

Architecture Orchids outnumber Onions

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ARCHITECTURE CRITIC

As a building boom surges across San Diego County's mesas and valleys, about 800 residents last night saluted what's fine and chided what's foul among recent buildings and parks, historic preservation efforts and projects that affect the natural environment.

There were two big reasons to celebrate this year's Orchids & Onions community awareness contest, which has become known as "the people's choice" of design awards.

One is the hefty crop of 19 orchids, crowned by the Grand Orchid: St. Gregory the Great Catholic Church in Scripps Ranch. By contrast, the panel of eight nondesigners, who judged nominations from the public, uncovered only eight Onions—none considered odious enough to merit a Grand

Onion.

They also whipped up one ambivalent Frittata award for The Prado restaurant's trendy interior design that ebbs and flows with that of the building that houses it: the historically reconstructed House of Hospitality in Balboa Park. The mix of old and new apparently scrambled the judges' taste like an omelette.

In addition, this year marks the nonprofit program's 25th anniversary, a noteworthy milestone for the program that organizers say has influenced San Diego's development.

Last night's awards presentation at SeaWorld's Nautilus Pavilion began with multimedia stroll through fields of Orchids and Onions, called "25years: History of the Senses."

Public involvement in pointing out good and bad planning and design has helped the county, Lisa Chaddock, this

year's Orchids & Onions chairwoman, said before the program.

"There's a huge impact," said Chaddock, a cultural ecologist who studies the interaction between humans and their built environment. "A lot of architects don't want an Onion.... The people who live here get the feeling they have a choice in the way their environment looks and changes. The (need to) have a say in their home, or it doesn't feel like home."

The St. Gregory church won for its elaborate and harmonious architecture, interior and landscaping. A blend of Gothic and Craftsman styles, this new church conveys grandeur and light in its large copper dome, huge clear-glass windows and fine craftsmanship, from exposed beams to decorative stone floors.

What amounted to a bouquet of Orchids went to five historic

preservation projects. Among those were the transformation and reuse of buildings as distinctive as an old power house in Del Mar (now a warmly casual community center furnished in wicker and wood) and a 1928 bank lobby and tower (now a Courtyard by Marriott hotel) in downtown San Diego. Others were the restoration of downtown landmark El Cortez Hotel into apartments, a building in Hillcrest turned into new offices for KTU+A Landscape Architects and the restoration and repainting of the County Administration Center facing San Diego Bay.

The sophisticated and distinctive styles of two new buildings were finely cultivated Orchids, the judges said. An office and research building along Interstate 15 that reflects the Nokia company's Finnish origins and the Bridgeworks/Hilton hotel in San Diego's Gaslamp

Quarter, which integrates hospitable public areas with urban street life, won high praise.

Onions brought tears to the judges' eyes, mostly in or near downtown San Diego. They deplored the way an old, brick hotel building was slathered with white paint and turned into a billboard for its new hotel owner.

They were offended by boxy, big new chain stores built along Washington Street in Hillcrest. A few blocks away on the same street in Mission Hills, they were displeased by newly installed bird-shaped sculptures mounted on tall poles — an unfortunate mismatch in scale, they said.

Sunday in Home: A commentary on 25 years of Orchids & Onions and complete list of this year's winners and stinkers. II
