Place attachment

This lecture will be about place attachment. This is a concept that has attracted a lot of research interest within environmental psychology during the last years. If the earlier highly fashionable concept in environmental psychology was environmental restoration, now it is place attachment.

As you will learn or have already learned, many concepts and approaches in environmental psychology overlap. Among the themes that we study in this course, place attachement has clear links to restorative environments, aesthetic esperiences and perhaps sense of community. Each of these themes still have varying theoretical and empirical traditions, therefore it is important that you are aware of them all.

Place attachment has gained attention in several fields of social sciences. Besides environmental psychology, also in urban studies, sociology and human geography to mention a few. What interests researchers here are the ways people are attached to places and how places remain important to people despite the globalization, growing virtualization of everyday lives and easiness of mobility across regions, continents and the globe. People are still attached to places and can find happiness encountering or living at a particular place.

So, perhaps also you have one or several places that you are attached to. These places have personal meaning to you and you have some degree of an emotional bond with them. In the earlier slide I had a picture of my daughter who always in springs goes to the stairs of the Helsinki cathedral and I am sure she would say that she is quite attached to this place.

Place attachment has been often studied by focusing on the experiences and meanings that individuals or groups of people form to places. Also the differences between individuals having certain types of meaning has been studied quite a lot. What has been less in the focus of the research is the place itself and especially the physical characteristics of places people are attached to. Place attachment has often been identified through different psychometric or self-report scales, but these measurement tools often fail to assess the spatial nature of the place bonds.

In empirical research place attachment has been operationalized (which means made more understandable and measurable) for example by using concepts like favourite place, happy place or meaningful place.
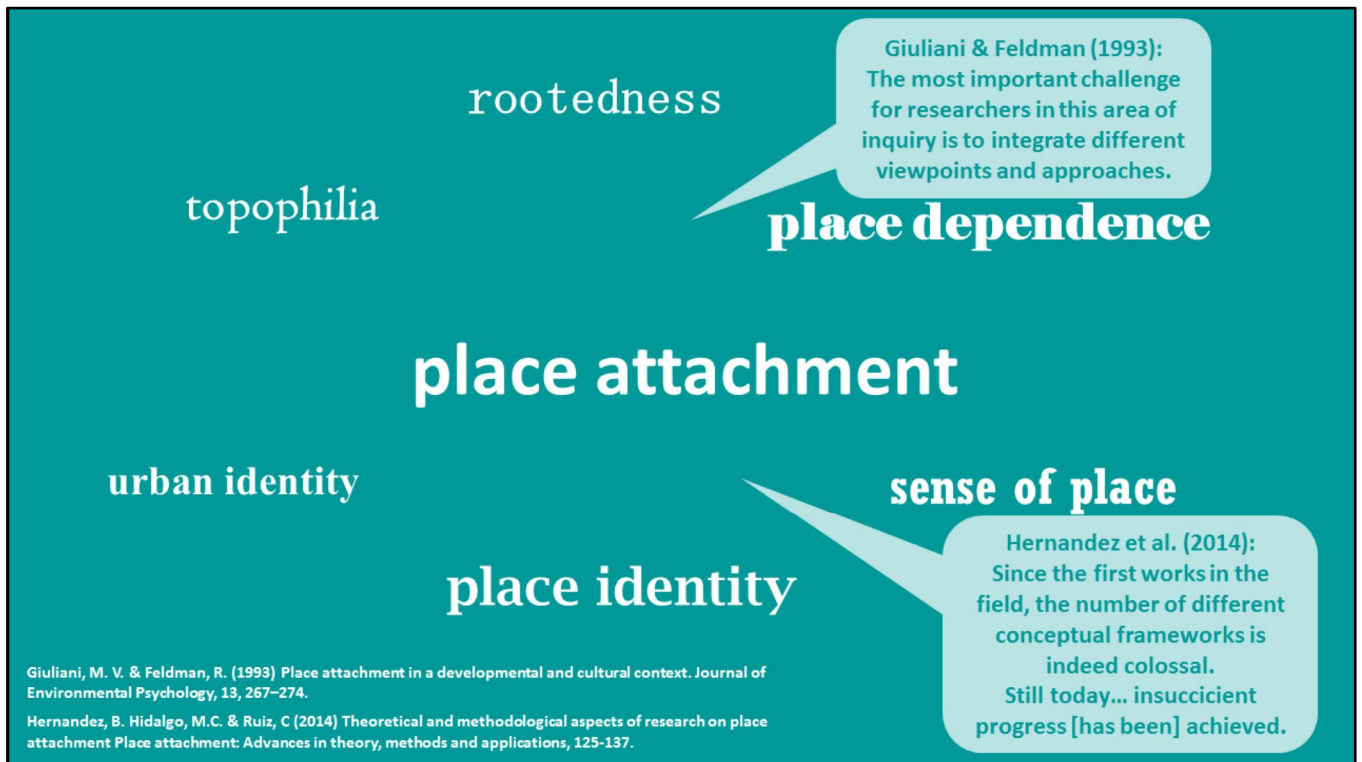
Despite of the strong research interest towards studying the bonds between humans and places, this has not accompanied by advances in the theoretical and empirical aspects. Most researchers agree that the main reason for this lack of progress is the large number of concepts and measurements. In addition to place attachment there is a wide array of other concepts that come quite close, like sense of place and place identity. Each of these concepts have their own theoretical underpinnings and empirical traditions. This may feel a bit chaotic – it feels chaotic to me. I have to confess that place attachment has not been my favourite concept exactly because it feels chaotic and has not been well-defined.

