CITIES IN A CHANGING WORLD:
QUESTIONS OF CULTURE, CLIMATE AND DESIGN

• Paper / Proposal Title:
Managing New York’s Unclaimed Dead, 1868 – Present Day.

• Author(s) Name:
Catriona Byers

• University or Company Affiliation:
King’s College London

• Abstract (300 words):
In April 2020, news outlets around the world published aerial footage of mass graves being excavated on Hart Island. Faced with allegations that they were intended for Covid-19 victims, Mayor Bill de Blasio quickly declared that only unclaimed bodies would be interred there, a situation he described as a ‘tragic reality’. Despite a growing body of reporting and activism throughout the 2010s, this may have been the first time many New Yorkers had ever heard of the city’s Potter’s Field, or begun to consider how unclaimed bodies are treated in the modern metropolis.

Hart Island is the largest mass graveyard in the United States. Approximately one million of New York’s unknown dead have been buried there by prisoners from Rikers Island since the land was purchased for the Department of Charities and Corrections in 1868. A significant proportion of these bodies were sent there from the newly established city morgue at Bellevue Hospital, an institution which has never before been the subject of academic study.

Examining city records, newspaper articles, contemporary accounts and official reports, this paper will trace the historic trajectory of the unclaimed body from morgue to grave, exploring how the systems, policies and authorities responsible for these bodies intersected. It will then analyse what nineteenth-century practices can tell us about present-day management of the unclaimed dead, and how we can attempt to
distinguish between administrative issues and socioeconomic prejudices in the handling of unclaimed bodies.

With management of Hart Island set to transfer to the Department of Parks in July 2021, understanding the historic structures and proposing ways in which these policies can be reformed is more vital than ever. This paper therefore intends to contribute to our understanding of the challenges of managing the unclaimed dead, while also addressing issues of poverty and social exclusion.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Catriona Byers is a soon-to-be PhD student in History Research at King’s College London, under the supervision of Dr Anna Maerker and Dr Caitjan Gainty. Her doctoral research will investigate the morgues of Paris and New York during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focusing particularly the significant civic role these institutions played in both social policy and management the anonymous urban dead, the use of unclaimed bodies to facilitate medical, scientific and medico-legal advancements, and how these morgues can be understood within the broader transnational movement of medical ideas, students and systems between France and the USA during this period.

She holds a B.A. in History and French from the University of Manchester, and an M.A. in Urban History and Culture from the University of London Institute in Paris, where her master’s dissertation explored how medical authority was used to enable exploitative practices towards the socially vulnerable through the use and display of anonymous bodies at the Paris morgue. She currently lives in Paris, and works as a food stylist, photographer and writer alongside her academic research.