Aesthetic experiences

Now it is time to look briefly the research in environmental psychology concerning aesthetic experiences. Please remember that environmental aesthetics has been studied quite a lot also within some other disciplines like humanistic aesthetics, philosophy and sociology. But we will concentrate on the approaches of environmental psychology.

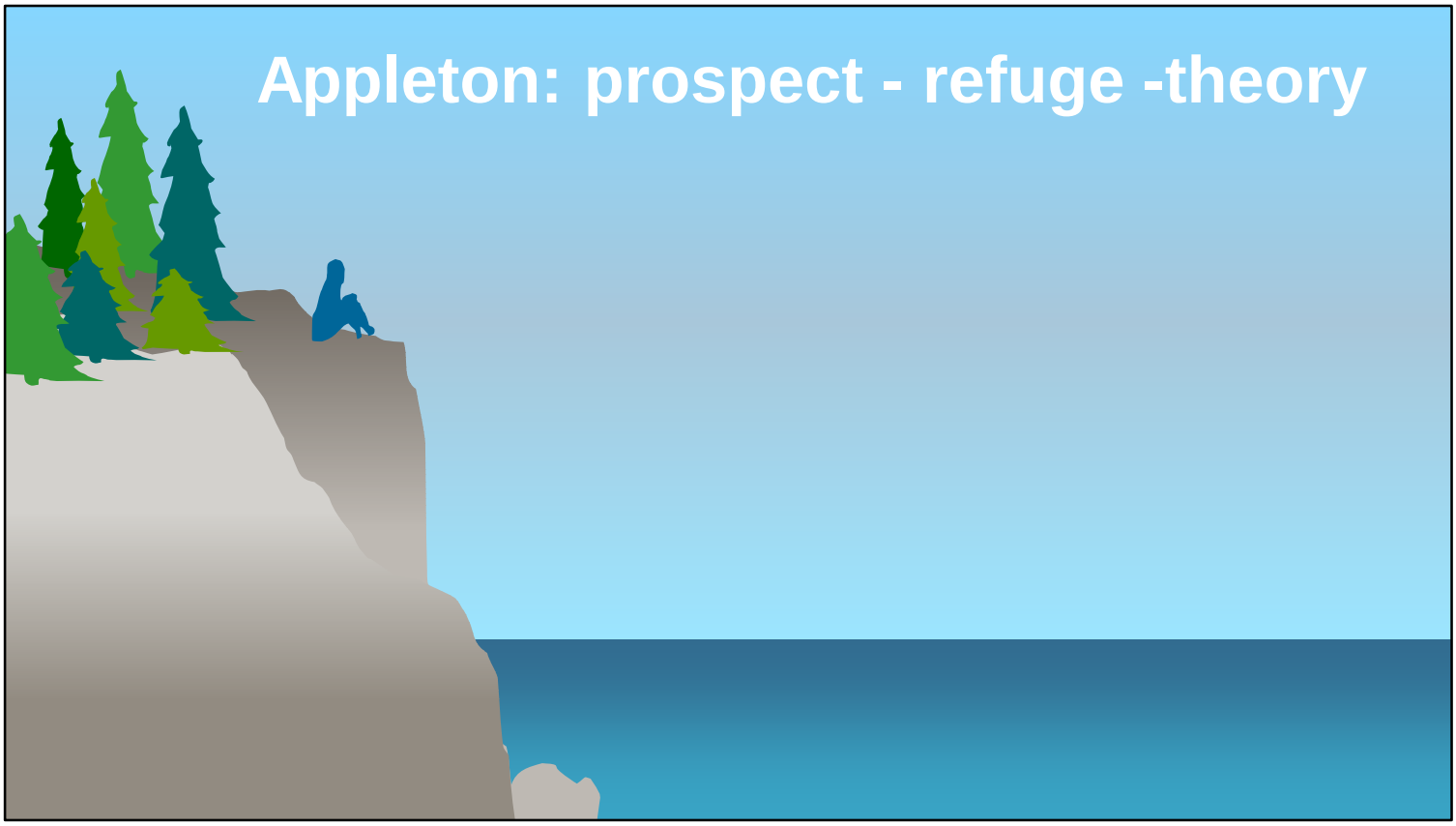
Empirical research on aesthetic esperiences

Experts' views on aesthetic quality

Layman's aesthetic experiences

According to the traditional view in environmental psychology, the aesthetic experiences of laymen differ from those of experts. In fact, it is often said that aesthetic evaluations belong to the tourists and experts. Then, in the laymen's relationship with the environment social and funtional aspects would be more emphasized. Recent studies, however, challenge this view. Let me come back to this theme at the end of this short lecture.

