

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Three, Number Three

In interstitial space - Žižek on “Architectural Parallax”

Lahiji Nadir, University of Pennsylvania

Can architecture be an answer to the deadlock of social antagonism? Slavoj Žižek has an affirmative answer to this question. He argues that an architectural motif, a “leftover” space, taken metaphorically and literally, is an answer to the phenomenon of *class struggle*. He steps into the field of architecture only to claim it for his radical social theory. Žižek has come to architecture to provoke and challenge; he has arrived with full force that strikes the eyes. Architecture in contemporary culture is much too important to be left to the vagaries of *apolitical* feckless liberal critics in academia. Much more is at stake when architecture is enlisted in the service of cultural logic of late capitalism. With his intervention, Žižek, as a psychoanalytical philosopher and a radical cultural and political critic, has thus entered into a lineage which goes back to Walter Benjamin in folding architecture into radical political thought.

On the occasion of “Lacanian Ink 33 Event” which took place in Jack Tilton Gallery in New York City on April 23, 2009, Žižek gave his talk on architecture. This is good news. One of the most prodigious thinkers of our time eventually announced his entry into the domain of architectural criticism.¹ This was bound to happen. His late arrival is very welcomed, at least for those inside the discipline of architecture. Žižek has now joined the ranks of social and cultural critics from outside of the discipline (including Fredric

Jameson, who is his major reference) who much earlier took up the subject of architecture at the peak of the debate on post-modernism. How should we measure the weight of his intervention? Has he done his homework before arriving? Žižek has made his inroad but not with a grand philosophical theory to interrogate the underlying *architectural* system in the western thought which goes back to Georges Bataille at least in recently history. He is neither interested to put the question of architecture into the grand narrative of Ontology (at least not for the time being); nor is he concerned with what his favourite writer Kojin Karatani has done remarkably in *Architecture as Metaphor* in exploring the *architectonic* in the Western metaphysical system of thought and its “*will to architecture*.”ⁱⁱ In this sense, Žižek is not interested in engaging in a grand act of destabilizing the stable *ground* of architecture, and he is not interested in offering an alternative to grand project of Deconstruction after late Jacques Derrida, who was adopted in the hall of architectural fame and then misappropriated by the avant-garde architectural circles.

So Žižek has arrived neither having an agenda to take up the analysis of ground breaking *texts* written by architects and architectural historians on the Left with which we have been struggling in the last three decades, specially the writings of the Italian Left in 60s and 70s, whose specific notion of architectural ideology became the subject of analysis early on by Fredric Jameson. Nor is Žižek interested to challenge certain contentious contemporary architects who have large body of writings on the “Bigness” and other big issues concerning contemporary city and culture. When he chooses to discuss Rem Koolhaas, for that matter, as we shall see below, he is not concerned with the large volumes of the work and writing by this architect, nor does he take him to task for his cynical position on global modernization and culture of media, etc. So the question is: has Žižek come with a modest goal and small claim with “limited knowledge” into the field as he says at the beginning of his talk? His is a surprisingly radical theory, if not a “grand” one. His critique of a dominant aspect of contemporary architecture production is one we cannot afford to miss. After all, what could be more radical, these days, than to talk about *class struggle* in architecture, when nobody anymore uses this notion in the discipline, let alone everybody else outside the discipline on the Left seems to have dropped it from their vocabulary of political critiques? Žižek has gone back to classic work of Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, as his major reference point with which to advance his thesis.ⁱⁱⁱ He foregrounds the doctrine of the “political unconscious” in Jameson and expands it to architectural analysis which had not been undertaken previously. This is the core of his contribution and worthy of serious consideration.

Before any talk about the limit of Žižek's knowledge in the field of architecture, it must be said that what makes his talk so stimulating and refreshing is that his critique of contemporary architectural culture comes across in sharp contrast to many complacent and conformist critics and writers inside the discipline of architecture, and even against many others from the outside. What is significant is that Žižek has tapped into the internal categories in the language of architectural criticism that, while it is illuminating, could be nevertheless its pitfall. But Žižek's intervention confirms a major point for us: that a radical critique of contemporary architecture – rare these days – is most effective when made within the framework of a radical social and political theory and not within the shaky aesthetic discourse predominant nowadays in academia. This point sums up Žižek's provocation in the text of his Talk. In spite of his modest denial in the past declaring "not knowing anything about architecture," we are in for some big surprises.^{iv} But perhaps his Talk is as significant for what he says as for what he omits to say. Yet, what he has to say is at times dazzling.