Already some twenty years ago some researchers paid attention to this conceptual chaos and pointed out the need to build more integrated approaches. Unfortunately this has not really happened.

Two conceptualizations of place attachment
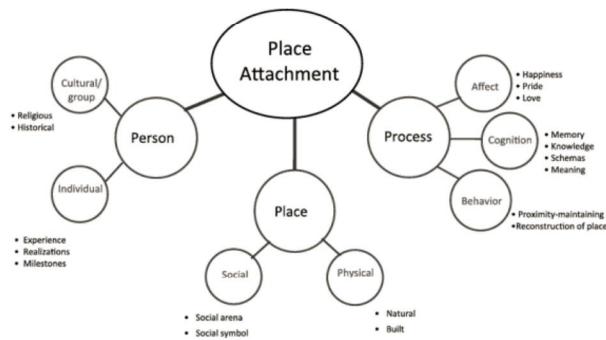
Scannel, L. & Gifford, R. (2010)
Defining place attachment: A tripartite organizing framework. *Journal of Environmental Psychology 30 (2010) 1–10.*

Gustafson, P.E.R. (2001)
Meanings of place: Everyday experience and theoretical conceptualisations. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 21(1), 5–16.*

As I said, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks developed around place attachment are numerous. Let me take two examples.

Among the most cited is the model by Scannel and Gifford who have proposed a three-dimensional framework of place attachment to structure the diverse definitions of the concept. This tripartite model suggests that place attachment is a multidimensional concept that is comprised of person, place and psychological process dimensions. I have a bit hard time understanding why person, place and process dimensions are here presented in such an unconnected and non-dynamic way.

Another model by Gustafson ten years earlier is also a three-dimensional framework. In his model the three nodes are personal, social and physical. He pays attention to a network of relational place meanings with some meanings situated in the relationship between self, others and the environment. This synergistic process focuses on how mind-body-environment processes contribute to the development of one's attachment to place. I find this model quite a lot more interesting and dynamic than the previous model although it is older.

If you think about all existing models and approaches, you can say that the focus has been mainly on the person. However, if the concept of place attachment is all about the emotional bond BETWEEN a person and a place, then it seems a bit disconnecting to take these apart form each other and not to look at both. Very few studies have focused on the physical nature and spatial characteristics of the places that people are