It is clear that aesthetic appreciations should always be seeen as a multisensory experience. In the empirical research on aesthetic experiences visual aesthetics nevertheless deminate. There is also a lot of empirical research about the aesthetic experiences related to natural settings – here there is quite a lot of overlap with the research on restorative environments of which we have another lecture in our course. This is to say that built environment has attracted less research interest. I think that the aesthetic requirements should apply to all levels in environment and environment as a whole, to buildings, green areas, yards, routes, streetscape and details.



The aesthetic evaluations of laypeople have been studied most often in environmental psychology as part of more general environmental preferences. Already in 1970's a geographer Jay Appleton noticed that places that people prefer provide often both an open view or a good vantage point (this is Prospect) without being vulnerable to an unexpected approach (Refuge), The refuge is helped by something that supports us from back.

Appleton explained this phenomenon with an evolutionary perspective. These kind of places have originally provided us a possibility to see without being seen, to eat without becoming eaten! While we no longer need to evade predators on the savannah, the same general idea holds as we navigate the urban jungle. Which places are reserved first in a restaurant? The places by the wall that provide a good view to the room, right?

In fact, my own favourite place in Eastern Finnish archipelago provides both prospect and refuge as you can see in this picture. How about your favourite place?

Aesthetic experiences a la Kaplans

	Understanding	Exploration
Immediately apparent	**Coherence** *(the extent to which the scene seems to "hang together")*	**Complexity** *(information richness of the scene)*
Can be inferred or predicted	**Legibility** *(the predicted navigability of the scene upon further exploration)*	**Mystery** *(the promise of the scene offering additional information upon further exploration)*

Kaplan & Kaplan 1987, 1988

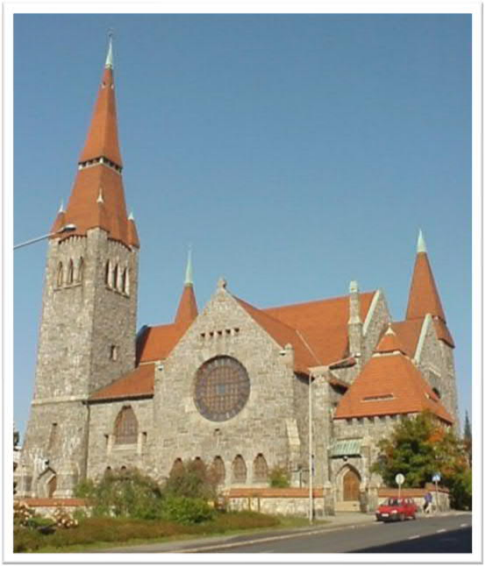
One of the best known conceptual frameworks in environmental aesthetics is the model developed by cognitive psychologists Stephen and Rachel Kaplan. They developed a model which identifies the basic cognitive needs that people have.

According to this model we almost automatically try to make sense our surroundings and gather additional information, information that helps us understand what is going on and that helps us to explore and learn more. During the evolution we have learned to favor environments that support these two basic needs. Those environments attract us instinctively and each generation does not have to learn these basic rules again.

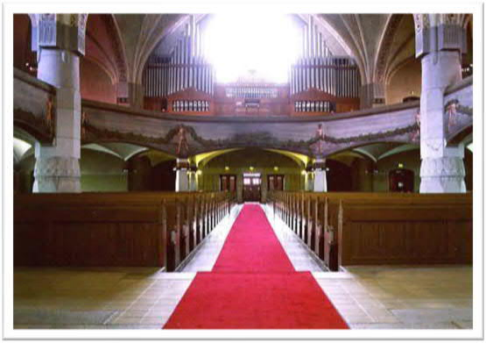
So, information should help us to *understand* and *explore.* Information can also be either immediately present or can be predicted. Combining these two aspects, gives us four different types of information: Coherence, Complexity, Legibility and Mystery.

