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## Orchids & Onions aims for architectural awareness



Courtesy of San Diego Architectural Foundation

*Designed by San Diego-based architecture and development firm FoundationForForm, The Earnest apartment building in North Park is up for an Orchid award in this year's program.*

**By Mark Armao**

A well-designed building can recall the beauty and elegance of a blossoming flower, while the sight of a poorly executed project can sting the eyes like a freshly chopped onion.

At least that is the logic behind Orchids & Onions, an architectural awards program hosted by the San Diego Architectural Foundation (SDAF). Drawing on input from both the public and a jury of design professionals, the group will recognize the best - and worst - of San Diego's built environment during the 41st edition of the awards ceremony Thursday.

Straying from the prestigious pat on the back that most industry awards amount to, the program is unique in that it not only rewards praiseworthy projects - with aromatic orchids - but punishes the cringeworthy ones - with odorous onions.

"It's been a controversial subject for years. Some architects are okay with it; some architects hate it," said Doug Austin, a local architect and city planning commissioner who was part of this year's jury. "But the one thing it has done is it has created dialog, and there have been some things that have happened along the way that have actually changed the course of design in San Diego."

Established in the 1970s by the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects, the annual program ran for nearly 30 years before being discontinued in 2003, when the chapter was focused on planning a national architecture convention.

The San Diego Architectural Foundation purchased the program from the AIA for \$1 and rebooted the awards in 2006.

Unlike its previous incarnation, which was usually juried by a panel consisting mostly of laypeople, the new program called on the expertise of design professionals to lend more credibility to the selection process.

The public still has its say though: Members of the community can nominate projects online, and a People's Choice Orchid and Onion are handed out each year based on a public vote.

Leslee Schaffer, who was executive director of SDAF when the nonprofit took over the awards, said one goal for the revamped program was to keep the Onion presentations "respectful and constructive." But keeping it classy at an event in which an emcee may be tempted to make jokes at a project's expense can be challenging, she said.

To make the ceremony a friendlier environment, the SDAF always invites Onion recipients to attend the event, receive the award (which takes the form of a giant leek) and speak on behalf of the project.

"It was really important for the [Onion recipients] to come and have their say," Schaffer said. "You never know what might have gotten in the way of a project realizing its potential."

While the majority of Onion awardees steer clear of the event, some accept the award in good humor. Others attend the ceremony to plead their case, sometimes in spectacular fashion.

Austin, who is chairman and CEO of AVRP Skypoint Studios, recalled an Onion winner who stood on stage and delivered a lengthy dissertation on the culinary and nutritional benefits of an onion versus an orchid, and a strip-club owner who brought a pair of "scantily clad" women on stage while he argued for the merits of the business's obtrusive signage.

In 2014, when the city of San Diego drew an Onion in the miscellaneous category for a series of outside "No Parking" signs in several beach communities, then-city councilman Todd Gloria showed up to receive the award.

Others have not taken so kindly to the dubious honor.

"We've had some very rough reactions," said SDAF President Pauly De Bartolo.

Two years ago, when a fraternity house at SDSU received an Onion for Architecture, a member of the fraternity took to the message boards on the Orchids & Onions website, blasting the foundation for having "self-absorbed, arrogant architectural board members."

"Please don't give awards to people who do not seek them or find any meaning in them," the poster wrote. "It's really a waste of your time."

Despite the negative connotations of the smelly bulbs, the foundation asserts that the Onions are meant to highlight where a project may have gone astray, and to spark discussions of how similar blunders could be avoided in the future.

"It's easy to look at the Onion awards and to think we're simply poking fun at something that doesn't look great, and that's not the intent," De Bartolo said. "The intent is to understand what went wrong, [whether] it's a systemic issue or a budgetary issue or a code issue."

Many local architects agree that Orchids & Onions, which is generally seen as a lighthearted, more inclusive alternative to the more exclusive AIA San Diego Design Awards, serves its purpose in raising awareness of San Diego architecture.

But does it actually drive architects to create better buildings? The local architecture community seems split on the issue.

Architect-developer Lloyd Russell, who won the Grand Orchid in 2009 for Station Tavern in North Park and an Orchid in 2011 for his Centre Street Lofts project, said architects have enough on their plate to keep them from fretting about an Onion.

"Architects are trying to get hired, trying to get paid, trying to do a decent job; the last thing on their mind is 'Oh I shouldn't do this because I might get an Onion,'" he said.

Jeff Svitak, whose Columbia Lofts project was nominated for an Orchid two years ago, agrees that the program probably does not drive many architectural decisions.

"I think when architects or designers start thinking about awards, it distracts from the real purpose of the architecture," Svitak said.

But, even in cases when a well-executed project gets hit with an Onion because someone in the public has a "bone to pick," Russell conceded that the program performs its mission.

"If people are debating about the merits of the Onion, then Orchids & Onions has succeeded because it's raising design awareness," Russell said.

Austin, on the other hand, said he thinks Orchids & Onions has had a tangible impact on the urban fabric of San Diego.

He said that in the early days of the program, a well-known architect was so infuriated by being served an Onion that he threatened to sue the AIA. But, because the jury castigated the project for repelling pedestrians at the street level rather than engaging them, the architecture community began making more of an effort to activate the street, he said.

"It was probably one of the most instructional awards that's ever been given," Austin said. "One of the things San Diego became aware of is paying attention to life at the street.

"That was one place where Orchids & Onions had a big impact, and it had it early enough in San Diego's history to make a difference."

Whether the awards program actually motivates architects to create better designs or it serves only as a playful celebration of San Diego's manmade surroundings, SDAF will continue to hand out the plant-based accolades as long as they keep the public engaged.

The Orchids & Onions ceremony will begin at 8 p.m. at the U.S. Grant Hotel.

"For the three or four days following the awards, I'm bound to get a few phone calls from very upset people," De Bartolo said. "But the entire intent of [the program] is to improve the quality of our built environment so we can continue to strive to be America's finest city."