attached have tried to combine the personal and the physical when studying the place attachment. One reason for this lack of person and place approaches might be the lack of suitable methodologies.
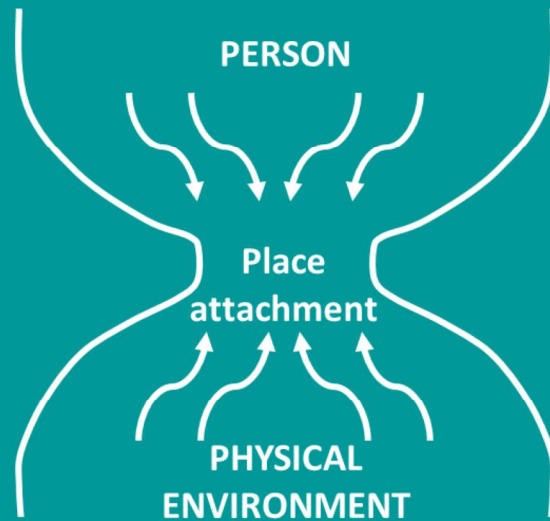
Two young researchers in my team, Tiina Laatikainen and Elli Saari are right at the moment doing some ongoing work about place attachment. They are trying to fill the gap of research literature related to the minor attention paid to the physical environment characteristics. Naturally they do not want to disregard the person pole either. So, here is the tentative model they are working with. It includes a hypothesis that perhaps sometimes place attachment well more from the physical environment characteristics and other times more from the personal characteristics and experiences.