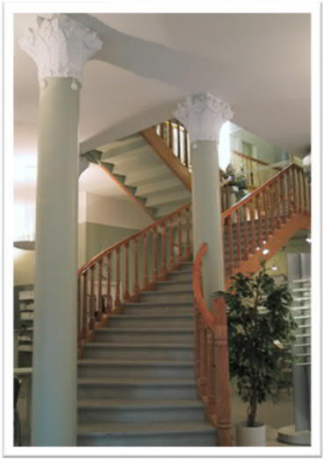
For coherence and complexity, the researchers have concluded that they follow the inverted U-shape pattern: we can find a level of coherence and complexity that most people prefer. Both legibility, that helps us to navigate in the environment and mystery have a linear association with preferences: the more the better!

Out of these four factors, mystery has been shown to predict preferences most strongly. Mystery refers to information that is not present but anticipated, a promise of additional information. For example partially occluding views are mysterious. The four factors also interact with each other: for example the more complex environment is, the more coherent it should be to become preferred. By the way: it is interesting that according to very many empirical studies legibility explains preferences weakly. And this is an important element in Kevin Lynche's theories... Kaplans argue that environment should not only be easy to make sense but also include something new and surprising.



The cathedral of Tampere



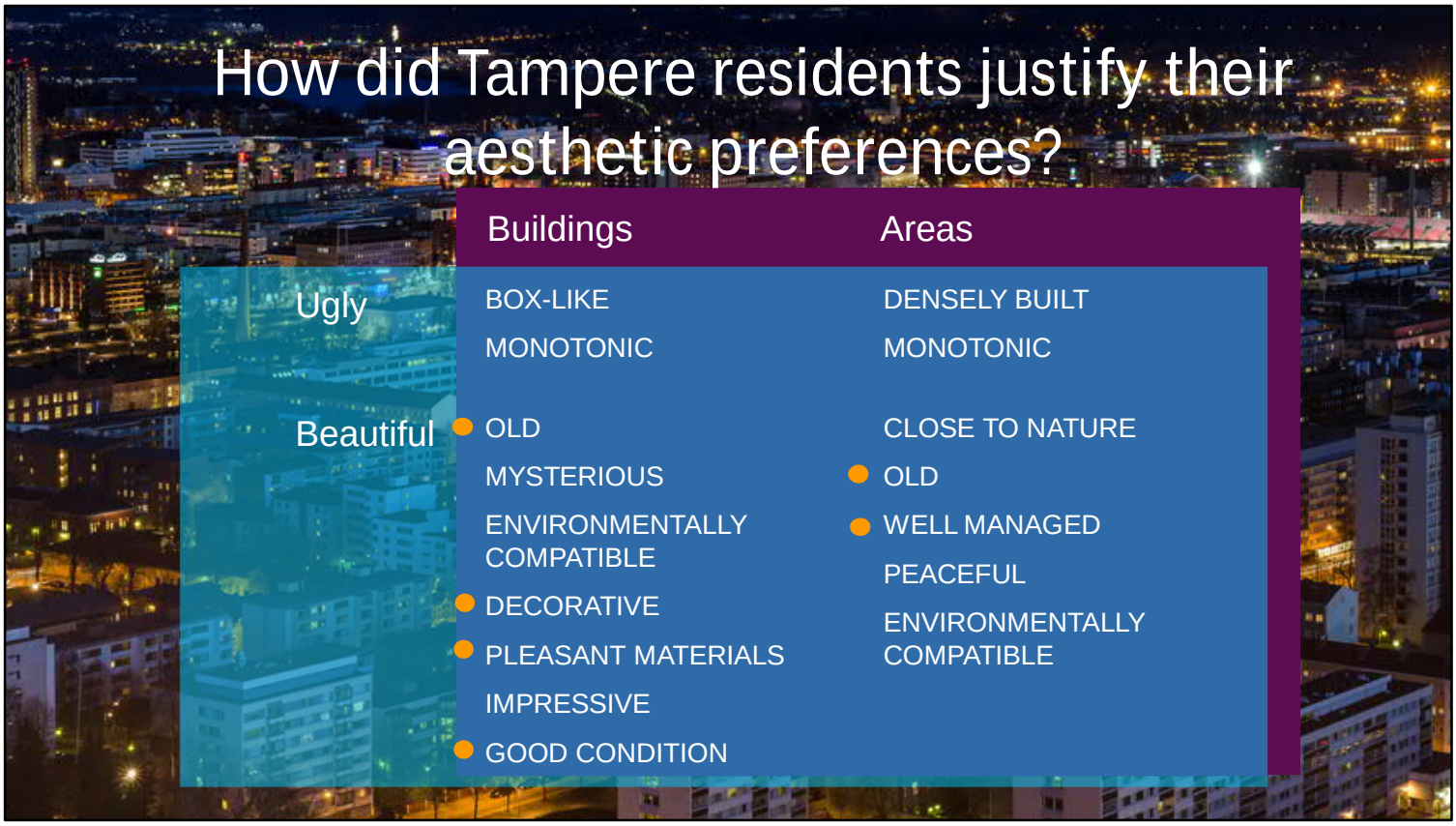


Tirkkonen's house

Although the four factors of the Kaplans' model have been studied mostly in natural settings, it seems that mystery would explain also the aesthetic preferences of built environment.

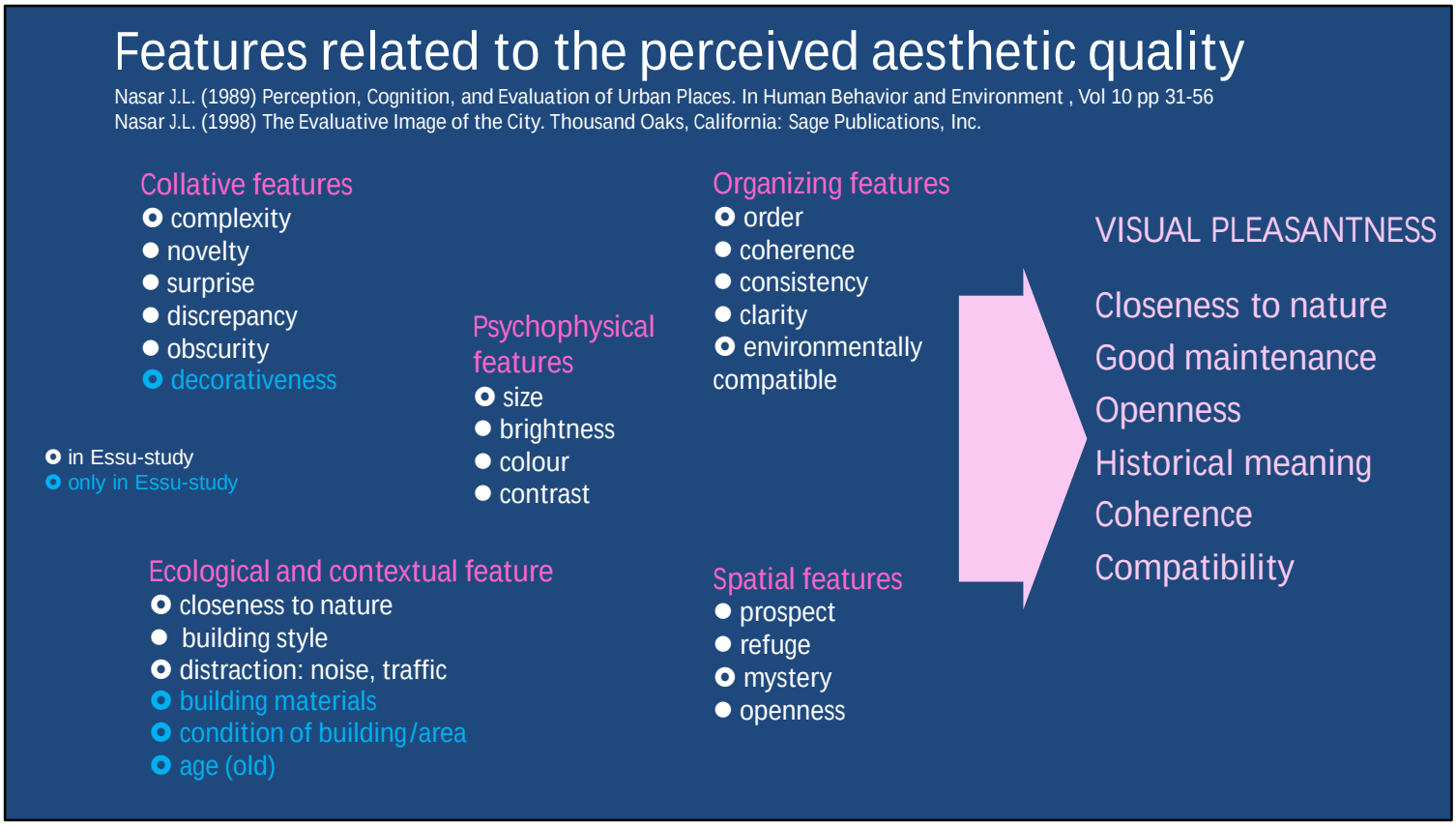
In the ESSU-study we asked which building and areas the inhabitants of the city of Tampere find attractive. The jugend style cathedral of Tampere was clearly the most beautiful building in the city according to the respondents. Also the old Tirkkonen's house, again jugend style building was among the three most popular buildings. Both building were characterized as mysterious and fascinating.

