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## The beautiful and the bad

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Orchids & Onions, San Diego's 30-year-old program promoting the best and dissing the bad in local architecture, returned after a three-year break last night, with top honors going to the Calit2 Building at UCSD and worst-of-show dishonors showered on a proposed expansion of the architecturally renowned Salk Institute.

The nine-member jury bestowed a Grand Orchid on the \$70 million building housing the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology (Calit2). The 215,000-square-foot structure at UCSD was designed by the Seattle-based architectural firm NBBJ. It opened in October 2005.

The jurors called it “sleek and contemporary – yet with an aura of mystery.” It includes a \$27 million “clean room” to create and manufacture microchips, and space to monitor the university's 20,000 laboratory mice.

Less than one mile away from Calit2, the Salk Institute got a Grand Onion for its plan to nearly double the size of its complex on Torrey Pines Mesa over the next 50 years.

The jury said the proposed buildings would bring “impacts to environmentally sensitive canyon lands” and “obstruct what's left to see” of the venerated original Salk building, the iconic 1960s concrete complex designed by modernist Louis I. Kahn. An environmental impact review is under way.

Representatives of the Salk Institute accepted the Onion and noted that their master plan architect, Jack McAllister, also was involved in the Orchid-winning UCSD project.

The Salk Institute is not a newcomer to the onion field. It received one in 1993 for its east building annex, completed in 1995.

More than 500 people at the Stephen and Mary Birch North Park Theatre watched as the recipients of 14 Orchids and 12 Onions were announced. Mission Improvable, an improvisational comedy troupe, performed skits and architectural designer Teddy Cruz served as commentator.

Cruz said public space needed to be considered as important as buildings, and he urged more dialogue on the subject.



Mike Torrey Photography  
Kudos for design excellence went to the sleek Calit2 building at UCSD that houses the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology (Calit2).

“The absence of critical debate in our city is a tragedy,” he said.

The Salk Institute representatives weren't the only Onion winners to come in person to accept their less-than-honorable. Three of the 12 Onion winners showed up.

SDG&E, which won an Onion for its Sunrise Powerlink transmission line through Anza Borrego State Park, sent employees dressed as renewable energy sources. A spokeswoman, Laura McDonald, said she hoped the company would win an Orchid in 2010 for the same project.

The awards were started in 1976 by the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects. Orchids & Onions grew into an annual tradition that highlighted hits and misses in architecture, landscape architecture, planning, graphic design and public art.

The program was suspended after the 2002 event amid criticism that it had become trivial and too costly. The separately run San Diego Architectural Foundation brought back the program this year with some new twists.

The Internet was employed for the first time to solicit nearly 400 nominations and then to invite the public to select two people's choice awards.

The most votes from the public for an Orchid went to the San Diego Padres for Petco Park, and the San Diego Unified School District received an Onion for its recently completed Golden Hill Elementary School.

Orchids & Onions co-chairwoman Maxine Ward said the school seemed to be singled out because of a campaign by neighbors who objected to it being built in a canyon. Vice Principal Glenda Gerde defended the school online by saying “orchids (students, teachers, parents and community supporters) are flourishing everywhere.”

The Padres won two other Orchids for Petco's architecture – overseen by New Mexico architect Antoine Predock – that preserved the historic Western Metal Supply building at the western edge of the ballpark.

Downtown San Diego developer Douglas F. Manchester – a four-time Onion winner – received two more Onions: for the Seaport Tower addition to the Manchester Grand Hyatt hotel and for the Pacific Gateway redevelopment proposal for the Navy Broadway Complex at the foot of Broadway.

Two parks received the Orchid treatment – the trail along railroad tracks in Solana Beach and the late Niki de Saint Phalle's grouping of fanciful mosaic figures at Escondido's Kit Carson Park. The city of San Diego got an Onion for its “granny flat” ordinance that makes it difficult to add units to single-family residences.

Continuing its reputation for offering witty sound bites, the Orchids & Onions jury called SDSU's recently opened College of Arts & Letters Building “a shoe box on steroids.”

A series of North Park condo projects, designed by the Normal Heights architectural firm of Gary Taylor & Associates, was ridiculed as an “attack of the clones.”

Among the other Orchid winners were Washington Street Skatepark, developed by skateboarders under the Pacific Highway overpass; the modernist condo conversion project at 3200 Sixth Ave., across from Balboa Park; and an addition to the San Diego Rowing Club in Mission Bay.

“The Garty Family Rowing Pavilion made the jury want to take up rowing!” jurors said.

In addition to awards, program organizers invited the public to vote via the Internet for the region's top priorities. No. 1 was extending the San Diego Trolley to North County, followed by a new main library

downtown, a new airport and a new Chargers stadium.

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