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Smokestacks & Geraniums



Orchids & Onions: Can it bloom again?

Local architectural awards and admonishments return after hiatus

By Roger M. Showley

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Orchids & Onions is as much San Diego as Balboa Park, the Padres, fish tacos and the Over-the-Line Tournament.

And after a three-year hiatus, it's coming back to life as the premier people's choice awards evaluating developments in regional architecture, planning, landscape and other aspects of the built environment.

“I think Orchids & Onions is one of the great programs out there,” said architect Maxine Ward, co-chairwoman of the event's organizing committee. “It creates some dialogue between the general public and designers, developers and public officials responsible for approving projects. It's about generating a dialogue, having your say, making your voice heard.”

But some whose projects have been hailed and hail-stoned in the past are skeptical that their previous objections will be overcome when the awards ceremony, slated for Nov. 17, takes place under its new format at the North Park Theatre.

“It seems like an idea fraught with problems,” said Rob Quigley, a prominent architect and former Orchids & Onions juror who has won his share of recognition in past O&O programs.



File photo

The Mormon Temple along Interstate 5 received a ♦waffle♦ award in 1992 when the jurors couldn't decide if it was a structure of beauty or an example of bad taste.

Orchids & Onions was founded in 1976 as a way to encourage good urban design in San Diego County by lauding the best and skewering the worst. Winners took home a bouquet of orchids while those who were skewered were handed a bunch of onions.

Orchid recipients were typically humble in their acceptance, appearing with their consultants and families. Those bestowed onions were either contrite as they rationalized what went wrong (“The city made me do it” or “What's wrong with red-tile roofs and pink stucco?”) or they boycotted the event, avoiding public ridicule.

The local chapter of the American Institute of Architects borrowed the idea from a similar program in Chicago and over the years added co-sponsorships from groups representing area landscape architects, graphic artists and other professional design organizations. Each organization typically honors work of its members, but none ever slammed the bad work until O&O came along.

Other cities followed San Diego's lead and held their versions of the program, but most have been disbanded. Currently, Toronto has its “Pugly Awards” for good and bad architecture. The name comes from the pug dog – considered cute by some, ugly by others.

Sometimes, design professionals comprised the jury, at other times only nonprofessionals did the judging. Drawing on nominations from the public (private homes were not eligible), jurors would visit the projects but rarely if ever sought details from the developers, designers and public officials who worked on them.

After the 2002 event, Orchids & Onions was canceled in 2003 so its organizers could focus on hosting the national AIA convention in San Diego. But there were also many architects like Quigley who thought the program had run its course, was focusing on the trivial and failing to educate the public on the principles of good design.



File photo
The San Diego City Council received an Onion in 1977 when Belmont Park's historic Giant Dipper roller coaster seemed headed for the junk pile. The classic ride subsequently was saved for future thrill-seekers.



File photo
The Washington Street retail corridor received an Onion in 2000 for poor planning and urban design, which in the jurors' view offered the area little that was attractive.

Then the independently run San Diego Architectural Foundation took over the program with an eye to making it a centerpiece of its educational outreach efforts.

An 18-member committee, composed mostly of architects, debated how to meet critics' objections while still maintaining the traditional humor associated with the awkward task of giving the developer of a multimillion-dollar project a bunch of onions for what the jury considered a job poorly done.

Quigley said the early years of the program prompted lively debate on the direction of development.

In 1976, for example, the San Diego Unified School District received an Onion for its “standard design package” for schools, a design approach that disregarded the character of individual neighborhoods.

But after later juries began focusing on what Quigley considered minor missteps, he and other professionals felt O&O had lost its credibility.

“I refused to attend the event, because I didn't believe in the program,” Quigley said.

Mike Stepner, the former San Diego city architect and planner who has been involved with the program from the beginning, acknowledged the program's ups and downs. But he said Orchids & Onions has over the years affected public policy and has afforded the public a chance to express its views.

“One of the things that happened is, we have had, as a profession, to work harder at developing the public trust and respect,” Stepner said.

In the San Diego school district's case, a “metamorphosis award” was bestowed in 1984 for “dramatically changing its design emphasis.”

From 1976 through 2002, there have been 351 Orchids, 200 Onions and 37 miscellaneous awards. The most given in any one year was 44 in 1995, and the least was 12 in 1977, according to program records.

Orchids went to many obvious candidates – historic buildings beautifully restored, San Diego Zoo exhibits, the Old Globe Theatre rebuilt after a devastating 1978 fire, Horton Plaza shopping center and several public libraries. The list includes many stately company and institutional buildings, innovative land-use plans and ordinances and significant works of landscaping, public art and graphic design.

A retrospective of the 30-year legacy of O&O has been making its way around various public libraries and other venues since June. It is on display through Oct. 9 at the Malcolm X Library in Valencia Park.