In this study the mysteriousness was associated with decorativeness and old age of a building.



Let's take a closer look at which criteria were used in the ESSU study to describe beautiful buildings and areas. The participants of the survey used many criteria that occur in other, international studies. Besides mystery, criteria like compatibity and closeness to nature appeared and on the negative side monotony. But here were also some spesifically Finnish criteria that are not mentioned often in earlier studies (marked with orange balls).

Perhaps these criteria represent things that Finnish people especially value or maybe they feel that these things are missing here.

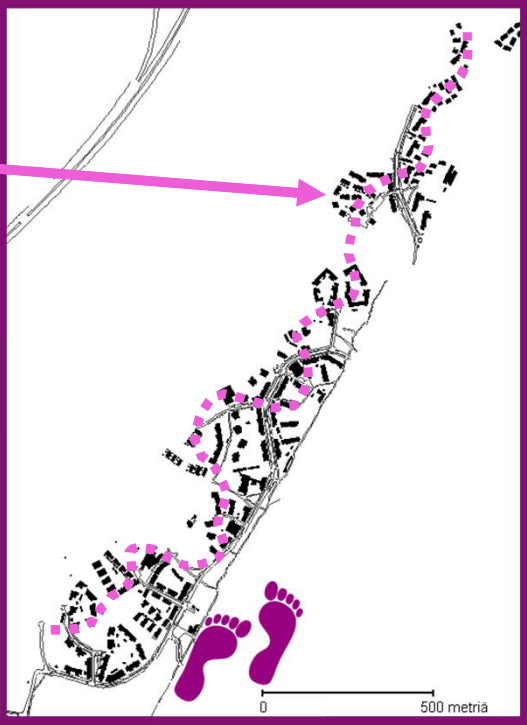


The four criteria of the Kaplan & Kaplan model are hardly enough to explain all environmental preferences and aesthetic experiences of people. Other researchers have identified many more important criteria. Here are criteria found by Jack Nasar, who has done a lot of work in environmental aesthetics. According to him, we will have to complement Kaplans' model at least with ecological features like closeness to nature and with psychophysical features like size, colour and brightness. Later Nasar summarized the six most important features related to the visual pleasantness of urban environment. As we have seen, some of these additions were found also in the Essu study in Tampere.

Evaluating the neighbourhood:

Kivikko audit 2004

	Experts	Inhabitants
Mean score	9.40	8.75
Rank order	1.	1.
Comments	+ Restful colours + The planning of the yards	+ Beautiful architecture - No access/ routes to the forest



We can next look at another example of the evaluation of the whole neighbourhood. Here I refer to a project where the neighbourhood of Kivikko which locates in the Eastern Helsinki was evaluated from many different points of view – among them was the comparison of the evaluations of inhabitants and experts. In this case, a walk through was organized with both groups separately.

If you remember, I said in the beginning that the traditional view has been that the aesthetic evaluations of these groups are really different. In this case, we found one block where the two groups agreed! The favourite block of these groups was the same. SO: we could conclude that it is possible to find an architectural style that pleases both laymen and experts.

The varying aesthetic criteria

Nasar, 1994: Urban Design Aesthetics. Environment and Behavior 26(3):377-401.

