

Spaces of Happiness. Nature, Sustainability, and Aesthetic Experience in Viikki Church, Finland


Espacios de felicidad. Naturaleza, sostenibilidad y experiencia estética en la Viikki Church, Finlandia

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Helsinki's Viikki Church (JKMM Architects, 2000-05) as modern architecture where aesthetics, sustainability, and nature converge to create 'Spaces of happiness'. It examines materiality, light, colour, and symbolic elements through Lefebvre's spatial triad and semiotics. The church's minimalist style and ecological design principles provide a multi-sensory environment of serenity, clarity, and connectedness to nature. Viikki Church represents sustainable sacred architecture, where caring for the environment, cultural identity, and emotional wellness support each other, based on an analysis of the building and its theoretical ideas. The results demonstrate how architecture combines ecological responsibility, sensory richness, and symbolic depth to promote happiness.

KEYWORDS

Viikki Church, space of happiness, Lefebvre's spatial theory, semiotics, sustainability

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la iglesia de Viikki (JKMM Architects, 2000-05) en Helsinki como un ejemplo de arquitectura moderna donde la estética, la sostenibilidad y la naturaleza convergen para crear 'espacios de felicidad'. Analiza la materialidad, la luz, el color y los elementos simbólicos a través de la tríada espacial de Lefebvre y la semiótica. El estilo minimalista de la iglesia y sus principios de diseño ecológico proporcionan un entorno multisensorial de serenidad, claridad y conexión con la naturaleza. La iglesia de Viikki representa una arquitectura sagrada sostenible, donde el cuidado del medio ambiente, la identidad cultural y el bienestar emocional se refuerzan mutuamente, según un análisis del edificio y sus ideas teóricas. Los resultados demuestran cómo la arquitectura combina la responsabilidad ecológica, la riqueza sensorial y la profundidad simbólica para promover la felicidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Viikki Church, espacio de felicidad, teoría espacial de Lefebvre, semiótica, sostenibilidad

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INTRODUCTION

Finland, being ‘the happiest country in the world’, has evolved into a global cultural reference, cited annually in the *World Happiness Report*.¹ The nation’s happiness is grounded in stability, trust, humility, and a cultural affinity for peace and the natural surroundings (Martela et al. 2020). These values embedded within the built environment are psychological or sociological phenomena. Historically, Finnish architecture has expressed social ideas, emotional values, and national identity; Viikki Church in Helsinki (2005) is a contemporary building in the cultural formulation of happiness (Fig. 01).

Situated within the Eco-Viikki urban development area, the church has exercised a broader architectural philosophy in serenity, modesty, and ecological harmony through timber construction, soft lighting, and a forest-inspired interior (Lehtovuori 2010). Beyond a worship place, it is a community centre, a social space, and a symbolic milieu for belonging and well-being, as well as the connection between people and nature.

This paper focuses on multifaceted and culturally diverse notions of ‘Spaces of happiness’. Recent studies in environmental psychology, architecture, and urban studies indicate that specific spatial attributes (materials, daylight, acoustics, simplicity, and nature) can enhance wellness. Viikki Church asserts that careful decisions in balancing material, symbolic, and experiential aspects create happiness, as it integrates nature, sustainability, and aesthetics. By doing so, the church can transcend its physical structure into cultural bliss. Architecture shapes emotional experiences, promotes societal ideals, and contributes to national identity.

Lefebvre’s spatial triad (1991) and semiotics are a methodology. Lefebvre provides the basis for augmenting church as a tangible environment, a philosophical endeavour, and an emotional location. Semiotics assists with how materials, shapes, and sensory attributes signify cultural meanings. In Finnish culture, wood, light, silence, and minimalism are symbols; happiness correlates with simplicity, ecological stewardship, and emotional restraint.

HAPPINESS, NATURE, & FINNISH MODERNITY

Finland’s reputation for happiness is often treated as a cultural curiosity, yet it is deeply rooted in the nation’s historical, social, and spatial development, which includes a social welfare system, community, and connection to nature. The notion of well-being is traced in stability, trust, and security, and happiness is marked by low arousal with calmness, humility, and the lack of stress (Saari 2019). This tendency is due to the nation’s relationship to nature as a material resource and a cultural emblem. Forests, lakes, and open terrain are integral to Finnish identity, and the built environment has mediated human life with nature.

Finnish architects have prioritised natural materials, understated forms, and sensory comfort, from Alvar Aalto’s humanistic modernism to contemporary ecological architecture (Connah 2015). The outcome is a spatial culture that cultivates well-being through environmental harmony, functional clarity, and emotional moderation. These attributes are interconnected with social frameworks, including the welfare state, high institutional trust, and a cultural attitude of equality and humility (Rothstein and Uslaner 2005).

Eco-Viikki was established (late 1990s-early 2000s) as Finland’s inaugural ecological housing development to diminish energy usage, enhance biodiversity, and encourage community participation (Helsinki City Planning Department 2001). The planning documents present green living for a tranquil and balanced life. Viikki Church became a religious edifice and a symbolic cornerstone of the district’s ambitions. Its timber structure, minimalism, and landscape are meant for Finnish themes about happiness; thus, the church’s design fosters wellness through calmness, constancy, and comfort. The church became the spatial manifestation of Finnish happiness by absorbing its core ideals (Fig. 02-03).

Philosophical Concepts

Finnish happiness and its architectural expressions are conceptualised within a philosophical framework. Happiness has been theorised for over

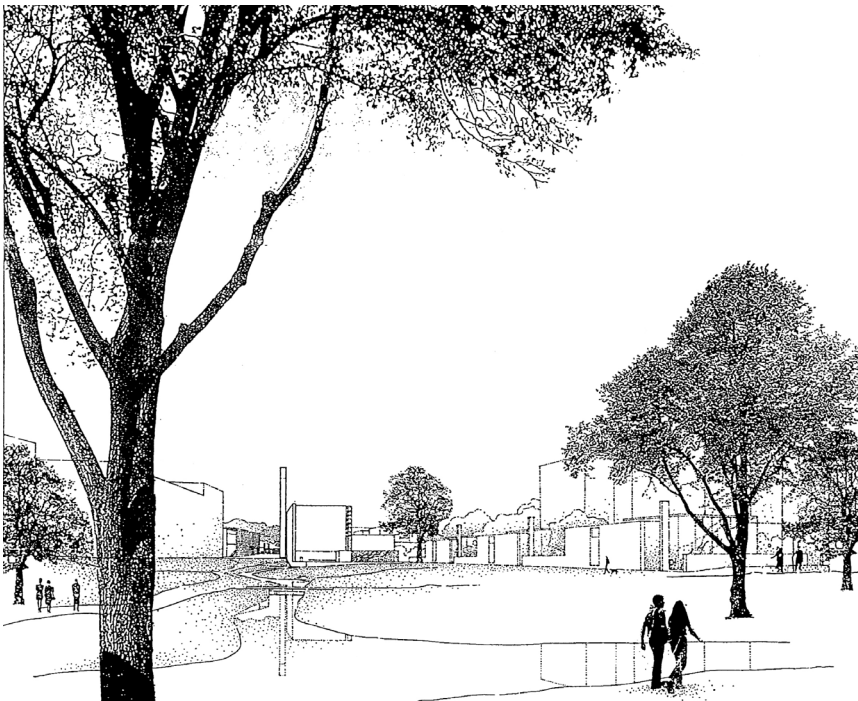


Fig. 01. JKMM Architects, Viikki Church, Helsinki (Finland), 2000-05.
Fig. 02. A connection between the church and nature.

two millennia, and its distinctions shape social perceptions of well-being, the creation of environments, and individual emotional experiences.

