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Memory of the City: New York 9/11/2013

Abstract: The article presents functional, spatial and symbolic transformations of New York City and its architecture after the terrorist attack of 9/11. Destroyed Twin Towers have been replaced by the new WTC One, highest building in the US. Its architecture is controversial, but according to author, it will soon become a new symbol of New York. 9/11 tragedy did not stop development of the city. Just contrary: New York's ambition is to become a model for cities in the 21st century, a resident-friendly and sustainable urban eco-system.

Key words: New York architecture, Twin Towers, WTC One

New York is the largest American metropolis and one of the main hubs of a network of global cities. It is a fascinating place, in particular its central district – Manhattan: a metaphor of modernity; abundant with iconic buildings and powerful symbols of urban life. Wojciech Kosiński argues that “the heart of the world” after Babylon, Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, Paris and London, has now moved to Manhattan.¹ The Author spent there the 12th anniversary of the 9/11 attack with his camera, with the intention to retrace what has remained of the event, and in particular to record the process of transformation of its cityscape, and the creation of its new spatial symbols.²

The two towers of the World Trade Center, built in the early 1970s (designed by the Japanese born American architect Minoru Yamasaki), nicknamed the Twin Towers, were among the most prominent symbols of Manhattan. For their large scale, mighty form and double rhythm, they towered over the City, becoming the icon of New York, and by this gaining unusual power and importance. This is why the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 and the destruction of the WTC Towers was a shock for the entire civilised world. The image of the falling towers, repeated thousands of times on live TV, the transmission of which continued for hours,³ was the first “global terrorist superproduction”, and was particularly disturbing to everyone.⁴

¹ W. Kosiński, *Serce świata – Manhattan*, “Czasopismo Techniczne Architektura” 2008, no. 3A, p. 100.

² Photo essay: *New York 9/11/2013* was presented on 20 September 2013 during the panel *Urban Culture: Concepts and Activities*, organised under the 2nd Congress of the Polish Association of Cultural Studies in Kraków.

³ ABC broadcast the transmission of the attack non-stop for 91 hours, whilst CBS's breaking news continued with no interruption for 93 hours and 5 minutes.

⁴ T. Goban-Klas, *Media i terroryści. Czy zastraszą nas na śmierć?*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2009, p. 119.

But the tragedy of 9/11 most strongly affected the residents of New York. “The skyline, and the city, are changed forever. When the site is cleared, and the lost lives are counted, there will be a huge hole in the heart of New York and every New Yorker” – wrote Ada Louise Huxtable, a columnist of the “Wall Street Journal”, a few days after the attack.⁵ The scale of destruction was appalling: the entire big city superblock on an area of over 6 hectares fell in ruins reaching up to the sixth floor. Twelve years after this tragic event the site has been cleared and the lost lives counted, but the reconstruction of the destroyed quarter of the city has not yet been finished: the 9/11 Museum has not been opened yet and the construction of the Freedom Tower (later prosaically renamed WTC One) is still underway.

In consequence of the attack, the WTC area has become a sacred site: on the one hand, it is seen as the site of an unprecedented barbarity in our times, hallowed with the blood of nearly three thousand innocent victims and known as Ground Zero – which in military terminology means the epicentre of a nuclear attack; on the other hand, it is a place of commemoration of the heroic rescue operation and solidarity that the authorities, institutions and residents showed in the face of this tragedy. The efficient process of reconstruction was to symbolize the power of American democracy. In the aftermath of the events of the 11th of September, the WTC site became one of the most important public places in the US defining national identity.

