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Time to pick the Orchids and peel the Onions

By [Roger Showley](#)
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Online: Nominations for Orchids & Onions, due Aug. 31, may be submitted online at orchidsandonions.org in eight categories: architecture, landscape architecture, urban design, public art, planning policies, sustainable design, historic preservation and interior design. Sponsorships are also available for the Nov. 12 awards event. Information: (619) 232-1385 and sdarchitecture.org.

Apropos of the dreary times, the Orchids & Onions co-chairs plan to shake things up in this year's toasting and roasting of good and bad architecture and design.

“People are out there voting about what they like in the built environment — what smells good and what stinks,” said architect Deborah Smithton, co-chair of the program that asks San Diegans to vote online for what they admire and despise in architecture, landscapes and six other categories. The deadline to nominate is Aug. 31 and the results will be revealed Nov. 12.

Sponsored by the San Diego Architectural Foundation, the program dates back to the 1970s and every year seems to generate controversy.

This year is no different, according to Smithton's co-chair, landscape architect Christopher Gustard. Someone nominated the proposed Las Colinas women's prison replacement project in Santee for an Onion and signed his or her name surreptitiously as Supervisor Greg Cox, who supports the \$308.5 million project.

Gustard said county lawyers issued threats of lawsuits unless the nomination was removed, but when it was, someone else, not Cox or any other elected official, renominated the controversial project that many Santee residents and leaders believe will harm their city's ambitious downtown development plans.



Deborah Smithton and Chris Gustard plan to shake things up with this year's Orchids & Onions awards program. - San Diego Architectural Foundation

“We're not finger-pointing,” Gustard said, “we're not saying, ‘You suck.’ We want to drive that home. There's always going to be good and bad things out there whether we're in a recession or not.”

Smithton, 42, who lives in Normal Heights with her husband and is in-house architect for the Citymark Development urban housing firm, said the recession probably will not affect the quantity of submissions this year, because many were planned and built before the recession hit. But she says fewer may show up next year, considering how little construction is under way.

“Honestly, it's a little more of a challenge” to survive in a downturn, she said, “but it seems people are rising to the challenge and getting more creative with less. Things don't seem as opulent as they were in previous years.”

But Gustard, 33, who has moved his practice into his downtown condo after being laid off from his job after 10 years at a local firm, said the recession also raises the temptations for some agencies to loosen standards just to get construction going and tax revenues flowing.

“We don't want them to compromise good design by lowering the standards,” Gustard said.

To keep O&O from getting stale, Gustard said the awards event will move to the historic John D. Spreckels Building downtown, where the On Broadway event center is located. There will be a silent auction for the first time in memory, and Barbarella, a local writer and radio show host, has signed to emcee.

“The message we're putting out is keep calm and rock on,” Gustard said. “We know it's bad out there, but some people can take solace in having a fun event around their profession, even if they might not be working.”


Gustard was speaking on his cell phone while waiting tables at a downtown Mexican restaurant, a sideline of work while he awaits more commissions.

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