Stephen Haley: Australian Suburbia Transformed into Apartment City

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Abstract

The subject of this article is Stephen Haley, an Australian visual artist recognised for his exploration of the house and the built environment. Haley’s creative production reflects the changing architectural face of The City of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia from a city once surrounded by suburbia to one dominated by the growth of apartments. I discuss the artist’s origins in suburban Melbourne, followed by his university years, international travel and the emergence of his house images from 1994 to 2007 that symbolise a consumer-driven Australian international metropolis. I conclude by arguing that Haley’s pivotal work, Vanishing Point, 2007, declares the end of the myth of the historical tradition of Australian home ownership: a detached house on a quarter-acre block. It is this challenging appraisal of suburbia as international atelier zone that establishes Haley’s artwork as pioneering within the context of house and home.

Keywords: Apartment, home, city, suburbia, metropolis

The city of Melbourne, Australia is a hodgepodge of built contradictions, a contemporary environment of inner-city lanes and fashionable cafes, towering office blocks and terrace houses now priced well beyond the average blue-collar wage earner. Even by the scope of other great world cities such as London and New York, the metropolis of Melbourne gambols outward at an astonishing scale. Running alongside the Yarra River and cavorting through old inner-city, derelict factories are now countless modern one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments. In many ways Melbourne has been revitalised by these city studio flats, towering across the old river’s edge and docklands, encircling the once mighty MacRobertson’s Chocolate factory and peeking out from behind the historically classified neon Skipping Girl Vinegar sign. These large-scale multistorey residential complexes occupied mostly by urbane professionals, international students and retirees looking for new experiences have brought a diverse global community ethos to the old inner-city working-class suburbs of Fitzroy, Richmond and the Yarra River edge. The dilemma for Melbourne, as with any growing international metropolis, is to maintain the equilibrium between the sanctity of private space and a commercial sector driven by the need to house increasing numbers of people choosing to live within reach of the inner city. It is Stephen Haley’s continuous creative research during the past three decades of Melbourne’s changing residential environs that make his artistic output vitally important to the Australian understanding of house and home within a global neighbourhood.

1. Childhood, Family, School and University

The first home that Stephen Haley lived in as a child was a Housing Commission house at 4 Julius Parade, Coburg. The Victorian State Government leased these dwellings to low-income families. Haley revisited Coburg in 2003 and, on a whim, passed by his former house and was surprised by the size of his childhood home. He commented: ‘It was really shocking to go back and see just how incredibly small it was’. Many have made the same trip home. The suburb of Coburg is well known as the former site of Her Majesty’s Prison, Pentridge. Now an inner suburb, in the early part of the twentieth century Coburg was on the edge of the city and an ideal site for a prison, being only eight kilometres from the city yet close enough to transport prisoners.
The main buildings and surrounding high walls were constructed predominantly of large bluestone blocks, giving rise to the common name among Melburnians of “Bluestone College.” The prison walls were visible from the front driveway of Haley’s house. When visiting the Coburg shops he would have walked the length of the wall. I will demonstrate that Haley’s depiction of apartment living as represented in his landmark expose of Australian apartment living, *Vanishing Point* (Figure 1) has a prison-cell appearance with an ordered, controlled, sterile aesthetic, devoid of human expression. In 1965 the Haley family moved from Coburg to Nunawading to a new housing estate being built on what was then the outer boundary of suburban Melbourne. Haley’s mother took great pride in the appearance of the family house, almost to the point of clinical obsession. He described the house’s front lounge room as ‘immaculate, and festively adorned as if in expectation for all the Avon parties and afternoon teas that would never happen there’.² Peter Timms defines the drawing room or parlour as ‘the best furnished, but least-used room in the house’.³ The effect of Haley’s upbringing upon his artwork is not easily determined. He does concede the Coburg and Nunawading houses ‘obviously contribute to the works featuring suburban imagery, but this is also because the suburbs are so fundamental to the Australian ethos’.⁴ After high school Haley studied at the University of Melbourne for six years, dropping in and out of courses as his interests developed. He read widely, across many genres and styles, including Austen, Burroughs, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hardy, Hemingway and D. H. Lawrence. He survived during his university days on a succession of part-time, casual and full-time jobs, combined with cheap student-rental houses. In 1987 the lure of travel overseas became consuming. He left with a backpack and a pile of cash saved from the various jobs. Travelling on the Trans-Siberian Railway, he made the great Australian overseas trip travelling through China, Mongolia, Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece, Italy, Switzerland, France, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Morocco, Portugal and England.