Tiina and Elli aim to study the physical nature of places people form bonds with and are investigating what kind of physical settings people form emotional bonds with. They are also studying empirically weather the person- or place-based meanings dominate in the discriptions of place attachment.
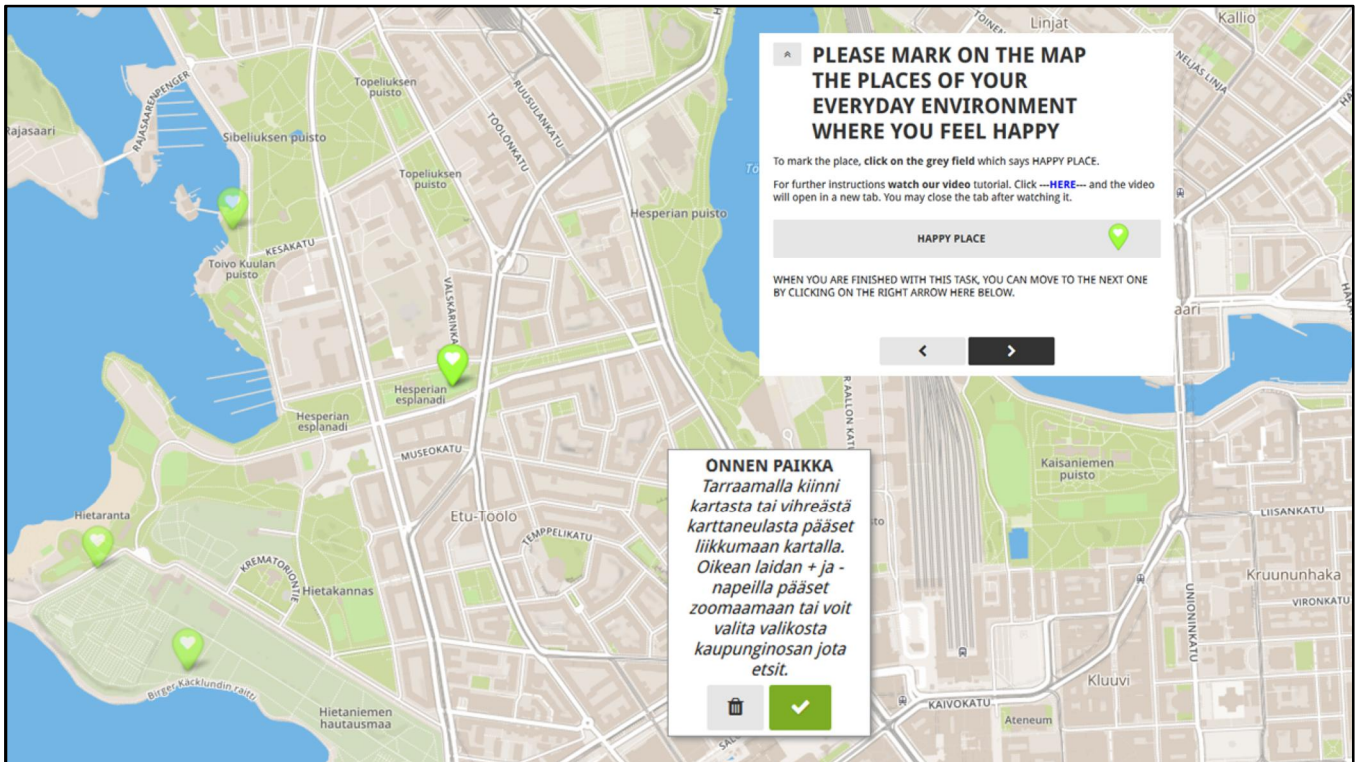
To really be able to study the spatially bounded people-place-prosesses we need a methodology that allows to do that. As part of her PhD project about the urban structure that promotes healthy life of older adults, Tiina Laatikainen asked participants to mark their happy places on the map using a softGIS survey.
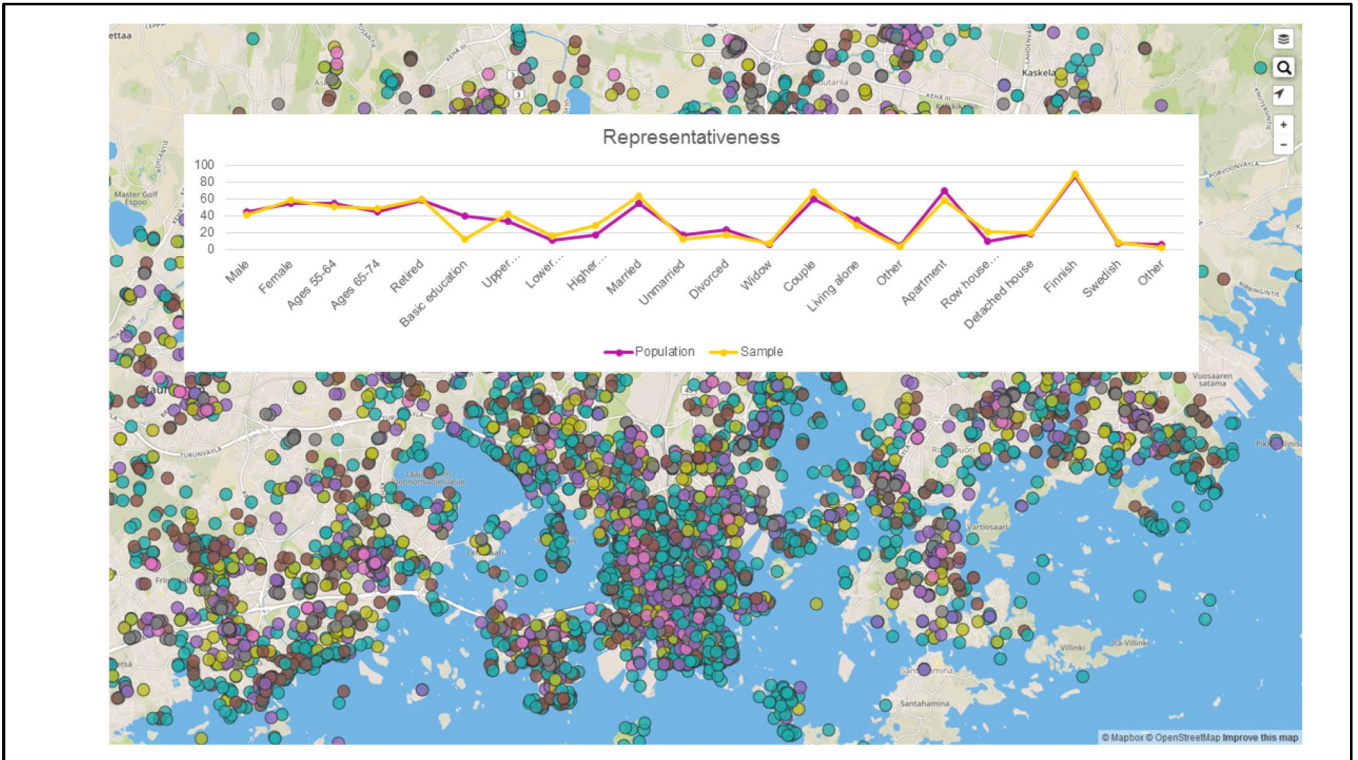