The Greek term, *eudaimonia*, defines happiness as flourishing via virtuous action (Aristotle 1999). It is a continual practice attained by moderation, reason, and congruence with one's objective. The focus on balance and moderation resonates with Finnish cultural values, in which emotional restraint and stability prefer well-being over transient pleasure.

Epicurus (1994) considers happiness to be the presence of pleasure. Although modern consumer societies embrace hedonism, Finland's cultural orientation deviates from this model: happiness minimises anxiety, uncertainty, and social discord.

John Stuart Mill (1863) reconceptualised happiness as a measurable societal good—maximum happiness for a maximum number. This pragmatic logic underlies welfare policies in the Nordic nations. Finland's social systems of healthcare, education, and public institutions contribute to community wellness.

20th-century philosophers redirected their focus towards lived experience, embodiment, and being in the world (Heidegger 1962, Merleau-Ponty 1962). Happiness is not a measurable state but a mode of adjustment to one's surroundings. This phenomenology correlates with architectural experience in materials, light, acoustics, and spatial rhythms.

Contemporary psychology distinguishes between high arousal happiness in excitement and low arousal happiness in calmness (Tsai 2007). Finland receives high rankings for the latter: happiness is characterised by tranquillity, natural surroundings, and social trust in the built environment.

According to cultural theories, happiness transcends emotion and becomes a cultural directive: communities delineate the criteria for a 'happy' existence and motivate individuals to strive for it (Ahmed 2010). In Finland, a 'happy life' constitutes modesty, nature, quietness, and social equality.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Viikki Church, as a 'space of happiness', needs conceptualisation for the interaction of material structure, symbolism, ecological values, and lived

experience. This section outlines the theoretical lenses of Lefebvre's production of space, the semiotics of architecture, and contemporary scholarship to offer a multifaceted perspective on the church's emotional resonance and ecological meaning.

Lefebvre's Production of Space (1991)

Lefebvre's inspiring text deals with the spatial theory of conceptualising space. His spatial triad—Spatial practice/Perceived space, Representations of space/Conceived space, and Representational spaces/Lived space—is interconnected in a way that produces the space.

Spatial practice/Perceived space denotes the routines, movements, and quotidian uses that confer functional coherence to space. The perceived space in Viikki Church starts at Eco-Viikki's green corridors, where pedestrian pathways traverse wetlands and forests. The tranquil shift from landscape to the church establishes a sequence of spatial thresholds between nature and built form. Within the church, spatial practice is made by the seating configuration, the orientation toward the altar, and the movement directing visitors through the nave, chapel, and communal areas. As the edifice facilitates religious events, concerts, meetings, and contemplation, daily use creates a spatial cadence that follows Finnish ideals of emotional control and social cohesion. The consistent, gentle spatial experience—diffused light, warm wooden surfaces and modulated acoustics—enhances psychological balance that reflects Finnish happiness (Fig. 04-05).

Representations of space/Conceived space denotes conceptual, institutional frameworks by architects, planners, and authorities to structure the space. The conceived space of Viikki Church, designed by JKMM Architects, reflects the philosophy of Nordic minimalism, ecological sustainability, and a focus on the human environment. They consider the church a 'forest of pillars', a metaphor for the building's attachment to the woodland as a conceptual fusion of spirituality and nature. Eco-Viikki's planning documents explain the church's position within a larger ecological and social experiment. Sustainability, community, and well-being prompt the church's role

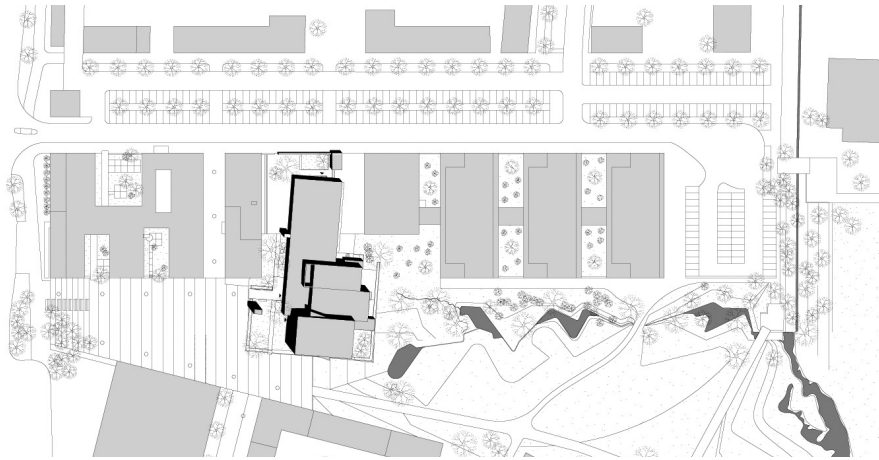
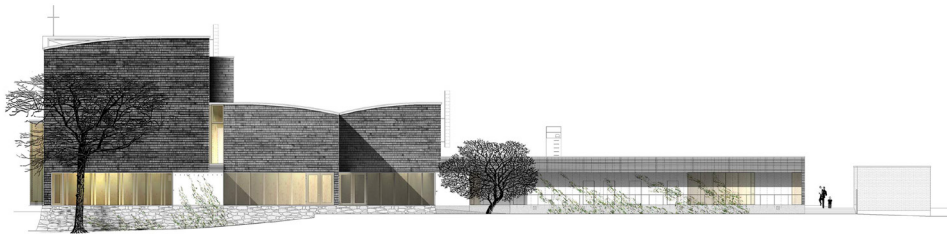


Fig. 03. JKMM Architects, Viikki Church, Helsinki (Finland), 2000-05; Viikki Church and its area.
Fig. 04. South façade.
Fig. 05. Floor plan.



to be symbolic yet functional. The Lutheran Church's motto—simplicity, humility, and quotidian spirituality—led to this outcome. Happiness is derived from modesty and virtuous living.

