

Request for Qualifications

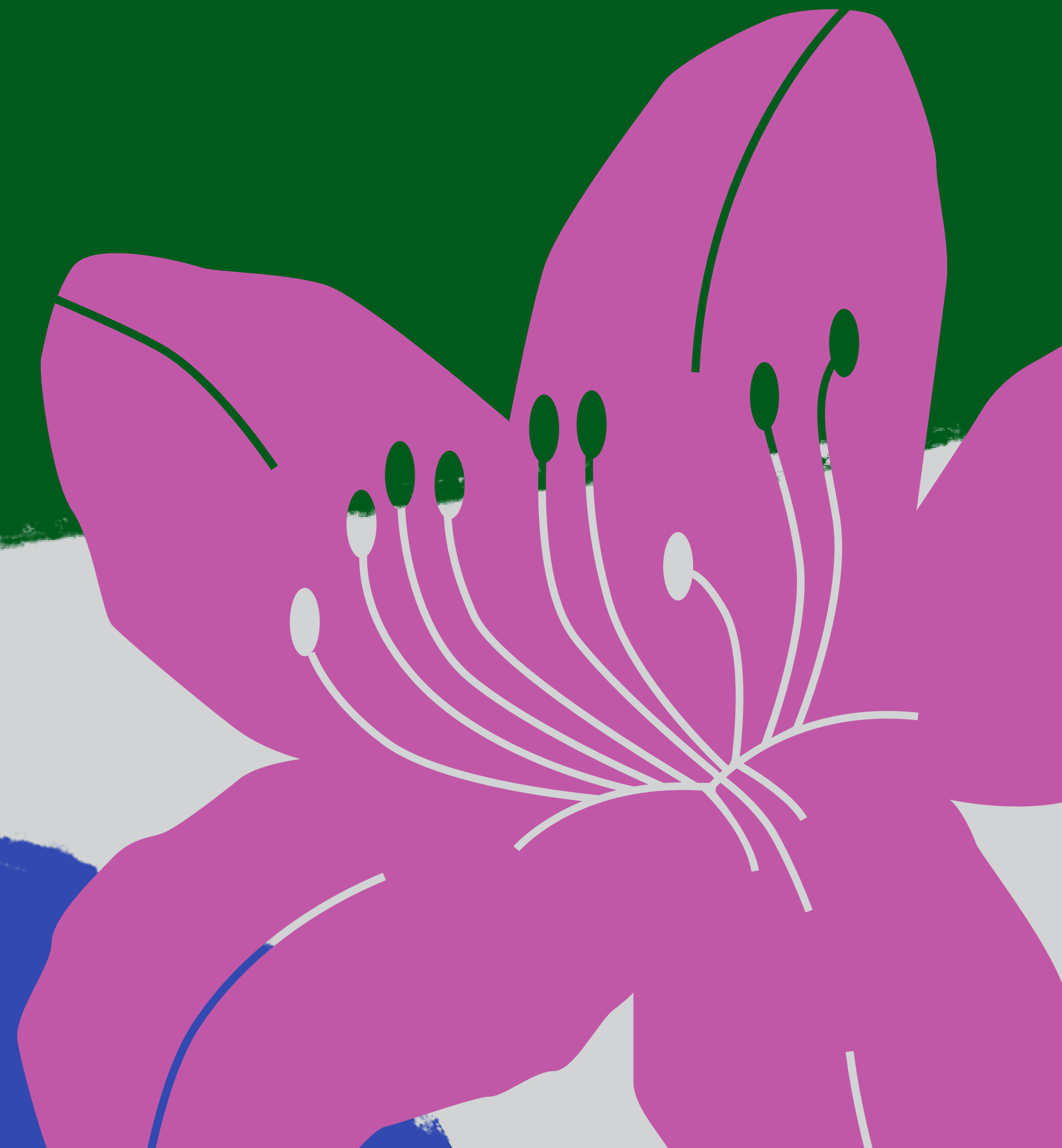
Reimagining the Enslaved African Burial Ground



van cortlandt
park alliance

DESIGN TRUST
FOR PUBLIC SPACE

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The Opportunity

Van Cortlandt Park Alliance, in partnership with the Design Trust for Public Space, is launching a “design ideas competition,” seeking architects, landscape architects, artists, or other qualified firms and individuals to submit qualifications to reimagine the Enslaved African Burial Ground in Van Cortlandt Park. Three winners will be selected who can help unlock ideas and visions for the site that center healing, memory, and imagination. These ideas will catapult the project into its next phases, creating momentum for a new memorial that can serve its community for generations to come.