It has often been questioned whether older adults can really participate online softGIS studies. In earlier studies of my team we have noticed that the older adult population was sometimes underrepresented. Therefore Tiina realized a usability study among older adults before collecting the dataset. She found that yes they can! Some improvements to the tool were necessary but after that, it was possible to collect a dataset from about 1000 older adults from Helsinki metropolitan area. This dataset represents rather well the characteristics of the population when it comes to the background variables. Only people having lower education level were somewhat underrepresented.
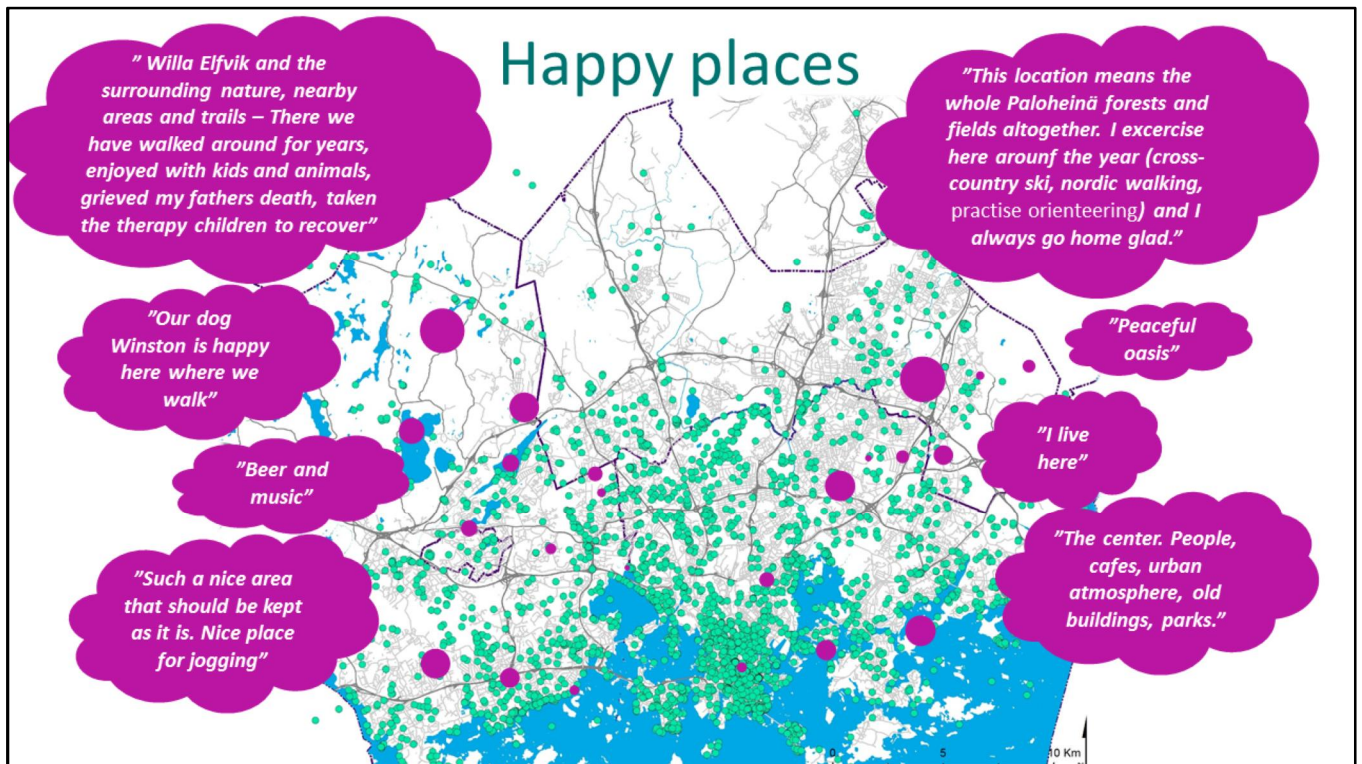
The participants marked on the map nearly 3200 happy places. About 2300 of them included also short stories related to these places.

