Death of architecture exists. Sometimes it is slow just like the process of getting older and sometimes it is like the death of a protected permanent ruin – Forum Romanum. Sometimes the death is sudden, a result of war – like Warsaw in 1944. There is planned death – like St. Louis in 1972. Finally, there is an unexpected, painful death resulting from tragedy and loss of beauty, like the towers of World Trade Centre on 11th September 2001. What matters is not the shape of the monument but the memory about the people who died here and the memory of the beauty in the World’s Cemetery of Remembrance.

Keywords: architecture, death, value, meaning, memory

This attempt to write about the durability and fleetingness of architecture on a late-summer Sunday – September 11, 2011 – in the secluded town of Kazimierz begins and ends with images. My own authorial pictures of New York City taken on September 20, 2001, and today’s long hours of reading a harrowing list of the victims’ names out loud on television. Their deaths are complemented with the death of the architecture. Only the uncertainty of a possibility of showing the authorial pictures which date from the year 2001 can justify these words. They should not really be here – in the presence of images and memories.

We often say: architecture is a durable value. It is a cliché taken from the language of instruction. Architecture dies, too. Usually long and stately, till the monumental phase, a restoration permanent ruin if it has the quality of Forum Romanum or even a Polish castle which died several centuries ago. An encounter with some emotionally moving architecture inclines people to remain silent, to contemplate its beauty instead of describing it, sometimes to admire its scale, technique, hidden meaning and derive pleasure from finding it. In 1988, the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers became my great discovery, beauty incarnate with their uniquely integrated technology, scale and semantic dimension. Interrupting the Manhattan skyline with those two silver perpendiculars designed by Minoru Yamasaki could be interpreted like cathedral towers: a symbol of the Solar Gate, a cosmological sign of a vertical which connects the Earth with the Sky – man’s dream of such a Way. The vertical of the optically confined clearance between the Twin Towers was becoming this Way as well as the gate to NYC. The surrealism of the landscape of the disorderly congestion of the city centre, somewhere between 30th Street and 60th Street, juxtaposed with the extensive space around the WTC’s lonely towers built such perception. That was twenty-three years ago.
It happens, however, that architecture dies suddenly. Our generation could not witness the death of Warsaw’s houses during World War II. It remains in photographs, also aerial ones, precise after the German fashion. Sometimes architecture dies in order to – as our tutors wrote in the conference outline – *yield a place to another architectonic thing*: it is the case of Warsaw’s Supermarket somehow justified on July 15, 1972 by the symbolic *death* of the Pruitt-Igoe housing estate designed by M. Yamasaki in St Louis. Charles Jencks used the word *death* in relation to concrete architecture.

I watched the death of the WTC on that infamous September morning from the distance of San Francisco. Nine days after, on September 20, in the smell of things burnt and omnipresent dust in the air, I used the memory of my sight as well as my camera to record the death of the beautiful architecture I had known before. The elegance of those skyscrapers had been genuinely impressive – one spatial event with that conscious emptiness between them. And then I was recording all the New Yorkers around me, beholders and tourists scared stiff, those concentrated on repairing, cherishing their posttraumatic quiet, praying for all the casualties, looking for their missing relatives. The death of the architecture gave birth to a new community. No World Museum of Imagination could invent such a new image of the city.

Our far-sighted tutors also wrote that in the case of yielding a place to *another architectonic thing*, *esthetical reasons do not really matter*. It is true because the former WTC site is a cemetery for almost three thousand people as well. Thus, no spatial operation, like the Arada waterfall, will create a place of remembrance. Even if it is Aqua Vitae. The Tower of Freedom under construction, treated as an ambitious monument to this place, is just another commercial usable object without an ambition to be good architecture. In fact, esthetics is unimportant here, while the symbol has grown superficial.

That is my short story of the fleetingness and durability of architecture – in such reverse order. It is about durability in the memory of sight. Let a black homeless man, somewhere in the vicinity of the UN seat, remain the last sequence of this series of images – indifferent to the event of death, left all alone with his visions of the world and interested only in his movable belongings enriched in the days of American Apocalypse with a white helmet: against another attack…

*It is a commentary to 40 author’s photo-pictures of New York from 20th September 2001.*