It was whilst working and living in Italy that Haley discovered an appreciation for fine art, creativity and design. There he realised his purpose in life was to be an artist. In Milan he stayed in an apartment, sleeping on a fold-out bed in a spare room. This period is critical I believe in understanding Haley’s interpretation of the apartment city, cramped living quarters, but surrounded by the “artistic lust” of life. Haley commented on the Milan apartment: Like most Milano apartments, drab outside and modest, but enter the large wooden coach doors to an open courtyard that leads onto 19th-century marble, wood, brass and glass lobbies and stairwells. The apartment was three bedrooms with a wonderful lounge room with a feature wall covered in original artwork.⁵ In 1988 on his return to Australia, Haley enrolled at RMIT University, Melbourne in a Bachelor of Fine Art course. He was influenced by a group of lecturing staff, all interested in contemporary avant-garde art and, specifically, emerging postmodernism, specifically Jon Cattapan, Peter Ellis and David Thomas. He remembers this group as relatively young, enthusiastic and passionate about contemporary art and ideas. The RMIT days positioned Haley with mentors at a time when he was hungry to learn not only the trade skills of painting, mixing colour and stretching canvas, but also and significantly the conceptual ‘why’ of making art. After completing his Bachelor of Arts at RMIT in 1991, Haley applied for a two-year Postgraduate Diploma in Fine Arts at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA). At the VCA he thrived, responding to the vibrant creative atmosphere and access to lecturers from various disciplines. His key lecturing staff were some of Australia’s leading contemporary artists and academics including Jan Murray, Norbert Loeffler, Robin McKenzie, John Davis and John Dunkley-Smith. All five gave him the enthusiastic confidence to pursue art as a professional and life long career.

2. *Echo*

In 1997 Haley exhibited *Echo* (Figure 2) in a solo exhibition of the same title at La Trobe Street Gallery. The work presents I believe for the first time the artist’s “mature” direct questioning of suburbia. *Echo* captures the typology of Haley’s childhood viewed from an aerial perspective. It depicts endless orange-tiled rooftops, lawns and concrete footpaths edging bitumen streets. Painted, defined roadways control and restrict the movement of cars, trucks and people. Haley’s version of suburbia depicted is compartmentalized, cold and severe – a harsh indictment on housing estates, almost prison-like in the cry for freedom. There is no infrastructure, no street signs, no streetlights and no bus stops. The painting depicts the houses and streets of Haley’s childhood as a sobering, clinical comment on suburban isolation. Haley’s paintings show no people; nobody is mowing the lawn, sweeping the footpath or putting out the rubbish bins.
3. Echohouse (default) – New Estates and Nature Strips

In 2001 Haley painted echohouse (default) (Figure 3). For Haley this key painting addresses his belief that the Australian cultural experience resembles an echo, a reflection that nevertheless takes on some of the qualities of the surface from which it reflects. This is abundantly true of the constructed environment, which is often a reproduction of another place and rarely bears any sympathy for the spatial environment in which it is constructed. Like a watchtower, the house stands alone, surrounded by suburban streets and sentinel streetlights that cast foreboding circular patterns on the ground. The block-tower appearance of the house is illuminated from within by an iridescent glow. The image could be naively described as spooky, eerie and frightening. The dark black background adds to the forbidding atmosphere. Jeffrey Makin in his review of New Estates & Nature Strips makes a connection between Haley, the Great Australian Ugliness of Robin Boyd and the painter Howard Arkley, but this could also be applied to other predominantly Melbourne city painters such as Robert Rooney, John Brack, Jan Senbergs and Rick Amor. The fact that Haley follows in the tradition of these artists, too easily diminishes his questioning. For Haley the interest is in the suburban reproduction, or brick veneer mutation that is endlessly reproduced, house after house. The building in echohouse (default) (Figure 3) stands as a singular and powerful commentary on the red-brick-veneered victor that resolutely typifies so much of Australia suburbia.

