e.g. Olivier 2017), to indicate the “placedness” of human existence.

To be more exact, places function essentially as “mediators” in our relationship to the world. As worldly beings we exist in a pre-given world that already is full of meanings and values, and the phenomenon of world is a necessary “counterpart”¹⁰ of human existence; in Heideggerian terminology, our being is *being-in-the-world*. We do not, however, encounter the world as such, and we relate to the world from a very limited and partial perspective

¹⁰ “World’ is not a way of characterizing those entities which *Dasein* essentially is *not*; it is rather a characteristic of *Dasein* itself” (Heidegger 1978, p. 92, original emphasis).

that is essentially bound to our place in it. According to this line of thought, it is places that provide us with an *opening* to the world (see e.g. Malpas 2012a), and our existence is by necessity *being-in-a-place-in-the-world*. It is crucial to note that our place, and the perspective it opens up, does not refer to a mere geographical or physical location but to more abstract dimensions of our existence, too: in addition to the inevitable socio-material constraints, our being is conditioned by the temporally and historically defined systems of meaning among which we find ourselves.

On the basis of this, it is clear that particular places are of utmost importance in defining who we are and what we do, and the places of our lives essentially manifest the possibilities and obligations we have in this world. Thus places also have a central role in the formation of our lifeworld and its horizons, and places comprise the necessary platform on which the meaningfulness and the everydayness of our everyday encounters eventually is based. To be sure, in the course of our everyday lives places themselves are relatively seldom in our focus of attention, but an everyday without its essential places is simply unimaginable: it is the places that afford us our everyday actions and encounters, and place-based experiences are the basis of our everyday lifeworld.

In analyzing the foundational places of our everyday lives, however, there is a danger lurking here. We easily end up looking for existing, pre-given places that seem to have a particularly remarkable status in our lives, supposedly telling us what is important and what is not. It is thus tempting to assign to certain central places a normative status that they do not necessarily deserve. Phenomenology has, indeed, been more or less rightly accused of normalizing the status quo without paying adequate attention to the structures of power and ideology that lie behind the givenness and the everydayness of a particular lifeworld. Consider, for example, the following criticism by Dovey (1999, p. 44):

Phenomenology should not be a quest to define some presupposed “sense” or “spirit” of place – it should be an opening to the world, not a reduction of it. Phenomenology is a necessary but limited approach to the understanding of place. The key problem is that the focus on the lifeworld can involve a certain blindness to the pronounced effects of social structure and ideology on such everyday experience. From this view a focus on experience runs the risk that the ideological framings of place remain buried and hence powerful.

The argument is that when we focus on the lifeworld and on particular place-based experiences as its constituents, we end up analyzing phenomena that set the tone of our everyday, such as a sense or spirit of place. However, focusing on the apparent givenness of the sense or spirit of a place hinders an understanding of the place and its experiential character as a temporal process, involving notable contingencies and path-dependencies. The processual nature of a place experience pertains both to the material basis of

the experienced environment and to the experiencing subject. Generally speaking, the eventual experience of a place is an outcome of a lengthy reciprocity between humans and their environments: not only do we actively shape our environments, but the environments we inhabit also shape us.

The same pattern applies to the everydayness of a place experience, and we cannot focus merely on describing the everydayness of a place-based everyday experience, for then we lose sight of the particular constituents that give rise to the everydayness in the first place. Above all, we lose sight of the contingency that is involved in the various constituents of the everydayness that define our relation to the place essentially as an “everyday relation.” The everydayness of our experience has a solid basis in a variety of elements that we have become used to, but this is a matter of coincidence to some degree: should our personal history be different, our routines and habits could be remarkably different, and our everyday experiences of (and in) the places we inhabit would also be different.

Admittedly, there is a certain blindness to the contingencies inherent in every possible place experience, and the socio-historical nature of our experience in general has not always been properly acknowledged among phenomenologically-oriented theories of place. In particular, the idealized descriptions of certain (historical) places have somewhat hastily and naïvely assigned them the status of exemplary (and often foregone) human environments full of desirable meanings and values. Phenomenological accounts of place thus often represent a form of (historical) essentialism – that is, “the idea of place becoming an original source, the authentic source of meaning, the *exclusive one right way*” (Dovey 2016, p. 262, emphasis added).

That being said, it should be kept in mind that phenomenology aims at providing an adequate description of the structure and the operations of our lifeworld, and this can eventually help in understanding the latent mechanisms behind its self-evident quality, and in assessing the built-in meanings and ideologies at work in the constitution of our place-based experience. This applies particularly to the more recent forms of phenomenology, such as everyday aesthetics, that aim at shedding light on questions of familiarity-based normalcy. It is thus crucial to notice the essential difference between stating that we experience something as “normal” and insisting that we *ought* to experience something as “normal.” More generally, analyzing the phenomenon of normalcy does not necessarily entail maintaining the currently prevailing conceptions of normalcy, but merely helps us see how certain things become taken-as-granted and thus gain a certain kind of normative status as something unquestioned.

On this basis, everyday aesthetics provides us with useful tools for understanding the contemporary urban condition from the experiential viewpoint, emphasizing the role of necessary everyday experiences in the structuring of our urban ways of life. The perspective of everyday aesthetics is particularly apt in addressing questions of settling down and attaching to places, as well as the general meaning of home and attunement, in an era

characterized by mobility, ever increasing diversity of lifestyles, and fast-paced technological development.¹¹ Central questions thus have to do with the possibility of familiarity-based normalcy in a contemporary urban environment. For example, where does the certain sense of continuity and normalcy stem from in an environment that is a materialization of a plethora of varying human values and intentions, manifesting thus essentially diversity and change?

¹¹ These questions understandably involve empirical dimensions, and they also are important topics in empirical environmental psychology. Despite this, the complexity of the related phenomena poses serious challenges to empirical sciences, and there is an undisputable demand for more theoretical philosophical inquiries that focus on the conceptual dimensions of the issues. For example, it has been empirically verified in a relatively recent review article that the meaning of place attachment for human well-being has not generally decreased (see Lewicka 2011); however, it still is not entirely clear what the attachment exactly means, and what forms of attachment are particularly relevant in the contemporary condition.

5 FAMILIARITY WITH THINGS AND THE FORMATION OF MEANINGFUL CONTEXTS

In an article discussing the foundations of everyday aesthetics, Arto Haapala (2005) describes the elements that make up an everyday experience of urban surroundings. The related experience of “urban normalcy” is particularly characterized by the feeling of familiarity, in relation to individual buildings (Haapala 2005, p. 49):

For many, perhaps even for most of the objects in our familiar surroundings, their function is simply to be present; for example, to me most of the houses on my street are just houses on my street. They are simply there as a kind of background; something that I have been used to. This kind of function is still a function in a weak sense; but these objects “do a service for us” just by being part of the familial surroundings, by not being strange.

Here Haapala considers the ability of forming a necessary background for everyday life is a particular function of the buildings, pointing out that this is a remarkable feature of them, besides the more conventional functions such as providing shelter and enabling certain practical uses. As a part of the background, the buildings have a notable role in forming the urban environment as a context for urban life. This is a very important matter from the viewpoint of a more general urban condition, emphasizing the inevitable *contextuality* of the buildings: accordingly, every building (and every other structure, for that matter) exists in a socio-material context, fitting into the context either well or not so well, thus contributing to that context in one way or another.

The contextuality of the buildings does not, however, refer merely to matters of architecture or art history, focusing on questions of coherence, diversity and how the buildings relate to their surroundings from the viewpoint of style, colors, materials, building techniques etc. These issues are, naturally, also of great importance regarding the overall quality of the built environment, but the form of contextuality that Haapala is discussing has to do primarily with the constitution of the urban lifeworld and the everydayness of our urban everyday.

Now we have to return to the questions of functions and functionality, for the prevailing conceptions regarding the functions of the built environment seem to fall short of providing an adequate account of the effects that the material surroundings have on us and our everyday life. In particular, the tendency to conceive the functions of a built environment merely as a selection of various possible uses is unhelpful in gaining an understanding of the role of

the material dimension appropriately. No matter how many potential uses we recognize in our urban surroundings, the buildings and other constructions always do more than this: a built structure can be an apartment block, an office building, a retail store, a museum, a library, a school, a public transport terminal or all of these, but the eventual meaning of the structure simply cannot be exhausted by such a listing of possible uses.

In short, the functions of a built environment are not merely a question of usage – i.e. of how we use these environments and why – but there are significantly wider issues to consider, such as how the environment serves us, and what kind of surroundings and contexts for living it provides for us. Thus we have to widen the scope of functions beyond the traditional and most obvious cases, and it is necessary to examine further the relationship between the uses of an environment and the way we experience it. In order to do so, we may utilize some concepts borrowed from the theory of design that approach the issue from the viewpoint of artifacts and their manifold functions.

Besides providing us with certain uses, the artifacts of our everyday life have to make us understand which particular uses they eventually are good for: it is not enough that a coffee thermos keeps the coffee warm for a long period of time, but we also have to be able to grasp that the item can be used in such a way. If we do not understand that the thermos has a cap that can be opened, and that the composition of the thermos is such that hot liquid can be poured into it (without the seams of the bottle leaking, or materials getting damaged), it is of no use to us. This capacity of an artifact to communicate to us its intended use can be called its “denotative function” (Muller 2001; see also Verbeek 2005, pp. 204–205), essentially indicating that the artifact is somehow able to denote its primary use, thus making itself understandable and useful to us.