Van Cortlandt Park is home to an Enslaved African Burial Ground that was officially acknowledged and named by NYC Parks on Juneteenth in 2021.

About the RFO

Background

Van Cortlandt Park is home to an Enslaved African Burial Ground that was officially acknowledged and named by NYC Parks on Juneteenth in 2021, due to the efforts of Van Cortlandt Park Alliance and the Enslaved People Project. Located along the eastern edge of the Kingsbridge Burial Ground, this area has been identified as a likely burial site of enslaved Africans who lived, worked, and died on the Van Cortlandt family plantation. They were responsible for its functions and economic gains for over a hundred years. According to records, there were several Indigenous people who were enslaved as well.

While NYC Parks recognized the Enslaved African Burial Ground with signage and fencing, the space remains largely unmarked. With generous funding from the Mellon Foundation, Van Cortlandt Park Alliance has partnered with the Design Trust for Public Space and Liminal sp to create a community-led process that imagines how a memorial or project of memory might help tell the story of these enslaved people and to lift up the Bronx community for generations.

Through community-led activation, public events, and public outreach, the teams

are leading an inclusive conversation about the future of the site. This design ideas competition will form the spark to reimagine the Enslaved African Burial Ground as a destination in Van Cortlandt Park that honors the memories of those who shaped the space, as well as provide a place for deep reflection, meaningful education, collective healing, and vibrant cultural opportunities.

Team

Van Cortlandt Park Alliance (VCPA) is the sole nonprofit partner working with NYC Parks to ensure the betterment of Van Cortlandt Park. VCPA's mission is to preserve, support, and promote the ecology, recreation, cultural arts, and history of Van Cortlandt Park. VCPA was formed in 2019 by merging two preexisting nonprofits whose 35 years of combined history lay the foundation for excellence in educational programming, cultural events, advocacy, and restoration projects. VCPA's Enslaved People Project (EPP), in coordination with local nonprofits, the park's community, and NYC Parks, has been working to share untold stories and the unvarnished history of Van Cortlandt Park, once a plantation, through cultural programs and events, ceremonies, classes, virtual walking tours, and new signage. VCPA's role is to make space

for dialogue, creativity, healing, and ultimately, for the community's vision to take shape.

The Design Trust for Public Space (Design Trust) is a non-profit organization that unlocks the potential of New York's public spaces. Their unique model catalyzes design ideas into action for a more just and equitable city. As a leader of the public space movement, the Design Trust brings together city agencies, community groups, and private sector experts to develop collaborative projects and new research to improve the well-being of residents and create systemic change throughout the five boroughs. With longtime partner Liminal sp, the Design Trust is working with the Van Cortlandt Park Alliance on the design ideas competition and related project activities. The organization is connecting the important needs of this project with the broader design and community development communities.

To undergird the project in local knowledge and experiences, a Legacy Council has been formed. This group is representative of the diverse perspectives of burial ground descendent and diasporic communities, park visitors, local residents, and the Bronx more generally.

About the RFO

This Legacy Council has met regularly to discuss their vision for the site, visit other memorial sites across the city, and to support creative programming at the burial ground. The Council has been active in preparing to launch the Design Ideas Competition and will remain an important voice throughout the process. Its members are made up of community members, professors and students from Lehman College, Barnard College, Sarah Lawrence College, local artists, VCPA board members, Bronx Community Board 8 Board Chair, NYC Parks rep, and Van Cortlandt House Museum staff.