4. Reverberator

In 2003 Haley travelled and resided in Tokyo for three months. Reverberator (Figure 4) was greatly influenced by the panorama he viewed from the fifty-seventh floor of the Tokyo Town Hall: ‘The view is very much like these prints because most of Tokyo is actually low rise. Not much more than two or three stories and little box forms tightly compressed. And it just goes on and on forever’, he commented. With this photograph Haley presents a world of walls, morphing translucently into each other. It is as if the buildings and roadways of Tokyo, Los Angeles and Melbourne converge into one swirling mass of repetitive box and rectangular forms, devoid of any sign of humanity, residing in a gravity-free time zone. Haley depicts the increasing spread of apartment living as an unstoppable disease or virus that, although interconnected by an integrated system of streets and roads, continues to grow and expand at an ever-faster rate. Often these new apartments require more materials and resources to construct them. The viral effect extends beyond the visual of the high-rise buildings, often these apartments absorb more than just space – also valuable materials, energy and natural resources. The buildings of reverberator display a world of similarity that is joined by the commonality of living based on a need for economy of space. A household environment designed with smart systems that turn things on and off, and security cameras to vet visitors at the front door. Robert Nelson said of the Reverberator exhibition that Haley’s landscapes ‘are all about a code, a grid of geometry that networks the domestic designs in a greater whole than any householder would recognize’.

5. After Reflection

In 2001 Haley returned to the VCA to study towards his PhD. The final exhibition presentation, After Reflection (Figure 5), comprised six oil paintings, a series of photographs mounted on perspex and three self-contained, looped DVD projections. Two of the projections were directed into a corner space of the gallery. Floor to ceiling, they were a combination of television imagery, video games, cinema and Haley’s travel experiences in large cityscapes such as Tokyo.

For Haley, the mirror and its shattered shards when broken are an allegory for the consumer-driven Western metropolis. A commercial environment based on the manufactured (echo), reproduction (mutation) and duplication of goods (virus), services and construction. After Reflection (Figure 5) demonstrates Haley’s belief that the mirror is a significant conveyer of communicable data information. As he commented: ‘This mirroring is ongoing through life as seen in the processes of education, training and social interactions’. Haley believes this emulation has created a new uncharted land, one based within computers. A virtual world he describes as an environment similar to the territories navigated by early European explorers. He argues in his Melbourne University PhD dissertation that the vacant lands of virtual space are already inhabited, in fact, occupied by the ‘very corporations, military and telecommunications agencies who construct the platforms through which this space unfolds’. He presents a convincing, albeit alarming, argument that these virtual spaces instead of being used by their developers as sectors for a new ‘free’ apartment-dominated world are in reality manipulated and exploited by the corporate and government sectors.
6. Los Angeles

In 2006 Haley was granted the Australian Government Australia Council Los Angeles Studio Residency in the Eighteenth Street Arts Complex. In his funding application Haley argued that he wanted to ‘document and photograph a number of “actual/virtual” spaces to produce a series of works that recreate these spaces as virtual 3D models’. For Haley, Los Angeles was the Mecca of suburbia, as he stated: ‘The residency would provide me with the opportunity to document the vast suburbs of LA to inform new paintings and the many thematic spaces’. Haley was particularly keen to visit the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Shopping Plaza, the world’s first shopping-mall centre, opened in November 1947. It includes a three-storey Wal-Mart, Macy’s and Sears Roebuck department stores. Haley was intent on finding the original shopping mall, but the complex has since been rebuilt.