The same applies to the built environment: if the elements of an environment do not reveal their uses to us promptly enough, we do not know how to make use of the environment and we will end up getting frustrated with it. For example, if we do not recognize the entrance to building, or we do not easily understand the opening mechanism of a door, the building has difficulties in fulfilling its function, and it is reasonable to consider the possibility of a downright design error. However, less obvious examples also exist in the urban realm: if a public park is surrounded by an overly hostile fence, or if a publicly owned and freely accessible shoreline has the same appearance and general atmosphere as the backyards of the nearby houses, the recreational functions of these places are compromised due to an apparent failure in the denotative dimension of functionality.

In addition to the denotative functions, artifacts and the entities in the built environment serve other kinds of “immaterial” functions, which are usually more subtle and require more interpretation. For example, the coffee thermos gives rise to certain images and involves implicit references to a certain kind of lifestyle. The imagery related to camping and other activities in nature are very strongly attached to the thermos. If one merely sees a thermos on the shelf

of a retail store, one easily begins to visualize oneself sitting around a campfire, far away from the obligations and the pressures characteristic of our everyday, or one is prone to reminisce about the moments spent in nature with one's dearest friends – perhaps in an overly nostalgic and romanticizing way. This attribute of an artifact can be called its “connotative function” (Muller 2001; see also Verbeek 2005, pp. 205–207), referring to the fact that in addition to its primary use, an artifact is always the bearer of various socio-cultural meanings.

It is clear that the elements of built environments have innumerable connotative functions, and there is no way to provide an exhaustive account of them. The cultural connotations that, say, a building gives rise to are not entirely universal, but depend on a variety of factors, such as experiential history, that can be personal or shared merely among a specific reference group. Despite this, there are many relatively common features in our culture-specific ways of interpreting our environment, so that the connotations can also be – and *de facto* are – anticipated when planning and designing the urban environment.

Just as speculating about the connotations of artifacts comprises a major part of a contemporary industrial design process – playing with existing connotations and creating new ones is a central method of differentiating products toward the lifestyles of target groups and desirable consumer types (see Muller 2001) – present-day urban design pays significant attention to the socio-cultural meanings that the urban environment supposedly represents (see e.g. Bell & Jayne 2003; Julier 2000; Robins 1993). This is also the starting point for place-making policies and practices that aim at deliberately creating meaningful, livable and sustainable places (see e.g. Kovács & Musterd 2013; Knox 2005; Lister 2012; Palermo & Ponzini 2015).

The evident challenge here is that the urban environment comprises the necessary habitat for the masses, and these urbanites generally cannot choose whether or not to take part in the postmodern “symbolic play” that characterizes the deliberate differentiation of design-products. What is particularly problematic is that the connotations inherent in a built environment might not always be as innocent as in the case of the coffee thermos, and the commonly used connotations resonate with the lifestyle of a relatively small amount of prosperous and wealthy people. However, every building and structure in one's urban surroundings represents a very specific set of values, whether we like it or not: they pose a silent yet effective imperative on us, as they promote a certain way of life and assert its superiority over others.

Despite many theories of design are apparently putting a notable emphasis on the symbols, signs, and “languages” that the design-products utilize in providing their connotative functions (see e.g. Verbeek 2005), the representation of values occurs both at a symbolic and at a more primordial sensory level. Hence, in addition to the recognizable value-laden symbols (such as logos and various written messages), the very concrete and sensory

features of the environment also can – and do – manifest values. For example, the glass-clad skyscrapers eerily looming above us very effectively remind us of corporate power, and the impenetrable mirror-glassed surfaces tangibly embody the possibility of looking out but not looking in and foster an atmosphere of constant surveillance. This is merely another way of stating that sensing and interpretation are essentially intertwined and, as Scruton (1994) puts it, appearances are saturated by meanings.

Summarizing, denotative and connotative functions are about the sphere of experience and interpretation, and with making the world appear in a particular way: recognizing the role of such functions implies that we necessarily relate to useful things and their use-based functions via interpretative experience. Thus uses have to be *sensible* to us in both meanings of the word: uses must be *sensed*, and they have to *make* sense to us. These classifications of denotative and connotative function also help us to understand how we integrate various functional entities as parts of our existing lifeworld – both at the level of concrete practices (recognizing the ways of use) and at the level of abstract meanings (recognizing socio-cultural relevance).

If we now consider the function of “being present as a familiar background” that Haapala was discussing, it is clear that this is not a traditional use-based function. But it does not seem to fall neatly into the categories of denotative and connotative functions either: being part of a background does not seemingly reveal any other function of the building, neither does it refer to any specific socio-cultural meanings. Despite this, being part of the background has essentially to do with how we experience and interpret the immediate environment.¹² The fact that the building is familiar to us, and not strange, contributes to the overall appearance and the experiential essence of that particular spot in the urban make-up. The familiarity of the building has to do with the constitution and the meaningful appearance of that particular *place*.

The familiar buildings, for their part, define the place as a place that affords us certain things and not others, and as a place that reminds us of the values

¹² Such an observation indicates the apparent shortcomings related to typical postmodern theories of meaning and experience, relying substantively on the dichotomy of denotation and connotation. This is particularly relevant from our current point of view, since certain branches of contemporary urban design still seem to conceive the phenomenon of urban experience in a manner similar to the postmodern stance, even though the concepts of denotation and connotation may not be explicitly mentioned. Summarizing, various denotative and connotative functions do exist in our urban environments, and the concepts of denotation and connotation might indeed be useful in understanding the overall functionalities of our environments; nevertheless, we cannot rely *merely* on these concepts in order to understand the constitution and essence of our interpretative urban experience thoroughly, but we need some further conceptualizations that essentially *complement* the previous theories.

underlying our ways of lives.¹³ In other words, the buildings have denotative and connotative functions with regard to the place they are part of, not with regard to themselves. Here we cannot merely examine the functions of the buildings in isolation, but we have to look for their function as a part of the surrounding urban structure, thus also influencing the lifeworlds that are based in that particular material environment. Hence, the familiar buildings are of crucial importance concerning the adequacy of the place *as a context for living*, and their function as “being present as a familiar background” is essentially a *context-forming function*, contributing to the contextuality of the place as a necessary platform for the urban lifeworlds.

The everydayness of a place – and thus the role of a place in the constitution of the urban everyday – has its basis in the familiarity of the constituents of that place. The familiar buildings form one dimension of the general constellation of the place they are part of, and the fact that they are familiar, and not strange, in a way “increases” the overall familiarity of the place. The more familiar the place becomes to us, the more it becomes contextual and taken-for-granted, and the less thematization and conscious attention it demands. This is also why the phenomenon of place is so important in everyday aesthetics, for places seem to serve as an intermediary step in the processes of familiarization, bridging the gap between particular familiar entities and the givenness of the lifeworld.

However, as the context of our experience, the lifeworld consists of perceptual, practical and cultural horizons that all play their part in the process of things achieving an “everyday” status: becoming accustomed to things occurs at the levels of sensing, usage, and interpretation. This applies to places too, so that the familiarity with regard to the perceptual, practical and cultural dimensions of a place all play a part in the place becoming a context for everyday life. In order to understand more comprehensively the contextual nature of urban everyday places and the role that the particular constituents of places have regarding that contextuality, we need further conceptual tools in order to analyze the presence of place-based entities. Of particular interest is the presence of familiar entities, for these are the ones that eventually give rise to the contextuality of places.

The previous example regarding the coffee maker as an equipmental entity in a familiar environment (the kitchen at home) is helpful: we make use of this device relatively effortlessly, for we know the whereabouts of all the related utensils (ground coffee, filter papers, coffee mugs, etc.), and we also know how to make use of them. We are thus familiar with the equipmental whole that is needed to brew the coffee that eventually results in a cup of hot refreshing liquid, lending some extra significance to the break it affords in the middle a

¹³ Of course, people are generally not entirely free to choose their habitat – there are usually numerous things to be considered at the same time – but we tend to favor such environs that also satisfy us spiritually and thus reflect our values.

busy day. This essentially contributes to the familiarity of the kitchen and its role as a (small-scale) contextual place in our everyday.

As pieces of equipment, the coffee maker and its related items normally withdraw from the focus of our attention into the background of our consciousness, and they become more or less invisible to us. Despite this, they are still somehow present to us and, above all, they actively influence the way we experience our surroundings. In short, the equipmental items not only provide us with certain possibilities and outcomes, but they eventually make us perceive the world *in terms of* these possibilities and outcomes.

A very concrete historical example of this is the introduction the hydroelectric power plants: only after the idea of hydroelectricity was properly developed – and perhaps after the experimental and very small-scale power plants were successfully established – were those previously freely running streams of water perceived as a considerable source of electric power. The introduction of new technology and their related technical devices significantly altered our conceptions and our experience of the surrounding (natural) environment.

The same logic also applies to much more mundane and less dramatic devices and tools, though it is usually the equipmental whole and not a particular piece of equipment that conditions our everyday experiences of things, places and events. The equipmental wholes are also amalgamated with the practices of making use of the whole. For example, it is the set of coffee-making utensils and the related practice of brewing coffee that makes us see the ground coffee as something on which hot water should be poured, the filter paper as an adequate holder for the ground coffee, the mug as a temporary container for the resulting liquid and, eventually, the kitchen as a potential place for such activities.

Without the practice of brewing coffee, such an interpretation of these items would not be possible (it would not make any sense), and without the existence of these items such a practice would not exist. As we become acquainted to certain practices by means of using certain kinds of equipment, the seemingly indifferent and neutral appearances of things are suddenly full of meanings. Becoming familiar with equipment thus means that we begin to see the world “through” them, in accordance with the things they afford us.