In the above-mentioned article, dated 17 September 2001, Huxtable, quite prophetically wrote:

There will be, and should be, passionate disagreement about replacing them at all. Rebuilding on this site requires serious consideration. There will be, and should be, calls for a memorial park, a public open space to serve as a permanent reminder of one the city’s, and history’s, worst catastrophes – a detestably man-made, as opposed to natural, disaster – and for the tribute to those who died needlessly and tragically in an act of unredeemed horror. And yet, one can almost predict what the New York process will be. This city can show its compassion, and its resolve, as it is doing now, but it is also a city incapable of the large, appropriate gesture in the public interest if it costs too much. That too, is something that can be debated. What are our values? How do we count the cost of those lives? Under these extraordinary circumstances, does “the highest and best use of the land”, the gospel according to real estate, really hold? Traditionally, that has meant filling the land to the maximum permitted by law, for the greatest return, while ignoring every social and human factor. If the usual scenario is followed, the debate will lead to the “solution” in which principle is lost and an epic opportunity squandered.⁶

This was exactly the case with the reconstruction of the WTC. The winner of the international architecture competition for the reconstruction of the centre of Manhattan, announced in February 2003, was Daniel Libeskind, an architect of Polish-Jewish descent. Libeskind’s original, innovative and highly symbolic vision, which culminated in the 1776 feet high Freedom Tower, expressive in form, gradually became increasingly distorted, and the architect was no longer employed in further design work, allegedly because of his lack of experi-

⁵ A.L. Huxtable, *On Architecture: Collected Reflections on a Century of Change*, Walker and Company, New York 2008, p. 378.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 378–379.



Photo 1. Silhouette of the Twin Towers on snack delivery truck, Queens, NY. Photo: Author.



Photo 2. Art installation *Tribute in Light* seen from Brooklyn Promenade – 9.11.2013. Photo: Author.

ence in commercial projects. He was replaced by David Childs, the head of the international architecture company Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, who belongs to the elite of American architects. He significantly remodelled and simplified the original design. The final blow to Libeskind's concept was in the spring of 2005, when the New York police stopped design work for security reasons. As a result of the police recommendations, the designs of the WTC complex structures were thoroughly revised, the construction was reinforced, the façade was hardened and security zones were built around the building. Paul Goldberger, a New York-based architecture critic, described the new WTC One design as "stunningly mediocre – an office tower on top of a bunker".⁷

In September 2006, architectural designs for the reconstruction of the following towers: the Second, the Third and the Fourth, were presented, designed by star architects: Norman Foster, Richard Rogers and Fumihiko Maki. Huxtable ironically dismissed them as "the disaster that has followed the tragedy", accusing the new buildings of being nothing more than "machines for making money". Their forms seem to be randomly selected, whilst stressing the most effective use of the building plots on which they have been planned. Huxtable also writes that they not only lack the lightness and the charm of Libeskind's original concept – *spiralling, crystalline towers* – but also as a result of political conflicts and clashes between officials, the balance between the overblown commercial part and other components of the concept aimed to commemorate the victims and to promote the values of a free and democratic society were completely lost.⁸

After 11 September, the entire Lower Manhattan area, home to the New York stock exchange, the Town Hall, courts, banks and global companies, has been considered a high risk zone and, fearing a future terrorist attack, surrounded with various safeguards and protections, built under the Lower Manhattan Security Initiative. Special security precautions will be installed in the WTC area. It is estimated that the 9/11 Museum will be visited by over two million people per year. A local police station will be open to ensure security, and all cars and coaches entering the garage complex will be thoroughly checked in the underground Vehicular Security Center. The possibility of the terrorist attack using a car bomb filled with home-made explosives raises the highest concerns of the police. This is why vehicle traffic will be banned from the entire area and streets neighbouring the WTC complex, like the area around the stock exchange on Wall Street. Details and effects of the construction of safeguards may be seen on the publicly displayed WTC Campus Security Plan.

The activities of the New York police are controversial: concerns are raised that the fortification of the urban space will result in a syndrome of fear, that the restrictions on access will hamper the operation of offices and trade, whilst troublesome and costly safeguards might turn out ineffective, considering the fact that terrorists constantly perfect their tactics and can use unconventional weapons for their attack, like the civil planes which were used on 11 September. Protests have also been raised as to the urban monitoring and other elec-

⁷ P. Goldberger, *Up from Zero: Politics, Architecture and Rebuilding of New York*, Random House Trade Paperbacks, New York 2005, p. 266.

⁸ A.L. Huxtable, *op. cit.*, pp. 397–400.



Photo 3. The National September 11 Memorial – Reflective Pool in the place where once the WTC Tower stood. Photo: Author.