Architecture and the Concept of Parallax

The title of his talk is complicated to begin with: "Architectural Parallax: Spandrel and other Phenomena of Class Struggle." It can be noticed that the title is a play on literal and metaphorical motifs of architecture in order to get to the last term of the title, "class struggle." He starts his talk with a disclaimer that his knowledge of architecture is limited to his "idiosyncratic data," consisting of, first of all, his love for Ayn Rand's architectural novel, *The Fountainhead* – on which he has previously written – and his admiration for the "Stalinist 'wedding-cake' baroque kitsch," and more interesting of all, his "dream house": "composed only of secondary spaces and places of passage – stairs, corridors, toilets, store-rooms, kitchen – with no living room or bedroom." (Žižek 2009: unpaginated) A surrealistic hilarious dream! Which I think is missing a room. Perhaps in this dream one more should appear, for otherwise where would he station himself to write, with the vertiginous speed he does – enough to send into panic a slow reader like myself – unless he has secured a section of the counter top in his kitchen for this purpose while he eats and watches science fiction and techno-thriller movies, or, if I may put it indecently, while sitting on his favourite object of the "truth": the toilet! (as he hilariously discussed in the beginning of *The Plague of Fantasy*.)^v But otherwise, his dream of "places of passage" could remind one of Walter Benjamin's ideas of "passage" in the *Arcades Projects*. At the

end of the first paragraph he writes that he is courting the danger that what he is saying “will oscillate between the two extremes of unfounded speculation and what most is already known for a long time.” True to some extent. As when he comes to speculate on Frank Gehry’s renovation of his own house in Santa Monica (1977-78), Žižek basically recites Fredric Jameson’s classic analysis, although he draws his own conclusion in the context of his argument as we shall see below.^{vi} All along in his Talk he pays respect to the work of Jameson.

After reading the opening paragraph in the text of Zizek’s talk above, I want to cite the last paragraph in the text where he goes back to his first dream. This time, he puts it in the terms of his main thesis about “interstitial spaces” as the “proper place of utopian dreaming,” a reminder, as he says, of “architecture’s great politico-ethical responsibility,” by recalling William Butler Yeats’ lines: “I have spread my dreams under your feet, / Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.” To which Žižek adds his own lines: “they refer also to architecture, so my warning to architecture [*sic*] is: when you are making your plans, tread softly because you tread on the dreams of the people who will live in and look at your building.” (ibid, unpaginated) This is a nice transition from his individual “private” dream of an ideal house to the dream of the house of *collectivity*. In these lines one can detect a trace of Benjaminian idea of the dream of “collectivity” linked to the historical act of “awakening.”

Let us now attend to the main body of the text to let it speak for itself and attempt to situate it within the context of contemporary architectural criticism. I must begin by saying this: Zizek’s idea that architecture is the stage on which the *class struggle* plays itself out is novel and serious. It does not matter, therefore, that the path on which he treads might lack the necessary components to arrive at a comprehensive and full demonstration of his thesis. Let us begin with the term “Architectural Parallax” itself. With this title, it is as if Žižek had to wait until he comes across the term “parallax” so that he can exploit it for the field of architecture, as this term carries certain architectural connotations. Žižek had adopted this term as the title of his “magnum opus,” *The Parallax View*.^{vii} The term was taken from Kojin Karatani’s *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*,^{viii} who in turn took the term as used by Kant, where the philosopher mentions it as the “pronounced parallax,” to be precise. This term now occupies Žižek’s work, in tandem with another term, *anamorphosis*, he adopted from Jacques Lacan. Both terms have certain spatial and architectural significations. Žižek first gives a definition of the term “parallax” in *The Parallax View* which he repeats in this Talk: “The apparent displacement of an object (the

shift of position against a background), caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight. The philosophical twist to be added, of course, is that the observed difference is not simply 'subjective' due to the fact that the same object which exists 'out there' is seen from two different stances, or the point of view. It is rather that, as Hegel would have put it, subject and object are inherently 'mediated', so that an 'epistemological' shift in the subject's point of view always reflects an 'ontological' shift in the object itself." (Žižek 2006, 17)

It is significant that Žižek basically bypasses the Kantian extension of the term that Karatani discusses at length. The methodological thesis in this "parallax gap," as Žižek expands on the term is "to conceive all possible positions as responses to a certain underlying deadlock or antagonism, as so many attempts to resolve this deadlock." (unpaginated, *ibid.*) He then sees the architectural manifestation of this thesis in postmodernism and takes two different design strategies exemplified in the work of Frank Gehry and Daniel Libeskind, "as two desperate (or joyous) attempts to combine two incompatible structuring principles within the same building." (*ibid.*, unpaginated) In the case of Libeskind, horizontal/vertical and oblique cubes (he neglects to give a specific building example), and in the case of Gehry, traditional house with modern materials of concrete, corrugated iron, and glass, "as if two principles are locked in a struggle for hegemony." (*ibid.*, unpaginated) These are two exemplary cases of post modern architecture for Žižek, which seem to demonstrate the notion of "parallax" directly.