While in Los Angeles, Haley was awarded the R & M McGivern Prize. The $10,000 prize enabled him to spend time in Las Vegas researching the abundance of neon and themed environments that dominate the casino city. Haley enjoyed the sights, taking in the casinos and spectacles of light-and-sound shows, including interior erupting volcanoes, tropical forests, Ancient Roman shopping malls and fountains with talking statues. In an attempt to gain an understanding of the city, Haley drove out of the inner casino strip and past the surrounding regimented suburbs. He stood in the searing heat of the desert and looked back upon what he termed ‘a reified madness’. Las Vegas is a city built upon a gambling economy, combined with tourism to attract the family oriented visitor. It is a unique environment, like Haley’s Vanishing Point (Figure 1) where most of the food and general merchandise is transported in by road or air from outside the municipal boundary.

7. Mirrorland – Tokyo and Los Angeles

The colourful influence of graphic and advertising neon in Tokyo and Los Angeles was evident in Haley’s video projection exhibition Stephen Haley: Projected Worlds, Academy Gallery, 2008. The gallery was divided into a large video projection space. As the audience entered, the video Mirrorland (Figure 6) with its pulsating soundtrack created a world of neon-dominated advertising imagery, fusing the architectural apartments of Tokyo with downtown Los Angeles. The L-shaped wall on which the video was projected was approximately 9 metres wide and 3 metres high. Haley digitally created and manipulated the imagery in homage to his experience of living, working and shopping in the neon-sign dominated, urbanised cities of Tokyo, Los Angeles and Las Vegas. Kelly Gellatly has commented: ‘The futuristic urban sprawl of Mirrorland is one that we could almost know – an enormous expanse of glittering New York style skyscrapers on the left, set against the consumer-driven frenzy of a city like Tokyo on the right’.

In the exhibition’s other video, GameOverGame (2006), a rectangle of semi-luminous yellow paper, the only real sign of life, flits across Nevada’s dry and forbidding Death Valley. The video flat screen was approximately 2.5 metres wide and 3 metres high with a black fabric edge. It shows Haley’s vision as he stood beside the roadside on that hot Las Vegas day, the sun’s heat burning his back. Where Arkley gave future hope, Haley offers nothing except a life of continual coded structures. Some are known and understood; for example, the means to fly between cities; others are too complex to be comprehensible; dark and disturbing, hidden and controlling of domestic space. Robert Nelson commented: ‘So much of the world is in our houses and apartments, not just through media and telecommunications but consumption. As a result our dwellings are no longer private but riddled with global anxieties’.

8. Vanishing Point – Atelier Zone

Haley’s pivotal work in his oeuvre to date is Vanishing Point, exhibited in Place into Space, Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne 2008. This artwork significantly goes beyond the accepted interpretation of Australian suburbia as housing estate into a new territory, a land dominated by the isolated city vertical community. The key image is a formulaic office block; bedroom, bathroom and trappings of apartment living are not shown. However, Vanishing Point depicts more than an office-tower block, it shows the future direction of the inner city as a networked, interlinked suburbia of cell-like pods. Haley with this large photograph of endless rooms, all containing identical office furniture, is I believe proposing the end of the great Australian myth of home ownership: a detached house on a quarter-acre block. This is what the artist describes as “international space.” As he remarked: “We see these developments everywhere, London, Docklands, Tokyo, Shanghai. When travelling in these places, you look about and think you could be in LA or Chadstone. I mean they are similar and virtually interchangeable”.
In the recent past many Australian CBDs were devoid of humanity after 5 pm. As so expressively depicted by John Brack, employees would head home in an end-of-workday exodus. Haley admits to a great interest in Brack’s work and says that his celebrated Collins St., 5p.m., 1955, was a direct influence on Vanishing Point. He commented: “With Brack the key element for me is that he dealt with what was right in front of him. The space of Australia. Arkley and Brack were forerunners in addressing that subject. In looking right under their noses, rather than a projected romanticized version of Australian landscape”.17

