

David Stephenson

Light Cities: Sydney Tokyo Osaka Perth Melbourne Boston
Boutwell Draper Gallery, 28 October – 20 November 2010

A meditation on the sublime has sustained David Stephenson's artistic practice over 30 years, which has evolved through long-term, interrelated projects of inquiry. His photographs of the sublime ceilings of European sacred architecture have been presented in two monographs with Princeton Architectural Press: Visions of Heaven: The Dome in European Architecture (2005) and Heavenly Vaults: From Romanesque to Gothic in European Architecture (2009), and showcased in several exhibitions at Boutwell Draper Gallery.

While travelling for these projects Stephenson made his first photographs of cities at night, which bring together a number of his previous interests, including the idea of the sublime, environmental concerns, and the transcendental power of light. The glowing "light city" seems the perfect emblem of so much that is both good and bad in our industrialized culture: an extraordinary example of a monumental technological sublime, where awe, beauty, and human aspiration are tinged with the horror of potential environmental catastrophe, our engine of modernity seemingly running on empty.

A key aspect of these city pictures is the explosion in growth of the modern city. The visible symbols of economic aspiration such as the skyscraper have spread across the globe. Every reasonably sized city contains a downtown area of high buildings, with urban sprawl often extending for hundreds of square kilometres, and all those buildings glowing with electric light from sundown through to the early hours. With the vast majority of this electric power generated by coal-fired thermal power stations, it is not difficult to see that this situation has a finite timeframe, before the fuel runs out or climate change has drastic effects on the world's ecosystems, requiring major changes to take place in the entire fabric of our modern industrialized culture. That many of these cities were founded as ports and are located at sea level, making them highly vulnerable to rising sea levels, gives further urgency to a close scrutiny of the modern city.

Stephenson is now in a second phase of his Light Cities project, working towards a third book. During 2006-10 he created images from a range of cities in Asia, Australia, and America. He is presenting a selection of these photographs - from Sydney, Tokyo, Osaka, Melbourne, Perth, and Boston - in his 5th solo exhibition at Boutwell Draper Gallery, 28 October – 20 November 2010.