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A design for living: Orchids & Onions



Invigorated, awards show roars back in North Park ceremony

By **Ann Jarmusch**

UNION-TRIBUNE ARCHITECTURE CRITIC

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The Orchids & Onions design awards returned with a flourish and zest Friday night, as searchlights swept city skies above the Birch North Park Theatre. A street party with a live band rocked a crowd of Orchids & Onions veterans and newcomers assembled for an entertaining, multimedia ceremony.

[Orchids & Onions 2006: The list](#)

After lying fallow for three years, the 2006 crop of Orchids & Onions has returned with fresh vigor, depth and food for thought. This year's event delivered 14 Orchids and 12 Onions with a infectious one-two punch: humor, always a powerful agent for change, and peppy or pithy commentary.

On stage, Teddy Cruz, an impassioned designer and academic who commented on each batch of winners, served as an engaging foil for the live and videotaped antics of Mission Improvable, an improv comedy troupe.

A reinvigorated emphasis on finding new ways to spark public discussion about our region's architecture, planning, design and public art surged through this year's program, which was organized for the first time by the education-oriented San Diego Architectural Foundation.

Ramped-up public participation began with last summer's first-ever, online public voting process to Friday's premier of zany videos, including a short tragicomedy called "The Making of an Onion," produced by this year's ambitious volunteer committee.

"Orchids & Onions has always been controversial and must always be," Michael J. Stepner, one of the program's founders and the former city architect and a planner for the city of San Diego, told the crowd.

Reflecting the county's growth spurt, the organizers provided a



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ORCHID FOR ARCHITECTURE: "This is the type of innovation we need from developers," jurors said of Fahrenheit. Studio E Architects designed the live/work spaces to wrap around a parking structure.

useful lens for viewing the assorted winners by presenting them in three categories – urban, environmental and waterfront – which, not coincidentally, double as keys to the region's future.

Manchester Financial Group's controversial plan for redeveloping the Navy Broadway Complex on San Diego Bay got an Onion, as did the developer's second Hyatt hotel tower and wide lobby on Harbor Drive, which block public bay access and views.

K. Hovnanian Homes also was hit with two Onions for downtown residential projects. To be fair, Manchester's and Hovnanian's Onions should be diced and shared with their governmental overseers, San Diego Unified Port Commission or the city of San Diego's Centre City Development Corp.

This year's Grand Orchid and Grand Onion winners demonstrate the jury's appreciation for innovative architecture and sound design principles but also San Diego's cultural, scientific and economic future.

Both the California Institute for



File photo

GRAND ONION: The jury objected to the Salk Institute's expansion plans calling for new structures on two mesas that hug a natural canyon on the west side of the renowned twin buildings. The complex, with a central plaza, overlooks the canyon and ocean.



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GRAND ORCHID: Like the telecommunications and information technology research going on inside UCSD's Calit2 Building, the jury found it sleek and contemporary, yet mysterious.



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ORCHIDS FOR LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL GRAPHICS: Residents joined artist Betsy Schulz in making and installing storytelling tiles on cobblestone arches that mark the north and south ends of the Solana Beach Coastal Rail Trail.



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ORCHID FOR INTERIOR DESIGN: At Tower 23 in Pacific Beach, indoors and outdoors merge, as on this casual rooftop deck. The hotel and restaurant interiors are awash in colors, textures and subtle references to this dramatic coastal setting." Mike Torrey photos.

Telecommunications and Information Technology (Calit2) Building at the University of California San Diego (Grand Orchid) and the nearby Salk Institute for Biological Studies' proposed expansion plan (Grand Onion) are multifaceted research centers. Both were designed to encourage collaboration and creative interchange among those who work or study there.

Calit2 is a glossy, angular building filled with specialized labs and topped with a rooftop “antennae garden.” It has prominent windows in jazzy shapes and arrangements, but they pop up and push out of coffee lounges and offices, where natural light won't intrude upon computer screens and research. This building is meant to be a beehive of internal activity.

The Salk Institute, on the other hand, is internationally renowned for its stunning indoor-outdoor marriage of architecture to a spectacular natural setting overlooking the Pacific. Architect Louis I. Kahn's masterpiece includes twin research buildings exquisitely joined by a serene plaza. This arrangement has succeeded in getting scientists to share ideas with one another as they cross the plaza or stop to take in sunshine and views.

The Salk's long-range expansion plans, which are undergoing environmental review, would add buildings to the shoulders of the unspoiled canyon that the original landmark buildings overlook, the jury said. They noted that another new building would block the already compromised view of the symmetrical Kahn buildings from North Torrey Pines Road.

Beth Alton, a Salk Institute spokeswoman who accepted the Onion, teased the jury for resisting change, for wanting classic “good ol' onion dip.”

When she said, “If the jury is trying to tell us to go to Florida, like some other La Jolla research institutions, we get the message,” the crowd groaned. Despite organizers' intention to take the sting out of the Grand Onion or any Onion, they were, inevitably, unsuccessful.

Other awards could be cheered by all. As advocates of good design would hope but never dare to assume, some of the people's top three choices – honors to Petco Park and the historic, red-brick Western Metal Supply Co. building it incorporates – duplicated Orchids bestowed by the professional jury.

Orchids that celebrate the spirit of San Diego were plentiful, from the Solana Beach Coastal Rail Trail, replete with pictorial tiles that recall local history, to Escondido's fanciful playground of artworks by Niki de Saint Phalle, which form the late artist's only permanent sculpture garden in the United States.

Architect and San Diego Rowing Club president Randy Hanna accepted an Orchid for an addition his firm designed for the club. The jury praised its references to the craft of boat-building.



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ONION FOR ARCHITECTURE: Most of the nominations for this “Mussolini Modern” building at San Diego State University came from faculty who work in it, contest organizers said.



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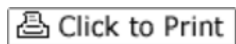
ONION FOR ARCHITECTURE: Cortez Blu “has all the charm and allure of a military radar installation,” wrote one citizen about the Cortez Hill tower.

“This building was inspired by the two things that are so special in San Diego: light and water,” Hanna said.

He's identified the makings of an elixir that works equally well on big and tall projects. Are you listening, Onionees?

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