Cities in a Changing World: Questions of Culture, Climate and Design

• Paper / Proposal Title:
City Diplomacy: the New York World’s Fair of 1939/40

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• Abstract (300 words):
This paper challenges current understandings of the role of the city in diplomacy. Traditionally scholars have employed a nation-centered approach to the study of foreign policy, but historically cities have formed an important part of national strategies as well as developing their own public diplomacy agenda. In particular, cities have used international events to promote their image as a distinct player in world’s affairs. Using the New York World’s Fair of 1939-40 as a case study, this paper will establish the impact this event had on the city’s rise to the international stage. It will challenge traditionalist histories of the World’s Fair by arguing that its uniquely global nature remolded a Great Depression stricken New York into one of the most important sites of international diplomacy of the twentieth century and laid the foundations for its present well-oiled diplomatic machine. By analyzing how New York tried to influence foreign publics’ perceptions of its values and identity, this paper will establish how the city developed its overall diplomatic strategy and came to acquire a distinct reputation and role from Washington DC in wider US foreign policy. The story of the World’s Fair is also an opportunity to explore the impact of diplomacy on the urban and fill some of the gaps in the history of New York, whose geographic and cultural landscape was irrevocably altered by the event and its aftermath. The Fair was built on a former vast ash dump and the Corona neighborhood in Queens. The work significantly changed the topography of
the area and its cultural and social landscape. It was, then, turned into a park when the exhibition closed. Present-day Flushing Meadows-Corona Park still retains much of its 1939 layout. The paper will ultimately chart a new field in the history of international relations by providing an original framework to rethink the significance of cities in the international system.

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

Dr Mara Oliva is a historian of twentieth century US foreign policy at the University of Reading, UK. She specializes in Sino-American relations, Climate Change Diplomacy and US Public Diplomacy since the Cold War and has published extensively on these topics. She is currently the Chair of the British International Studies Association’s US Foreign Policy Working Group and a member of the Women in American Studies Network steering committee.