Visions of Heaven

The Dome in European Architecture

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With essays by Victoria Hammond and Keith F. Davis

Princeton Architectural Press
New York

Published by
Princeton Architectural Press
37 East Seventh Street
New York, New York 10003

For a free catalog of books, call 1.800.722.6657.
Visit our web site at www.papress.com.

Printed and bound in China
09 08 07 06 05 5 4 3 2 1 First edition

Editing: Nicola Bednarek
Design: Jan Haux

Special thanks to: Nettie Aljian, Dorothy Ball, Janet Behning, Megan Carey,
Penny (Yuen Pik) Chu, Russell Fernandez, Clare Jacobson, John King, Mark Lamster, Nancy Eklund Later,
Linda Lee, Katharine Myers, Lauren Nelson, Molly Rouzie, Jane Sheinman, Scott Tennent, Jennifer Thompson,
Paul Wagner, Joseph Weston, and Deb Wood of Princeton Architectural Press
—Kevin C. Lippert, publisher

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Stephenson, David, 1955–
Visions of heaven : the dome in European architecture / David Stephenson ;
with essays by Victoria Hammond and Keith F. Davis
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 1-56898-549-5 (alk. paper)
1. Architectural photography—Europe. 2. Domes—Europe—Pictorial works.
3. Photography of interiors—Europe. 4. Stephenson, David, 1955–
I. Hammond, Victoria. II. Davis, Keith F. III. Title.
TR659.S74 2005
779'.4—dc22
2005009068

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Admiration and Awe

David Stephenson and the Photographic Sublime

by Keith F. Davis

Over the last quarter-century, David Stephenson has produced a remarkable body of work: one that is rigorously conceived, richly varied, critically informed, inventive, and poetic. This work is composed of a series of discrete and systematic investigations of a single large subject: the idea of the sublime.

Much, of course, has been written on the artistic meaning and philosophical tradition of the sublime. Developed in the eighteenth century from the writings of (among others) Joseph Addison, Edmund Burke, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, and Immanuel Kant, this idea forms a cornerstone of modern aesthetic theory.[1] The sublime involves a specific set of emotions and qualities: terror, obscurity, power, vastness, and infinity. The examples of the natural sublime cited by these writers include such familiar motifs as the boundless ocean, powerful storms, tall mountain peaks, deep chasms with raging torrents, and the starry night sky.

There are (at least) two key ideas in this reading of the sublime. First, the sublime is a matter not merely of objective, physical experience, but of one's subjective involvement *in*, or meditation *on*, the experience. Kant, for example, clearly states that sublimity is a product of the human mind, not a quality actually inherent in things. As such, the sublime represents a powerful synthesis of world and self, facts and ideas, images and feelings. Second, because this process involves the temporary alteration or expansion of our normal frames of reference, the sublime—for all its terror—can be a pleasurable and even necessary experience. As Joseph Addison wrote in 1712:

> Nothing is more pleasant to the fancy than to enlarge itself by degrees, in its contemplation of the various proportions which its several objects bear to each other, when it compares the body of man to the bulk of the whole earth, the earth to the circle it describes around the sun, that circle to the sphere of the fixed stars.[2]

Or, as Burke put it, "Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with [a] sort of delightful horror."[3]

The "delightful horror" of things vast and powerful stands, paradoxically perhaps, as an emblem of human freedom. Addison suggested that vast scenes present an image of liberty: endless realms in which the eye and imagination can roam unfettered. The play of imagination triggered by the sublime allows the self to symbolically engage subjects or feelings that would otherwise be inaccessible. These sensory and emotional experiences constitute a new form of understanding—a complement to reason as traditionally understood. They illuminate a powerful and paradoxical truth: we are at once insignificantly small in the face of nature and an integral part of it.