Interstitial Space

What Žižek takes from Jameson analysis of the Gehry's house is the idea of "interstitial space." He quotes Jameson's analysis to the effect that Gehry "took a modest bungalow on a corner lot, wrapped it in layers of corrugated metal and chain-link, and poked glasses structures through its exterior. The result was a simple house extruded into surprising shapes and surfaces, space and views." (*ibid.*, unpaginated) Žižek inserts himself here by saying that Jameson discerned a "quasi-utopian impulse," in quoting him, "...in this 'dialectic between the remains of the traditional (rooms from the old house, preserved like archaic dream traces in a museum of the modern), and the 'new' wrapping, themselves constituted in the base materials of American wasteland...[it]poses question fundamental to thinking about contemporary American capitalism: that between advanced technological and scientific achievements and poverty and waste.'" (*ibid.*, unpaginated) To this analysis,

Žižek adds his own conclusion: “A clear indication, for my Marxist mind, that *architectural projects are answers to a problem which is ultimately socio-political*.” (ibid, unpaginated) (emphasis mine). In other words, any particular strategy of architectural design, adopted by this or that architect, wrapped around with a seductive aesthetic envelope, is ultimately a *solution* offered to a socio-political deadlock in the working mechanism of capitalism. Should we then conclude that an architectural design strategy is a form of class struggle by other means? This would ultimately lead us to an important thesis: in general, an architectural project is only *an imaginary solution to a real contradiction* in capitalist society. Such a reading is supported by Žižek’s affirmative reference to the work of Claude Levi-Strauss, also analyzed by Jameson, which Žižek further develops.

Related to his observation of Gehry’s house, we are in for a wonderful surprise in Žižek’s fascinating argument. He turns to his favourite subject, Alfred Hitchcock’s masterpiece, *Psycho*, and its *unheimlich* character with its full implication for making an architectural case out of it. As a modernist work, *Psycho* for Žižek stages a case of an architectural antagonism, as opposed to postmodernism that often obfuscates the same antagonism at work (The modernist work always displays the split subjectivity.) Norman, the main character of the film, Žižek argues, is caught between the “horizontal” character of his Motel and the “vertical” Gothic image of his mother’s house, “for ever running between them, and never finding a proper place of his own,” (ibid, unpaginated) who eventually, in full identification with his mother, finds his *heim*, his home. (This longing for *heim*, by the way, is but one side of the dialectical pair of architectural modernity in twentieth century search for the idea of the “house,” as Anthony Vidler has written in his *Architectural Uncanny*.^{ix)}

Žižek then detects the same antagonism in Gehry design operation in his own house and comes up with an astonishing hypothesis: “If the Bates Motel were to be built by Gehry, directly combining the old mother’s house and the flat modern motel into a new hybrid entity, 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 – he would have a third place of mediation between the two extremes.” (ibid, unpaginated) Quite an astounding thought! The “mediation between the two extremes” is a reference to the same “interstitial space” to which Žižek repeatedly returns. Should we then conclude that it is in this *interstitial space* that the subject finds an *immunization* against its psychosis? Or, has architectural modernity offered a solution or an inoculation against the psychopathology of space caused by the rise of modern metropolis? This

Žižek does not further pursue and we cannot take it up here either. Suffice it to note that we surprisingly learn that not only architecture is an answer to a *socio-political* deadlock, but also it could be a *curing* agent in psychopathology of every day life of the subject. This is of course entirely different from the obsession of high modernism in early twentieth century with the ideology of *hygiene* in taking modern architecture as *the* curing agent in dressing buildings with a coat of whitewash, mainly in the works of Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier.^x

We are in for yet another surprise. This time it is Žižek's affirmative reference to Jean-Francois Lyotard and his *The Postmodern Condition*. When he first took up the notion of post modernism as object of his criticism in his *Looking Awry* in 1991, it was basically Jorgen Habermas who was his target.^{xi} He faulted Habermas for his misrepresentation of post-modernism in its difference from modernism. Žižek argued that the tension between the two is simply false, that post-modernism is the "immanent obverse" of the modernist project itself, a tension which was in modernism from its very beginning. At that time, Žižek never mentioned Lyotard's text as a counter argument against Habermas and instead claimed that it was only with Jacques Lacan that the break of post-modernism occurred. Later, in *Tarrying with the Negative* in 1993, his criticism of post-modernism and Lyotard is severe and negative. In the "Introduction" Žižek wrote that predominant post-modern theory is the mixture of neo-pragmatism and deconstruction exemplified by the names of Rorty and Lyotard; "their works emphasizes the 'anti-essentialist' refusal of universal Foundation, the dissolving of 'truth' into the effect of plural language-games, the relativization of its scope historically specified inter-subjective community, etc. Isolated desperate endeavours of a post-modern return to the Sacred reduced to just another language-game, to another way we 'tell stories about ourselves.'" ^{xii} (Žižek 1993: 4) Žižek then reminded us that Lacan is not part of this post-modern theory. Now Žižek asks if we are justified to still keep this "obsolete" term of post-modernism. He tells us that we nevertheless should admit that "when Jean-Francois Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition*, elevated this term from the name of certain new artistic tendencies (especially in writing and architecture) to the designation of a new historical epoch, there was an element of authentic nomination." (Žižek 2009: *ibid*, unpaginated)

