

# **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **ARCHITECTS SELECTED FOR VIRGINIA KEY BEACH MUSEUM**

An intense competition for the coveted privilege of designing the new museum structure for Virginia Key Beach Park, Miami's one-time segregated but beloved "Colored Beach" and treasured environmental site, came to an official end on Monday when the Park's Board of Trustees unanimously approved Coral Gables-based architectural firm BEA International, who will be working in close collaboration with Huff+Gooden, LLC of Charleston, SC, a dynamic African American partnership that provided most of the creative design. The winning design was unveiled at Miami City Hall at the monthly Virginia Key Beach Park Trust Board Meeting, where a model, several renderings and an animated PowerPoint presentation were shown. The winning team is rounded out by internationally renowned innovative African American landscape architect Walter Hood of California, who was unable to attend Monday's meeting but whose creative approach to the unifying of landscape of the park with the building design was a major factor in the jury's final selection of a winner.

The competition began several months ago, with seven architectural firms from around the country submitting entries in June, in response to the nationally advertised Request for Qualifications (RFQ), issued by the Trust. To ensure an effective, efficient and impartial selection process, all submissions were examined by a Technical Review Committee of experts in the field to ensure that the competing firms met all of the minimal requirements and qualifications, before they were passed on to a jury of highly distinguished nationally recognized architects and two Board of Trustees members. Comprising the jury were Mr. Maurice Cox, a leading African American architect and former mayor of Charlottesville, VA; Mr. Richard Dozier of Florida A&M University School of Architecture; Ms. Toni Griffin of Washington, DC; Dr. Gary Haeck, Dean of the University of Pennsylvania School of Architecture, Miami-based historic preservation architect Mr. Richard Heisenbottle, and renowned Miami Architect Mrs. Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. In addition to the architects, the Trust was officially represented by Chairperson Mrs. M. Athalie Range and Vice Chair Mr. Gene Tinnie, who completed the jury.

In the first round, three finalists were selected, based on their initial entries. Each would receive a stipend of \$10,000 to develop a design concept for the museum. They would also make a mandatory visit to the site, and an introductory presentation to the Board of Trustees at its August 1 meeting (which was the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the official opening of the "Colored Beach" in 1945). Once acquainted with, and inspired by, the site itself and a more refined sense of the project, the three firms developed concepts to be submitted in September to the Technical Review Committee and then the jury, which met on the 24<sup>th</sup>. The three finalists were AARIS of New York, a young, fast-rising African American female-owned firm, widely acclaimed for its design, working with fellow team

members Creative Front Architects and renowned DIRT Studio landscape architects, of the African Burial Ground entrance monument in lower Manhattan; award-winning African American museum designer Philip G. Freelon, teams with the Miami-based firms of Clyde Judson and Partners and Wallace Roberts and Todd (WRT) landscape architects (both of which are intimately familiar with Virginia Key Beach from extensive earlier services rendered to the Trust); and BEA International, the winning firm, mainly known for port and coastal construction projects, with the creative partners that were recruited for this project.

### **A Challenging Competition**

The competition posed some unique challenges. Because Virginia Key is a barrier island prone to hurricane damage, any newly constructed building must not only be able to withstand high winds, but must also be built above the ground, rather than at ground level, to avoid flooding and damage from storm surges. Located where the original ball field once stood, and facing the entrance gate, the museum design also needs to present an impressive façade to arriving traffic. In addition, the museum building has to blend with the entire historic park, which is planned to be an outdoor museum in itself, with the new structure as the main component of the overall experience. As such, visitors to the Park, which reopens for public use next year (the museum building is scheduled for completion in 2008) will be able to enjoy a national landmark that is not only historic and environmental, but also architectural.

The museum/park will once again offer the beautiful scenic views and shady recreational settings that made it so popular in the past, enhanced with new and improved amenities and by outdoor and indoor museum displays that present the fascinating natural and human history of this special place. Visitors can learn to identify animal and plant species on the island (and perhaps pick up a few tips on the history of Bahamian and Southern “bush medicine” traditionally associated with native plants). Here, the largely untold story of the Black population’s vital contributions to the making of South Florida will be prominently featured, along with those of other freedom-seeking peoples, from the Seminoles (three of whom were killed at the site by U.S. forces at this site in 1838) and Underground Railroad escape routes through South Florida, to the arrivals of rafters and boat people from Cuba and Haiti in modern times.