Onions went to a wide range of projects – some glaring eyesores and others sporting some debatable details contained in otherwise major works.



File photo
The 2001 jury bestowed an Onion on San Diego State University's flashing sign overlooking Interstate 8, comparing it to Las Vegas glitz and adding, "this sign is certainly contributing to an electricity crisis."



PEGGY PEATTIE / Union-Tribune
Razhel Wilson, 6, was at the North Park Library when a 30-year retrospective on the Orchids & Onions program was on display. The exhibit is at the Malcolm X Library in Valencia Park until Oct. 9.

The entire public got an Onion for indifference to historic preservation in 1980. The University of California San Diego earned one in 1987 for “squandering the opportunity to create timeless architecture.” And many commercial building developers got the bad news that their projects stank.

One of those was Douglas F. Manchester, who holds the apparent record for receiving more Onions – four – than any private developer.

O&O jurors criticized various aspects of his San Diego Marriott Hotel and Marina twice (1985 and 1987), his nearby Manchester Grand Hyatt hotel (1993) and his first major downtown effort (1982), the Columbia Center office tower, now called the First National Bank Center, at Columbia and A streets downtown.

Manchester is currently embroiled in a controversial redevelopment plan for the Navy Broadway Complex downtown, and members of the public submitted seven Onion nominations for the proposal by the Aug. 8 deadline. The second tower at his Grand Hyatt also received nominations for both an Orchid and an Onion.

The 10-member jury met late last month to eliminate duplications among the 395 nominations and select 57 finalists that they, as well as the public, will consider for a projected crop of 20 Orchids and Onions.

Reached in New York City, Manchester said in a series of e-mails that he supports awards programs that laud achievement, not those that involve criticism. His comments came a few days after the fifth anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

“This has been an emotional week,” he wrote, “which brings to mind that there should only be Orchids given for worthy projects and not hurt anyone's feelings, as our families' were upon receipt of an Onion for the Hyatt after all the work put forth to bring (about) what I feel is an outstanding project.

“This goes with my philosophy of, as an example, never ever having roasts but rather only having toasts or tributes. In this world where there is so much negative, I would only be interested in promoting the positive, not the negative.”

As the program progressed through the years, juries became more and more clever in their depiction of the failings of Onions while maintaining a respectful reverence for the Orchids.

The sound bites became increasingly biting: “Godzilla's doll house” (for a downtown office building), “capitalist cacophony of cluttered signs” (for a La Jolla shopping center renovation), “this mud-encrusted oaf” (for a Little Italy loft-housing project).

Tom Anglewicz, president of the San Diego Architectural Foundation, said his board is aware of the attitudes held by Manchester and others and has taken steps to encourage constructive criticism. But the foundation is comfortable with handing out Onions as well as Orchids.

“If we only point to the good things and never acknowledge things that are not so good, we're not doing justice to hopefully improving the overall quality of our city,” Anglewicz said.

The jury, comprised of design professionals, alone will decide how to phrase its Orchid and Onion commentaries, but the organizing committee has maintained the program's overall lighthearted spirit by hiring the Mission Improvability comedy troupe to entertain the audience at the awards event. Architect Teddy Cruz, also a member of the Centre City Development Corp. board, will serve as emcee, a departure from the past use of comedians and TV personalities.

In another adjustment, the program will feature for the first time an online system of voting by the public. Visitors to the *Union-Tribune's* Web site, www.SignOnSanDiego.com, will be able to cast their ballots, and

the results will be presented at the awards event along with conclusions of the jury.

Landscape architect David McCullough, co-chairman with Ward of the program, said post-event elements also are in the works. They could include a blog to maintain a year-round dialogue about hot design and development topics; an expanded traveling exhibit; TV and radio programs; and perhaps a speakers bureau and publications effort.

For now, he is trying to raise approximately \$45,000 in sponsorship donations on the understanding that the architectural foundation cannot cover any sizable deficits.

“This year will be the true test of whether or not we've been successful,” McCullough said.

Sanford R. Goodkin, a former O&O juror and longtime building-industry consultant, said the program's underlying premise remains valid – to encourage what he called “brilliant and audacious” design.

“The biggest problem in San Diego is not that we're laid back but that we're confrontational – we love to battle things we don't understand,” Goodkin said.

He said he welcomed the timeout the Orchids & Onions program took so it could be reconceived, but he is even more pleased that it has returned.


“It's about time,” he said. “I don't think we could have a lapse of 30 years.”

■Smokestacks & Geraniums is an occasional look at growth and development issues as they relate to historic trends in San Diego. The name is derived from a 1917 San Diego mayoral campaign pitting quick-fix forces against advocates of long-term planning.

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