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Smell the Orchids & Onions?

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Orchids & Onions, the awards program started 30 years ago that celebrated and skewered local architecture, will come back to life this fall after three years in hibernation.

“O&O 2.0,” “O&O Reloaded,” “O&O Reinvented,” whatever final moniker is chosen, the popular event has been transplanted by new hands wanting to emphasize the educational value of the program and to take advantage of the Internet.

But its new presenter, the San Diego Architectural Foundation, promises to retain the same bouquets of orchids for designers and developers deemed to have done a good job and bunches of onions for those who are judged to have left an eyesore on the local scene. From 1976 through 2002, the event had been administered by the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

“We see it as a public vehicle for talking about architecture and the values of good design,” said foundation President Thomas Anglewicz.

The humor that was a hallmark of past programs will return to the awards event, set for sometime in October. But Anglewicz said insults from a yet-to-be-selected master of ceremonies will be discouraged. He cited in particular biting comments from a past host, local TV personality Larry Himmell.

“The key is the reinvention of Orchids & Onions,” said Maxine Ward, an architect with M.W. Steele Group and cochair of the program. “Since the last one in 2002, look at how much San Diego has changed. The city has been reinvented.”

The other co-chair, David McCullough, a principal of McCullough Landscape Architecture, said every aspect of the program is being reviewed by a 15-member steering committee.

“I see it as a grassroots program instead of an extravaganza,” McCullough said.

Aside from an at-times rancorous program, Orchids & Onions encountered growing animosity about the selections drawn from new projects built in the county. Onion recipients increasingly boycotted the event in protest. Orchid winners, of course, were always all smiles.

After the 2002 edition, the AIA chapter canceled the 2003 event to spend time preparing for the American Institute of Architects national convention, held that year in San Diego.

In 2004, the AIA chapter turned over Orchids & Onions to the separately run architectural foundation, which has been holding meetings ever since to work out details of the program's revival.

Organizers said they will present about 10 Orchids and 10 Onions, as before, drawing from nominations made by the public.

But, as currently envisioned, many aspects of the program will differ from the earlier effort, which involved other professional design organizations in addition to the AIA.

The group plans to use the Internet to receive nominations.

The steering committee would weed out projects deemed ineligible, including private residences, past winners and those located outside the county, and would then post the nominations online.

In a departure from earlier practice, the committee also intends to research basic information on every project, such as its designer, developer, background and other details.

Via Internet blogs and postings, the public then will be invited to debate the merits of each nomination and vote on their favorites with precautions taken to avoid attempts to stuff the virtual ballot box.

The jury, composed of nine or 10 design professionals and knowledgeable laymen, also would look at the finalists and pick no more than one orchid and onion in each category. The jury's selections – along with the results of the public nominations – would be announced at the October event. Details on time and place and cost to attend will be worked out in coming months.

Ward and McCullough said they hope to kick off the 2006 awards program in June with a retrospective exhibition of previous Orchids & Onions winners.

Former city planner Mike Stepner, who has been involved in the program from the beginning, said the exhibits also would highlight those Onion winners who received a follow-up Orchid for the same project due to design modifications or changes in public policy.

Information is available from the foundation's office at (619) 232-1385 and the Web site www.sandiegoaf.net.

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