Representational spaces/Lived space denotes the emotional and symbolic aspects of a place as experienced by its visitors. The lived space in Viikki Church is generated through sensory attributes—aromatic wood, soft daylight, warm surfaces, and the acoustics that improve silence. Visitors feel the church is peaceful, private, and reminiscent of a forest as the building evokes Finnish nature, and these sensations lead to Finnish happiness. The church is a locus where cultural myths of well-being are experienced, transmitting architectural structure into emotional resonance.

Lefebvre's triad recognises that religious spaces function concurrently on practical, symbolic, and experiential dimensions. Spatial experiences are socially produced through material, meanings, and embodied practices (Harries 2013). It also meets current dialogues about sustainability. Space is created by human activities and through ecological interactions, and architecture is perceived within a wider socio-environmental framework (Mostafavi and Doherty 2010). Viikki Church demonstrates how conceived space integrates environmental ethics into architectural design. Materiality, architectural intents, and lived experiences produce emotion with ecological meaning.

Semiotics in Architecture

Semiotics is the study of signs in architecture (Eco 1986, Preziosi 1979, Jencks 1995). Buildings are perceived as sign systems that express cultural, symbolic, and ideological meanings. Peirce (1998) categorises a sign as an icon, index, and symbol, and how architectural elements elicit emotional responses, reference natural processes, or communicate cultural meanings. Icons are signs that resemble the ones they represent. Iconicity often manifests itself in shapes or materials that recall natural or cultural references visually or tactily. Wood in Viikki Church establishes an iconic link to Finnish forests, strengthening natural rootedness

and ecological identity. Its vertical slats are an abstract forest and a symbolic tie between the built form and nature.

Indexes are signs that point to or indicate something through causal or physical relationships. In the church, daylight is an indexical sign of the passage of time, weather conditions, and the sun's trajectory. Light filtering through surfaces and reflecting on materials indicates nature's cycles and underscores the building's ecological orientation. The aromatic wood and the acoustic softness suggest the material's organic origins, establishing a sensory connection to nature.

Symbols are signs whose meanings are acquired through cultural learning. Sacred architecture often adopts religious motifs, spatial hierarchies, and ritual features. Viikki Church's symbolism is minimalism; its spatial organisation—an axial progression, verticality, and a baptismal font—keeps Christian traditions. These symbols serve as aesthetic signs in a multifaceted environment.

Sustainable design conveys ecological values through materials, structure, and integration with nature (Guy and Farmer 2001). Viikki Church's certified timber, energy efficiency, and external landscape fulfil its symbolism and functionality. Architects posit the church as environmentally responsible sacred architecture. The sensory attributes of texture, lighting, and acoustics elicit calmness, warmth, and belonging through culture and memories (Pallasmaa 2005).

Nature, Sustainability & Aesthetics

The final theory addresses nature, sustainability, and aesthetics in architectural experience, because the contemporary architectural discourse is pertinent to Viikki Church.

Biophilic design proposes that humans have an intrinsic affinity to nature and that interaction can improve well-being (Kellert and Wilson 1993). Architectural strategies, such as natural materials, vegetation, and daylight, promote psychological well-being and emotional rejuvenation (Kellert 2008). Moreover, architecture establishes a sense of place by interacting with nature and cultural mean-



Fig. 06. JKMM Architects, Viikki Church, Helsinki (Finland), 2000-05; interior of wood, white, light, and the Tree of Life motif.

ings (Norberg-Schulz 1980). The material palette and spatial forms of Viikki Church reflect Finnish timber construction and landscape aesthetics, strengthening cultural identity and collectivity.

Sustainability in architecture includes techniques and ethics. The design should fuse ecological responsibilities with social, aesthetic factors (Mostafavi and Doherty 2010). Viikki Church was built from renewable materials and its strategies for using certified lumber, energy-efficient systems, and resilient materials. Sustainability enables both functional and symbolic architecture.

Aesthetics extends beyond visual form to embrace a multisensory experience. Hapticity, acoustics, and materiality foster a mood towards mental health (Pallasmaa 2005). The power of architecture resides in evoking atmospheres that reverberate with memory, emotion, and imagination (Zumthor 2006). Viikki Church's aesthetics are minimalism, warm wood surfaces soft acoustics, and adjusted lighting to create tranquillity and contemplation.

In summary, Lefebvre's spatial theory, semiotics, and scholarship on nature, sustainability, and

aesthetics offer a robust framework for the analysis of Viikki Church. The church is not only a physical entity but also socially produced, symbolically rich, and emotionally resonant. This theoretical foundation underpins its 'Spaces of happiness'.

METHODOLOGY

This paper invites a qualitative approach with an objective to comprehend Viikki Church through its material, symbolic, and experiential attributes. This methodology highlights the interpretative nature of spatial significance: architectural observation and material study, semiotic interpretation of spatial signs, and application of Lefebvre's spatial triad.

Architectural Observation & Material Study

An examination of the church's materiality, spatial arrangement, and sensory qualities is a method in phenomenological traditions within architectural theory, stressing embodied experience and sensory perception. Viikki Church is a constellated signifier in material, forms, light, and acoustics to convey Finnish identity and happiness.

Wood's semiotic implications are substantial. At the denotative level, it is building material (Fig. 06). At the connotative level, it denotes purity, nature, sustainability, and Finnish identity. The aspen shingles and spruce interior are indexical signs of the adjacent forest, connecting the building to the landscape. In Finnish culture, wood carries connotations of honesty, humility, and closeness to nature. The white interior shapes the church aesthetically and symbolically. White is a cultural signifier of purity, simplicity, and transcendence. Methodologically, this entails considering white both a colour and an atmospheric strategy for calmness and spatial clarity. Light is a physical phenomenon and a semiotic component, which underlines its symbolic, experiential importance in sacred architecture (Eliade 1959, Holl 2011). The Nordic light is culturally loaded by prolonged summer days and extended winter nights. Viikki Church uses regulated, soft illumination to foster emotional balance and sensory comfort. Light signifies clarity, hope, and tranquillity, directing movement and conveying a cultural ideal of happiness.

Silence in Finland embodies not emptiness but comfort. The church's acoustics encourage quietness, where sound is absorbed. Silence signifies trust, security, and emotional control. Acoustics produces happiness by supporting cultural norms of modesty and introspection. The church's austerity has aesthetic and ethical tones. In Finnish culture, minimalism represents honesty, transparency, and clarity. The lack of decoration creates humility, adhering to Lutheran principles and wider cultural discourses on the merits of simplicity. Minimalism is a semiotic expression of happiness through liberation from superfluity. Finally, the Tree of Life motif in liturgical furnishings exemplifies how symbolism improves lived experience. It is a focal point to understand Viikki Church's fusion of spirituality and ecological awareness.

