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Orchids & Onions jury tours would-be winners — and losers



Orchids & Onions juror Doug Austin snaps a photo with his iPad while architect Eric Naslund, left, describes the Celadon affordable housing project downtown, an Orchid nominee. (Roger Showley)



By **Roger Showley**

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In the midst of dozens of new buildings under construction, Orchids & Onions jurors searched this past weekend for the best and worst in the annual faceoff between good and bad architecture and landscapes.

The 22 stops on a nine-hour bus tour took in restaurants and hospitals, affordable housing and high-end apartments, a Japanese-inspired pavilion, spa, parking garage and car wash, high school theater and beach-themed library.

The jury reconvened Monday night for a jam session, where the eight members debated the merits and demerits of the 100 nominations submitted by the public. A majority was needed to pick an Orchid or an Onion and a unanimous vote was needed to pick the grand prizes. People's Choice awards will be chosen later by online voting by the public. All results will be unveiled at a gala reception Oct. 26 at the U.S. Grant Hotel.

O&O, which got its start in 1976 and is thought to be the nation's only such contest of its kind, is sponsored by the San Diego Architectural Foundation as a way to educate the public on good and bad design. Orchids are meant to inspire excellence and Onions to highlight missteps and missed opportunities that designers and developers should avoid in the future.

Craig Howard, one of the contest organizers, said he contacted the Orchid nominees and most came out on their day off to proudly tout their projects.

But when Howard attempted to contact the Onion nominees, he said they did not return phone calls and or offer to meet the jurors on site to offer a backstory. In most years, it's the brave Onion recipient who shows up at the gala to take his or her licks.

The tour began at the Inamori Pavilion at the Japanese Friendship Garden in Balboa Park. Facilities manager Jose Ramirez answered questions and jurors snapped photos and sketched on napkins that will later be auctioned off at the gala.

"What a great job you guys did — it's beautiful," said one juror.

Similar accolades were heaped on the Hotel Churchill, a historically preserved downtown building that's been turned into a low-cost housing project, and the Celadon, a high-rise affordable housing project down the street.

"We were happy to bring it back to life," said the San Diego Housing Commission's Mike Pavco at the Churchill. Celadon project architect Eric Naslund at Studio E showed off the public areas and solar panels running the height of the 17-story building.

Some nominees plied the jurors with refreshments — mimosas at Aqua Vie spa, champagne at The Earnest apartments, San Diego Slings at Cutwater spirits, cupcakes at The Duke apartments.

The Onion stopovers, including the Lindbergh Field rental car center, Wash Man car wash in Clairemont or Starbucks drive-through on El Cajon Boulevard, elicited winces but no outbursts of indignation. (The nominees can all be viewed and commented at the contest website, orchidsandonions.org.)

“It’s not deserving of an Onion,” said one juror of the rental car center. But she said the public art installation, “Tail Light Swarm,” made perfect sense in such a setting since it was made up of dozens of car tail lights hung on an interior wall.

The jurors couldn’t miss the sense of pride shared by some nominees.

“It’s just wonderful,” said Imperial Beach librarian Jean Engel, who showed off the beachy touches.

Student juror Jair Cortes, an 11th grader at Hoover High School aiming to study ecological architecture in Hawaii, sat in a reading carrel shaped like a woody where he jotted down notes on the library.

At Patrick Henry’s PHAME performing arts theater, former San Diego school board President Katherine Nakamura related the eight-year battle to complete the \$16 million, 509-seat facility.

“The quality is really nice,” said one juror. “What a nice space for kids!”

Several projects made repeat bids for recognition, including the Liberty Station arts district that was carved out a portion of the old Naval Training Center in Point Loma.

NTC Foundation Executive Director Alan Ziter, hoping for a big nod on the 10th anniversary of his organization, said some visitors get lost among the former barracks-turned-museums and shops. “Why wouldn’t you like to get lost in a place like this?” he asked rhetorically.

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