

# The best — and worst — of San Diego architecture



San Diego architects must be doing something right based on this year's contest: 15 Orchids, only 4 Onions.



By **Roger Showley**

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**S**ocial good and public spaces dominated this year’s Orchids & Onions program with big and small developments getting praise or blame.

Sponsored by the San Diego Architectural Foundation, the program began in 1976 and this year presented 15 Orchids for good work and four Onions for those that came up short.

The eight jurors reviewed scores of nominations from the public, toured 23 of them and announced the results Thursday at the U.S. Grant Hotel.

“The jury looked for projects that had a greater social importance,” said foundation president Pauly De Bartolo.

That’s why the Grand Orchid went to Celadon, the 250-unit affordable apartment downtown project by Bridge Housing.

“This is a bold and socially important project,” the jury said, calling it “intelligent and dignified.”

On the Onion side of the design ledger, there was no Grand Onion presented for third straight year, although a People's Choice Onion, selected from online voting, went to the San Diego International Airport Car Rental Center on Pacific Highway.

The jury called it a "behemoth of a building" with "no sense of human scale or pedestrian connectivity."

Most Onion winners boycott the program, but the San Diego County Regional Airport Authority defended the 5,400-space project in a two-page letter, saying it is a "visually engaging, extraordinarily efficient, highly contemporary structure."

"Our goal is not to have any Onions because we are raising the quality of architecture and design of the city," De Bartolo said. "The trend is certainly in the right direction."

Since its beginnings, the O&O program named the most Onions, 12, in 1995 and 20 Orchids that same year.

Originally put on by the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects, the separately run architectural foundation took it over in 2006 after a three-year hiatus.

It is believed to be the only program of its kind in the U.S., although some cities in the U.S. and abroad do offer a forum where the good and bad in architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning and design are called out.

Here are the winners (and losers) with excerpts from the jury's comments. More information is available at the program's website, [orchidsandonions.org](http://orchidsandonions.org).

The jurors were Douglas H. Austin, Jair Cortez (student juror), Laura DuCharme Conboy, Leigh Kyle, Marvin J. Malecha, Jeana Kim Renger, Kristine Schnell, Randy Van Vleck.

929 Ninth Ave., San Diego; builder/developer, Bridge Housing; architects, Studio E Architects and SVA Architects.

"The jury unanimously agreed that Celadon was an important contribution to the housing crises in Southern California that was designed in a thoughtful and respectful of urban solution (manner), highly crafted for its location and its residents."

810 Imperial Beach Blvd.; Imperial Beach; developer/owner, County of San Diego; architects, Jeff Katz Architecture and Domus Studio; interior design, Delawie.

"The building is layered with sustainable design practices, certified at the LEED Gold level and designed as a zero net-energy project. "The library's interior incorporates natural motifs and a custom carpet design simulates a bird's eye view of the native beachscape."

3355 Admiral Boland Way (Pacific Highway at Sassafras Street), San Diego; developer/owner, San Diego County Regional Airport Authority; architect, Demattei Wong Architects.

"Like a beefy and robust form that has somehow been made worse by a seemingly incomplete scaled artistic treatment. While the jury couldn't quite agree on this one, the people have spoken!"

A former auto-repair shop turned into a design studio and food and beverage venue: 2725 State St., [Carlsbad](http://Carlsbad); developer-architect, Brett Farrow.

"This is a fun project and perfectly placed in Carlsbad."

9452 Medical Center Dr, [La Jolla](#); developer/owner, [UC San Diego](#); architect, ZGF Architects.

“The building is elegant, modern, textural and allows a natural flow of light and ventilation.”

9300 Campus Point, La Jolla; owner/developer, UC San Diego; architects, Scott Laoboonmi and Cannon Design.

“A building that simply must be experienced to be appreciated. Married to a site beautifully, the building comes to life the closer you get.”

3300 Goesno Place, National City; developer/owner, San Diego Unified Port District; architect, Safdie Rabines Architects.

“Beautifully detailed and layered with subtle nautical gestures... It’s light, playful and in balance.”

Seven-unit apartment project: 2535 Brant St., San Diego; developer, Forge Development; builder, Bothwell Builders; architects, Stephen Dalton Architect and Micklish Design Studio.

“The perfect example of small-lot urban infill development that incorporates affordable housing to maximize density in [Bankers Hill](#).”

6702 Wandermere Drive, San Diego; developer/owner, San Diego Unified School District; architects, PJHM Architects.

“What could have been a typical barebones building has become a sense of pride that makes the students feel special and inspires creativity.”

Master-planned development of 105 acres with three existing buildings: 16550 W Bernardo Drive, San Diego; developer/owner, Jay Paul Co.; architects, DES Architects and Lastras de Gertler Landscape Architects.

“A once-barren campus of mainly large one-story buildings is transformed into an amenity-infused campus with multiple shaded gardens and courtyards distributed throughout the property.”

A 3-acre park including one acre of restored creek bed: 4639 Home Ave., San Diego; owner, San Diego city; landscape architect, Schmidt Design Group.

“A heavy-duty design and construction that would ensure years of fun and play for the families of the surrounding residential developments.”

14.3-acre park at master-planned community: 7902 Civita Blvd. (Friars Road, west of Qualcomm Way); developer, Sudberry Properties; landscape architect, Schmidt Design Group.

“A bold dedication to providing a grand-scale community park...engaging at every level, providing recreational facilities for multiple age groups.”

Metal screen at apartment project: 1435 Imperial Ave., San Diego; developer/owner, Affirmed Housing; designer, Lynn Susholtz at Stone Paper Scissors.

“Brought a robust ornamentation and sense of scale to the building.”

72-unit apartment project for former homeless: 827 C St., San Diego; developer, San Diego Housing Commission and its Housing Development Partners unit; architects David S. Holmes (1914) and Studio E Architects (2016).

Structural seismic elements “contrast to the fine detailing of the entry lobby, creating an exciting and inviting arrival space.”

100-acre district incorporates buildings and grounds from Naval Training Center site: 2640 Historic Decatur Road, San Diego; developer/owner, NTC Foundation; landscape architect, OBR Architecture

“A wonderful regional asset, this precinct is sensitive to scale and extremely well activated with thoughtful programming.”

Two restaurants and a bar: 1023-1027 University Ave.; developer/owner, Cohn Restaurant Group; designer, Philippe Beltran.

“It’s like falling into a rabbit hole as you transition from vibrant colors into a vintage French interior with chandeliers, plush furnishings and living trees.”

2572 Clairemont Drive, San Diego; owner/developer, Prestige Auto Wash and Sunshine Finance Corp.; architect, Desert Design Builders of Apple Valley.

“Simply grotesque. An over-the-top, hyped-up nightclub version of a carwash.”

45 condos: 2601-2699 Fifth Ave., San Diego; developer, ColRich; architect, Ark Architects

“A layer cake in a bastardized Tuscan style in that classic San Diego beige color palette. Production housing with a half-hearted design. It’s trying so hard but it’s so bad and it’s a disgrace for this great location in Bankers Hill.”

2644 El Cajon Blvd., San Diego; owner/developer, Starbucks; architect, Kyle Stephens & Associates.

“A missed opportunity...More an issue of planning, the development clearly prioritized vehicular accessibility and service over people. It’s socially irresponsible to do this along a transit corridor.”

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