It seems to me that Žižek's rethinking of the term and his positive affirmation of Lyotard's text at this juncture has to do with his thinking about architecture recognizing the usefulness of the term in criticism of the contemporary architectural production. But this does not mean that Žižek has abandoned his high estimation of modernist work which he constantly brings out in the work of music, films and literary texts in the early twentieth

century. In the positive estimation of the term, Žižek asserts that post-modernism effectively functioned as a new Master-Signifier which introduced a new order of intelligibility into the confused multiplicity of historical experience.” (ibid, unpaginated) That is, according to him, post-68 capitalism needed a unified term to explain its economic, social and cultural unity. Žižek, therefore, uses the term post-modernism to explain the entire production of contemporary architecture (and not just as a term of reference to architecture of ‘70s and early ‘80s when historicist post-modern buildings were at its peak.) In the meantime, he is still concerned about the old debate between modernism and post-modernism. Žižek informs us that, “If, in great classic modernism, a building was supposed to obey one all-encompassing great Code, in post-modernism we get a multiplicity (ambiguity) of meanings.” (ibid, unpaginated) And further, “As it was often remarked, post-modernism can be said to stand for deregulation of architecture – for radical historicism where, in a globalized pastiche, everything possible, anything goes. Pastiche works like ‘empty parody’: a radical historicism where all the past is equalized in synchronicity of eternal present.” (ibid, unpaginated) (In these remarks we can hear the echoes of Frederic Jameson’s classic analysis of post-modernism.)

Žižek then goes on to cite the example of an apartment house in Moscow for the new rich which shows off the elements in imitations of “Stalinist neo-Gothic Baroque,” which is an indication of the past combined with “hyper-capitalist present.” Žižek concludes: “We should read this use of ‘totalitarian’ motifs as a case of post-modern irony, as a comic repetition of the ‘totalitarian’ tragedy.” (ibid, unpaginated) “Neo-Stalinist” post-modernism is a weird case of the class struggle, the return of the repressed of the official ideology of “socialist” state now integrated into current hyper-capitalism. The new capitalist elite, Žižek says, sees itself “ideologically” indifferent, “apolitical,” “caring only for money and success, despising all big Causes.” (ibid, unpaginated) The same goes with despising the big *causes* in the case of the neo-liberal order in the West. Thus, in this analysis Žižek brings forward his first example in demonstrating how architecture gets into the deadlock of social antagonism and how the “return of the repressed” in the “political unconscious” of the building literally is written in aesthetic codes virtually all over the surface of the building.

Architecture and Social Antagonism

At this point Žižek asks the crucial question: “how does an ideological edifice (real architectural edifices included) deal with social antagonism?” (ibid, unpaginated) His answer is decisive and makes a significant theoretical contribution to radical criticism which otherwise is lacking inside the discourse of architecture discipline. He cites Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* where Jameson discusses Levi-Strauss’s interpretation of the facial decorations of the Caduveo Indians from Brazil. Jameson, discussing “The Structural Study of Myth,” develops the notion that “the individual narrative, or the individual formal structure, is to be grasped *as the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction*.” (emphasis mine) (Jameson 1981: 77) He writes: “Thus, Levi-Strauss orients his still purely visual analysis of Caduveo facial decoration towards this climatic account of their contradictory dynamic.” (Jameson 1981: 77) He quotes from Levi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropiques*: “the use of a design which is symmetrical but yet lies across an oblique axis... a complicated situation based upon two contradictory forms of duality, and resulting in a compromise brought about by a secondary opposition between the ideal axis of the object itself [the human face] and the ideal axis of the figure which it represents.” (Jameson 1981: 77-78) Further in his analysis, Jameson concludes with a statement crucial for Žižek’s thesis: “In this fashion, then the visual text of Caduveo facial art constitutes a symbolic act, whereby real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal resolution in aesthetic realm.” (Jameson 1981: 79) Jameson draws another important conclusion that Žižek could have cited: “We may suggest that from this perspective, ideology is not something which informs or inverts symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal ‘solution’ to unresolved social contradiction.” (Jameson 1981, ibid)

This point is elaborated by Levi-Strauss in another essay, “Do Dual Organizations Exist?” in *Structural Anthropology*, which provides Žižek with basic theoretical armature on which he can advance his critique of architecture within the notion of “zero-institution.” Without getting into the details of Levi-Strauss novel analysis, the upshot of this reading is precisely the thesis that was mentioned before. From the asymmetrical facial decoration of Caduveo tribe to an architectural plan, each is a formulation of “an imaginary resolution of a real contradiction.” (ibid, unpaginated) The significance of this thesis resides in the fact

that it can universally be applied to any conscious design act, and for that matter, to all architectural projects. Žižek cites the case of Oscar Niemeyer plan for Brasilia to make his point: “Does the same not hold for Niemeyer’s plan of Brasilia, this imaginary dream of the resolution of social antagonisms which supplements not the reality of social antagonisms but the lack of ideological-egalitarian mechanism which would cover them up with a properly-functioning appearance.” (ibid, unpaginated) (Another similar example would be Le Corbusier’s Chandigarh project built under Nehru in India around 1953.) At this point Žižek remarks that “This is why Jameson is fully justified to talk about the ‘political unconscious’: there is a coded message in architectural formal play, and the message delivered by a building often functions as the ‘return of the repressed’ of the official ideology.” (ibid, unpaginated)