Kant's complex analysis of the freedom of the imagination posits an absolute linkage between aesthetic ideas, reason, and morality. All aesthetic response is an

expression of the "free lawfulness" of the imagination, a lawfulness in which we find the freedom to conduct ourselves autonomously by the universal and transcendent dictates of reason. Thus, aesthetic beauty, the precepts of morality, and the structure of the universe are intimately related. In Kant's remarkable and memorable words:

> Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me*. . . . I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence. The first starts at the place that I occupy in the external world of the senses, and extends the connection in which I stand into the limitless magnitude of worlds upon worlds, systems upon systems. . . . The second begins with my invisible self, my personality, and displays to me a world that has true infinity, but which can only be detected through the understanding, and with which . . . I know myself to be in not, as in the first case, merely contingent, but universal and necessary connection.[4]

In this reading, the sublime is central to the larger notion of aesthetic experience, which in turn provides a suggestion or symbol of *who* and *where* we are, in the deepest sense imaginable.

This enormously rich set of ideas has been interpreted, extended, and critiqued by succeeding generations of artists, theorists, and philosophers. Stephenson is one of an important group of contemporary photographic artists who have explored the legacy of the sublime and, in so doing, have helped reinvent it. This contemporary quest is an appropriately skeptical and critical one. No element in the eighteenth-century equation of the sublime—nature, transcendence, the self, reason, freedom, morality—can be understood as simple, self-evident, or timeless. And yet, each of these terms *does* have meaning for us today—a meaning that begins with its own historical genealogy.

Stephenson's work of the past quarter-century represents a deeply personal attempt to rethink the meaning of the sublime. His artistic path over these years has been remarkably disciplined and focused. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that he has—through some purely individual combination of method and intuition—explored and reconsidered most of the key themes of this history. A recent large exhibition, titled "Cosmos: From Romanticism to the Avant-garde," documented the ways in which artists and scientists have imagined nature (on the largest scale) from the late eighteenth century to the present.[5] Stephenson's work recapitulates the central motifs in this survey: the mystery and promise of the untamed wilderness, the forbidding purity of the polar regions, and the infinite majesty of the heavens. In

addition to these facets of the natural sublime, Stephenson has explored the technological and cultural sublime: great works of industry and the architecture of transcendence. Finally, in addition to this extended meditation on the sublime, Stephenson's work consistently acknowledges its own means—the basic nature and potentials of photography itself. His pictures strike a consistent and energizing balance between the (objective) subject and the (subjective) process of perception, construction, and interpretation.

Stephenson's first serious body of work, begun during his graduate studies, is titled *New Monuments* (1979–83). Inspired by a host of artistic precedents—from Carleton Watkins to Robert Smithson—these images depict large-scale industrial structures such as bridges, dams, and the Alaska pipeline. While Stephenson conceived these photographs as single views, he soon shifted to the production of panoramas of three to five overlapping prints. It was appropriate that, like the subjects he was recording, these composite photographs were viewed as artifacts, overtly constructed things. After his arrival in Tasmania in 1982, Stephenson extended this work to include the controversial hydroelectric projects then under way on the island. While these pictures expressed clear environmental and political concerns, his next series—*Composite Landscapes* (1982–88)—was more mythic in nature. Many of these large mosaic works, made in the Tasmanian wilderness, the American West, and the Indian Himalayas, deal with grand natural vistas that are clearly indebted to the motifs of the Romantic-era sublime. The physical complexity of these images led to a deliberate move toward simplification; Stephenson's next project; *Pinhole Photographs* (1988–89), used the most basic of imaging tools to record spare ocean vistas and horizons.

The series *Clouds* (1990–93) was stimulated by Stephenson's interest in the histories of both photography and transcendental thought. On one level, these pictures are an homage to Alfred Stieglitz's celebrated *Equivalents* of the 1920s—images of clouds intended (in classic Romantic fashion) to trigger a host of subjective moods and emotions. Stephenson's blurred, brooding photographs hold this artistic legacy up to examination—they are postmodern "Equivalents" that at once confirm and question the possibility of transcendent experience. In this period, Stephenson was also involved in a collaborative project, *Kindred Spirits/The Overland Track* (1990–92), with the Tasmanian-based printmaker and painter Ray Arnold.[6] Stephenson's contribution to this project included views of the Tasmanian landscape joined with brief, poetic texts.