6 POSTPHENOMENOLOGY AND THE MEDIATING ROLE OF TECHNOLOGIES

We have here described the foundational idea behind the branch of philosophy called *postphenomenology*. The focus of postphenomenology is on the relations between humans and their world, and particularly on the useful things that effectively condition, steer and form these relations. The overall effects of such things on our worldly being can be described with the term “mediation”: innumerable useful things mediate our experience and existence, and we cannot imagine the human condition that would not be based on the various forms of mediation. Consider the following extract from Peter-Paul Verbeek (2005, p. 235), crystallizing the fundamentals of postphenomenology:

In [the postphenomenological] perspective the relation between human beings and their world takes center stage, and are viewed as mutually constituting each other – human beings are what they are thanks to the ways in which they are present in their world, and their world is what it is thanks to how it appears to them. Things play a role precisely in this relation between human beings and world. This relation happens “via” things: human beings act with the help of artifacts and perceive [the world] through them. This role of things can be characterized as “mediation.” Thanks to their mediating roles things help to shape the way in which human beings are involved with their world and interpret it. Things – and in our current culture especially technological artifacts – mediate how human beings are present in their world and how world is present to them; they shape both subjectivity and objectivity.

As Verbeek here mentions, postphenomenology has a particular focus on technological artifacts or technologies, and their mediating role in the relationships between humans and their world. Another proponent of postphenomenological thinking, Don Ihde (2009, p. 23), who in a way is its founder,¹⁴ has described postphenomenology as a hybrid of phenomenology and pragmatism, setting as its objective “to probe and analyze the role of technologies in social, personal, and cultural life” by means of concrete empirical studies of “technologies in plural.”

For example, one can think of a contemporary mass rapid transportation system like the metro: the existence of the metro has irreversibly affected our conceptions of what a contemporary urban environment is and what kind of activities are possible, presumable and desirable in such an environment. For us, it is not at all surprising or astonishing that one is able to move tens of

¹⁴ Postphenomenological thinking owes much to Ihde’s pivotal arguments in the field of philosophy of technology in the 1970s, even though the scope of postphenomenology has widened considerably since then; for a more thorough account on the relationship between Ihde and postphenomenology, see e.g. Selinger (2006).

kilometers between two places within a dense and crowded urban structure in a matter of minutes, consuming only a relatively small amount of money. To be sure, this is merely a raw fact, according to which we arrange our daily lives. For a person living in a relatively chaotic city a few centuries ago, however, this would easily count as a nonsensical idea that some silly utopian thinker might have aired out loud. In short, we have become used to the idea of the metro inasmuch as we take it for granted and we cannot imagine a true metropolis without a comprehensive metro system.

Beyond the level of abstract concepts and conceptions, the metro also has affected our concrete behavior, as well as our immediate experience of the city at many different levels. When we need to get around, we start looking for the symbols indicating a metro station, if we do not know the location of the nearest one. We also *de facto* travel through the immediate surroundings of the metro stations more often than other parts of the city, so that the vicinities of the stations become experientially familiar to us, even though we have no special interest in them. Finally, we even conceive the urban structure according to the network of metro stations, so that it seemingly consists of interconnected nodes, though there is no direct equivalent to such a configuration in the physical reality above ground.

On this basis, one could think that the metro somehow confuses or distorts our relationship to the urban environment, emphasizing quite arbitrarily certain dimensions and neglecting others, but this is an incorrect conclusion in that it presupposes a “neutral” environmental relationship that would have existed before the introduction of the metro. From the postphenomenological perspective it is crucial to understand that the metro simply has a notable mediatory role regarding our relationship to our environment – and, eventually, to the world – providing us with certain types of use and action that entail certain types of urban experiences.

Despite an apparent emphasis on technology, it is not always entirely clear what, exactly, counts as a “technology” from the postphenomenological perspective, and why. In any case, postphenomenology does not aim to provide a universal but still informative definition of technology (e.g. by listing certain necessary and sufficient conditions), for such an enterprise is very likely doomed to fail. The impossibility of such a task derives mainly from the inexhaustible diversity and the temporal quality of technology as a phenomenon, which postphenomenology takes as its starting point (see, e.g. Verbeek 2005).

Acknowledging that technology is a historical phenomenon that a single all-encompassing definition cannot do justice to, one is still tempted to expect some kind of delineation of technologies, since surely not *every* possible thing is “a technology,” or should be regarded as such. In other words, we *de facto* categorize the world in terms of things that are technological, and things that are not technological, and such categorizations are not indifferent but involve notable questions of valuation. To be more exact, the degree of “technologicality” of an artifact or other entity has notable and indisputable

bearings on our experience of it, regarding both experiential meanings and values.

One can consider, for example, the differences in the “technologicality” of certain building materials, and the varying experiential outcomes that these differences result in. Many so-called natural materials – such as wood, stone and even burnt brick – tend to give rise to experiences of warmth, coziness and intimacy, whereas more processed materials – such as glass, steel and concrete – are intuitively associated with coldness, formality and distance (see e.g. Böhme 2017, pp. 60–62). The point here is that all of these materials are *de facto* more or less processed and are thus presumably technological to some degree (the usage of completely untreated wood or stone is nowadays very rare, as even the mere cutting into a form is a kind of treatment), but the amount of processing is apparently of utmost significance from the experiential point of view.

Without engaging in a burdensome search for the “essence” of technology, it seems justifiable to claim that the role of human agency is of crucial importance here. For example, a tree in itself apparently cannot be regarded as a technological entity, whereas a tree planted by a human – with some particular intention in mind – can be. Planting rows of deciduous trees along streets of a certain width is *de facto* a fire-preventing strategy that was used in Finnish cities particularly in the nineteenth century (see Kirjakka 1996), but it is open to debate whether this is a fire-preventing technology.

Such a historical practice of preventing fires clearly bears some resemblance to “more archetypal” forms of technology – it is an instance of utilizing natural resources according to particular human intentions – but, in any case, it does not represent any kind of particularly high or complex technology. Indeed, the crucial feature of being capable of hindering and perhaps stopping fires comes from the trees themselves – healthy and flourishing deciduous trees can store significant amounts of water, and they do not catch fire very easily – and *not* from the human operations, so that such a fire-preventing technology has a significantly low degree of refinement.

From the viewpoint of functions, the case of deciduous trees as a fire-preventing technology illustrates the diversity, indeterminacy, and even the arbitrariness of the functions that a particular material-level solution may give rise to. In addition to the original, very technical and rationally justified function of increasing fire safety in Finnish towns, the solution has remarkably altered the way people conceive old town centres in Finland today – both conceptually and at the level of experience. Indeed, from a contemporary point of view, the lush rows of deciduous trees that change their appearance with each season simply *belong* to the Finnish townscape, and a lack of such trees is regarded generally as a serious shortcoming. Regarding daily life in such urban surroundings, the trees essentially enrich the urban experience, shaping and giving depth to the local character and its related aesthetic values. In short, the trees are nowadays an essential part of “an urban aesthetic” and accorded

a remarkably high value that would have been very hard if not altogether impossible to predict in mid-nineteenth century Finland.

In order to understand more profoundly the contingency and path-dependency involved in all functions – but especially in those affordances with a human origin – the postphenomenological notion of “multistability” is particularly useful, referring to “the ever-present potential for a technology to be used in multiple ways through multiple contexts” (Rosenberger 2014, p. 373). Generally speaking this means that, say, a hammer can be used in hammering – as its designer may have originally intended – but also as a paperweight, an art object, a murder weapon, etc. according to the intentions of the current user, and the features of the particular context (Ihde 1993; see also Rosenberger 2014 & Verbeek 2005). Multistability does not mean an arbitrariness of possible uses, as the material basis of the technology – “the particularities of its physical composition” (Rosenberger 2014, p. 377) – essentially limits the set of potential uses: a hammer simply cannot be used as a means of transportation, no matter how much one may try to interpret it in such a way.

The multistability of technologies refers, however, primarily to the dimension of use, whereas the multistability of functions can involve phenomena that apparently fall outside the conventional scope of “use”: in addition to the various intended and unintended uses, environmental functions can and do shape our experience, as do the more general conceptions regarding the essence of that particular environment, which the example of the deciduous trees illustrates. The planted deciduous trees have, indeed, served the intended function of preventing fires, but also various other functions, such as an “aesthetic function” of contributing to the general environmental quality, especially when the trees have grown bigger (Kirjakka 1996). According to the idea of multistability, the related aesthetic function has been, in a way, *inscribed* in the materiality of the particular technology – that is, the rows of trees – but the realization of such a function has been dependent on external conditions (for example, that the trees have not been used as firewood, or that they have not been regarded as visual obstacles and thus been cut down).

The possibility of delineating technology to some extent may be of particular significance with regard to addressing urban environments. This is due to the fact that there are countless entities in the urban sphere that are similar to, or analogous with, the above-mentioned example of urban trees, and it is not entirely clear whether the fundamentals of technology-oriented postphenomenology can be applied to these “semi-technological” dimensions as such. In any case, postphenomenological thinking also has clearly significant applications in analyzing contemporary urban life, as the following example by Asle Kiran (2012, p. 83) demonstrates:

A car driver takes roads and tunnels for granted and may never ever think of them as being part of his technologically structured lifeworld.

[...] [Such] background technologies profoundly influence the social environment we move around in; they shape the way we live in or perceive our own lifeworld.