To affirm this point, Žižek draws our attention on “the mute signs of a building” that cannot be talked about by citing the two projects for *casa del Fascio* (the headquarters of the Fascist party) by Adolfo Coppedè’s “neo-imperial pastiche” of 1928 and Giuseppe Terragni’s design from 1934-36.” Žižek rhetorically asks: “do they not, in their simple juxtaposition, reveal the inherent contradiction of the Fascist ideological project which simultaneously advocates a return to pre-modern organicist corporatism and the unheard-of mobilization of all social forces in the service of rapid modernization.” (ibid, unpaginated.) The lesson to be learned from this suggestive comparison is that it could be equally valid for different design solutions offered under any other modern political system. For example, in early twentieth century high modernism under the liberal capitalism, the conflict between modernist avant-gardes, on the one hand, and the camp of the Expressionists, on the other hand, is very instructive example. As Anthony Vidler has put it, the conflict is “between a universalist, standardized, abstract language of pure geometrical forms appropriate to the gamut of the task demanded by the technologies and social mores of industrial mass society, and personalized, psychologically generated language that are at once expressed the alienation of the individual in such a society and its triumphant overcoming. The debate between, for example, Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier, on the one hand, and Bruno Taut and Hans Scharoun, on the other hand.” (Vidler 2008: viii-ix) Are not these different solutions in the guise of different aesthetic formal play, just different “imaginary resolutions to a real contradiction,” or, different answers to the deadlock of social antagonism? The same goes with current neo-liberal order of late capitalism, under which architecture has become a “cultural capital,” (Žižek’s term) that different design strategies which are dressed in different aesthetic wrappings, whether an

Expressionist envelop or the *blob* as opposed to the *box*, are just different ways of secretly coding of the design as the return of the repressed. This argument can stand as universal criteria for judging the so-called merit of different design act as different *solutions* to the same problem at hand, which often gets reduced to empty talk of aesthetic playfulness or the professional competence of the designed object.

The Inside and the Outside

We must now come to the main issue in Žižek's argument: the question of the "Inside" vs. the "Outside" in contemporary architecture. He picks up recent phenomenon of "performance arts venues," now proliferating around the world, as the *paragon* of contemporary architecture and gives number of examples to make his case. He correctly observes that excessive *aestheticization* that now reigns in contemporary architecture occurs here. He adopts the old dichotomy between *skin* and *structure* to discuss his cases. In one of the examples he falls back on the exhausted case of Rem Koolhaas's competition entry for National Library of France. Koolhaas's project is admittedly a significant case comparing to other examples he discusses. Let me point out that this project did not win the competition, as Françoise Mitterrand, then the socialist President of France, picked another project that would suit better his obsession with monumentality in the marks of his architectural legacy he left in the city of Paris. (He picked the problematic design by Dominique Perrault which caused heated controversy around the world). Žižek quotes the description of the project to make his point about the incommensurability between the inside and the outside: "the functions, the rooms, the interior, the inner spaces, hang within their enormous container like so many floating organs." (ibid, unpaginated) He sees this division as operative in all performance arts complexes, which also represent a case of "zero-institution." He asks if this is not an ideology in its purest, i.e., "the direct embodiment of the ideological function of providing a neutral all-encompassing space in which social antagonism is obliterated, in which all members of society can recognize themselves?" (ibid, unpaginated) They all, in Žižek reckoning, present a radical incommensurability between the outside and the inside. He, nevertheless, is quick to remind us that this division should not be taken as criticism because "The incommensurability between inside and outside is a transcendental a priori – in our most elementary phenomenological experience, the reality we see through a window is always minimally spectral, not as fully real as the closed space where we are."

(ibid, unpaginated)

The categories Žižek uses for his analysis are familiar ones. In his use of the binary oppositions between skin and structure, and between the Inside and the Outside, Žižek may seem to rely too much on the conventional vocabulary of mainstream architectural criticism, whereas one would have expected that he would rather deploy more of extra-architectural concepts in his criticism. One would wonder why he insists on these old dichotomies which have plagued architectural criticism in its entire modernist history. He even at one point gives the impression that he is comfortable with modernist notion of form follows function which came under attack beginning with 1960s critique of modernism. In regard to the question of inside/outside particularly, I wonder why he has not deployed the more complex psychoanalytical concept of *extimité*, defined by Lacan as “excluded in the interior,” that would transcend these dichotomies by passing to deconstruct them, a concept that otherwise Žižek has exploited masterfully in his philosophical and political writings. Related to this concept is the topographical figure of Möbius Strip which could have been of some help. With this topographical figure, Žižek could counter the pretensions of some contemporary architects who have adopted this figure as a design strategy in claiming to have gone “beyond” the same phenomenological division between inside and outside. The same goes with the skin and structure dichotomy. On this issue, Žižek could have benefited from the criticism advanced by Hal Foster in his discussion of Frank Gehry. In his seminal essay, “Image Building,”^{xiii} Foster writes against the current trend of contemporary aestheticization which is very much in line with Žižek’s own argument. Foster elsewhere correctly observes that all these aspects of the skin and structure, as the predominant mode of design in contemporary architecture, has not gone any further from the phenomenon of the Statue of Liberty a hundred years ago. In fact, contemporary architecture is a disguised repetition of the same phenomenon. Therefore, from Foster’s standpoint, who constructs his argument with the help of Guy Debord’s *Society of Spectacle*, all in contemporary architecture is the spectacle of Image translated into *Decorated Duck*. Foster coins this term by tracing Robert Venturi’s famous division between *Decorated Shed* and the expressionist *Duck* in his *Learning from Los Vegas*^{xiv}, which started postmodern turn in architecture forty years ago. Žižek, of course, is mindful of this notion of spectacle in contemporary culture. One would have expected Žižek to have avoided over-reliance on architectonic categories in his analysis and instead would take up to challenge architectonic pretensions made by some contemporary architects who have philosophically taken the concept of the fold in Gilles Deleuze’s work for their

