

Calit2 Takes Top Honors in San Diego Architectural Foundation Awards

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Atkinson Hall: "Sleek and contemporary -- yet with an aura of mystery," according to the award citation.

It wasn't a Hollywood premiere, but there were searchlights aplenty outside the Birch North Park Theater Nov. 17, as hundreds of guests showed up for a San Diego tradition: Orchids & Onions. Staged for the first time in four years, the ceremony organized by the San Diego Architectural Foundation handed out the 'best and worst' awards for architecture and the "built environment," and the top prize - the Grand Orchid - went to the Calit2 building on the Engineering Courtyard of the UC San Diego campus.

The jury said the building, which opened in October 2005, is "sleek and contemporary - yet with an aura of mystery - [and] provides shared facilities for researchers and artists at the intersection of art, engineering and science."

UC San Diego division director Ramesh Rao was on hand to accept the award, even though Calit2 was not informed beforehand whether it would receive one of the 14 Orchids, or one of 12 Onion citations. "When they ran through all the sub-categories it got a bit intense," recalled Rao later. "But at the end, we got the Grand Orchid!"

Unlike other architectural awards, the Onions & Orchids do not go specifically to the architects, but include the sponsoring organizations as well as contractors. Rao accepted on behalf of Calit2, UCSD, Gilbane Construction and Seattle-based NBBJ, the world's second largest architectural firm.

In his short thank-you to a packed theater, Rao surprised the audience by giving credit to the Calit2 building advisory committee for helping to create a great structure. "We don't often associate creativity with committees, but in this case, the building advisory committee played a salient role in influencing the architects at NBBJ to make sure that our open, interdisciplinary mission was reflected in the final design," said Rao, who is also a professor of electrical and computer engineering in the Jacobs School of Engineering. "In turn, those early meetings with the architects helped create our Calit2 community."

After the ceremony, Rao was surrounded by well-wishers, including many members of the jury. "I was gratified to see how much the architectural community cherishes that sort of engagement," he wrote later in a message to Calit2 staffers. "Architects don't see a building as just an object, but as an expression of a well-informed aspiration."

The building, now called Richard C. Atkinson Hall, was also cited for its "creative use of materials and the dramatic arrangement of windows. This was clearly a work of architecture that was meant to lead rather than follow."

The jury commended UCSD for "maintaining their high standards of planning and architecture."

The Grand *Onion* went to another La Jolla research organization, the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, for its master plan that would nearly double the size of its complex, "obstruct what's left to see" of Salk's widely-hailed 1960s concrete headquarters, and cause "impacts to environmentally sensitive canyon lands."

Ironically, the original Salk structure was designed by famed architect Louis I. Kahn and a team that included Jack McAllister, prime architect of Salk's new master plan. But it was Calit2's Rao who noted for the audience that McAllister was also the lead architect for NBBJ when it put forward its bold (and winning) proposal to build... the Calit2 building. (McAllister, who ran the Science and Technology group of NBBJ, later left its San Francisco office and is now a consulting architect on the Salk master plan.)

For the first time in the awards' 30-year history, the public was invited to nominate architectural standouts for Orchids & Onions. More than 1,500 people also voted online for their best and least favorites. The People's Choice Orchid went to the San Diego Padres' Petco Park, while the People's Choice Onion went to an elementary school in the San Diego Unified School District.

The awards jury included landscape architect Terry Barker, architecture critic Pablo Bransburg, art curator Betti Sue Hertz, environmental graphics consultant Bennett Peji, architectural designer Rene Peralta, David Rice, director of architecture and planning for the Zoological Society of San Diego, sculptor Roman de Salvo, Casa Familiar director Andrea Skorepa, and Pamela Thorsch, director of Rebuilding Together.

Throughout the evening, the audience was treated to a running commentary on the awards and insightful analysis of the current state of San Diego's built environment from Teddy Cruz, a professor of popular culture and urbanism in UCSD's visual arts department.

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