In these years, Stephenson was fascinated by the dauntingly alien landscape of Antarctica. He made two visits there, in 1990 and 1991, as well as a related trip to the Arctic regions of northern Europe. These trips resulted in three bodies of work. *Vast* (1990–91) deals with the elemental themes of water, air, and time in juxtaposed

diptychs of Scandinavian skies and streams, and icy Antarctic vistas. In both cases, Stephenson's presentational strategy (diptychs composed of either vertical or horizontal pairings) aimed at creating a tension between an apparently transparent rendition of the "real" world and a more complex pictorial and conceptual abstraction. For his series *The Ice* (1991–93), Stephenson printed black-and-white negatives on color paper, creating ethereal images in a pale, ghostly blue. These photographs stand on the boundary between description and abstraction, sight and sensibility. In *Blue-Green Horizon Line/Southern Ocean* (1991–93), he made a similar use of false color for expressive, rather than descriptive, purposes. In these seven-print ocean panoramas, the hue of the image shifts gradually from one side to the other, from pale green to delicate blue—symbolizing the voyage south from the warm Tasmanian Sea into the icy waters of the Antarctic.

Stephenson's life and work underwent significant change in the early 1990s. After returning from many weeks in the stark environment of the Antarctic, he was struck anew by the green—and lush growth—of the Tasmanian forest. He responded to this verdant subject in a collaborative project, *Dark Nature* (1992–93), with his academic colleague (and later wife) Anne MacDonald. Together, the pair created images exploring the landscape's range of possible meanings, from the benign and spiritual to the hostile and oppressive. This landscape is, at once, a symbol of order and chaos, life and death, freedom and claustrophobia. With his series *Interiors* (1992–93), Stephenson turned for the first time to an exclusively cultural subject. These details of a once majestic but now decaying Regency mansion provide a poignant metaphor for the turmoil of his personal life at the time.

Beginning in 1993, Stephenson began the projects for which he has received the most international attention. In that year, he was awarded an Australia Council Studio Residency in Besozzo, Italy. He flew out of Hobart with great eagerness but little specific idea of what he would photograph in Italy. Quickly, however, he found inspiration. On a visit to Rome, he went to the Pantheon, where he was overwhelmed by the vast internal space and majestic dome of the ancient structure. A new series was born. During his remaining three months in Italy, he traveled extensively to record the domes of over one hundred churches and cathedrals. At the same time, he explored other subjects: trees, surfaces of water, and the ceramic photographic portraits attached to gravestones. Stephenson combined these four Italian motifs in the exhibition "Transfigurations." This title underscored his interest in the largest possible themes: nature and culture, perception and memory, life and death, time and transcendence.[7]

These profound issues also lie at the heart of Stephenson's *Stars* (1995–96) series. These remarkable photographs use extended, interrupted, or overlapping exposures to

transform the starry night sky into a matrix of elegantly arcing lines. Here, photography, drawing, light, and time are woven together into something at once new and ancient. Through Stephenson's artistic intercession, the camera becomes a tool of almost magical power—the means by which the cosmos "draws" itself in a potentially endless series of permutations. This body of work combines a surprising simplicity of means with an extraordinarily rich set of cultural and historical references. Throughout history, humankind has looked to the heavens for both geographical and spiritual orientation: when in doubt as to where we are going, we have always looked upward.