theoretical legitimacy. Žižek would have been in strong philosophical position to challenge this neo-baroque as the West's counterpart of the Neo-Stalinist Baroque.

Yet, while retaining these set of dichotomies, Žižek evidently has a different approach in conceptualizing them. His method consists in treating them as antinomies. This is consistent with his philosophical method generated by his application of the *parallax gap*. This is evident when he reframes the problem of the Inside and the Outside in the Kantian term of Sublime. He writes: "sublime is the majesty of nature seen from the inside, through a (real or imagined) window frame – it is the distance provided by the frame which makes the scene sublime." (ibid, unpaginated) The conclusion he draws is very instructive: "What this mutual encroaching indicates is that Inside and Outside never cover the entire space: there is always an excess of a third space which gets lost in the division into Outside and Inside. In human dwellings, there is an intermediate space which is disavowed: we all know it exists, but we do not really accept its existence – it remains ignored and (mostly) unsayable." (ibid, unpaginated) At this point Žižek goes back to his discussion of post-modernism and the general *gap* that he detects between skin and structure, which he observes to result in a general aestheticization.

The crux of his argument is a dialectical and political: it is precisely this *gap* which also provides the undecidable space where the class struggle can be staged. He brings in again the examples of Rem Koolhaas's Library project and adds to it now Libeskind's design strategy. The latter's projects, he says, "reflects the gap between the protective skin and the inner structure into "skin" itself: the same external form (enormous box) is multiplied, relying on the contrast between the straight vertical/horizontal lines and the diagonal lines of the external walls." (ibid, unpaginated) So, the next step, Žižek continues, "is the aestheticization of the external container: It is no longer just a neutral box, but a round shell protecting the jewel inside." (ibid, unpaginated) He has not missed to mention that the aestheticization of the skin culminates with "sculptural Gehry buildings" where "the outside shell enveloping the functional inside is no longer just a shell, but a meaningful sculpture of its own." (ibid, unpaginated) For this he gives the example of Gehry's Performing Arts Center at Bard College. He could have cited the better example of Bilbao Guggenheim Museum to illustrate his case. In this again, Foster's critique of Gehry could have been of some help to Žižek.

After citing some lesser known examples, Žižek comes back to his central thesis: To what *social antagonism* these buildings are the solutions? He unmasks the claim of the so-called "anti-elitism" of these buildings. And it is here that Žižek significantly deconstructs

the hierarchical order of high and low art. What is false about the anti-elitism of performance arts buildings, which is secretly elitist, is the thesis that in great arts, for example those of Schoenberg or Weber music, as much as it is difficult for the broad public to listen, there is nothing elitist about them. “Great art is by definition universal-emancipatory, potentially addressing us all.” (ibid, unpaginated) (We can hear the echoes of Adorno’s thesis about modernist art here.) Or, take Mozart music. It has nothing to do with its appropriation by the high society in the early years of Met in New York City. Mozart, instead, “belonged to the poor in the upper stalls who spent their last dollars to see the opera,” (ibid, unpaginated) Žižek asserts. He recalls what Walter Benjamin said about the Charles Garnier Opera House in Paris, “The true focus of the opera is not the performance hall but the wide oval staircase on which high society ladies display their fashion and gentlemen meet for a casual smoke – this social life was the true focus of opera life, ‘what it really was about.’” (ibid, unpaginated) It is here that Žižek eventually brings in Lacanian psychoanalytical theory: “In the terms of Lacan’s theory, if the play on stage was the enjoyment which made the public come, the social game which went on the staircase before the performance and during the intermissions was the fore-play which provided the *plus-de-jouir*, the surplus enjoyment making it worth to come there.” (ibid, unpaginated) Thus Žižek exposes the false claim of the “democratic anti-elitism” in today’s performance arts-venues. The truth is rather in their “cocooning protective wall of the skin.” (ibid, unpaginated)