Values and Vision

African burial grounds, cemeteries, and sites of memory have experienced an emerging awareness of their importance in remembrance and in their capacity to be restorative sites. In the 1800s, the burial ground was one of the few places that African-Americans and Indigenous communities were allowed to freely gather and revive suppressed cultural practices that were native to their homeland. Honoring these Enslaved African burial grounds is a way for the ancestral, present, and future communities to connect with each other as well as repair the collective history, environment, and culture that ties us to these places.

Active, engaged, and inclusive community engagement has been at the core of the Reimagining: Enslaved African American Burial Ground project. The winners selected through the design ideas competition will be asked to learn from and continue to engage with the community, taking stock of its visions, values, and aspirations for the site. These finalists will also be encouraged to bring their own values and experience to the project, helping unlock creative and bold opportunities for the site.

The Legacy Council has helped to identify goals that focus on honor and engagement, and range more specifically from spiritual depth to accessibility to aesthetics to education. It should be a space that recognizes the emotional weight it holds for many visitors and fosters spiritual practice and ancestral reverence. It should be easily accessible, inviting deep engagement from anyone interested in learning more. It should be an honest resource for history and storytelling, and it should include connection to nature and the physical environment.

A local survey showed, despite responses coming from a majority of local residents, that 37.4% percent of respondents had

never heard of the burial ground and 40.4% were somewhat familiar. The Legacy Council also identified clear, prominent signage as an important priority. Survey respondents were interested in information and education, seeking out exhibits, tours, storytelling, and educational programming, raising awareness of the site and honoring its history. Accessibility for people of all ages with all kinds of mobility limitations is a priority for the Legacy Council and for survey participants, who proposed benches, paths, and gathering spaces. An important tension for a designer to address would be to allow for contemplation and respect of the land while also accommodating a high-demand for cultural programming.

The winners of the design ideas competition should be able to understand and incorporate these values and vision, further develop community engagement, and propose design ideas that can reimagine the Enslaved African Burial Ground at Van Cortlandt Park.



ENSLAVED
AFRICAN AND
KINGSBRIDGE
BURIAL GROUNDS

Active, engaged, and inclusive community engagement has been at the core of the REIMAGINING project.

RFQ Structure

Reimagining the Enslaved African Burial Ground design ideas competition has been developed to be open, generative, inclusive, and imaginative. It intends to unlock new ways to memorialize a painful past, educate the present about the importance of this site, and inform a future made more full by healing and remembrance.

The competition will identify and compensate three finalists to create design ideas for the site, which will be used to help VCPA launch the next phase of this initiative. While the three ideas will be important keystones to the future of the memorial, the ideas are not expected to immediately result in a capital project, nor will one firm be identified as a preferred vendor for future design services. However, the community built by the competition will remain essential to this ongoing process of memorialization.

RFQ

Structure

Eligibility

This RFQ is open to firms, teams, and individuals with the necessary expertise and perspective to create compelling visions for the Enslaved African Burial Ground at Van Cortlandt Park.

- Relevant professional backgrounds could include, but are not limited to, architects, landscape architects, artists, urban planners/designers, or other creative professionals.
- Applicants can be firms or teams of any size or sole practitioners.
- Applicants may submit as a team or partnership, but a primary applicant must be identified who will receive all communication and be responsible for all agreements with the competition parties.
- Primary applicants must reside in or be registered to work in the United States of America.
- As this is an “ideas competition,” applicants need not think about sub-consultants necessary to carry out a capital project, the winners will be asked to provide conceptual and schematic ideas for the memorial.
- Current undergraduate students are not eligible. Graduate students are eligible with a commensurate level of professional experience.

Selection Criteria

Applicants will be judged during the competition according to the following criteria:

- Past experience and expertise dealing with sites of memory, historic landscapes, and heritage experiences.
- Expertise in working with and in large metropolitan parks and landscapes, including experience with landscape, ecology, and civil engineering disciplines.
- Demonstrated experience with and a clear understanding of inclusive community engagement and communication. Creative approaches to working with a diverse and impassioned community.
- Presence of creative, thoughtful, and beautiful approaches towards design; an ability to “wow” the public with powerful visual and spatial statements.
- Experience working with multi-stakeholder clients and partners, including conservancies, public sector officials, local residents, and higher education.