Semiotic Interpretation of Spatial Signs

A Peircean category of an icon, index, and symbol assesses materials, forms, and spatial configurations in Viikki Church. (Icon) Architectural aspects resembling natural form, such as vertical wooden slats that recall a forest, are iconic signs. The role of

these iconic references enhances biophilic experience and cultural identity. (Index) Indexical signs include phenomena indicative of natural processes, such as daylight across wooden surfaces. The indexical attributes improve ecological consciousness and provide a sense of temporal grounding. (Symbol) Symbolic signs, such as the Tree of Life, the axiality toward the altar, and the use of white, are culturally taught meanings. Semiotics interprets these symbols within contemporary Finnish culture and Christian tradition.

Application of Lefebvre's Spatial Triad

Lefebvre's spatial triad analyses the architectural and experiential aspects of Viikki Church. (Perceived Space) It is examined via sensory and material observation: the tactile warmth of wood, the softness of acoustics, the luminosity and directionality of daylight, and the visual clarity on white surfaces. These variables shape comfort, calmness, and well-being. (Conceived Space) It is examined via architectural intentions, sustainability strategies, and design ideologies: the architects' objectives, the church within the Viikki district, the Nordic minimalism, and the symbolic program. It demonstrates the church's cultural and environmental values. (Lived Space) It is examined via the emotional and symbolic experiences: serenity and stability, adjacent nature, spirituality of symbolic components, and ambiance generated by materiality, lighting, and spatial proportion. Lived space is where the notion of 'Spaces of happiness' is most pertinent, as it encapsulates the emotional and psychological impact of the architectural environment.

VIIKKI & THE CHURCH

Viikki Church should be explained within the Viikki district's ecology, landscape, and cultural values to choose its materials, spatiality, and symbolism. The church is an initiative project in Helsinki. Conceived in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the church's district was designed for sustainable urban life, having residential spaces, research institutions, agricultural zones, and conserved natural environments. Viikki is often referenced as an example of harmonising biodiversity and environmental stewardship (Beatley

2011, Jalkanen 2004). The district owns extensive green corridors from residential zones to wetlands and agricultural fields, energy-efficient housing and district heating systems, infrastructure conducive to pedestrians and cyclists, university research facilities in environmental sciences, and conserved natural habitats. Accordingly, Viikki Church bears environmental responsibility, material sustainability, and landscape awareness as a district edifice and a cornerstone of its ecological identity. Visitors experience a shift in the spatial progression of the church as a threshold between daily life and reflective space. This interaction enables 'Spaces of happiness' in ecological consciousness.

In this context, JKMM Architects, founded in 1998, is known for natural materials, minimalism, regulated lighting, landscape integration, and human-centred design. JKMM endeavours to make the church a «warm, humane, and natural» sacred space that adheres to Finnish cultural tradition and contemporary ecological values (JKMM 2005). Despite the church's compactness as a rectangular structure enveloped in vertical wooden planks, its material choices and details impart sophistication. The untreated wood exterior enables the building to weather naturally, because the ageing process is a deliberate plan that reinforces the building's ecological identity and its connection to natural cycles. The interior features warm wooden surfaces, diffused daylight, a subdued colour palette, minimalist furnishings, and soft acoustics for an ambiance. The church's aesthetics follow Nordic simplicity, workmanship, and nature (Weston 2002).

The church's strategies consist of certified timber as the structural and interior material, energy-saving building features to elevate insulation, natural ventilation and passive lighting techniques, durable materials to reduce long-term environmental impact, and district heating systems. These strategies embody the ethos of the Viikki district. Nordic ecological design stresses sustainability as a cultural-aesthetic value (Høyer and Holden 2003). Moreover, to strengthen the church's spirituality and emotion, the Tree of Life motif denotes Christian theology in resurrection, renewal, and divine presence; ecological awareness,

suggesting growth, interconnectedness, and natural cycles; and cultural identity, alluding to Finnish forest landscapes and woodcraft traditions. The motif mediates spirituality and nature, reinforcing the church as an intersecting space.

Finally, the church represents modern Finnish architecture and serves as a sustainable sacred building. It is a site of worship and a communal gathering venue. Its landmark is multifarious: contemporary Nordic design, sustainable building practices, Finnish traditions in timber architecture, and tranquillity and wellness. This amalgamation leads the church to foster 'Spaces of happiness'.

VIIKKI CHURCH PRODUCES HAPPINESS

Viikki Church can be perceived as a locus where various interpretations of happiness intersect. The architecture reflects Finnish values and creates a specific form of well-being. Using Lefebvre's spatial triad and a semiotic analysis of its material and sensory attributes, the church expresses a spatial technology that develops, stabilises, and conveys a Finnish paradigm of happiness, marked by modesty, ecological awareness, low arousal, and social trust.

(Perceived space) From a Lefebvrian context, happiness is a spatial condition. Spatial practice—the routines, movements, and sensory rhythms in daily life—shapes emotional experience. The spatial practice in Viikki Church is defined by transitions, acoustics, and light and shadow. These spatial rhythms follow the Finnish trend to low arousal well-being, in which happiness is related to quietness and stability without stress. The church's positioning within Eco-Viikki enhances this impact. The route trail continues from nature to the church, a spatial narrative where happiness arises from ecological balance. The church is a liminal space where environmental calmness is converted into an emotional one.

(Conceived space) The representations of space by architects, planners, and institutions generate happiness due to their ecological responsibility, human-centred settings, and minimalism. For Lutheran simplicity and humility, happiness depends on ethical clarity rather than sensory excess (Weber 1930). This Protestant perspective differs from

Catholic or Orthodox traditions, in which happiness is often facilitated by ritual complexity, embellishment, and sensory transcendence (Balthasar 1982). The planning documents of Eco-Viikki focus on sustainability and well-being and conceptualises happiness as a collective, utilitarian good (Mill 1863). The church, as a public building, is a symbolic cornerstone of this social-democratic vision of well-being.

(Lived space) Representational spaces—the emotional and symbolic space—are where happiness is mostly felt. In Viikki Church, sensory attributes invoke Finnish well-being through the aromatic wood, soft daylight, warm surfaces, and the acoustics. These features are semiotic signs that communicate calmness, safety, and harmony with nature. This experience also aligns with current psychological research on high arousal and low arousal happiness (Tsai 2007). Finland achieves high rankings in the latter. Accordingly, the church does neither stimulate nor overwhelm; it soothes and provides escape.

(Myth) The church's materials and symbolic codes develop a cultural myth of happiness: wood-purity/nature/Finnish identity; light-clarity/hope; silence-trust/emotional control; and minimalism-honesty/ethical simplicity. These signifiers create the myth that a cultural narrative normalises specific values and emotional norms (Barthes 1972). It is Finnish, influenced by Lutheran modesty, Nordic ecological ethics, and a preference for well-being. Happiness is conceptually defined as tranquillity, stability, and harmony with nature.

