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Del Mar Heights School wins top architecture award in Orchids and Onions

Pacific Highlands Ranch Library's public art also honored



The front of Del Mar Heights School. (Nancy Ingersoll)



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PUBLISHED: October 14, 2025 at 7:51 AM PDT

San Diego's unique architecture competition, Orchids and Onions, is back with a new batch of trophies for the region's most inspiring projects — and the duds.

Orchids and Onions, now in its 49th year, is the most popular local architect competition because it takes the rare step of pointing out bad work. (It'd be like if the Academy Awards handed out an Oscar for Worst Picture.)

The San Diego Architectural Foundation's event gave out 17 Orchids for exceptional architecture and four Onions for projects they said missed the mark. There were more than 80 nominations.

Juror comments were kept anonymous, and there is extra care given to make sure the Onion recipients don't know who voted for it. For Onion winners, the architectural foundation only includes comments from the original nominator.

This year features a Grand Orchid winner, which only happens when all jurors unanimously agree on a project. The last time a Grand Orchid was awarded was in 2020 for the Center for Novel Therapeutics in UC San Diego's Science Research park. There were six jurors this year who evaluated the nominations and visited sites.



The innovation center/library at the new Del Mar Heights School. (Karen Billing)

Winner of the Grand Orchid, the new Del Mar Heights School won praise for its outdoor learning zones, trails and green space, elevated pathways and natural ventilation systems. A juror said it is more than just a school: "It functioned as a public space as well with the community being able to access it after hours and on weekends to use the playgrounds and fields. It just didn't have many flaws."



The TEXT/TILE artwork at the Pacific Highlands Ranch Library won a public art award in the 2025 Orchids and Onions competition from the San Diego Architectural Foundation. (Pablo Mason)

Text/Tile, the terra cotta courtyard art at the Pacific Highlands Ranch Library, won the Orchid for Public Art.

This artwork by artist Janelle Iglesias features tile letters in three languages that are tied to the region: English, Spanish and Kumeyaay. A juror said they found the spot inspiring. "So much like you search for knowledge in the library," a juror said, "you are also searching for it outside in a different and highly creative way."

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