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## **Arabia Alliance Receives National Award For Community-Informed Bruce Street School Revitalization**

*The Arabia Alliance was recognized for its community-driven restoration of the Historic Bruce Street School, which will become an outdoor museum with amphitheater.*

**Lithonia, GA** – The saying goes: teamwork makes the dream work. Back in September, the Arabia Mountain Heritage Area Alliance—the non-profit stewards of the [Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area](#) just 20 minutes east of Atlanta—received a prestigious [Honor Award in Communications](#) from the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), the largest and oldest professional association for landscape architects globally. The Arabia Alliance, along with DeKalb County and the City of Lithonia, were recognized in collaboration with the Atlanta-based [Martin Rickles Studio \(MRS\)](#) for their robust community engagement work at the [Historic Bruce Street School](#), located in the Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area.

Over the last three years, the Arabia Alliance has engaged with the Bruce Street and broader Lithonia community in fresh and inventive ways to preserve DeKalb's first Black public school building. With hundreds of participants, the Arabia Alliance and its partners led 7 different community engagement sessions to shape the conceptual design of the future of the stone schoolhouse ruins. Four of these sessions were planned around the theme of Impressions, including: "Voicing Impressions," recording oral history interviews with alumni, "Making Impressions," creating charcoal rubbings and clay impressions of the stone walls, "Space Impressions," retracing with alumni the rooms, outdoor spaces, individuals, objects, and activities of the site, and "Leaving Impressions," sharing memories, feelings, and wishes for the School.

Informed by these and other activities, the Arabia Alliance worked with the community to transform the historic Bruce Street School into an outdoor museum that will now offer visitors a look into what African American education in the Jim Crow South looked like. The community engagement did not stop there. Since then, the Arabia Alliance has kept local people who will be most impacted by this history center deeply involved. Over the last year, the Alliance has hosted several fun and free public events at the school ruins such as a Community Archaeology Day, Juneteenth Storytelling Festival, Soil Building and Clean Up Day, and Fundraiser Kickoff (with a community parade).

“Community engagement and storytelling are what we do—we capture we don’t create these stories,” said the Arabia Alliance’s Executive Director Revonda Cosby. “So talking to the community was the only thing that we could do at this sacred space. Being a daughter of the South, with a grandmother born in 1911, honoring these ancestors and making certain they felt welcomed in their space was my whole goal.”

Built in 1938 in a grassroots effort from locally quarried granitic gneiss, the Bruce Street School served as the first public school for African Americans in DeKalb County. It remained in use until 1955, following the end of legal segregation, when students were relocated to an “equalization school” across the street. Shortly thereafter, the old schoolhouse burned, leaving its unique stone walls exposed to ruination for the next six decades. The revitalization is slated to be completed in 2025.

In recognition of this unique and collaborative design process, Arabia Alliance Executive Director Revonda Cosby and Jennifer Martin and Carley Rickles (founders of MRS) flew to Minneapolis to receive the ASLA award during an honors ceremony. This is the Arabia Alliance’s second ASLA award; their first was received in 2006 for outstanding professional achievement. “Innovative in both approach and method, this is a powerful process of listening, tracing memory and senses in a new and pure way,” wrote the 2023 Awards Jury. “It’s a beautiful and unique exploration of sensory ethnography and oral history through the theme of “impressions”. This work reimagines how landscape architects can engage with communities to build connections, unearth collective memory, and activate our senses to explore possibilities for meaningful and sometimes painful places of our shared history.”

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### **About the Arabia Alliance**

The Arabia Mountain Heritage Area Alliance is dedicated to protecting, connecting and sharing the unique history, rich culture and engaging landscapes of the Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area (AMNHA) for the benefit and enjoyment of all. The staff and volunteer board of the Arabia Alliance work with partners across the AMNHA to ensure that everyone can benefit from the cultural and natural resources of the National Heritage Area. For more information, visit [www.arabiaalliance.org](http://www.arabiaalliance.org).