(Technology) Collectively, the spatial, conceptual, and semiotic dimensions illustrate the church as a cultural technology of happiness. It generates emotional states, maintains social standards, and conveys ethics. Architecture can influence life through quietness, tactile warmth, and spatial lucidity; thus, the church transcends from a religious edifice to a spatial manifestation of Finnish happiness. It is a locale where philosophical traditions, cultural norms, and architectural practices intersect for an emotional landscape, validating Finland in global perceptions of well-being. A sense of community among its inhabitants is fostered.

ANALYSIS

This section revisits the theoretical framework. Each element in Viikki Church produces meaning, ambience, and emotion, cultivating the church as 'Spaces of happiness' through the interaction of materiality, ecological values, symbolic language, and sensory experience.

Perceived Space: Practices/Materiality/Sensory Experience

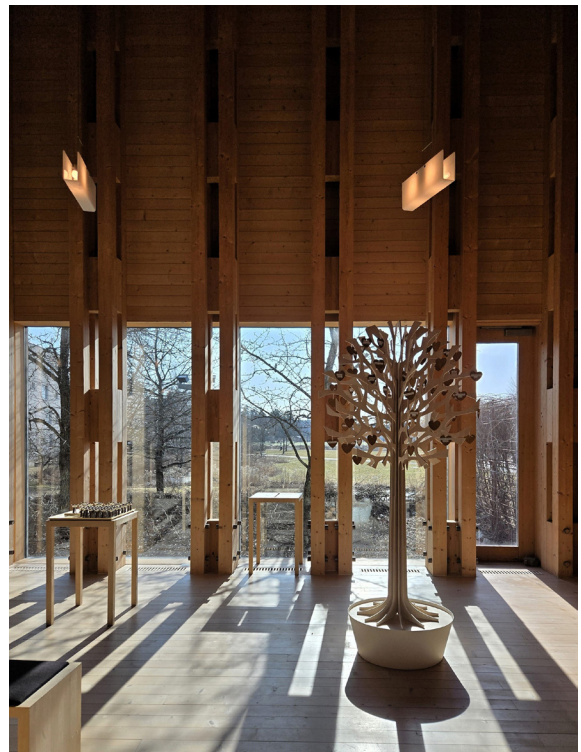
Perceived space denotes the physical, sensory, and functional aspects of the built environment. In Viikki Church, materials, illumination, acoustics, colour and spatial arrangement provide ambience and directly affect emotional well-being.

Wood is a core contributor (Fig. 07). The walls, ceiling, floors, pews, and liturgical furnishings are crafted from Finnish timber. As an aesthetic material, wood enhances sensory experiences of the space variously. Architecture involves the body via hapticity, which includes the sense of touch and embodied perception (Pallasmaa 2005). The warm texture, fine grain, and natural aroma make up a multisensory atmosphere. Visitors feel 'warm', 'soft', or 'embracing' due to wood's tactile qualities. With acoustic softness, wood controls sound to offer tranquillity and reinforces the church's contemplative ambience. The acoustic qualities correspond with sound in shaping architectural atmospheres (Zumthor 2006). Wood's aroma, visible grain, and ageing process evoke memories of woodlands, growth, and natural cycles. Wood is an indexical sign of ecological processes, linking the church with nature. Wood bears cultural meaning, as timber construction has historical origins in Finland. Viikki Church conjures up traditional Finnish churches and rural landscapes of continuity. All attributes provide wood as a core of the church's perceived space, influencing sensory experience and emotional reaction.

In Christian symbolism, white represents purity, clarity, and transcendence (Eliade 1959). In Viikki Church, it amplifies the perception of daylight, creating a luminous and uplifting mood. The whitewashed altar wall, coated in a matte mineral paint, disperses daylight into a soft, even glow that eradicates harsh



Fig. 07. JKMM Architects, Viikki Church, Helsinki (Finland), 2000-05; wooden panels on the wall and ceiling.
Fig. 08. The windows connect the interior and exterior and absorb daylight to create brightness and openness in the church.



shadows. In semiotics, white is a symbol of Nordic winter lights and snow-laden terrains, as well as theological purity and renewal. White surfaces reflect light and improve the brightness of the space. Its clarity creates tranquillity and spaciousness, linked to well-being in environmental psychology (Kellert 2008). White represents minimalism in simplicity, order, and visual quietness (Weston 2002). This facilitates emotional grounding by minimising visual clutter and enabling mental repose. White carries connotations of purity, rejuvenation, and enlightenment. The white backdrop at the altar area amplifies the liturgical elements.

Light plays a role in Viikki Church (Fig. 08). The architects regulated it via clerestory windows, slender vertical apertures, and reflective surfaces. Daylight indicates the passage of time, weather conditions, and seasonal changes, connecting architecture to nature's cycles (Holl 2011). The interplay of light on wooden surfaces makes a dynamic ambiance. Light produces a soft, diffused luminescence and fosters calmness and warmth. Light symbolises enlightenment, purity, and renewal. Light is associated with divine presence in sacred architecture. The soft lighting evokes transcendence. The church's spatial arrangement reinforces contemplation from the entrance to the altar. The entrance transits from the mundane to the sacred space. This experience corresponds with «existential space», wherein architecture mediates between the individual and the world (Norberg-Schulz 1980). The interior is modest in size, and this human-centric design generates comfort and belonging. In summary, the perceived space in Viikki Church is defined by warmth, softness, and clarity, which enhance emotional well-being and ground the church as 'Spaces of happiness'.

*Conceived Space: Architectural Intentions/
Sustainability/Symbolic Design*

Conceived space pertains to the conceptual and ideological aspects of architecture, encompassing designers' objectives, the cultural meanings of form, and the environmental strategies to define the building's identity.

Viikki Church was conceived based on the ecological ethos of the Viikki district (Fig. 09). Certified lumber commits to renewable resources and low embodied energy, following modern ecological design ideas (McDonough and Braungart 2002). In addition to the building's insulation, daylight reduces artificial lighting, solving the architects' aims. The church's design and materials harmonise with the landscape, an ecological perspective in which architecture engages with nature. JKMM chooses Nordic minimalism and connection to nature. The aesthetic prioritises materiality and light. This constraint is a cultural inclination towards tranquillity and contemplation in Finnish design. The detailing of wood surfaces underlines craftsmanship for the building's tactile and emotional attributes. The Tree of Life represents resurrection, renewal, and the divine presence in the Christian tradition. It reflects growth, connectivity, and natural cycles. Trees have cultural significance in Finnish forests, and their complexity connects spirituality, ecology, and cultural identity. In summary, the conceived space in Viikki Church includes ecological ethics, minimalist aesthetics, and symbolism to define the building's identity and enhance its emotional resonance.