Photo 4. 9/11 Anniversary Parade, Brooklyn, NY. Photo: Author.

tronic surveillance techniques of public places: for example activists of the Occupy Wall Street movement protesting against global financial institutions were watched *via* CCTV cameras by security officers of these institutions, who are working hand in hand with the police officers at the New York security centre, opened in 2009. “Wall Street’s criminals have not been indicted or sent to jail because they have effectively become the police” – commented the female columnist of the radical magazine “CounterPunch”.⁹

The central element of the urban complex replacing the destroyed WTC consists of the 9/11 Memorial designed by Michael Arad and Peter Walker. The main elements of the memorial are two large and deep pools built on the site of the foundations of the destroyed towers. Water cascades flow down the walls of the pools, with the names of all the victims of the attack cut out on the panels edging the pools. A park was also set up with white oaks seasonally changing colour. The finishing works at the 9/11 Museum designed by the Norwegian Snøhetta office, well known for its design of the Oslo Opera House, are still underway. The three-storey high entrance hall to the Museum will house two original buttresses which survived the catastrophe.

The city still pays tribute to the victims on every anniversary of 11 September, including calling a roll of honour and parades, but the ceremonies are becoming more and more unofficial every year. Instead, the tradition of meetings, charity campaigns and philanthropic deeds is growing. In this way, many American citizens commemorate the day in their own private way. However, according to the author, the most expressive symbol of remembrance of the 11th of September 2001 is the annual light show, which was held for the first time in 2002. It consists of several dozens searchlights, creating two light beams rising to the heaven near the site where the WTC once stood. The project, originally called *Towers of Light*, and later, under the pressure of the victims’ families, renamed *Tribute in Light*, won the respect of the city’s residents and since that time, every night on the anniversary of the attack, towers of light rise over the sky of New York, as a symbol of remembrance of the attack and its victims.

Contrary to frequently raised fears, neither the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001, nor the world financial crisis and the fall of Lehman Brothers in 2008, nor Hurricane Sandy, which destroyed the city piers in autumn 2012, have stopped the development of New York. Just the contrary: Lower Manhattan has presently become a fashionable and attractive place to live. With over a thousand shops and restaurants and millions of tourists, who come here every year, the district is alive around the clock, seven days a week. The entire city is developing: the number of residents is growing, and the population has recently exceeded a record eight million, the crime rate is shrinking and living standards are improving. New York’s ambition is to “become a model for cities in the 21st century”,¹⁰ the “greenest” city in the US, a strongly urbanised, resident-friendly and sustainable urban eco-system. Paradoxically, its intensive density and a well-developed public transport system contribute to this. The US has become aware that the most environmentally-friendly and cost-efficient form

⁹ P. Martens, *Wall Street Firms Spy on Protesters in Tax-funded Center*, “CounterPunch”, 11.10.2011.

¹⁰ M. Bloomberg and The City of New York, *PlaNYC: A Greener, Greater New York*, New York 2007, p. 11.



Photo 5. *NoGo* antiterrorist barrier, Wall Street, NY. Photo: Author.



Photo 6. WTC One: an office tower on top of a bunker. Photo: Author.

of development is high and dense mid-town architecture, whilst suburbs are the most environmentally wasteful, energy and natural resource consuming.¹¹ Under “A Greener, Greater New York” strategy, launched in 2007 with the 2030 perspective, a regeneration of the natural resources of the city was planned, including buildings, land, air and water, developing energy efficiency and public infrastructure, with commercial and residential development along infrastructure lines. A system of pedestrian and cycling routes, public promenades and parks, is also planned to surround Manhattan and will continue along the eastern banks of the East River. The city’s competitiveness and attractiveness is planned to be improved, as well as residents’ living standards: every New Yorker is expected to have access to a park and a public transport system within a five-minute walk.¹² Since 2005, every publicly-funded building has to meet at least LEED Silver certification standards (Hill 2012, p. 12). New York parks and green spaces already attract attention by their selection of greenery, typical of organic gardening: preference is given to native plants which do not need watering and special care, with prevailing grass and low ground cover plants, xerophytes and succulents.

