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ULI honors best 'smart growth' projects of 2009

by **MONICA UNHOLD**, The Daily Transcript

Saturday, May 16, 2009

Architecture and design that positively changes community character was celebrated Thursday night during the Urban Land Institute (ULI) San Diego/Tijuana Smart Growth Awards.

Selected for commitment to sustainability and ability to engage communities in both the design and post-construction phases, projects honored included urban gardens, transit and projects that combined both residential and commercial spaces.

The awards are important to steer the direction of design toward innovative community solutions. Design has the power to cure many of society's afflictions, said keynote speaker Richard Farson, a psychologist, author, educator and president of the Western Behavioral Sciences Institute.

By incorporating ramps and lowering drinking fountains, designers have given people with disabilities independence in society.

Studies also show the layout of classrooms affect student learning and the design of hospital rooms can shorten recoveries, Farson said.

"We're not just designing buildings, but situations," Farson said. "Not just homes but family life."

The first Smart Growth award, deemed the "Grass Roots Award" went to Seeds at City Urban Farm. Founded in 2008, the project offers inner-city children fresh produce and educational training through a partnership between Roots Sustainable Food Project, San Diego City College, San Diego High School and Garfield High School.

"The farm provides local, healthful organic foods to those who have little or no access to such produce and offers and education in the art of sustainable living," said Mark Steele, emcee for the evening and chair of the ULI Smart Growth Committee.

The adaptive reuse project Community at Martin Building and Flats was awarded the "Re-energize Award."

Designed by the LWP Group and located in the trendy Banker's Hill neighborhood, the affordable housing project provides a community garden, community grocery bag program and free wireless Internet access to residents.

The interior is designed to cultivate a boutique atmosphere with graffiti emblazoned walls, furniture made of stuffed used clothing and a sneaker sculpture adorning the hall staircase.

"This is more than a building," Steele said. "It's a way of life."

Also honored for ideal urban housing design was the practice of implementing granny flats. The method, rather than a specific project was honored with the "Back to the Future Award."

The city of Oceanside was awarded the "Mobility Planning Award" for its Bicycle Master Plan and North County Transit District (NCTD) Oceanside Transit Station.

Together the projects demonstrate a comprehensive effort to encourage more sustainable modes of transportation in the region.

Two cross-border projects were also honored.

The “Land Rescue Award” was bestowed on the Comité de Mujeres Lluvia del Sur.

Twenty-five women from a marginalized Tecate neighborhood organized the transformation of a garbage dump into a thriving vegetable garden.

The group also manages a recycling project, selling cardboard and plastic to fund the gardening effort, which in turn provides produce for local families.

A playground adjacent to the garden allows mothers to work in the garden while supervising their children.

For a cross-border effort to restore the Tijuana River Valley, the Smart Growth Awards honored the Laureles Canyon Revitalization Project.

In the summer of 2008 students from the Graduate School of the Sam Fox School of Design at Washington University in St. Louis arrived in Tijuana to determine how to restore the canyon, working in collaboration with the Tijuana Municipal Planning Institute (IMPLAN) and the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve in Imperial Beach.

For his work with the Laureles Canyon Project, Oscar Romo received the “Visionary Award.” Romo has participated in many cross-border projects and currently serves as a delegate to the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development.

During his 30 years in the region Romo has seen development of San Diego and Tijuana create “lessons to be learned on each side of the border,” he said during his acceptance speech. Through cross-border collaboration both cities can be improved.

“Tijuana and San Diego is just one mega-city,” Romo said.

San Diego Architectural Foundation also participated in the awards by presenting the Community Vision Awards. Of the seven projects nominated, four were selected as finalists, including 30th and Ivy “Shopkeeper” in North Park, Community at Martin Building and Flats, MXD830 in Golden Hill and Solara in Poway.

MXD830 was the winner of the “Community Vision” award and the \$25,000 prize, which will go to the Greater Golden Hill Community Development Corporation to continue the revitalization of the area.

The project offers two residential units, seven office/studio spaces for artists and a single retail space, which will soon house a sidewalk café. The project incorporates parking hidden from street view, as well as a variety of sustainable design elements such as low-E lighting and a cool roof.

“We’re looking for a project that resulted in a collaborative effort between the design team and the community,” said County Supervisor Ron Roberts who participated in the the selection process for the Community Vision Award. This year, MXD830 was that project.