

Suspicious mind adds homes and hotels

Robert Bevan

Rock star philosopher and film buff Slavoj Žižek has turned his mind in the past to subjects as varied as bottled water, violence, Christianity and porn. Dubbed the Elvis of Cultural Theory, the neo-marxist from Slovenia has inherited the cult status once enjoyed by Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.

He now brings his idiosyncratic eye to matters architectural, headlining Parallax, the Australian Institute of Architects' annual national conference next week. An often controversial figure who infuriates the politically correct liberal left as much as the right, Žižek is a great coup for the Melbourne conference organisers, architecture practice Terroir.

In a draft of his 10,000 word address, his first substantive offering on architecture, Žižek muses over Frank Gehry who, early in his career, radically spliced his traditional California house with an additional fractured layer. Žižek concludes that if the Bates Motel in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* were to be built by Gehry, directly combining the old vertical Gothic mother's house with the modern, horizontal motel, things might have turned out different.

"There would have been no need for Norman to kill his victims, since he would have been relieved of the unbearable tension that compels him to run between the two places."

It is classic Žižek, combining the cultural, the ideological and the psychological, with sparky wit.

"We've found philosophers very helpful. They are amazingly good at arguing [things] through. He's like the giant therapist at the conference," says Terroir director Gerard Reinmuth, who hopes the event will underline the difference between merely building and a genuine architecture, "which is about trying to implement ideas in real space".

Žižek's paper ranges over vast terrain: the consequences of postmodernism; the spectacular performing arts venues that privatise public space; the sometimes covertly undemocratic work of Gehry, Daniel Libeskind and other "starchitects"; Stalinist wedding cake architecture (he's an unexpected fan).

The international director of the

Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities in London, he also riffs on Donald Rumsfeld's infamous 2003 speech on Iraq — "there are known knowns, there are unknown unknowns" — to produce something cogent about "unknown knowns", those aspects of our unconscious that the design of buildings can reveal.

Žižek gives as his only credentials a love for Ayn Rand's architectural novel *The Fountainhead*, and his dream of a house made entirely of staircases and corridors, bathrooms and store rooms, with no actual living or bedrooms.

In addition to his usual philosophical and psychoanalytical touchstones, G.W.F Hegel and Jacques Lacan, he relies heavily on the architecture writings of fellow

philosopher Fredric Jameson for his jumping-off point, and heads straight to the crux of our political and psychological engagement with our built environment.

"There is [a] very simple but trenchant dilemma confronting us here: if we live in [an] alienated-commodified society, what should architecture do? Make us aware of alienation by making us feel uncomfortable, shocked and awed, or provide false semblance of [a] nice life which obliterates the truth."

Žižek doesn't provide any solutions to this struggle, but then again it's a problem that progressive architecture has been wrestling with for a century. Žižek's star turn at Parallax will help shift focus back to that crucial question — just what should architecture do?