

## ARTS

## SAN DIEGO CITYSCAPE

# Top designs recognized

A high school music hall, a UC San Diego research center, Clairemont senior apartments and more are honored at 2023 award ceremony

BY DIRK SUTRO

**S**an Diego is enjoying an upswing in outstanding architecture.

Winners of this year's American Institute of Architects San Diego 2023 design awards, presented June 21 at the UC San Diego Park & Market building downtown, show just how we're evolving. Architects are finding fresh ways to combine catchy forms with practical considerations, such as how well a building serves its users, how it fits into a neighborhood, and whether it meets a high standard for sustainable design. (The full list of winners is at [aiasandiego.org/design-awards](http://aiasandiego.org/design-awards).)

Overall, this year's collection strikes me as a pretty sweet package for AIASD on its 95th birthday. It's a stronger group than I've seen in years.

From a pool of several dozen candidates, 29 winners were selected by a jury of five architects who deliberated via Zoom: Marlon Blackwell (Fayetteville, Ark.); Barbara Bestor (Boston); Andrew Love (Boston); Christiana Moss (Phoenix); and Alex Ogata (Kansas City, Mo.).

"I was impressed with the wide range of work submitted," said Blackwell, who in 2020 received the annual Gold Medal awarded by national AIA to the country's leading architect. "This tells me there is a pretty dynamic design community and culture there."

"The projects were responsive to climate and terrain," added Ogata. "Buildings by the city, the desert, the water, for example, cluster around each other creating mini-regional identities."

Número Uno on my list is Mira Mesa High School's new music building, winner of a top-level Honor Award. It was designed by Architects Mosher Drew, which turns 75 this year.

For the most part, this campus is a sprawl of bunker-ish 1970s buildings. The new addition, along with fellow Honor Award winners the Rady Shell at Jacobs Park and the renovated Mingei International Museum, demonstrate the transformative power of the arts when paired with strong architecture.

The music building's exterior of striated concrete panels and wood-like phenolic sheathing grabs your attention with its sculptural forms. The most prominent feature is an angular piece that juts from one end, with the letters "MMHS" silhouetted on a broad expanse of glass. Clerestories all around bring daylight into the spaces, while solid lower-level walls keep traffic noise from Mira Mesa Boulevard at bay.

Hallways are bright blue, which doesn't seem in keeping with the refined design, but apparently boosts school spirit among the school's Marauders team fans. At one end of the building is an expansive rehearsal space with a podium for bands director Jeanne Christensen. Her charges have won several national awards and marched in the Rose Parade. At the structure's other end is a space for orchestral music. In between are practice rooms, and the building also includes offices and administrative areas.

In the performance spaces, varied angles combine with surface materials that absorb or diffuse the sound of instruments to create a subtle sonic mix. On a recent afternoon, violins, wind instruments, percussion and brass came through with balance and clarity.

A few miles away at the University of California San Diego, Franklin Antonio Hall (named for the UC San Diego alum and Qualcomm co-founder who donated \$30 million) is a Merit Award-winning research center designed by Perkins & Will.

This \$127 million, 186,000-square-foot stunner of concrete, steel and glass is configured in two V shapes connected by an atrium. The V's create a tapered landscaped entrance in front, and an outdoor courtyard behind the building, at the edge of a natural canyon. The sharp-edged exterior is softened with rows of tall vertical sunshades that admit daylight but block direct sun — a simple, elegant way of keeping interiors cool.

Franklin Antonio Hall is a double-winner. Besides its Merit Award, it received an Honor Award in the Divine Detail category for its finely crafted spiral stair-

case. At the heart of the building, this sculptural element lures visitors upward like a mini version of Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum in New York. Climbing these pie-slice treads, I was impressed with the ergonomics. They are wide and low in height, and there is plenty of room for two-way traffic.

With school out for summer, you might run into faculty, students and assorted San Diegans at Cerveceria Insurgente in Tijuana, an Honor Award winner designed by Heleo Architecture & Planning. The three-story brewery and tasting bar has a rooftop terrace and an open interior that incorporates tall cylindrical fermenting tanks as part of the décor. Concrete, steel and glass are combined with a lightness that makes this place glow like a lantern at night.

It seems that young Heleo might be headed for a future in the feel-good business. They also earned a Merit Award for Sage & Fire, a cannabis outlet in a converted garage behind a gas station in Lone Pine, near Mount Whitney. Town planners specified a "woodsy" style, and the architects responded with a sort of "rustic barn" that changes character with the seasons, according to Carlos Hernandez, a partner at Heleo. Unlike your typical neighborhood weed shop, Sage & Fire is an upscale retail boutique, one that just happens to sell cannabis extracts, edibles, lotions and smokeables (Hernandez did not offer a review of the products).

Back in San Diego, "I was impressed by the experimental work being done in the housing sphere," design awards juror Bestor said. "We saw creative designs for both ADUs (accessory dwelling units) and affordable housing."

In a region desperate for affordable housing, Honor Award-winning Ivy Senior Apartments, 52 subsidized units in Clairemont, is a step in the right direction. As the nicest and probably newest building in its neighborhood, Ivy illustrates how low cost does not mean low design values.

Built "for seniors with chronic medical needs who have experienced homelessness," the place was full of smiling faces during my recent visit. One friendly resident carried a bag of groceries from a nearby market, and another waited in the spacious lobby for her son to pay a birthday visit. In the three-story triangular building's courtyard, vegetables and flowers thrive in elevated beds, well tended by residents.

ADUs behind existing homes were recognized with various awards, a reflection of the growing trend toward looser zoning to create much-needed housing. Together, these designs presented thoughtful ideas for living comfortably on a "tiny house" scale.

Also in the realm of housing, several large multifamily designs were submitted, but did not win. I saw good ideas, but some projects seemed overbearing for their neighborhoods, while others tried too hard to make dramatic statements.

It's possible that the best San Diego architecture is yet to come.

A new generation holds promise. Weiszbluth & Brown won an Honor Award in the "Unbuilt" category with its very first project. Tasked with converting a pair of sheds in Alpine Valley owned by family friends into guest houses, Dutra Brown and Alex Reed ("Weiszbluth" honors his family's ancestral Holocaust-era name) took inspiration from *pech isbe*, which were tall brick ovens that formed the heart of family huts in 15th-century Russia.

Both products of Harvard and SCI-Arc, Brown and Reed also create custom tiles featured in many of their designs. Here, tall perforated tile screens serve as signature features of the inviting hearths, filtering light evenly through the spaces. These contemporary *pech isbe* are configured to divide the interiors into bedrooms and baths. The architects imagine many cozy weekends for guests, once the studios are completed and furnished later this summer.

While new architecture tends to grab the spotlight, historic preservation is essential on this stage.

An Honor Award for preservation went to Heritage Architecture for a renovation of the Hotel del Coronado's front façade and broad veranda — where Marilyn Monroe & Co. arrived in the film "Some Like It Hot." Among other fine details, original stained glass windows were painstakingly re-created.

Another Honor Award for preservation was given to architect Milford Wayne Donaldson (a founder, now retired, of Heritage Architecture), for his preservation of Futuro, a 1969 spaceship of a building designed by Finnish architect Matti Suuronen. Futuro sat for years behind the Fifth Avenue

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The new music building at Mira Mesa High School won an Honor Award.

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Franklin Antonio Hall, a new research center at UC San Diego, received a Merit Award.



Ivy Senior Apartments in Clairemont, designed by BNIM, took home an Honor Award.



Cerveceria Insurgente brewery and tasting bar in Tijuana got an Honor Award.

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Alex Ogata • architect and juror