The same reflex—finding ourselves by looking up—is at the heart of our experience of sacred architecture. Stephenson returned to photographing domes in 1996 and has been at it ever since, expanding his quest beyond Italy to include cupolas in nearly every European country. Stephenson revels in the infinite variety of these forms: domes, like snowflakes, are at once generic and unique. No two are really alike, and yet the feelings we experience standing beneath them are interestingly consistent. These are special and protected spaces that glow with a carefully orchestrated light. As we look up into a dome, we feel elevated, uplifted; we have, in a sense, stepped out of the flow of secular time and—for a moment—into eternity. Domes present an image of geometric clarity—more or less intricate in pattern, each is structured as a boldly symmetrical design around a central oculus or focal point. The effect of this is at once spiritual and rational. As we are (psychologically) drawn upward into these spaces, we also recognize the symbolic language of their precise and logical construction. The dome's symmetry presents an image of unity, totality, and resolution. This design has no beginning or end: we perceive—with God-like clarity—everything at once. We are given, in essence, a divine vision of the cosmos. Appropriately, this insistent geometry stands as a symbol of thought itself—of the capacity (perfect in God, less so in Man) to construct and to perceive flawless coherence in disparate pieces and parts. The bold geometry of these domes is important to their power: beginning with the ancient Greeks, geometry and logic have been closely allied.[8] Finally, of course, these domes are images of heaven, with all its attendant motifs and associations: angels, infinity, transcendence, and salvation.

As an artist, Stephenson is only in mid-career: it is abundantly clear that he has many productive years, and projects, ahead of him. That said, I can only marvel at how elegantly all his previous concerns are crystallized and summarized in his domes work. The experience of the dome is one of an ideal realm—a remarkable synthesis of engineering and metaphysics, a space of the imagination in which volume is revealed as a function of design. Before taking his first dome photograph, Stephenson roamed the world to record the American West, the Tasmanian rain forest, the Himalayas, the Scandinavian north, the frigid expanse of the Antarctic, and such elemental subjects as

water, clouds, and stars. In every case, he sought to create photographs with an essentially dual meaning—images balancing his genuine respect for the reality of things with his awareness that the world is inevitably informed and shaped by the ideas we bring to it. Thus, every landscape photograph is a hybrid of what we see and what we think; each is an attempt to imagine a totality—a satisfyingly complete and coherent (visual) world in miniature. This ideal is closely allied to our experience of domes, which provide the "Equivalent" of a flawlessly unified (and thus transcendent) experience, one in which man's constructive intellect stands as a symbol of (or our longing for) a divine genius and logic. This experience can only be a synthesis of the objective and the subjective—what we see, and what we think and feel. As Stephenson understands so well, our "enlightened" skepticism cannot negate the resonance of this encounter. His domes are a perfect emblem of the sublime: a conception of space in which reason and intuition become one.

1 For a concise overview of this rich subject, see, for example, Paul Guyer, "The Origins of Modern Aesthetics: 1711–35," in Peter Kivy, ed., *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 15–44.

2 Ibid., 33.

3 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), cited in Charles Harrison, et al., *Art in Theory 1648–1815: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 520.

4 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788); cited in Guyer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1.

5 The exhibition was organized by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. See Jean Clair, ed., *Cosmos: From Romanticism to the Avant-garde* (Munich: Prestel/Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1999).

6 The title of this body of work pays clear homage to Asher B. Durand's famous painting of the same name, from 1849.

7 This was presented at Fotofeis '95 International Festival of Photography, in Scotland. A slightly later exhibition under the same title, at Robert Lindsay Gallery in Melbourne, was composed of just domes and gravestone portrait images.

8 For example, as the scholar Wilbur Knorr has written: "To the ancient Greeks we owe the notion of mathematics as a form of theoretical knowledge.... In this conception, the project of geometry is not the manipulation of figures in physical constructions but the understanding of their properties in pure thought." From "Mathematics," in Jacques Brunschwig and Geoffrey E. R. Lloyd, eds., *The Greek Pursuit of Knowledge* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2003), 235. It is interesting to note that two of the most remarkable works in the history of philosophy—Spinoza's *Ethics* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*—are strongly indebted to the form of the geometrical theorem or proof.