Selection Process and Schedule

The design ideas competition will launch in November of 2025 and conclude in June of 2026, with a final public exhibition and celebration. The selection process

will follow a two-stage process. The first is an open RFQ process, with a simple application requirement. From this pool, the jury will select a smaller number of semi-finalists to undertake interviews with a panel including Legacy Council members and the planning team, who will select the three winners. At this point, each winner will be compensated and be given ~8 weeks to create their design proposals. The following are the key milestones:

- Nov 18, 2025
Design ideas competition is launched and RFQ opens
- Dec 1, 2025
Virtual public information session
- Dec 17, 2025
RFQs due by 11:59pm
- Jan 28, 2026
Jury meeting; semi-finalists selected
- Week of Feb 9, 2026
In person semi-finalist interviews
- Feb 17, 2026
Finalists notified

RFO

Structure

Feb 25, 2026

Design process begins

March 12, 2026

Public forum and announcement

April 22, 2026

Final materials due

June 19, 2026

Final exhibition and celebration

In addition to these public events, other internal waypoints will include meetings with the Legacy Council, NYC Parks Department, working meetings with the competition team, and tours of the site. These will be scheduled flexibly during the spring of 2026.

Compensation and Benefits

Three finalists will be selected to create compelling design materials. These finalists will receive:

- A \$20,000 stipend for their time creating their designs. The \$20,000 will be payable in three installments over the course of the competition as milestones are met.
- Opportunity to speak at two public events featuring the project.
- Public exhibition of designs displayed in

Van Cortlandt Park.

- Promotion on VCPA and Design Trust websites and in related collateral, including a final publication.
- Complimentary membership with Van Cortlandt Park Alliance and membership in the Design Trust’s DT Council (including invitations to both organizations’ 2026 benefits).

Jury

The Jury will comprise experts in their fields, such as landscape architects, artists, curators, representatives from the African Burial Ground National Monument and parks organizations, and professors of African American Studies. Semi-finalists will be invited for an in-person interview with members of the Legacy Council and the planning team in mid-February.

Applicants are encouraged to attend an [information session on December 1, 2025 at 12:00pm](#). The session will be recorded and available online after the session. Applicants with questions should direct them to reimagining@vancortlandt.org by December 8, 2025.

Base Materials Attached

- Site plan
- Site tour (bit.ly/REIMAGININGMAP)

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What will the selected finalists do?
Three finalists will be selected and compensated to develop conceptual design ideas for the site. Their proposals will serve as catalysts for future community engagement and memorial planning—not as final construction documents.

2. Is this a design competition or a capital project?
This is a design ideas competition. The goal is to spark imagination and dialogue, not to immediately build a memorial. None of the selected winners will automatically be awarded future design or construction contracts.

3. Can international applicants apply?
Primary applicants must reside in or be registered to work in the United States. International collaborators can be part of a team if the lead applicant meets this requirement.

Other questions can be directed to reimagining@vancortlandt.org.