*Lived Space: Atmosphere/Emotion/'Spaces of
Happiness'*

Lived space denotes the emotional, symbolic, and experiential aspects of architecture—how space is felt, interpreted, and recalled. The atmosphere is core to experiential space, as it constitutes the immediate emotional effect of architecture (Zumthor 2006). The fusion of wood, subdued acoustics and soft illumination engenders warmth and comfort. Simplicity and whiteness create mental clarity. The sensory qualities of wood and the variation of daylight connect to nature. These attributes are referred to as restorative environments by environmental psychologists (Kellert 2008). Lived space encompasses the symbolic meanings from experience. Visitors define the Tree of Life motif as grounding, uplifting, or resonant. It fortifies notions of rejuvenation and interdependence. The subtle lighting of the altar area evokes transcendence.

'Spaces of happiness' pertains to places that generate well-being. Viikki Church executes this concept through sensory comfort, nature, symbolism, clarity, and ecological ethics. These attributes correspond with current studies on well-being in architecture (Holl 2011). In summary, the lived space in Viikki Church is defined by emotional warmth, symbolic depth, and ecological presence. These attributes engender a sense of happiness and wellness.

Concrete Architectural Examples: Material/Light/Colour/Symbol

Wood, white, light, and the Tree of Life motif illustrate the simultaneous operation of material and symbolic strategies.

(Wood) The nave walls are adorned with vertical wooden battens in a rhythmic pattern akin to tree trunks. The roof structure is upheld by exposed laminated timber beams to highlight structural integrity. The pews, altar table, and lectern are crafted from solid Finnish timber. The external cladding remains untreated, letting it weather over time (Table 1).

Connecting to happiness, biophilic research indicates that natural materials alleviate stress and improve wellness. Viikki Church's wood mediates

emotional grounding and ecological significance. The warmth, smoothness, and sound absorption of wood calms sensory experience.

(White) The altar wall is coated in a matte white mineral paint, which diffuses light. The ceiling panels are subtly bleached, enhancing the timber's hue while preserving its grain visibility. White is used judiciously, establishing contrast with the warm wood (Table 2).

Connecting to happiness, environmental psychology associates well-lit, organised environments with less anxiety and an enhanced mood. The white interior of Viikki Church fosters a mental clearing conducive to introspection and tranquillity.

(Light) A clerestory band extends along the rooftop, concealed under timber slats, producing the effect of a suspended ceiling. Narrow vertical apertures punctuate the lateral walls, generating rhythmic beams of light. The east-west position enables morning and evening light to illuminate the nave. Seasonal fluctuations in daylight transform the indoor ambience (Table 3).

Connecting to happiness, natural light is associated with wellness, circadian regulation, and emotional

Semiotic interpretation	
Iconic	The vertical battens evoke a stylised forest, forming an abstract woodland interior.
Indexical	The aroma of unprocessed wood and the visible grain directly indicate the material's natural provenance.
Symbolic	Wood signifies Finnish cultural identity, alluding to traditional wooden churches and forested landscapes.
Lefebvrian space	
Perceived space	Warmth, softness, and acoustic absorption of wood foster a tranquil sensory atmosphere.
Conceived space	The architects selected wood to convey ecological stewardship and Nordic craftsmanship.
Lived space	Visitors characterise the interior as 'embracing' or 'peaceful', highlighting the emotional influence of wood.

Table 1. Material and symbolic strategies: Wood.

Semiotic interpretation	
Iconic	White signifies Nordic winter light and snow-laden terrains.
Indexical	White surfaces reflect the variety of daylight, indexing time and season.
Symbolic	In Christian tradition, white represents purity, renewal, and illumination.
Lefebvrian space	
Perceived space	White enhances natural light, fostering clarity and expansiveness.
Conceived space	The minimalist application of white embodies Nordic design values of simplicity and restraint.
Lived space	The luminosity and visual tranquillity facilitate introspection and emotional lucidity.

Table 2. Material and symbolic strategies: White.

stability. In Viikki Church, light is a spatial catalyst for peace and transcendence.

(The Tree of Life) The motif is carved into the wooden altar screen, using the same lumber as the nave walls (Fig. 10-11). Its design is abstract and vertical, reflecting the rhythm of the adjacent battens. It is situated at the liturgical focal point, grounding the spatial narrative (Table 4).

Connecting to happiness, symbolic growth, renewal, and interconnectedness enhance emotional resilience and facilitate meaning-making. The Tree of Life is a psychological anchor in space.

In summary, the architectural components exemplify how Viikki Church fosters a multisensory, symbolic, and sustainable atmosphere. Material and symbolic strategies enable the church to be 'Spaces of happiness'.

Semiotic interpretation	
Iconic	The ceiling elicits transcendence by its luminous detachment from the walls.
Indexical	Light signifies time, weather, and season, linking the interior to natural cycles.
Symbolic	Light is historically associated with divine presence and spiritual enlightenment.
Lefebvrian space	
Perceived space	Light fosters gentleness, warmth, and dynamic visual engagement.
Conceived space	The architects employed light as a basic design element, substituting ornamentation with illumination.
Lived space	Visitors characterise the light as 'gentle', 'uplifting', or 'spiritual'.

Table 3. Material and symbolic strategies: Light.

Semiotic interpretation	
Iconic	It resembles a stylised tree, visually linking to the wooden interior.
Indexical	Its wooden materiality connects it to the forests surrounding Helsinki.
Symbolic	It alludes to biblical motifs of renewal, resurrection, and eternal life.
Lefebvrian space	
Perceived space	The sculpture enhances texture and visual emphasis in the altar area.
Conceived space	The motif articulates the architects' objective to integrate ecological and spiritual meaning.
Lived space	Visitors see the Tree of Life as hopeful, grounding, or emotionally resonant.

Table 4. Material and symbolic strategies: The Tree of Life.

DISCUSSION

This section consolidates these findings to validate Viikki Church as a modern paradigm in religious architecture, wherein nature, sustainability, and aesthetics are spatial experience. 'Spaces of happiness' integrates environmental responsibility with sensory richness and symbolic depth.

The Convergence of Nature & Architecture

Viikki Church incorporates nature into its architecture—material, sensory, symbolic, and ecological. The use of wood establishes a direct link to nature. The tactile warmth, acoustic softness, and organic aroma form a multisensory environment for comfort and well-being. They follow biophilic design principles, which underline the psychological advantages of natural materials (Kellert 2008). The Tree of Life establishes nature and spirituality together. Being a theological and ecological emblem, it connects religion with environment. This dual symbolism signifies a wider cultural transition towards perceiving spirituality in ecological contexts (Taylor 2010). The church's sustainability in renewable materials, energy efficiency, and landscape exemplifies architecture's engagement with ecology. It is modern urbanism in the interrelation of built and nature (Mostafavi and Doherty 2010). Viikki Church's holistic approach to

nature and architecture fosters both environmental stewardship and emotional wellness.

