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Downtown design jury likes orange blob to hide pump house

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Is it a many-tentacled anemone, a "throbbing, sweating sea creature" washed up on Biscayne Boulevard, as its creator says? A giant Koosh ball? Or just a really wild hair day?

However it strikes you, the rubbery, orange luminiscent architectural animal named Pulse by its designer was the bold and unanimous choice of a prominent jury charged with selecting the best idea for a radical makeover of a Boulevard blemish: the drab sewage pump station in the middle of downtown's fledgling arts and culture district.

Pulse beat out 143 entries from around the world Friday for the \$8,000 DawnTown 2008 Award, sponsored by the Downtown Development Authority.

There were lots of green schemes proposed, several waterfalls, and lots of intricate structures, screens and enclosures to hide the pump house. There was one other urchin-like cover. At least one plan would have buried the pump house.

But jurors were evidently looking for a kick-in-the-pants statement that did not entail another slab of concrete on the bayfront.

Pulse tries to transform the unlovely sewage station into an ebulliently unrestrained work of public art. The simple scheme would cover the pump station with a steel cage, to which would be attached a writhing mass of flexible rubber tentacles with light-emitting diodes at their ends.

An electronic board running along the base could carry information about the pump station's function.

"I was struck by the incompatibility of the pump station with museums next door and luxury condos across the street," said the winning designer, architect Helen Pierce of PierceWorkshop in San Antonio, Texas. "We're trying to hide an ugly, messy thing. But it keeps the city alive, and I liked the idea of making something beautiful from it."

Now comes the question of whether Pulse -- or any of several other prize-winning and honorable-mention proposals -- will be built.

Miami-Dade Water and Sewer officials say they intend to redo the station's exterior and are open to ideas, but they aren't promising anything. DDA interim director Alyce Robertson said she will make sure they think about going beyond what engineers might normally consider.

"They need to see these boards," she said, pointing to the dozens of proposals posted around the Chapman Center conference hall at Miami-Dade College's downtown campus, where the winner was announced. "I will find a way to get this in front of them."

Miami Mayor Manny Diaz confessed Pulse might not have been his first choice, but said he, too, would push the engineers to think broadly.

"Keep in mind, as mayor I have to look at what can actually be done," Diaz said. "But if we can get buy-in,

how perfect would that be?"

The international competition was timed to draw attention to downtown Miami's transformation while the Art Basel/Miami Beach crowd was in town.

At the college, several jurors said they liked Pulse precisely because it was not another building competing for attention with the two new museums planned for the adjacent Bicentennial Park or other new downtown construction -- but something entirely different, a fun *thing*.

"This building-object clearly sets out to be friendly," said juror Alex Wall, professor of urban design at the University of Karlsruhe in Germany, who is teaching at the University of Miami this fall.

The second- and third-prize winners were far more restrained, though ambitious.

The runner-up, by Danish architect Mikkel Thisted -- just two months out of school -- would remove the facility's walls and expose the pumps to view within a glass bubble meant to recall a drop of water. A long, cantilevered structure would house a learning center focused on water conservation and, in a deliberately provocative stroke, a hyper-organic restaurant.

"It was a way of making the point even more clear," Thisted said by phone from Frederiksberg.

Third place went to The Living Filter, by Bryan Astheimer and Sarah Weidner Astheimer, a married pair of young American architects working temporarily in London.

Their proposal would wrap the pump house in an undulating mesh of copper pipes that would draw rainwater from the roof through a series of built-in filtering tanks planted with Everglades grasses -- much like coastal ecosystems function to clean water naturally.

But jurors said both runners-up raised concerns because of possible cost and their large scale, especially in comparison to Pulse.

Two of the four honorable mentions came from Miami architects -- Jason Chandler and Alejandro Gonzalez. (All entries can be seen at www.dawntown.org.)

The jury was led by Miami Art Museum director Terence Riley and comprised, beside Wall, Miami Science Museum director Gillian Thomas, prominent landscape architect Raymond Jungles, Foram Group CEO Loretta Cockrum, Cabi Developers vice president Misha Mladenovic, and Cathy Leff, director of the Wolfsonian-FIU Museum.