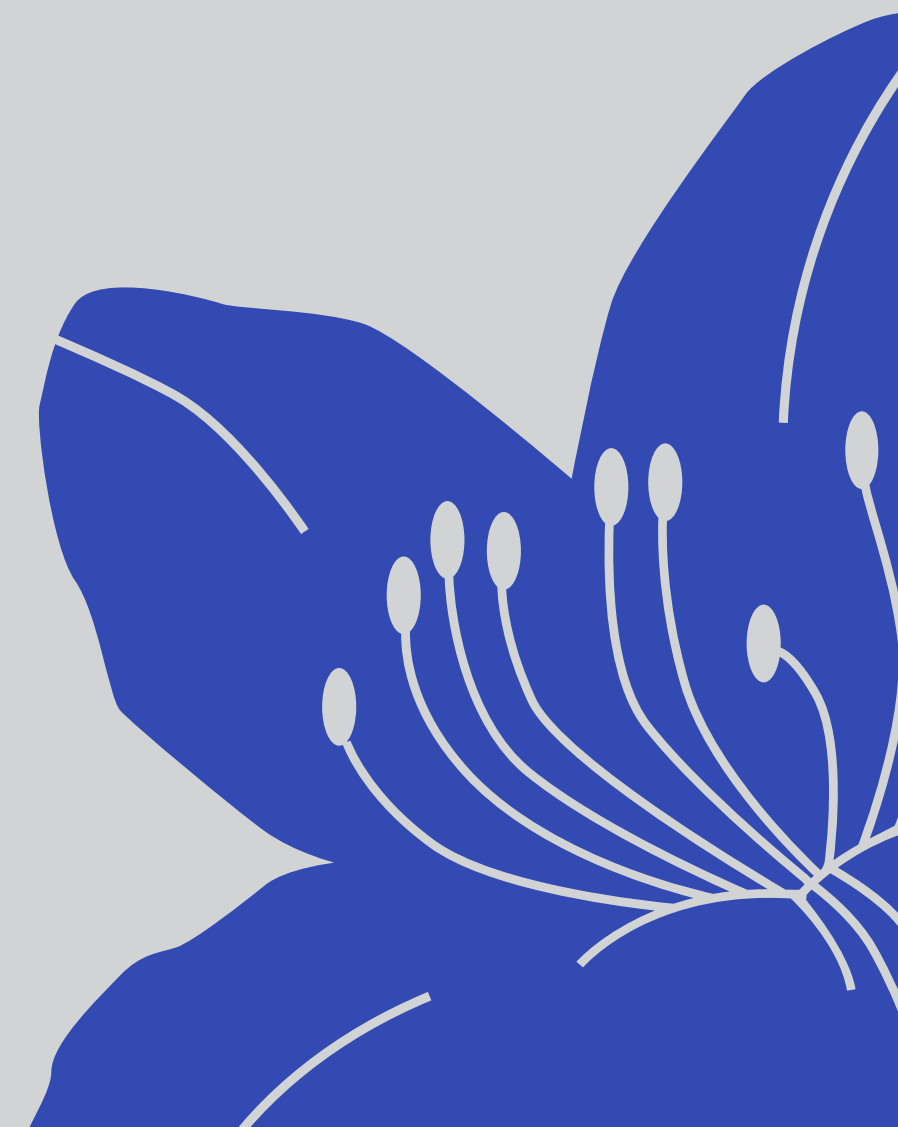
How to Apply

How to Apply

To apply to the RFQ, applicants should submit the following materials by December 17, 2025 at 11:59PM through the button to the right. The RFQ instructions are also available at: bit.ly/REIMAGININGRFQ. The form will ask applicants to submit the following information:

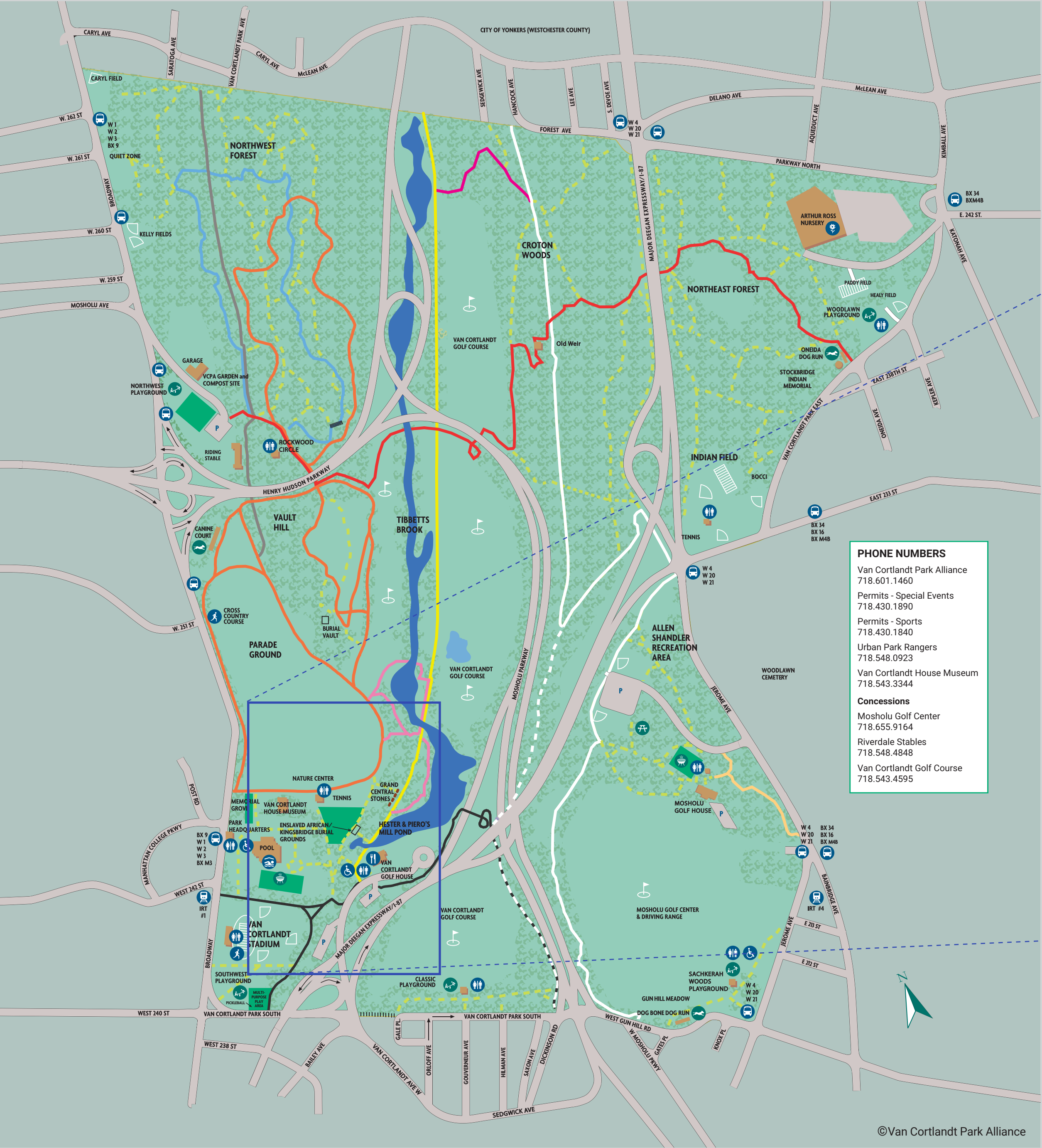
1. Key contact information of the Primary Applicant (including email, phone, website, social media, and zipcode) and three references.
2. An explanatory list of all relevant team members and their roles within the team
Short form answers to these questions (character limit for each: 1500 characters):
 - Why are you interested in this design ideas competition and what relevant experience do you or your team bring to the project?
 - What is your connection to the Enslaved African Burial Ground or the surrounding Bronx community? How would you build trust working with this community?
 - What approaches would you take to designing the Enslaved African Burial Ground? Include how you would make collective decisions within the planning team and community.
 - Describe a project, preferably from your sample work, where you experienced conflict with stakeholders or collaborators and how you addressed it.
3. Work Samples: Applicants should create a pdf, not exceeding 10 pages and 25mb in size, with the following content and upload directly to the application form:
 - Background of your firm or description of your individual experience.
 - At least three previous projects relevant to this RFQ. List specific information: title, date, location, size, materials, type of work, short description, role, etc.
 - Applicants are welcome to include other creative experience or background that might be relevant to this RFQ, so long as it fits within the 10-page limit.
4. Applicants are not expected to create design materials regarding the Burial Ground and will not be judged on these materials if they are included.

CLICK TO APPLY



Map

Van Cortlandt Park





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