	How many times a theme was mentioned in the stories of happy places	%
PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES	744	23 %
PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT		
Social life	268	8 %
Appearance of the environment	722	22 %
Functional possibilities	1198	37 %
Atmosphere	307	9 %

The contents of these stories were analyzed from two perspectives: first from the personal perspective. All elements of stories were included to this category if people were talking about their personal memories or personal routines and preferences. The second perspective was related to the perceived characteristics of physical environment, like physical appearance or atmosphere of the place and social or functional quality. From the table you can se how these various perspectives were represented in the stories related to happy places.

You learn that personal perspectives cover about 23% of themes mentioned in the stories. The rest, 76% relate to the perceived characteristics of physical environment. We can conclude that it is a mistake to concentrate only on personal perspectives. Perhaps we can also conclude that this results is very interesting from the point of view of urban planning. The quality of physical environmental really matter!
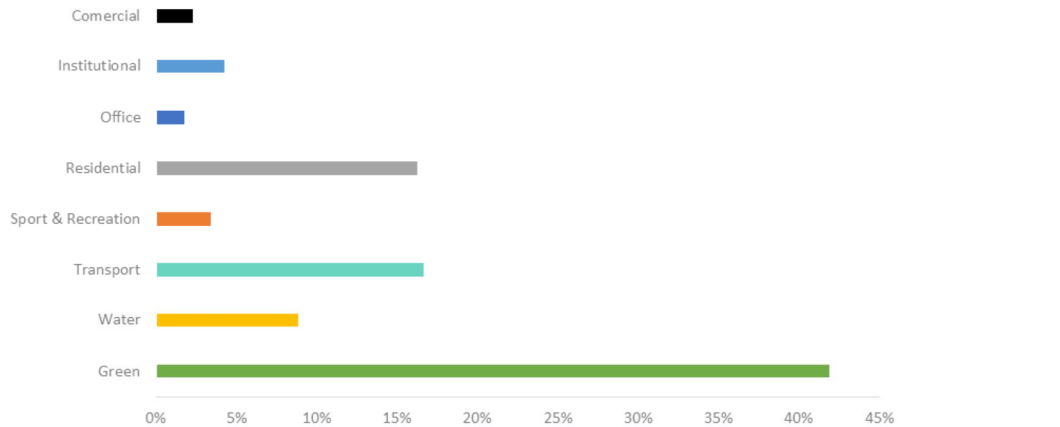
The objective physical environment characteristics of happy places can be analyzed as well. This was done by buffering the marked happy places with a 50 meter radius buffer. Within this buffer zone the proportion of various land use categories were analyzed. As you can see, the proportion of green infrastructure is on average very high, over 40% of the area around the happy places.
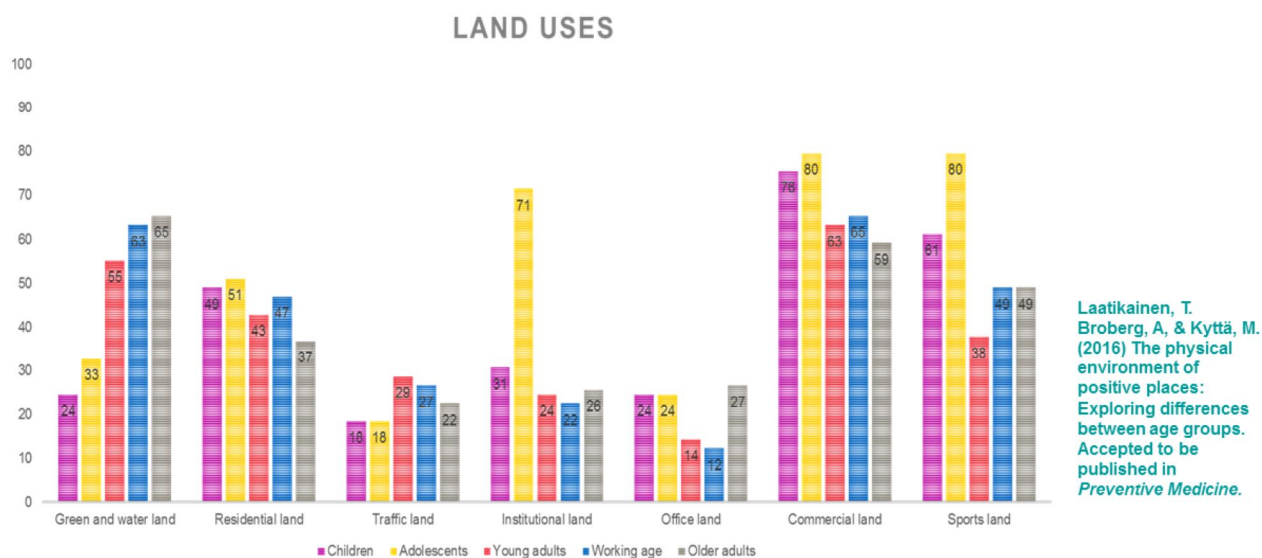
Happy places were located rather far away from home, on average 4,3 km away. 20% of the happy places were located at a distance between 1 and 2.5 km from home.