In a similar manner, a pedestrian takes sidewalks, crosswalks and parks for granted, possibly never paying attention to the fact that such features of an urban environment have been planned, built and maintained by someone. Moreover, these features essentially shape not only the pedestrians' direct and concrete experience of their immediate surroundings, but also their indirect and thus more abstract conceptions of what an urban environment is, or could be, or ought to be. It is not, however, entirely clear whether all these features can, or should be, counted as technologies, or whether they are merely entities that provide us with such functionalities that form the usually unnoticed and thus taken-for-granted backdrop of our everyday lives. Thus what is particularly important about these elements of urban surroundings is perhaps not the fact that they are manifestations of background *technologies*, but that they form a specific set of background *relations*.

The background relations form one main category of the Ihdean fourfold relations¹⁵ regarding technologically mediated human-world relationships – the category that focuses on technologies that tend to remain “aside” due to their composition and the ways they are used. Ihde (1979, p. 13–14, emphasis added) describes these background relations as a salient dimension in our contemporary technology-saturated society that constantly and inevitably condition our being and our daily experiences:

[I]n an increasingly more complex technological society more and more human-machine relations take on “atmospheric” characteristics in terms of the machine background. [...] I neither relate *through* these [mundane] machines, nor explicitly, except momentarily, *to* them. Yet at the same time I live in their *midst*, often not noticing their surrounding presence.

Yet their surrounding presence is almost *constant*. For example, in the here and now we may meet in the presence of lights, the warmth provided by our semi-automatic heating systems, and in many modern buildings in which there is a total environmental control by way of technological artifacts [;] we may be said to be “inside” a machine.

What is particularly noteworthy in such atmospheric background relations is their somewhat ambiguous relation to the sphere of conscious experience: they are not entirely transparent, but not entirely opaque either – they are not entirely absent, but not entirely present either (Ihde 1990). Ihde ends up using the term “present absence,” indicating that despite its non-focal quality, the

¹⁵ According to Ihde, the main categories of the human–technology–world relations are: 1. embodiment relation, 2. hermeneutic relation, 3. alterity relation, and 4. background relation (see Ihde 1979, 1990, 1993; see also e.g. Kiran 2012; Nørskov 2015; Verbeek 2005).

technology “nevertheless becomes part of the experienced field of the inhabitant, a piece of the immediate environment” (Ihde 1990, p. 109).

Such a description of the (technological) background-like components of our experience implies above all that a phenomenological stance involving an overly strict division between the thematized focus and the contextual background is insufficient in providing an adequate and informative account of what constitutes our lifeworld and our everyday encounters with things. Even though Ihde deals primarily with technologies, his remarks have a considerably wider scope of application, opening up new vistas to our relationship to equipmental entities in general – and to the entire environments that largely consist of such equipmental entities.

As Asle Kiran (2012, p. 83–84, emphasis altered) has argued, the specific mode of presence called “present absent” may not pertain merely to proper background technologies, but it may also be appropriately applied to other kinds of technologies, representing the other categories of the Ihdean fourfold relations:

[W]e need to highlight the specific presence “background” technologies can have even when they, as artefacts, remain in the background [...] Also technologies that go into the ordinary technology relations but whose mediating function is not actualized can be seen to harbor a similar aspect. For instance, the *ready availability* of the telephone might seem to be, at most, a background relation although the actual use is not. However, knowing that we can call, or be called upon, is also *an aspect to how we organize our lives*.

The point here is that the “ordinary” (i.e. not background-like) technologies are also present to us as a kind of background to our lives when they are not in use. Hence their overall significance to our worldly existence cannot be exhausted by focusing merely on their “proper” functions and their related ways of mediation. The specific way in which currently unused devices and other tools are present in our experience has, in turn, a considerable effect on the overall composition of that experience, having notable influences on the constitution of our lifeworld.

This observation, however, reveals the “blind spot” of current postphenomenology: typical postphenomenological accounts fall short of explicating how, exactly, the “ready availability” of devices, and how that being “an aspect to how we organize our lives,” manifest themselves *experientially* and at the level of *experiential quality*? Despite the fact that postphenomenology relies on the hermeneutical concept of “interpretation” – and that it builds on examining the technologically conditioned and thus historical ways of perceiving the world – there seems to be an unexplained and somewhat troublesome emphasis on *what* we perceive, and not so much on *how* we perceive. To exaggerate slightly, for postphenomenology the world consists of things, and not so much the qualities of these things.

7 AFFORDANCES AND THE PERCEIVED QUALITY OF AN ENVIRONMENT

In order to tackle such problems, and in order to provide necessary room for acknowledging the role of experiential quality and aesthetic matters in the constitution of our everyday experiences, we need to double-check how the functionality of technologies is understood in postphenomenological thinking. When addressing the mediatory role of various technologies, and the related contingencies inherent in the context of application, it is tempting to scrutinize the various “uses” of particular technologies: for example, the concept of “multistability” refers specifically to “the ever-present potential for a technology to be used in multiple ways through multiple contexts” (Rosenberger 2014, p. 373). The question of which use appears to be the primary one, and why, remains more or less unanswered. There are, of course, the intentions of the user, but we *de facto* perceive innumerable technological devices and other tools without currently having in mind any specific intentions concerning them, and we still perceive them essentially as meaningful entities serving certain functions and not other ones.

It seems that our interpretations regarding the functionalities of things are highly context-sensitive, pointing to the fact that we tend to encounter them primarily in certain kinds of socio-material environments, as parts of particular spatially arranged equipmental wholes. Our experience of such equipmental environments is, in turn, conditioned by the various functionalities that comprise our everyday practices that ultimately form the basis of our lifeworld. In other words, we see the environment in terms of how we are used to utilizing it, and thus in terms of what we are used to seeing: we have learned to perceive certain uses and not others. This process of learning must have a pragmatic basis – related eventually to the cost-efficiency of our perception – so that we do not have to start interpreting our environments from scratch, which would consume our time and cognitive resources simply too much.

In order to acknowledge the pragmatic nature of all environmental experiences and the role of related learning processes adequately enough, an alternative term for describing our relationship to the functionalities of an environment is needed. Consider the following quote by the postphenomenologists Kiran and Verbeek (2010, p. 417, emphasis added):

[A] piece of equipment influences the world to appear for us in a manner that is in accordance with its *affordances*. A claw hammer [...] *affords* rock hard hits and pulling things, which points it toward a context that includes nails and spikes, items that in turn afford hitting or pulling. The nails and the spikes stick out from a background, the world, because of the hammer.

Here the authors employ the notion “affordance,” a term originating in the 1960s from the ecological perceptual psychologist James J. Gibson, though the most well-known formulations are from his 1979 book *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. In general, “affordance” refers to the possibilities of use and action *in* an environment *for* an experiencing agent, thus exceeding the scope of term “use” in highlighting the crucial role of the context and the user’s experiential perspective from the very beginning (see e.g. Jones 2003).

What is for our present purposes the most important dimension in affordances is the level of conventionality and normativity inherent in perceiving them. Affordances belong to specific forms of life, and they comprise a description of conventional ways of utilizing the innumerable possibilities of an environment: a certain regularity and the relative stability of behavioral patterns constitute practices that, in turn, define the normative dimension of the behavior (see e.g. Bloomfield et al. 2010; Menatti & Casado da Rocha 2016; Raudaskoski 2009; Rietveld & Kiverstein 2014; van Dijk & Rietveld 2017). Becoming a member of the particular form of life thus means learning to make use of the environment according to the prevailing conventions, but also learning to distinguish between correct and incorrect instantiations of the context-sensitive behavior.

When one has truly internalized the “normal way” of relating to the plethora of affordances – that is, when one has become a full-blown member of the form of life, a “skilled agent” (Rietveld and Kiverstein 2014) – such normative assessments occur automatically and without conscious consideration and reflection. One simply *perceives* what action the specific situation demands, as well as the correct affordances that it is presumed one will make use of.

An extreme case of the normativity involved in affordances takes place when we begin to see certain possibilities of use and action as objective features of a thing or an environment, but at the same time not seeing any other possibilities as relevant alternatives to the established ones. This is an example of learning to attach meanings to things so firmly that we do not even recognize any other possible choices, or that there would have been any real options available in the first place. Such instances can be called “canonical affordances” (see Costall 2012 & 2014), referring to the self-evidence and the normality of certain deeply conventionalized ways of use and action.

Canonical affordances represent an ultimate form of familiarity with regard to the functionalities of things and environments. Hence, it is the canonical affordances of things and environments that tend to form the background of our everyday experience: we take *them* for granted, so that we can focus on dealing with some other less familiar and perhaps more demanding affordances. Canonical affordances also allow us a half-conscious relation to various environments that are similar enough, even though we might not be so acquainted with them at the level of details.

Thus canonical affordances are of specific importance regarding the familiarization with new and strange environments and their places: we immediately recognize such affordances of any place that generally have “canonical status” in our eyes. However, in familiar places other, more nuanced and intricate affordances may become canonical to us too, and becoming used to the details and idiosyncrasies of a place considerably alters the quality of our experiential relationship to that place (see e.g. Kaplan, Kaplan & Ryan 1998).

Normativity also prevails with regard to these more nuanced and intricate place-based affordances, giving rise to the conventionalization of more personal and reference group-specific relations to a place and its experiential character. To be more exact, the experiential character of a place is, at least partially, the *outcome* of the processes of familiarization and canonization, thus manifesting the correspondence, as well as the possible tensions,¹⁶ between the experiencing agent and the place.

There is another aspect related to the normativity of affordances that has to do with perceiving the correspondence between the agent and the environment. The theoretical framework of affordances relies primarily on a systemic and holistic view concerning individual actors in their environments, as it aims to assess the *fit* between the environment and the individual actor. Affordance-based psychological studies thus typically aim to examine how well the environment satisfies the needs and the desires of the individual.