Pleasant place
- order
- moderate complexity
- familiar and historical elements
- popular rather than ”high” style
- not too far from prototype solutions
- minimal distraction

Interesting, exhiting plase
- very complex
- original
- low order

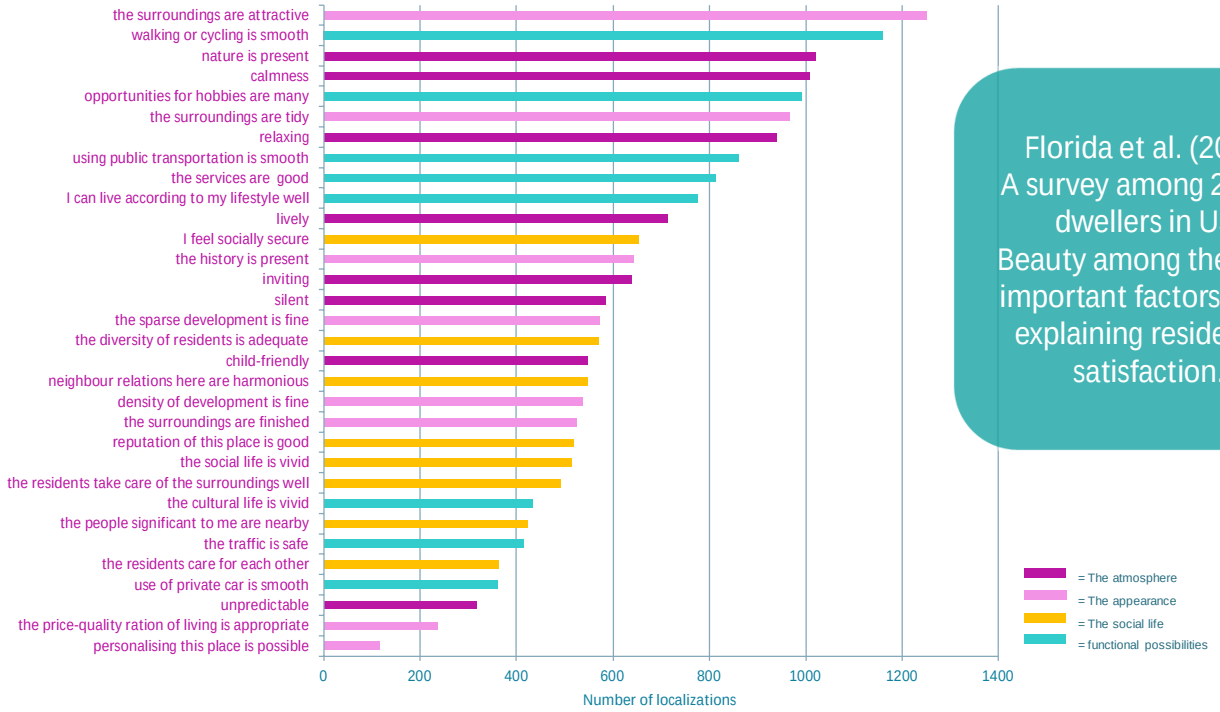
Restorative, relaxing, peaceful place
- high order
- natural elements and materials
- familiar elements

Why was that block perceived so positively?

Well, one explanation could come again from Jack Nasar who has reminded that the same aesthetic criteria cannot be used everywhere. For example, the museum of modern art can be wau architecture and really original, special and aesthetically challenging. In places, attempting to be pleasant and relaxing, criteria like familiarity, safety and coherence should be applied. Natural elements are among the best to promote relaxation. In housing areas that are supposed to please as many people as possible it is important to minimize distraction and favour moderate complexity that are not too far from prototype solutions. Also historical continuity should be emphasized.

Perhaps the block in previous slide represented exactly this kind of “not too challenging” style. When I called to the architectural office who had designed this block, they were not really that interested to learn that their architecture pleases both experts and laymen alike. I don’t know why….

The contents of positive quality factors



Florida et al. (2011)
A survey among 28 000 dwellers in US:
Beauty among the most important factors when explaining residential satisfaction.

Finally, I would still like to challenge the traditional view that laymen are not that interested in the aesthetic quality of environment.

My team did a study here in Helsinki called ”Urban Happiness”, where we asked participants to mark those quality criteria on a map that are important to them personally. Beauty was mappes most of all. First I thought that perhaps this was a finding that was somehow related to the methodology that we used, which was an online softGIS survey. Not so typical method in this kind of research. Then I found a survey by Richard Florida from among 28 000 dwellers in US. They also found that beauty was among the most important factors when explaining residential satisfaction.

Maybe we will have to take it seriously that beauty is also quite important to us all. Is it important to you in your daily life or when you are looking for a new place to stay?