Happy places around Esplanad in the centre of Helsinki
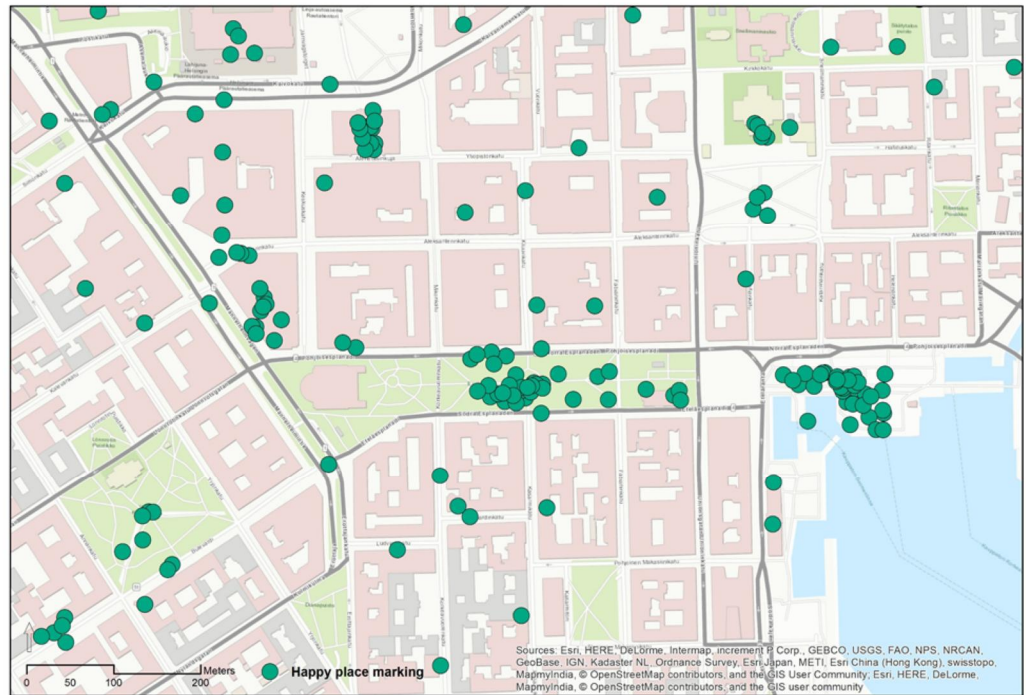
Let's finally take a closer look at happy places of older adults around Esplanad in the very centre of Helsinki.

Here especially the Esplanad park and the market place are very often the happy places of older adults. The personal meanings of these places vary somewhat as you can see from these sitations. I can also see quite a few markings of Stockman. This is interesting to me because Śtockmann is for me quite meaningful, it is my happy place.

Characteristics of positive places – differences across the life span

LAND USES

Laatikainen, T. Broberg, A, & Kyttä, M. (2016) The physical environment of positive places: Exploring differences between age groups. Accepted to be published in *Preventive Medicine.*

As one last thing, let's compare the characteristics of positive places among different age groups across the life span. The findings from the earlier study among older adults may not necessarily apply to other age groups.

By comparing datasets from several studies of our team, we were able to conclude that the characteristics of positive places really differ among the age groups. Adult's places are characterized mainly by green, blue and commercial spaces while sports and commercial spaces characterize children's and adolescents' places. Although older adults' positive places were not very close to home, they are closer compared to other age groups.

These concluding findings challenge urban planners to create motivating and attracting environments for all ages. In an urbanizing world where we cannot create separate spaces for all different functions and user groups, we should strive to find ways how to combine the needs of various user groups.