According to the central argument of ecological psychology, environmental “aesthetic preferences” – understood as something comprising the overall perceived quality of an environment, not as a set of reflectively and deliberately chosen “likings” – are themselves a *perceptual manifestation* of the fit. The argument goes that there is an aesthetic preference for environments that apparently correspond to the fundamental needs and desires of an experiencing agent, the individual thus being “intuitively drawn away from unpromising places and towards places that afford more positive opportunities” (Kaplan 1987, p. 24). Hence there is an implicit aesthetic incentive *within* our experience that leads us to inhabit such environments that involve more beneficial affordances than neutral or detrimental ones.

The kind of aesthetic preferences and the related aesthetic reactions that the evolutionary and ecological psychology aim to describe are automatic and unconscious by nature, and they represent a form of economical and cost-efficient way of recognizing the environment as an environment that can be used in order to do or gain something. Put briefly, the aesthetic reactions serve as an efficient way of categorizing and classifying, as well as estimating and

¹⁶ It must be remembered that there are many places that have an oppressive experiential character and negative connotations, and not all canonical affordances of a place are positive by nature. The term “correspondence” is used here in a neutral meaning, referring merely to the amount of shared history, not taking any stance on whether this history is has a positive or a negative general tone.

evaluating, our surroundings – from the viewpoint of affordances (see Kaplan 1987).

Aesthetic preferences guide our choices not merely *between* different places, but also *within* particular places, and these choices are based on our perception of the particular place-based affordances. In other words, the perceived quality of an environment is an approximation regarding the suitability of the place-based affordances, and such approximations are made between places and within places. The assessment of the perceived quality is, in turn, based on our previous experiences of known environments and their affordances, for we have learnt to classify and evaluate new and strange environments on the basis of more familiar ones. Through this automated ability of classifying and evaluating, we also gain a specific experiential relationship to the most familiar surroundings, which eventually gives rise to the aesthetic qualities of homely environments.

The general economical imperative of our perceptive processes implies that we have to favor such methods of observation that use our scarce resources efficiently. We simply cannot afford to needlessly fixate on such familiar features of our familiar environments that we already know on the basis of various previous encounters with them. In accordance with this, it can be said that we perceive familiar environmental affordances *peripherally*,¹⁷ meaning that we acknowledge them without consciousness of either the affordances, or of the act of acknowledging itself. Peripheral perception applies also to places, meaning that we perceive the qualities of place-based affordances directly – we do not have to rely on any mental representations (see Raymond et al. 2017) – but essentially in a non-focused and non-thematizing way.

This is another way of expressing the meaning of the “atmospheric characteristics” of the manifold background relations in our environments: we live among affordances, our place-based existence constantly being conditioned by the possibilities of that place, surrounding us like an atmosphere that is simultaneously present yet still absent. The direct but non-focused perceptual relation we have to all environments and their affordances can also be called “atmospheric perception” (see Pallasmaa 2014). Such mechanism of perception is of specific importance in our most familiar environments and places, in which we are *atmospherically aware* of all their relevant functionalities and other features. We simply do not have to pay any specific attention to place-based affordances that are canonical to us, and the

¹⁷ “Peripheral perception” is a concept developed by Juhani Pallasmaa (see e.g. 2014), referring primarily to those dimensions of an environment that we primordially grasp without understanding them intellectually. Pallasmaa focuses on relatively abstract phenomena, such as atmospheres and the characteristics of a particular situation, but the concept can arguably be applied much more widely, covering an entire branch or subspecies of our environmental relationship.

“functional essence” of these homely places is present to us via the specific experiential character of those places.¹⁸

¹⁸ On this basis, it seems that the background-like relations and their atmospheric characteristics are closely connected to something akin to Heidegger’s concept of *Befindlichkeit*, which has been translated as “affectivity,” “attunement,” “disposedness” and even “state-of-mind,” to name a few alternatives (see Slaby 2021). In any case, *Befindlichkeit* comprises an ontological structure of *Dasein*’s being, referring specifically to our way of existence as being-in-the-world. In Heideggerian terminology, *Befindlichkeit* is the ontological counterpart of *Stimmungen* (“moods”), and “as the ontic manifestation of *Befindlichkeit*, *Stimmungen* are the various and specific ways in which *Dasein* can relate to and disclose the world, all of which occur against the backdrop of the structure of *Befindlichkeit*” (Elpidorou & Freeman 2015, p. 663). Moods, in turn, are something that Heidegger likens to atmospheres that have a crucial role in our existence, since we eventually exist *in* them, or *through* them: “[moods] are not some inner, private, or subjective states of Being. Instead, moods are the pervasive medium or lens through which the world is disclosed to us, and in existing, we constantly find ourselves in them” (Elpidorou & Freeman 2015, p. 664). As a medium through which we are related to the world and to the worldly things, moods “affect and to an extent even determine *how things appear to us*” (Elpidorou & Freeman 2015, p. 664, emphasis added). Moods thus have essentially to do with the *experiential quality* of our relation to things and the surroundings (the places) they are part of. On this basis, it seems that the form of “atmospheric perception” we have discussed above could be described as a distinct form or subcategory of moods, referring to the specific unobtrusiveness and givenness of our everyday environments and their entities. In other words, the amount of familiarity we have with our most typical environments is such that we eventually end up relating to them through such moods that their inherent possibilities of use and action (i.e. the place-based affordances) gain “atmospheric characteristics,” and thus are present to us as something “absent.” These considerations remain, however, mere curiosities, indicating that there are salient connections between Heidegger’s original formulations and the more applied stance we have developed here. As was shown above, there are, for instance, several more or less established (English) translations for the term *Befindlichkeit*; therefore Heideggerian original terminology might not always be as operational and useful as one would wish, so that a relatively wide selection of possible interpretations eventually hinders developing further applications. This is the ultimate reason why the original terminology is not utilized more extensively in the thesis.

8 CONCLUDING REMARKS

A satisfactory or thriving environmental relationship that is primarily based on the described atmospheric awareness is possible only if an environment consists of places that we experience as familiar enough to us. Hence considerable changes in such an environment may shake the delicate balance of our environmental relationship at least temporarily, perhaps even permanently. The atmospherically sensed experiential quality of our habitat is the outcome of a lengthy process of familiarization with our environment – of sharing a history with it, and even growing with it – and the nuances in our personal experiential relationship with our “home environments” cannot be grasped from an external point of view in their full richness.

The experiential quality of an environment – which is a major theme in everyday aesthetics – plays an important part as a *mediating structure* in the process of the peripheral or atmospheric perception of place-based affordances. As peripheral perception entails an “ease of interpretation” of an environment, the specific experiential quality that lies behind such an efficient mode of perception has many far-reaching yet poorly recognized repercussions for our environmental relationship. This experiential quality affects, among other things, our conceptions of how well the environment and its affordances satisfy our needs and desires, as well as how well it resonates with our ideals and values regarding life in general.

Using the terminology of environmental psychology, it is not merely the objective fit between ourselves and our environment that matters, but also our personal experience of this fit, especially when assessing our habitat from the viewpoint of comprehensive well-being. Experiential quality and its components thus need to be taken into account from the very beginning, not merely as a minor theme that can be ameliorated *after* the city is developed (cf. Dovey & Pafka 2020). Abstract experiential issues – such as those related to aesthetic values and meanings inherent in homely environments – equally deserve attention when planning and constructing, as well as maintaining and reorganizing the urban environment, if we intend to enhance the social and cultural, as well as the ecological and economic sustainability of our urban form of life in the long term.

Now the crucial question is whether it is possible to foster an environmental relationship primarily based on atmospheric awareness or not. If one assumes an affirmative response to this question, one is tempted to ask further: how, exactly, is this done? In particular, what forms of environmental management and development – including both strategic and operative levels of planning, as well as the diverse processes of construction – could possibly be sensitive enough to preserve or even enhance the experiential quality of an urban environment that is subject to changes? These are even more critical issues if one properly acknowledges the essence of cities as constantly and

continuously evolving and ever-renewing entities. Hence it is not the change in itself but the *nature* of this change that may pose a threat to the often so delicate and humble aesthetics of everyday urban places.

In order to tackle the aesthetic challenges related to change in people's urban habitat, a few concluding remarks are in place. First of all, it should be properly recognized that *different people really do experience various environments in different ways*. This does not mean that everyone might perceive and interpret their surroundings in radically different or completely idiosyncratic ways, but that people actually do pay attention to different environmental aspects and details, and that they evaluate these aspects and details differently. Familiarity with certain types of environments plays a crucial role in this: it really does make a difference whether one has spent most of one's life in urban, semi-urban or rural environments. Matters of homogeneity and diversity, cleanliness and shabbiness, as well as the presence of history in an environment, are all important.

For example, if one is used to the excessive rationality and the central role played by public authorities that are visibly present in Nordic cities, the liveliness and a certain lack of order that is characteristic of many Mediterranean cities might appear odd, challenging and even oppressive. On the other hand, from the Mediterranean point of view, the neat, orderly and relatively young Nordic cities might indeed seem cold, unwelcoming and downright depressing. This is, however, a somewhat unsophisticated example, and more subtle differences exist within the Nordic and Mediterranean people, to be sure.