Žižek brings out series of the oppositions in which performance-art complexes function. They are: “public/private,” “open/restrained,” “elite/popular,” etc., that are “all variations on the basic motif of class struggle (which we are told, no longer exists in our societies).” (ibid, unpaginated) He further says, “The space of these oppositions delineates the problem to which performance-art buildings are solutions.” (ibid, unpaginated) Here we come to the application of Levi-Strauss’s novel analysis to concrete case of contemporary architecture. The class analysis culminates in this criticism of the “anti-elitist” architecture, in the failure of these performance art buildings, in that they are reproductions of the paradoxes of the “upper class liberal openness.” Their limitation is the limitation of our “tolerant liberal capitalism.” (ibid, unpaginated) So these buildings contain a “political unconscious,” the message of which is “democratic exclusivity: they create a multi-functional egalitarian open space, but the very access to this space is visibly filtered and privately controlled.” (ibid, unpaginated) Žižek concludes that these buildings are “utopian spaces which exclude junkspace: all the foul-smelling, ‘leftovers’ of the city space.” (ibid,

unpaginated) (On this matter, Žižek would be in the best position to provide a critique of Rem Koolhaas's diatribe on "Junkspace.") Žižek here cites the Deleuzian term, the "disjunctive inclusion," to briefly touch on contemporary city: "it has to include places whose existence is not part of its 'ideal ego' i.e., which are disjointed from its idealized image of itself." (ibid, unpaginated) Such places are slums of *favelas* in Latin America, "places of spatial deregulation and chaotic mixture, of architectural 'tinkering' / *bricolage* / with found materials." (ibid, unpaginated) These are the urban condition which is direct consequences of the modernization processes in global capitalism.

Ex-aptation, or, the Interstitial Space

Toward the end of his Talk, Žižek's asks if there is a way out of the deadlock that he has perfectly analyzed. His answer lies in his thesis he has repeatedly mentioned, that is, the gap between skin and structure and the unexpected emerging space: *The intestinal space*. He provides more examples to illustrate his point that we do not need to discuss further. Rather than discussing this concept directly, the so-called the "space in between," which Peter Eisenman once called "Zones of Undecidability" in reference to the term *poché* – as a rhetorical term of relation between solid and void - ^{xv} (Eisenman 1998). Žižek strangely opts for another explanation. He adopts the term *ex-aptation* that he has adopted after biologists. He explains that it refers to features that are not the result of adaptations through natural selection, but rather, are side effects of the adaptive processes that have been co-opted for a biological function. He mentioned the biologists Stephen Gold and Richard Lewontin who borrowed the architectural term *spandrel* "to designate the class of forms and spaces that arise as necessary by-products of another decision in design, and not as adaptations for direct utility in themselves." (ibid, unpaginated) Now like a competent architectural historian, Žižek describes the meaning of the architectural term spandrel ("the triangle space 'left over' when a rectangular wall is pierced by passageway capped with a round arch"), and then tries to expand its meaning: "By extension, a spandrel is any geometric configuration of space inevitably left over as a consequence of other architectural decisions." (ibid, unpaginated) (By the way, in the vocabulary of architectural history, spandrel is slightly different term from *pendentive*, which mistakenly taken as synonymous with it.)

The resulting ornamental space of spandrel can be conceptualized as a necessary supplement in the Derridian sense of the term. But Žižek takes spandrel as a place for

applied decoration like the portraits of the four evangelists stuck to it in church buildings, as he says. It should be mentioned here that if we still stay at the level of binary oppositions, it is more accurately the *gap* between structure and ornament rather than between structure and skin. In modernism the two elements of “skin” and “ornament” merged together as unified *dressings*. But in any case, it is the idea that “anatomical spandrels may be co-opted for uses that were not selected for in the first place.” (ibid, unpaginated) He stretches this concept so much that it loses its original meaning when he gives the example of the left over space under bridges where homeless people sleep not intended for it. His conclusion is that the interstitial space, “opened by disconnection between skin and structure,” is precisely this spandrel, “functionally empty spaces open up for exaptation.” (ibid, unpaginated) Important conclusion he draws is that it is precisely this space which is then open for political struggle to be appropriated and be occupied. Therefore, Žižek claims that these interstitial spaces are the proper places for “utopian dreaming – they remind us of architecture’s great political-ethical responsibility. Much more is at stake in design that it may appear.” (ibid, unpaginated) What is at stake for Žižek is that in every design resides a utopian dream, that these *undecidable* spaces are places where class struggle can be staged. Hence, the citing at the end of William Butler Yeats’ lines I quoted in the begging, warning architects in “treading softly” on this potentially utopian spaces.