The main story, of course, is of the heyday of the “Colored Beach” in the 1940s (after being opened in response to a courageous protest demonstration) and 1950s, until the end of segregation in the early 1960s. During that time, which saw the birth of the Civil Rights struggle for equality throughout the South, Virginia Key Beach was a much-beloved “paradise” that brought together all Black neighborhoods in the region, as much for baptisms and religious services and social gatherings as for family recreation and “Lovers’ Lane,” and was often frequented by visiting celebrities, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. himself. What made this “improved Dade County Park for the exclusive use of Negroes” so special was that, unlike the typical second-class segregated park facilities elsewhere in the South, this one was truly “separate but equal” in almost every way to nearby “White-Only” Crandon Park. And, unlike other locations, it served a thriving, prosperous Black community, as attested to by many of the latest model cars in

the full parking lot and the numerous boats and trailers at the launching ramp, not to mention the generous picnics and fashionable beachwear, all of which blended easily with the experiences of those of lesser means, as there were no social class distinctions in this singular place of freedom.

In addition to containing gallery spaces for permanent and temporary exhibitions to tell these stories, the museum building will need to offer event and gathering spaces, administrative offices and meeting rooms, generous storage space and, of course, such practical “revenue-generating” facilities as a restaurant with spectacular views and a gift shop (which can also help to foster economic development within the local community).

All three finalists rose admirably to the challenge of meeting all of these combined needs, submitting innovative designs which all included a “wading pool” water feature while each offered its own appealing unique touches. The AARIS/Creative Front proposal featured a three-story structure with large glass areas, broad exterior ramps enhanced with decorative exterior concrete screens, and a particularly original approach to a welcoming lobby and gathering space. The Freelon/Judson Joint Venture team proposed a low-rise structure, harmonious with the environment by not rising above the tree line, with a remarkable multi-level reflecting pool, and a building characterized by three parallel rectangular galleries which seemed to fly above the landscape, finished with a vivid bright-orange exterior with superimposed mural-sized historic photographs. The BEA/Huff+Gooden concept offered a unique blend of landscape and architecture, with sharp angles, multi-level open terraces and an overall “beach house” look with supporting columns that evoke the appearance of mangroves and swaying palm trees. In a close decision, following much discussion filled with many valuable insights and observations, the eight-member jury chose this last design for its overall originality and for coming closest to being “a museum OF the site, rather than just ON the site.” The winning team will begin contract proceedings immediately, and will work with the Trustees and Staff on making all necessary modifications.

### **In Stride with Progress**

This final selection of an architectural team to design the new museum structure comes at exactly the right time in the ambitious overall plan for the park’s restoration and reopening, in that it occurs at practically the same time that the Trust has begun its review of exhibition designs (by a separate contractor) for the building’s interior displays and informational signage concepts for the entire park. The two teams, now better informed of each other’s design approaches, and of the community’s wishes, can begin their dialogue promptly and productively, while other work on the park gets completed for official reopening in late 2006, while the museum opening is scheduled for summer, 2008.

Already finished is the restoration and improvement of the existing historic buildings, including the Carousel Building, Concession Stand, Bath House, Rest Room, Picnic Pavilion and Mini-Train Tunnel, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has completed the restoration of the shoreline, replacing the historic “groins” (the wooden structures that extend from the beach into the water to help control the currents and erosion of the sand)

that were part of the Park's historic landscape. New outdoor cooking grills have also been installed. At the present time, the newly installed sewer system (replacing the old septic tanks) is very near completion, and work will begin shortly on reconstruction of the parking lot, with the addition of some welcome shade trees. Among the most fascinating historic features to be brought back will be the mini-train and carousel amusement rides, and a fascinating new addition will be a specially designed children's play area. Thus, the park is being "brought back to its original splendor," as the community has demanded, which will make it a favorite recreational venue once again, only better, for old and young alike.

With these projects completed, and with the approval of its operating budget request for the 2005-06 fiscal year by the Miami City Commission, the way is clear for the Trust to forge ahead with all projects, including the museum, without delays or interruptions to the enjoyment of the reopened Park. The partnership of the Trust and the City of Miami has established an enviable track record of productivity in getting projects completed in a timely manner, and, thanks mainly to the leadership of Commissioner Barbara M. Carey Shuler, Miami-Dade County has emerged as a major supporter of the museum construction effort, through funding from the Convention Development Tax (CDT) Fund and the General Obligation Bond (G.O.B.) initiative that was approved by the voters last year.

What began as a hard-won half mile of shoreline restricted to "Colored Only" under the absurd regulations that were in effect at the time the park was officially opened, will be reborn as a world-class attraction like no other, and a different kind of landmark for Miami: a quieter, greener place of fresh air and fun, where stories of courage and joy and a reconnection to nature where everyone is welcome. No less important, it has also emerged as a model of citizen involvement and productive cooperation between government agencies, which will serve other projects and communities well. It is small wonder, with such a past and such a future, that Virginia Key Beach Park has so aptly been called "a sacred site." For more information on these exciting developments as they unfold, please visit the web site at [www.virginiakeybeachpark.net](http://www.virginiakeybeachpark.net), or call 305-571-8230.