Sustainability as Aesthetic & Ethical Framework

Sustainability in the church transcends a technical aspect and constitutes an artistic, ethical framework for its identity and experience. Wood, minimalism, and daylight foster simplicity, clarity, and tranquillity. Sustainable architecture cultivates a visual language for ecological ideals through material and spatial expression (Guy and Farmer 2001). Sustainability is an ethic of the church's conceived space. Architects prioritised renewable resources and energy efficiency, following modern theological perspectives for a spiritual responsibility (Deane-Drummond 2008). Sustainable design contributes to the lived experience through harmony and stability. Visitors feel tranquil or rejuvenating, linking to nature (Kellert 2008). Sustainability contributes to happiness through ecological responsibility and emotional resonance.

Aesthetics as Emotional & Cultural Expression

The aesthetics of Viikki Church include multi-sensory experiences, cultural identity, and emotional ambiance (Fig. 12-13). Warm timber, soft acoustics, mild illumination, and a subdued colour palette support stability. The potency of architecture is the

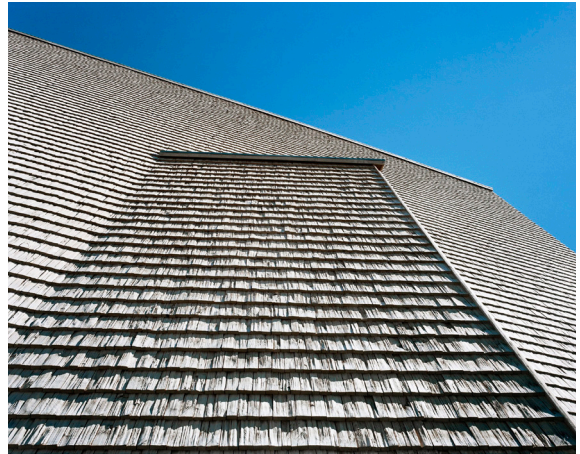


Fig. 09. JKMM Architects, Viikki Church, Helsinki (Finland), 2000-05; certified lumber for the church's exterior.
Fig. 10. The Tree of Life motif in the entrance hall.
Fig. 11. The Tree of Life motif at the altar.





Fig. 12. JKMM Architects, Viikki Church, Helsinki (Finland), 2000-05; aesthetic, warm atmosphere for church worship services.
 Fig. 13. Water font before the sanctuary.



capacity to engage all the senses (Pallasmaa 2005). Minimalism embodies Finnish traditions of simplicity, workmanship, and a connection to nature. Its culture creates belonging and identity, solidifying the church as a communal landmark. Tranquillity and lucidity foster well-being. The emotional architecture appears from the nuanced interaction of materials, light, sound, and proportions (Zumthor 2006).

Happiness as Spatial Experience

'Spaces of happiness' offers a framework for understanding the emotional and psychological effects of Viikki Church. Happiness is not a transient pleasure, but a deep form of well-being grounded and connected. The warmth of wood, the softness of acoustics, and the clarity of light establish a sensory rest. The presence of nature cultivates grounding and

belonging, linking to psychological well-being. The Tree of Life imparts meaning and orientation for emotional profundity. Sustainable design cultivates congruence between individual values and ecological answerability to feel fulfilment. Viikki Church's happiness is rooted in nature, sustainability, and aesthetic clarity.

Implications for Contemporary Architecture

Viikki Church teaches modern architectural practice. The church illustrates how to incorporate sustainability into architecture as a technical, aesthetic, and emotional aspect. Sustainable design fosters a balance between environmental responsibility and human values. The church enhances well-being through sustainability, nature, and visual clarity. The focus on the atmosphere is architecture's

role in wellness by crafting evocative and sensory milieu. Symbolic features show modern design's embedded meaning without historical ornamentation. Architecture connects to nature via material selection, spatial design, and ecological integration.

In summary, the integration of nature, sustainability, and aesthetics at Viikki Church exemplifies how design can provide 'Spaces of happiness'. The church promotes emotional well-being, ecological awareness, and cultural identity through its materiality, symbolic language, and atmospheric aspects. The church addresses contemporary challenges by fostering environments conducive to human and ecological prosperity.

AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK: EMBODIMENT, ATMOSPHERE, AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Lefebvre's spatial theory, semiotics, and scholarship on nature, sustainability, and aesthetics through building materials and their attributes demonstrate Viikki Church as 'Spaces of happiness'. Further thoughts arise. The topics of embodiment, atmosphere and religious experience are not the paper's main discussion, but they are worth mentioning, based on Pallasmaa (2005): architecture involves the body via hapticity, which includes a sense of touch and embodied perception.

The concept of embodiment has become a key idea in modern architectural theory, questioning how people perceive, inhabit, and understand built spaces. Embodiment emphasises the lived, sensory, and affective aspects of spatial experience rather than viewing architecture as a static object or visual artefact. This represents a partial shift in philosophy, cognitive science, anthropology, and neuroscience, as these disciplines focus on the body as the primary site where people think and engage in culture.

As human experience is inherently embodied, architecture, cognitive science, and religious studies contend that perception, emotion, and meaning arise from the dynamic interaction of body, place, and affect. Three theories from different fields can enhance our understanding of how environments affect both daily and transcendent expe-

riences: Mallgrave's architectural embodiment, McNamara's neuroscience of religious experience, and Radermacher's religious atmospheres.

Embodied Experience and the Built Environment

Phenomenology is the basis of modern embodiment theory. Merleau-Ponty (1962) frames the perception of the human body as an active interaction with space. Mallgrave (2013) combines neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, and phenomenology to show people's inclination to respond to environmental stimuli through sensorimotor and emotional pathways. For him, architectural experience is rooted in biological and emotional processes. Architecture is not mainly visual but multisensory, shaping mood, attentiveness, and social interaction through multiple senses. In his mirror neurone research, Mallgrave argues that people connect with architectural forms through embodied simulation – they feel as much as they see spatial rhythms, materials, and atmospheres. His viewpoint reinterprets architecture as an affective medium that shapes human experience.

Neuroscience and the Transformative Self

McNamara (2009) extends embodiment theory to religion, positing that religious experiences emerge from the interplay of brain systems that regulate self-identity, emotion, and agency. Its key aspect is the decentering of the ordinary self, which results in the reorganisation of executive functions and sensations of unity, presence, or divine encounter. These experiences involve various brain systems, including the temporal lobes, limbic system, and prefrontal cortex. Moreover, neurotransmitters affect people's absorption in rituals and their emotional levels. Religious experience is an evolutionary adaptation that fosters cooperation, emotional regulation, and communal cohesion. McNamara's research enhances Mallgrave's by demonstrating that environments—architectural or ritualistic—can influence brain and emotional states, facilitating selfhood's transformation.



Fig. 14. JKMM Architects, Viikki Church, Helsinki (Finland), 2000-05; Viikki Church as ‘the spaces of happiness’.