Many CBDs are still empty after the knock-off hour, but Melbourne and Sydney now hum to the beat of 24-hour traffic – human and vehicular. The controlled world of Vanishing Point is located in an all-too-familiar land. This building and corporate ethos has been seen before, towering overhead or spread across the old inner working-class suburbs of Melbourne. Yet Vanishing Point shows more than just a symbol of the 5 pm exodus; instead, it presents a subjugated new suburbia of isolation and apartment living, an endless vista of apartments, office-block towers inhabited by nameless people, sitting at computers talking to “friends” on Facebook. Why venture outside when there is Twitter? These city apartments lack the familiarity of the Roll-A-Door garage and Clark Above-Ground-Pool from Haley’s Nunawading childhood. More importantly, they lack some of the neighbourly friendship of Haley’s inner-city university housing experiences.

Vanishing Point defines the mass dominance of the mutant reproduction of sameness. The echo of Haley’s earlier works still exists, but now in a constructed form of duplicated DNA. Every room in the photograph is alike. The only indicators of human habitation are the uniform desk, computer, empty bookshelves, artwork and clock – with the same time set at just after 5 pm, the traditional workers’ vanishing point. Even the artwork on the wall is positioned in an equivalent location and is identical. There are no common spaces, no public domain, not even an office water-cooler. Here Haley is depicting the neighbourhood as manageable parts. Vanishing Point conveys a biosphere of computer-screen eerie glow, mobile telephone buzz and the email culture ping. The street pavement has been swapped for a network of rabbit warrens served by a multitude of software programs. This is a world of internet shopping where everything from groceries to New York or London designer labels is delivered directly to the door. The photograph hanging in each room is by the German artist Thomas Demand and shows the Paris location where Princess Diana and Dodi Al-Fayed were killed in 1997. Another vanishing point? Demand’s process of carefully constructing his photographs from cardboard large-scale models is similar in nature to Haley’s approach. Demand, however, makes his models in physical three-dimensionality; Haley’s photographs are made in the virtual world of the computer by a laborious process of construction. Making these virtual models, assigning textures, lighting them, doing test renders and so forth, takes many weeks of intensive work.

Haley’s computer-generated imagery is reminiscent of the building designs that determine the practical fit-out of inner-city apartments. The extreme example being the purchase of an off-the-plan apartment, where everything from the cups and saucers to light fittings, wall colour and kitchen appliances can be specifically selected and created by a computer. The apartment rooms of Vanishing Point are much like prison cells. Everything is ordered: there is a place for the computer; office desk and bookcase are all positioned exactly the same. As with the prison cell, the personalised item encountered in an inner-city apartment is significant, not so much for what it tells us about the owner, but more for its abhorrence of the conformity of a controlled environment. In 1975 Hugh Stretton wrote the groundbreaking text on Australian suburbia, Ideas for Australian Cities, in which he argued for more consideration of the impact of urban sprawl on the environment. His article in Australian Greats contains comments on landless apartments: “House and garden are productive capital. What they enable parents and children to make and do and teach and learn, and to enjoy in family life and friendship, may often be more productive and diversely interesting than can be done in landless apartment and mostly paved, mostly public-spaces around them.”18 When referring to the space of the city, Haley describes it as “resembling bacteria in a petri dish, spreading, threatening to devour all available area”.19 As with the rabbit in Haley’s West Space exhibition, in Vanishing Point each individual room or “warren” is the same and equal to the next. The glimmering oddity in Vanishing Point is the reflection of that once mighty symbol of émigré freedom, the Statue of Liberty, perhaps a sign of human hope that all has not been lost. Haley gives no indication or hint of an answer.