In a study conducted in the Netherlands (Jansen 2014), significant differences were found in the way two reference groups valued their habitat and its prominent features. The two groups do not differ with regard to age, gender and income, but they do exemplify different stances concerning housing-related values: one group prefers safety, harmony and stability, whereas the other finds choosing, creating and exploring more important. According to the study, the former group prefers to "live in a dwelling with a traditional architectural design," and in a relatively homogeneous neighborhood, since it provides them with "a sense of harmony and stability" (Jansen 2014, p. 271–272). The latter group, in turn, prefers "an innovative architectural style" and "a neighbourhood with different types of residents and a mix of residential and commercial land uses" (Jansen 2014, p. 271–272).

What is interesting here from our current point of view, is that the members of the latter group "less frequently prefer a newly built dwelling and less frequently would accept a dwelling in a new housing development," presumably because such forms of housing are regarded as "dull, monotonous and [having a] boring uniformity" (Jansen 2014, p. 272). There thus are clear differences between the groups in how they reacted to the more abstract experiential aspects of environments, and in the aesthetic evaluation of them. This example underlines that it really does matter how well the environment

corresponds to the overall values and “lifestyles” of urban dwellers.¹⁹ The differences in the lifestyles refer here particularly to matters of education level, family size and employment – that is, to factors that to a significant extent define the content of one’s everyday. In other words, an environment with the concrete functional affordances that suit one’s daily needs and desires is generally valued experientially and aesthetically; these experiential and aesthetic values, in turn, form another level of more abstract atmospheric environmental affordances that add to the overall value of that particular environment.

These considerations provide a connection to my second remark, focusing on *the role of expertise and education in environmental experience*. It is widely recognized, and also empirically verified (see e.g. Gifford *et al.* 2000, 2002), that environmental planning and construction experts (that is, architects and other designers) see the realities and potentialities of an environment in a different manner to the average end-user of that environment (that is, a resident, a regular visitor, or a passer-by). Gaining abstract knowledge regarding the functionalities and the technicalities behind the immediate appearance of an environment thus significantly alters one’s relation to the environment, also at the level of interpretative experience. This is an understandable outcome, particularly from the viewpoint of affordances and the notion of “skilled agent”: in order to become a full-blown member of the “community of environmental experts,” one simply has to learn to perceive and evaluate the realities and potentialities of an environment correctly – that is, according to the commonly shared principles and conceptions prevailing in that community.

Such an outcome might, however, become a problem if the perspective of the experts and the “lay people” begin to diverge and differentiate too much. This can be seen as the stumbling block of modern architecture that relied heavily on the notion of “function”: while acknowledging merely those functions that were considered necessary and proper by the designer, modern thinking essentially dismisses the diversity of functions that the environments may *de facto* serve. Highlighting the “chosen” functions in architectural design, in turn, created a corresponding modernist aesthetic, resulting in

¹⁹ It is noteworthy that a similar study conducted in Finland (Ilmonen *et al.* 2000) provided comparable findings: when inquired about the most valuable features of their current area of residency, it was found out that the representatives of specific “know-how professions” (professions related to design, advertising and marketing) mentioned the *character of the area* more than twice as often as the representatives of specific “knowledge-based professions” (professions related to IT and natural sciences). Here the character-related responses consisted of descriptions of the area, its milieu, age or general reputation. In particular, the atmosphere, the design, the coherence and the idiosyncrasy of the area were appreciated by the know-how professionals. Thus it seems that there is a correspondence between the professional identity of people, and the way environment is experienced and evaluated by these people.

ascetic and very streamlined environments, which seem to divide opinion particularly effectively (Gifford *et al.* 2000, 2002).

Despite evident and sincere attempts to get rid of the elitism inherent in modern functionalism, the legacy of architectural modernism is to some extent present also in contemporary practices of planning and construction. In particular, there still seem to be considerable challenges in communicating the views and needs of the end-users to those who are in charge of the environmental design. For instance, Raine Mäntysalo *et al.* (2019, p. 23, emphasis added) have expressed their concerns about prevailing established practices:

It is interesting – and alarming – that architects do not seem to take much interest in how their implemented designs are inhabited by their users. They communicate with each other through pictures in journals – and through architectural competitions – but knowledge about how the built architecture is used is unusual.

One way of overcoming the evident gap between experts and end-users is to explore and evaluate the concrete outcomes of the design – that is, the buildings, neighborhoods, or larger areas of an environment – *jointly* and perhaps some time (say, some years) *after* the construction work has finished. Only then is one able to see how the environment actually serves the needs and desires of the residents, and what kind of context for the everyday activities it really provides. Such evaluative enterprises comprise a form of *Post-Occupancy Evaluation* (POE), which can be broadly defined as “an appraisal of the degree to which a designed setting satisfies and supports explicit and implicitly [sic] human needs and values of those for whom a building is designed” (Friedmann *et al.* 1978; cited in Luusua 2016, p. 35).

Despite an apparent demand for different forms of POE – focusing either on a single building, a neighborhood, or some other part of the urban environment – there are very few examples of examining the outcomes of planning and design processes from a retrospective perspective, at least in Finland. One evident reason for this is a lack of resources, but there may well be other – that is, social and cultural – factors involved. Perhaps the designers and planners are simply not too keen on receiving criticism of their work, at least if the criticism is presented in a very passionate and unmoderated way. However, POE need not focus solely on criticism and negative issues, and it is very important to try to find such concrete solutions that have proven to be successful – judging both from the viewpoints of the expert and the end-user. Luckily, there are at least some examples (see e.g. Kyttä *et al.* 2004) of such evaluations, too.

Generally speaking, the most significant reason for the small number of POEs conducted in Finland is most probably structural in nature, having to do with legislation and the established practices of urban and land use planning. Namely, the land use planning system in Finland is such that it very much emphasizes utilizing research and various forms of reporting so that the effects

of a plan are adequately evaluated *a priori* – that is, before any concrete steps in altering the environment are taken (Luusua 2016). This, however, highlights the role of experts and related “hermeneutics and professional intuition” (Luusua 2016, p. 36, emphasis added) as the necessary basis for the evaluation, which might eventually be harmful from the perspective of enhancing communication between experts and end-users.

There are a few reasons why an excessive emphasis on “professional intuition” might be detrimental, particularly with regard to experiential and aesthetic issues. First, it is not justifiable or sensible to assume that the perspective of environmental experts would be enough as such, since while obtaining formal education, the experts *de facto* modify the way they experience and evaluate the environment. They thus eventually gain a membership in a specific *community of experience*, whether they are aware of this or not.²⁰

In addition to this, end-users themselves can be members of specific communities of experience, due to their habitual and bodily everyday relations to certain environments. Such experiential communities based on a (partially) shared everyday in a (partially) shared environment tend to be very loose, and people might not even recognize the existence of such communities until its ultimate basis – that is, the shared socio-material context for living – is subject to major changes or otherwise under threat. The evident problem here is that the experts cannot gain membership of such local experiential communities that easily, even if they wanted to. All in all, the apparent differences in experience call for more effective means of taking the views of the potential end-users into account than those based on mere “professional intuition.” Examining in more detail the local affordances, both functional and atmospheric, that are crucial for the formation of experiential communities could provide a promising way forward here.

The second reason for encountering problems if focusing too much on “professional intuitions” has to do with *common language*, or the lack of such language, between environmental experts and end-users. Put briefly, if people are not asked regularly enough, they may not learn to conceptualize their views and opinions about the quality of the urban environment clearly and informatively enough. In other words, people might have an experience that “something is not right” in their habitat, but they might find it difficult to articulate and communicate their experience – even if asked occasionally. Consider, for example, the following extract from an interview-based research study that examined the experiences of the residents in a newly built neighborhood (Mäenpää 2007, p. 174, emphasis added, translation altered):

²⁰ It is clear that there does not exist any *single* community of experience that would cover all environmental experts, and, in reality, the experts represent a variety of different views regarding aesthetics and experiential issues. In the light of this, it could be wiser to speak about a *set* of experiential communities.

People felt that the area was peaceful, too quiet even. [However,] the interviewees had little to say about the physical streetscape, and nothing very drastic. [...] The architecture of the buildings, the structure of the residential blocks and the townscape generally remained something of a grey area in the interviews and were not discussed much. [...] The large-scale structure of the residential blocks and the massive urban proportions of the buildings were taken as a given and never discussed.

On the basis of this particular research, it seems that people are more or less “resigned” to the prevailing realities of urban planning: they are not particularly willing or able to question or criticize the status quo, even if they have (justified) intuitions that some aspects of the environment are not optimal. However, if the typical large-scale structure and the massive proportions of newly built urban surroundings are more generally “taken as a given” – even though such environments would not afford interesting and versatile streetscapes, or lively and cozy public spaces that foster a vibrant urban life – it seems that there are severe shortcomings in providing people with real alternatives, and in publicly discussing the positive and negative aspects of alternative urban environments.

It is due to the triumph of industrial housing production that the number of available real alternatives is very limited, so that there are scarce variables in the end-products on which the user may actually have effect. This is particularly the case with regard to individual apartment houses, but the same applies largely to commercial buildings, and to the construction of the urban environment in general. The continuing lack of alternatives has resulted in a situation in which many people are no longer able even to imagine more satisfying and diverse urban environments as their habitat, let alone to demand the realization of such environments. Hence, as Karin Krokfors (2016, p. 213, emphasis added) writes, we simply need more “examples that *define* what could be possible [;] in the lack of diversity in the housing stock, it is difficult for people to *conceive* what is possible, as the examples of doing things differently are yet so few.”