Atmosphere as Affective Mediation in Religious Space

Radermacher (2024) brings embodiment and affect into the analysis of religious practice. Atmospheres—the emotional characteristics of spaces—are crucial to how religious societies convey transcendence and foster a sense of belonging. Atmospheres are formed by the interaction of bodies, spaces, objects, sounds, and rituals, influencing perception and emotion prior to conscious interpretation. Through his empirical studies of modern Catholic and evangelical initiatives in Germany, lighting, music, spatial design, and ritual choreography cultivate environments that engage participants’ religious experiences. These atmospheres facilitate

communication, rendering them sensorial-transcendent. His religious-scientific environment combines phenomenology, affect theory, and sensory ethnography to conceptualise atmospheres as relational fields.

In summary, Mallgrave, McNamara, and Radermacher reveal a shared theoretical framework: physical interaction with emotionally charged environments influences human experience. First, cognition is based on biological processes. Architectural spaces and religious ceremonies influence neural and emotional conditions, affecting individuals’ self-perception and worldview (Mallgrave and McNamara). Second, this gap between built environments and religious experience is filled by the atmosphere (Radermacher).

Connecting the Three Theories to Viikki Church

Finland's status as the world's happiest country is psychological and architectural. Following Mallgrave, the embodied qualities of Finnish churches—natural materials, soft lighting, and human-scale proportions—support emotional ease and bodily comfort. McNamara's neuroscience suggests that calm, low-arousal environments promote emotional regulation, a neurological foundation for happiness. Radermacher's atmosphere further clarifies that Finnish churches cultivate a culturally resonant emotional tone: quiet, nature-integrated, and sincere. Viikki Church (2005) validates these three theories.

Above all, in my view, religious experience is objective and subjective for individuals who exercise their faith in countries where religion is a free choice, particularly in the Nordics. Accordingly, the three theories fail to provide happiness directly and fully for ordinary Christians who visit churches only on special occasions (religious holidays/baptisms/weddings/death rituals/concerts). Viikki Church is both a religious site and a communal space that attracts people through architectural experiences, rather than the religious atmosphere found in Orthodox or Catholic churches. Finnish churches are sustainable buildings between sacredness and profanity. This fluid liminality leads the churches to foster 'Spaces of happiness', allowing individuals to pursue their objectives in any direction.

CONCLUSION

Viikki Church is contemporary architecture, fusing nature, sustainability, and aesthetics for well-being and culture. This paper discusses the church's materiality, symbolic language, and atmospheric aspects through Lefebvre's spatial triad and semiotic analysis. The use of wood, the moderation of daylight, a subdued array of white surfaces, and the Tree of Life motif create spatiality that is ecological, spiritual, and emotional.

In perceived space, the sensory attributes—warm wood, soothing acoustics, and mild light—cultivate tranquillity and peace. These attributes correspond with biophilic design principles and environmental

psychology studies, which underline the rejuvenating benefits of natural materials and daylight. In conceived space, the architects prioritise sustainability, Nordic minimalism, and symbolic clarity. The building's ecological strategies, material selections, and aesthetic moderation reflect a unified design philosophy grounded in environmental ethics and cultural identity. In lived space, visitors feel the church as a locus of stability, contemplation, and emotional lucidity. The Tree of Life, the dynamic interplay of light, and the sensory richness of wood encourage a sense of purpose and well-being.

Tangible architectural examples—wood, white, light, and the Tree of Life—illustrate how particular elements function concurrently as material, symbolic, and experiential constituents. Concrete architectural solutions embody the church's emotional and ecological resonance (Fig. 14).

Viikki Church represents a novel paradigm in sacred and public architecture, wherein sustainability transcends a basic mechanical necessity to become a wellspring of aesthetic and emotional depth. This fact convinces us that architecture promotes well-being by integrating environmental stewardship with sensory comfort, symbolic depth, and cultural continuity, ultimately fostering a harmonious relationship between people and their environment. In a time of environmental instability and societal division, Viikki Church testifies to how architecture can create spaces that nurture human wellness and ecological consciousness.

On sacred spaces of Viikki Church, a final thought emerges. According to Le Corbusier (1948), architecture inherently generates a sense of the sacred through its materials, proportions, and design techniques. The architect's creativity is essential for consecrating a space and rendering it sacred. In this regard, Crosbie (2017) claims that individuals seek a genuine, personal sense of spirituality rather than conforming to an organised religion. Two perspectives may illuminate sacred architecture: (i) architecture itself is sacred, or (ii) architecture serves as a conduit that invokes the sacred. The differentiation lies between situational and substantive sacred space. The sacred is thought to inhabit substantive

space; in situational space, any site might be deemed sacred, contingent upon human presence, location, and behaviour, often on behalf of a community.

Then, where is liminality between religious space and happiness? Leto (2019) argues that liminality refers to the intermediary phase during which the transforming execution of the ritual occurs. Liminal experience, integral to religious experience, entails a journey between transcendence and immanence. Terrin (2014) contends that liminality pertains to a tangible transition and, hence, involves space. During this transforming liminal phase of the ritual, metaphorical language is employed. This is the sole means of articulating existence in a liminal state; it enables us to convey what would otherwise remain unexpressed and to amalgamate what could not coexist. «Liminality is semantically linked to *marginality*, marginality is one step away from *dualism* and dualism is enriched with a symbolic and metaphorical discourse, which in the end turns out to be like the grounds of the very possibility of speaking of another world» (Terrin 2014, 19).

This prompts future studies of the embodiment, atmosphere, and religious experience, which was briefly mentioned above. Bearing the discussion so far, happiness in architecture does not seem a fortuitous, accidental by product but a meticulously cultivated experience—one that arises from the thoughtful amalgamation of nature, sustainability, and aesthetic clarity. It is what the term 'Spaces of happiness' stands for?

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- Fig. 01, 06. JKMM Architects (Kimmo Räisänen).
 Fig. 09. JKMM Architects (Jussi Tiainen).
 Fig. 14. JKMM Architects (Arno de la Chapelle).
 Fig. 02-05, 07-08, 10-13. Author's archive.

NOTES

1. The happiness rankings (1-10) represent three-year averages. The 2025 rankings aggregate data from 2022 to 2024. Happiness rankings are established through the analysis of extensive Gallup polling data from 149 nations across six categories: gross domestic product per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make your own life choices, generosity of the general population, and perceptions of internal and external corruption levels. Northern European nations lead the happiness rankings, indicative of robust social support systems and high living standards. Since 2002, the World Happiness Report has used statistical research to identify the happiest countries globally. According to the 2024 report, Finland is ranked as the happiest country globally, with a score of 7.741 out of a maximum of 10. The residents of Finland exhibit robust communal support and mutual trust, which both facilitated their number 1 ranking and enabled the country to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. During that challenging period, Finns firmly believed in their autonomy to make independent choices and showed little scepticism regarding governmental wrongdoing. Both elements significantly contribute to overall happiness. In 225, five Happiest Countries in the World are Finland (7.74), Denmark (7.52), Iceland (7.52), Sweden (7.35), and Netherlands (7.31) (World Population Review 2026).