At this point a tricky question poses itself. It concerns the reading of interstitial space which could lend itself to a misunderstanding. This space should by no means be conceived as a third space, empirically given to experience, opened in the division between the skin and structure. Žižek might have at one point conveyed this misleading reading. If this was the case, then the whole conceptual strategy of *parallax gap* in his analytical edifice would collapse. This space of *intermundia*, as Kojin Karatani discussed apropos of Marx and Kant, is only a term of oscillation, a *transversal* or *transposition*, as *transcendental* difference between the antonymical opposition and their undecideability. This is why Karatani, whom Žižek follows, came up with his idea of *transcritique* to expand on Kantian transcendental critique. Therefore, the utopian dreaming in Žižek’s dreams, can take place in no Place that empirically given as the third space out there to be occupied physically, but rather, it could only be a transversal space constantly oscillating between the division of the Inside from the Outside, which might appear in the interstices between skin and structure, taken as antonymical poles in a pair of an opposite. Although we might have a glimpse at this space at the phenomenal level, as in Spandrel, but more

accurately, it is the *thing-in-itself* that can only appear in the phenomenon itself as Žižek philosophically illuminated for us in his taking on the Kantian doctrine. Therefore it must be emphasized that, in spite of certain misleading comments, we must not be mistaken about the fact that Žižek adheres faithfully to a transcendental critique in his novel analysis of the “Architecture Parallax.” (In parenthesis, in the midst of all his very serious analyses, we are delighted with couple of funny and humorous idiosyncratic statements typical of him, such as that in Guggenheim Museum in New York designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, art works hung on the wall on its long spiral ramp upwards is only to decorate an otherwise boring walk upward! And, for the same reason, he finds skiing a stupid sport: why should one climb up only to slide down back, it is a waste of time, you might as well just stay down and read a good book!).

Conclusion

Žižek made his first entry into the field of architecture by trying to foreground socio-political and ethical discourse in criticism of contemporary architecture and to expose certain aspects of ideological masks at work in post-modernist aestheticism. He has made his case as a radical cultural and political critics writing about architecture. That is, a cultural critic armed with radical social theory and taking a distance is in a position to expose the *ideal ego* of architecture, that is, how at the imaginary level, it likes to project an idealized image of itself, to present a likeable image to the outside. But in doing so, Žižek left unanalyzed its dialectical other, the *ego ideal*. That is, the fact that contemporary architecture functions to fill the gap of the big Other at the cultural level, what Žižek himself has calls “cultural capital,” to rendered it whole and consistent, in the service of cultural logic of the late capitalism. This is missing in his analysis. In his talk he has fallen back over-reliantly on the categories of the language of criticism which have propped up the same aesthetic excess he is challenging. In this sense, Žižek’s achievement in his talk is also a missed opportunity. For some unknown reason, he has avoided utilizing the rigorous psychoanalytical categories that he has masterfully deployed in his analysis of culture and film in his other writings. We would have expected that he takes the gap in the parallax view to its logical conclusion by avoiding the worn out division between interiority and exteriority altogether.

But if, at this level, Žižek has “failed,” we must interpret his failure in the sense that he wrote about the failed attempts in twentieth century revolutionary struggles. In his

recent “How to Begin from the Beginning,” he quotes Samuel Beckett to this effect: “Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” (Žižek, 2009 a: 45) In this sense, Žižek should make another attempt to even “fail better”! In this second attempt, we expect him to illuminate the gap that separates the excluded from the included, to underscore even better the ethico-political ground of architecture in contemporary culture in order to see more clearly how it is an answer to the deadlock of social antagonism.

i I would like to thank Don Kunze for his careful reading of the first draft of this essay. I benefited from his editorial intervention and intellectual feed back he generously offered.

This talk subsequently posted on line on April 28, http://w.w.w.lacan.com/essays/?page_id=218.

- ii Kojin Karatani, *Architecture as Metaphor: Language, Number, Money* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).
- iii Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious, Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).
- iv On a personal note, some years ago as I was about to go to Ljubljana to visit Joze Plecnik, the early twenty century Slovenian architect, I sent an email to Žižek asking him if I can meet with him in his city to discuss the architectural and political aspects of “space,” to which he responded by saying “I do not know anything about architecture.” Of course, he had already written some strong commentaries on Joze Plecnik work. See Andrew Herscher, “Plecnik avec Laibach,” in *Assemblage* 33 (August 1997).
- v See Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasy* (London and New York: Verso, 1997).
- vi See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992). Žižek through out the printed version on line of his talk does not give references when he cites the authors and sources.
- vii Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006).
- viii See Kojin Karatani, *Trancritique: On Kant and Marx* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005).
- ix Anthony Vidler, *Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992).
- x See Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Dressing Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge: the MIT Press, 1995). See also Nadir Lahiji and Daniel Friedman, eds., *Plumbing: Sounding Modern Architecture* (New York: Princeton architectural Press, 1997).
- xi See Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry, An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), see chapter 8 “The Obscene Object of Postmodernity.”
- xii Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 4.
- xiii See Hal Foster, “Image Building,” in *Architecture Between Spectacle and Use*, ed. Anthony Vidler (Williamstown: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2008). Also see Hal Foster critique of Frank Gehry in his *Design and Crime (And Other Diatribes)* (London and New York: Verso, 2002).
- xiv See Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Los Vegas* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972).
- xv See Peter Eisenman, “Zones of Undecidability: The Process of Interstitial,” in *Anyhow* (Cambridge: The MIT press, 1998).