The city’s functional and spatial transformation can already be seen with the naked eye. Manhattan may be safely encircled by bike, city streets, plazas and parks are full of people, and water buses run along the East River. Docks and old harbour storage areas are being replaced by newly built, attractive riverside boulevards, accessible to the public, such as, for example, the recently opened East River Waterfront Esplanade in South Port, Lower Manhattan (SHoP Architects). Spectacular inner city parks are created, of which the most popular is Highline Park in Chelsea, set up on old supports of the municipal central railroad (Diller Scofidio + Renfro and James Corner Field Operations). Numerous public-private revitalisation projects and activities in the spirit of sustainable development are being undertaken. However, the city is still full of contrasts: new skyscrapers, museums, and stadiums are built in the middle of the crowded and noisy streets of the New York grid. Sometimes the streets are still full of holes and dirty, but shabby, post-industrial facades can hide luxury boutique stores, art galleries and lofts – everything is in constant movement and reconstruction. So-far, once neglected districts: Meatpacking, Williamsburg and Greenpoint, are gaining new functions and new residents. The big-city style of life has become fashionable among young people, but senior citizens also sell their suburban houses, and abandon their dearly tended gardens to move to small apartments in the central part of the city in order to benefit from the company of other people and the fascinating things on offer in this full of life, multicultural and multi-ethnic city.

But, as the New York sociologist Sharon Zukin has noted, the revitalisation projects are accompanied by the process of gentrification, so as a result areas which become fashionable and begin to fill with new galleries, cafes and shops, lose their past identity and authenticity, whilst their residents: craftsmen, shopkeepers, immigrants and poor artists are forced to leave and to give way to better-off residents who have come here to look for originality and authenticity. And, thus, these enclaves are becoming commercialised: small galleries and

¹¹ V. Chakrabarti, *A Country of Cities: A Manifesto for Urban America*, Metropolis Books, New York 2013, pp. 74–124.

¹² M. Bloomberg, *op. cit.*, p. 15.



Photo 7. Commercial advertisement using the image of the WTC One. On the left: “ghost bike” commemorating a cyclist killed in a crash. West Broadway, NY. Photo: Author.



Photo 8. Tower WTC One looming up from the Lower Manhattan skyline. Photo: Author.

boutiques are replaced by the network magazines of global companies, luxury restaurants and repetitive, retail banking and service points. According to the author, as a result of this cyclical process, "the city is losing its soul", which Zukin sees not as much in its diversified functional and spatial context, but rather in the ethnic diversity of its residents.¹³

Here and there in New York you can still spot the images of the Twin Towers: in the old photographs, on book covers, or on the sides of trucks; some police cars also bear this image, accompanied with the inscription: "we will never forget". Even the neon sign in Blue Note, the famous jazz club, repeats the characteristic silhouette. But life goes on – the stands with their tourist souvenirs sell postcards with many configurations of the Manhattan skyline: with old twin towers, stripped of the towers, with the alone WTC One or the entire complex of WTC towers, representing a view for which we will still have to wait many years.¹⁴

Meanwhile, the unfinished WTC One which towers over Lower Manhattan has already appeared on commercial billboards. The story known from the building of the Twin Towers repeats itself: the new WTC design is accused of being oversized and clumsy in terms of its architectural expression. These flaws are enhanced by its almost entire lack of detail, and its unnecessarily mono-functional use as an office building. Like before, the municipal authorities came to the rescue of the private developer, deciding to hire large amounts of office space at the WTC complex. However, as the previous experience shows, it can be expected that despite the critical opinions, the towers of the new World Trade Center will soon blend together with the city skyline and will create a new, powerful and generally accepted symbol of New York.

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¹³ S. Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*, Oxford University Press, Oxford–New York 2010, pp. 1–31.

¹⁴ During the ten years which have passed since the destruction of the WTC, only one tower: WTC Seven has been rebuilt, and the 9/11 Memorial opened. The opening of the 9/11 Museum, the WTC One and WTC Four towers is planned in 2014. The date of completing the other WTC facilities is still not known.