Such a situation clearly is not merely the result of relying too much on “professional intuition,” but it has to do with the established construction process as a whole (see Krokfors 2016). The environmental experts do, however, have a special role as mediators between end-users and the usually rather conservative housing industry that operates according the logic of finances: they are the ones who compile the blueprints and the visualizations on the basis of various boundary conditions “given from above.” Despite the undeniably narrow and limited space that the building planners and urban environment planners generally have, they still ought to have the courage to use their “professional intuition” not only in accordance with the visions and the interests of the industry, but in order to provide people with real alternatives to choose from. The experts thus have the exceptional possibility of showing people what kind of (functional and experiential) affordances our habitat can offer us, but finding and creating the most essential affordances is

a task that demands a certain humility from the experts, for they do not plan the environment primarily for themselves.

The kind of “silent approval” or a downright “hopelessness” implied from people’s side due to the current lack of alternatives comprises a very detrimental phenomenon from the perspective of enhancing urban sustainability. The lack of alternatives is both an outcome and a prerequisite for the *homogenization of urban surroundings*, which is in the focus of my third and final remark. By homogenization here I mean the process of cities and different parts of cities becoming more and more similar functionally and experientially, so that it is ever harder to figure out one’s whereabouts on the basis of an immediate experience.

The homogenization of urban environments has its basis in the fact that newly built commercial and apartment buildings tend to be very similar – mostly due to their industrial origin, as was seen above. Indeed, contemporary buildings are by and large compiled using pre-fabricated parts, and the largely automatized production processes of these parts define many of their qualities in advance. In the light of this, homogenization results from the *standardization* of the production processes, in the name of general efficiency and particularly cost-effectiveness. In short, standardization is simply a means to produce large amounts of commodities as economically as possible, and this inevitably implies that the outcomes have to be very homogeneous.

To be fair, there is nothing wrong in standardization as such, as it can bring about indisputable economic benefits considering mass-produced commodities. Now the crucial question is, what is the adequate scope of standard-based thinking, and to which entities and aspects can we apply the logic of standardization? To be more exact, the crucial question is related to our possibility of choice: which entities and aspects of an urban environment do we *wish* to be standardized, and which entities and aspects do we *wish* to keep outside the scope of standardization?

It is clear that not only the production of pre-fabricated parts is standardized, but that entire buildings can also be, and indeed are, constructed in standardized ways. The mass-production of residential and commercial buildings practically defines the present-day realities of construction, and projects that utilize any custom-made solutions are relatively unusual, instantiating the exceptional importance of the project.²¹ Indeed, any significant differences between newly produced buildings are rare – even with regard to their composition and appearance, though these aspects typically are

²¹ The case with renovation construction is somewhat different, since the structures and other architectural features of the existing building largely define the possibilities and the restrictions of the project, so that the proposed solutions necessarily are context-sensitive and thus more or less custom-made. Despite this, the methods and the means of a renovation project are, to a significant degree, standardized, so that the difference between “ordinary” and renovation construction projects is not qualitative but quantitative in nature (both rely on standardization, but the degrees of standardization differ).

not as pre-determined by various regulations as the more technical issues might be.

The ultimate result of the large-scale standardization of individual buildings is that the urban environment in its entirety becomes more and more homogeneous. This has been going on ever since the beginning of industrialized housing production. The industrial production was introduced at the level of theory by the pioneer architectural modernists in the 1920s, and at the level of practice by profit-seeking construction companies in the 1960s (see Krokfors 2016).

Homogenization is a type of change that is particularly dangerous from the viewpoint of the experiential quality of the environment, as it eradicates the distinctive features of the urban environments that have evolved in the course of decades or even centuries. The evident problem here is that homogenization is not a well-defined planning problem that might be exposed when undertaking an objective statistical analysis of an urban environment: evaluating an environment only in the light of various technical and economic factors does not reveal a worrying situation regarding its experiential and aesthetic dimensions.

These challenges have been widely recognized in the past decades, and the reaction against such homogenization comprises a significant part of the criticism of architectural modernism. Such criticism has typically been formulated as a defense of places, and it is clear that places are in the centre of the debate around homogenization. According to the central argument, existing urban places provide the basis for urban diversity, and if they are transformed into standard-like environments without any real distinctive characteristics, the related urban diversity may be lost forever.

Related to this, we can identify two different yet interconnected lines of development that by and large define the conditions of contemporary urbanism and its relation to places.²² First, cities are adopting entirely new strategies for growth: they generally aim at growing *inwards* by increasing the density of the urban structure and utilizing various forms of urban infill. This is a radical change, particularly in Finland, that has largely relied on a distinctively loose urban structure that can be extended to nearby forests and farmlands if needed. For instance, a few years ago in Helsinki, the capital of Finland, the Vision for the new City Plan stated that “sufficient housing production requires *significant* construction volumes and *extensive* area reservations, [implying that] we cannot *only* build on the outskirts of the current areas” (City of Helsinki 2013, p. 29, emphasis added). According to the Vision, such a situation changes the nature of urban planning and thus calls for an entirely “new way of perceiving the city” (City of Helsinki 2013, p. 29).

²² These considerations are based on observations particularly from Finland, but they are applicable to a remarkably wider set of urbanized countries and societies – at least within many areas of the Western world.

The apparent need for new strategies for growth comes from sustainability-related arguments. The main idea is that a more dense urban structure enables more efficient public transportation, moderate distances in the urbanite's everyday, and accessible public and commercial services (see e.g. City of Helsinki 2013). These are the indisputable advantages of more dense cities, but it is not entirely clear whether the effects on urban sustainability have been addressed comprehensively enough.

In a more dense urban structure, the demand for moving around on a daily basis would obviously decrease, so that the related energy consumption and greenhouse emissions would also decrease accordingly. In addition to this, systematic densification is, however, likely to alter the quality of nearby surroundings significantly for masses of urban dwellers. Increasing density through infill development is by necessity an *intervention* that more or less alters the context of living for local residents. Such an intervention may either improve or weaken the quality of the local environment, and the ultimate outcome depends on the concrete execution of the infill project (see Vihanninjoki 2018).

From the viewpoint of experiential quality, the worst case scenario is that typical infill projects extend the standardization and homogenization of urban environments to a number of previously “untouched” urban areas. It is true that urban environments are, in principle, subject to change all the time: urban environments are the result of lengthy and complex processes, and we can see merely a single “still frame” of these processes at one time. Having said this, it is reasonable to presume that the mentioned “new way of perceiving the city” may have considerable effects on the situation – most probably accelerating the pace of change, at least to some degree.

Thinking of everyday urban places, it is necessary to recognize the challenges that large-scale urban infill can pose to experiential quality in both the near and the distant future. In short, if numerous infill projects are not planned and executed carefully and sensitively enough, there is a significant risk that the existing places become more and more similar in the course of time.²³ This, in turn, can remarkably reduce urban diversity and thus

²³ These kinds of challenges have been taken into consideration in Helsinki, or at least there seem to be intentions pointing in this direction. Consider the following caption from the Vision (City of Helsinki 2013, p. 30): “Supplementary construction will be supported on all levels. In some areas, the increase in construction rights may be significant, which, in itself, will change the nature of these areas substantially. [...] However, the building heritage and identity of areas must be taken into account when performing supplementary construction. Supplementary construction must be of high quality. It must improve the image of current areas.” It is not, however, entirely clear how these ambitious and noble objectives will be achieved. For example, the City Planning Department has developed a “sensitivity analysis” that examines how well the different areas of the city are likely to cope with change caused by urban infill (City of Helsinki 2014). The apparent problem with this method is that it is applied merely to a set of relatively coherently constructed areas, and not to *any* temporally layered or mixed areas. In addition, the method is not meant to be used in urban areas built after the 1980s *at all*. On this basis it seems that

compromise the resilience and the related sustainability of urbanized society as a whole.²⁴ In this sense, while an excessive standardization of the urban environment might appear cost-efficient in the short run, and bring about short-term benefits and profits, in the long run it can cause unanticipated and very far-reaching expenses, both financial and socio-cultural in nature.

Compared to the general tendency of cities growing inwards by increasing the density of their urban structure, the second line of development is related to places even more straightforwardly, having specifically to do with the role that places have in contemporary urban development. Today, the significance of lively and prosperous places is often explicitly stated and even emphasized, and the various forms of place-making comprise a considerable part of present-day urban design. Despite this, it is not always clear what kinds of places are regarded as “proper meaningful places,” and exactly what kind of

the presented method serves primarily governmental purposes related to preserving cultural history, and that it is fairly useless in safeguarding the experiential quality of various everyday environments and their places.

²⁴ Urban diversity, resilience and sustainability are all essentially interconnected. “Resilience” is a central term in contemporary sustainability sciences, making eventually sense of what sustainability is and what is required of sustainable systems. In short, according to a classic definition “resilience is the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks” (Walker *et al.* 2004). On this basis, “from a resilience perspective, sustainability is not about maintaining a system at its equilibrium state [...] but rather sustainability should focus on the system’s capacity to create and test opportunities and maintain adaptive capabilities” (Wu & Wu 2013, p. 219; see also Holling 2001). From the viewpoint of urbanism, the resiliency-based interpretation of sustainability means a shift from “stability, optimality and predictability” to a perspective focusing on “risk management” and “avoiding potentially catastrophic regime shifts” (Wu & Wu 2013, p. 219). Maintaining urban diversity, in turn, is an important means of managing risks by decentralizing them: when encountering an unpredictable change at the societal level, not all parts of the urban structure rely on exactly the same prerequisites in order to remain functioning. Hence the diversity within an urban system ultimately contributes to the performance of the urbanized society as a whole in the case of an unpredictable event. The Covid-19 pandemic is an illustrative example of such an unpredictable event that poses a significant threat to the contemporary urban life form. In a relatively short time, the pandemic had caused a state of emergency due to which the normal functioning of urbanized societies by and large ceased. All around the world urban everyday was suddenly and radically redefined (see e.g. Lehtinen 2020), as people were either instructed or obliged to remain home and to avoid unnecessary movement – spending time in public places and using public transport was to be avoided. In such a situation the “densifying public transportation city” (City of Helsinki 2013, p. 12) was not that sustainable anymore, as people were mainly trying to cope in their relatively tightly-fitted urban dwellings, and were not able to use the public urban space as their living-room anymore. All in all, this is not to say that enabling efficient public transport would not be an important objective sustainability-wise, but that it also is absolutely necessary to take care of the diversity of urban surroundings, so that future unpredictable events do not paralyze the urbanized societies so widely.

relation to places and their development is desirable from the viewpoint of municipal authorities and commercial actors.