The contained, air-locked environment predicted in Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey, 1968, is now here, its existence celebrated as a rebirth of the inner-city wasteland. As Haley commented: “In the 1950s and 60s it was often thought that by the year 2000 we would all be living in space stations on the moon. It seems laughable now, but I think they were right. We do live in space stations, but here, on earth”.20 Vanishing Point depicts an endless, framed gridlock that goes beyond any traffic jam to the core of a city’s reason for existence.
This photograph epitomises Haley’s preoccupation with contemporary apartment living and coded architectural form as a symbol of the hidden and private. Possibly sinister, maybe perverse, but definitely controlled, the apartment world (office space) of *Vanishing Point* is located in a land of rigid geometric patterning. Haley’s apartments are devoid of real people; adults and children do not inhabit this land. Haley’s apartment cities have no place to walk the dog or cycle along a riverbank. Personal security and safety seem the primary concern of apartment living. Perhaps the same could be argued of any visit to a Melbourne CBD destination. There is a sense of (human) presence, where they (humanity) live, work and play, but, eerily, this inner-city land is uninhabited. Something in Haley’s city of never-ending towers has gone horribly wrong as the physical human presence, or even a sign of pets and other living animals, is non-existent.

The audience when viewing *Vanishing Point* is initially lulled into a comfort zone by the imagery, only to be thrust into a new place, a space inhabited by a mirror-like reproduction of what appears to be friendly, but when probed, is intellectually disturbing. The echo or mutated reflected reproduction of Haley’s conceptual intent has not disappeared; instead, it has returned in a new, sinister formula: an architectural system where people are living and working with hundreds of others in high-rise vertical communities, yet all the while missing genuine connection. Haley’s depiction of the multistorey office with rigid design opens the discussion of destiny. Are the workers, owners or renters in control? Or is the computer designer determining their movements, including social interaction? I believe Haley with *Vanishing Point* is questioning what the impact of isolation created by apartment living will bring in the future. Can apartment living or the multicomplex office space provide a sense of belonging, connection to community and a feeling of social inclusion? The dilemma evoked in Haley’s *Vanishing Point* is the depiction of apartment living as the abode of the majority and the way of the future. The question Haley posits is whether or not the ideal of home ownership, long held sacred by respective Australian governments, is dead.

9. Conclusion

The artworks of Stephen Haley, beginning with suburban Nunawading, progressing through shared student accommodation to his present abode in in middle class Elwood, reflect the changing domestic architecture of Melbourne. Significantly, these works represent the urban growth of Melbourne from a city enclosed by suburbia consisting of three-bedroom brick-veneer dwellings to a metropolis dramatically transfigured by the massive growth in apartment living. Haley’s artwork, culminating with the landmark *Vanishing Point*, challenges the Australian concept of suburbia as the house on the quarter-acre block. *Vanishing Point* propels Haley’s interpretation of house and home into unchartered territory, an Australian suburbia that positions the contemporary middle-class home in high-rise segregated communities. This is a new vision of suburbia, a community not explored by the likes of Australian artists such as John Brack, Rick Amor, Jan Senbergs or Howard Arkley. Soon, I would argue, with the Australian government encouragement for high-density urban living due to the shortage of land within our ever growing major capital cities, Haley’s apartment metropolis will replace what was once considered the norm, the Australian suburban housing estate on the outer fringe. It is this visionary positioning of Australian suburbia as apartment city that locates Haley’s artwork as being significant within the realm of house and home.

Notes


References
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Press Release, 1995: Westspace: Landscape and Space in Contemporary Western Culture, University of Melbourne: Victorian College of the Arts, October 18, 1995

Figure 1: Stephen Haley, Vanishing Point, 2007. Lightjet photograph, 118 x 300 cm, (Copyright Stephen Haley)
Figure 2: Stephen Haley, Echo, 1996. Oil and Enamel on Canvas, 70 x 120 cm. (Copyright Stephen Haley.)

Figure 3: Stephen Haley, Echolight (default), 2001. Oil on Canvas, 100 x 100 cm (Copyright Stephen Haley)

Figure 4: Stephen Haley, reverberator, 2004. Inkjet print, 132 x 125 cm. (Copyright Stephen Haley.)
Figure 5: Stephen Haley, *After Reflection* (installation view) 2005. Margaret Lawrence Gallery, VCA, Melbourne. (Copyright Stephen Haley.)

Figure 6: Stephen Haley, *Mirrorland*, 2005. Projected 3D Animation, 2 mins, infinitely looped ( Installation view) Academy Gallery, University of Tasmania, Launceston, 2008