For instance, there are a few differing views concerning the nature of place-making – that is, concerning what is, or ought to be, called place-making.²⁵ Generally, two different stances exist: the first one states that place-making is a “top-down,” design-driven, government and planning-oriented enterprise; the second states that place-making consists of “bottom-up,” community-driven and self-organizing grassroots-level activities. These two conceptions, in a way, manifest the ideal types of place-making, and in real life the place-making projects and their related activities are often some kind of hybrid, mixing the characteristic features of these opposing ends.

For our current purposes, what is most important in these characterizations of place-making is that both are based on a specific kind of relation to places: they both seem to presume that places are primarily “made” on a conscious and intentional basis, and that place-making really comprises a specific activity of its own. This is, however, only partly true, and reveals our limited understanding of the relation we have to our places in our everyday. Consider, for example, the following quotation from a recent dissertation by Jani Tartia (2019, p. 121–122, emphasis altered):

[M]uch of the place-making processes of the city are not the regulated or conscious attempts to create a (shared) sense of place but something that happens idiomatically through spatial uses. [...] If we only pay attention – whether research, design or policy-wise – to the sites deemed as (traditional, fixed, bounded) places, we can only reach a part of what the city is. [...] The day-to-day habitual routes and the intersections and street-corner spaces experienced in passing require the same kind of interest, analytical focus and appreciation as the other spaces of the city. We need to consider more seriously the role of temporality and the day-to-day ‘non-special’ spaces – that are often experienced, used and performed in motion.

The argument here is that many of the meaningful places in our urban everyday were actually never “made” in the sense of narrowly defined place-making: they simply are *not* the outcome of conscious and intentional attempts to give the urban environment “a meaning.” They are meaningful precisely because of their role as “enablers” in our everyday, and their meaningfulness is brought about through the idiomatic uses that give shape to our daily life. Such places tend to be “non-special” in that their meaning can be fully understood merely from within the temporal course of our everyday

²⁵ In Finland, “place-making” is not a very established concept, and it even has no direct translation. Despite this, various forms of place-making are very much present in contemporary Finnish urban planning practices and policies; this can be seen most easily in the notable emphasis on the sense of place (“sense of place must be taken into account,” “sense of place must be fostered” etc.).

activities, which is why they might remain negligible or even invisible to an outsider.

These considerations give reason to rethink the role that the “established” forms of place-making – either top-down, or bottom-up – have in improving and maintaining the experiential quality of our everyday environments. Such forms of place-making are, without doubt, important in that they often give us very beneficial and useful tools for creating new urban places or radically updating an existing place. Acknowledging this, these kinds of place-based projects are not the *only* means to take care of the experiential quality of our urban surroundings. And, to be honest, they may not necessarily comprise the *most suitable* instruments for managing our existing everyday environments and their places.

Hence, in order to emphasize and appropriately honor the significance of various everyday places and their humble yet sensitive experiential qualities and characteristics, we need to encourage a form of *place-maintaining* either instead of, or in addition to, the different branches of place-making. Only if we manage to nurture effectively the precious diversity that includes peculiar, banal, and sometimes rough or even grotesque everyday urban places, will we be able to retain and develop our urban form of life on a truly sustainable basis.

SUMMARIES OF THE ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

Article I serves as a general introduction to Heideggerian place-based ontology as applied to the contemporary condition. The article consists of a dialogue with Relphian human geography, which essentially relies on the Heideggerian notion of “place” but falls short of providing a thorough account of the placedness of human existence. The article thus includes a shift of focus from the consciousness-based model of intentionality to analyzing the role that the existential, materially-based intentionalities have in the constitution of human experience and existence. Accordingly, there is an ontological difference between places as ontic phenomena and places as ontological structures, referring to the difference between places encountered within the lifeworld and places as constitutive of the lifeworld. As ontological structures, places cannot in principle be encountered and thus thematized as objects of conscious experience; this is a feature that the Relphian contextual interpretation of place fails to recognize clearly enough. The article also provides a critique of contemporary design-led place-making policies and practices that overly rely on an object-based interpretation of places, eventually regarding meaningful and authentic urban places as deliberately created design-artifacts.

Article II introduces the fundamentals of the postphenomenological philosophy of technology, particularly the idea of mediation as a basis for the technologically conditioned relations between humans and their world. The article complements the postphenomenological stance by addressing in more detail the experiential qualities of our relationship to different kinds of technologies, namely to proper machines and other tools. The article also includes an application of the theory of affordances, which originates in ecological environmental psychology but which has been further developed in order to cover various fields of study. The concept of “canonical affordance” is also introduced, as well as its potential for understanding the constitution of our everyday experience of useful things and environments. The salient connections between postphenomenology and affordance-based thinking are pointed out: both frameworks emphasize the intertwining of tool-based practices and perception, implying that when we learn to use various tools and devices, we eventually learn to perceive the world in terms of them. Despite the common interest in the constitution of perception, both frameworks struggle with getting a proper hold of the matters related to the quality of perception, which essentially falls within scope of aesthetics. The article tackles these issues by means of a case study, examining the experiential and aesthetic repercussions of contemporary portable wayfinding devices.

Article III continues developing the themes presented in article I, applying the notion of “affordance” in elaborating the Heideggerian perspective on the

problem of designing authentic places. The main argument goes that contemporary place-making essentially contributes to the homogenization of urban environments and the places they consist of, thus remaining under the influence of the universalist modern project, despite an explicit focus on the particularity and authenticity of the created places. This is due to the largely applied marketing strategies that reduce the diversity of urban places to a pre-defined and pre-fabricated selection of “place brands,” so that the alleged differences between places remain marginal and are more or less invented from the very beginning. Accordingly, there is a shift from the standards of “modern man” to those of a “mobile consumer,” and while the modernist view represents certain “aesthetics of standardization,” contemporary place-making is a manifestation of “standardized aesthetics.” The affordance-based account of places and their experiential character is helpful in understanding the speculativeness of the place-making project that operates at the level of “generalized subject” and “generalized place experiences,” thus ignoring the necessary idiosyncrasies inherent in every possible experiencing agent. Such presumptions are harmful in that they falsely give rise to the possibility of regarding the created places as “experience machines,” supposedly producing pre-defined and ultimately controlled types of urban experience.

In article IV, the themes presented in article II are further elaborated, particularly from the viewpoint of mobility and movement in urban surroundings. The case studies are an aid to understanding the role of movement-related technologies in the formation of (both modern and contemporary) urban experience. The examples show that technologies effectively open up new possibilities of using and experiencing urban environments while simultaneously reducing the significance of some existing possibilities. From the viewpoint of places this means that even though technologies notably alter and redefine the ways in which we interact with our immediate environs, such changes can be seen as a continuous reorganization of our relationships to the various places in the urban make-up. Accordingly, new places and their affordances may become more accessible to us, and we may also learn to perceive new affordances in previously known and familiar places. Despite this, the mediating role of places in our relationship to our environment, and to our world, remains unaltered, even though technologies also have a considerable bearing in this process of mediation. The applied frameworks of postphenomenology and affordance-theory emphasize the materiality underlying the more abstract experiences of urban environments and urbanity in general. The case studies effectively point out that the constantly evolving varieties of urban experience – such as the metaphoric experiences of the “city as a machine,” of the “urban sublime,” and of the “city as a complex systemic whole” – cannot be grasped thoroughly without paying adequate attention to the material and technological basis they are founded upon.

Article V applies postphenomenological thinking and the theory of affordances in analyzing the aesthetic character or sense of contemporary

urban places in more detail. The article summarizes the main ideas and arguments presented in previous articles, putting forward a postphenomenologically-oriented affordance-based framework for understanding the aesthetics of everyday urban places. The affordance theory has salient connections to evolutionary environmental psychology: according to the evolutionary argument, environmental aesthetic preferences and the perceived quality of an environment presumably inform us about the affordances of that environment in a very straightforward and cost-efficient way. This observation is not supposed to serve as an exhaustive account of the aesthetic dimensions of an environment, but it helps us in understanding the general role that aesthetics and quality-related issues have in the constitution of our everyday experiences of mundane environments and their places. Place-based canonical affordances are of crucial importance concerning our experience of those familiar places, even though such affordances are not usually the focus of our experience yet they manifest a specific experiential quality. Canonical affordances remain in the background of experience, and their presence comprises a form of “present absence” that has “atmospheric characteristics.” We are thus aware of them, though not in a fully conscious manner, for we perceive them peripherally – that is, directly but in a non-focused way. On this basis, the article concludes with the idea that familiarization with places means that new, more nuanced place-based affordances become canonical to us, entailing qualitative changes in the perception of those affordances, thus also giving rise to notable repercussions regarding the overall aesthetic character or sense of that particular place.

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