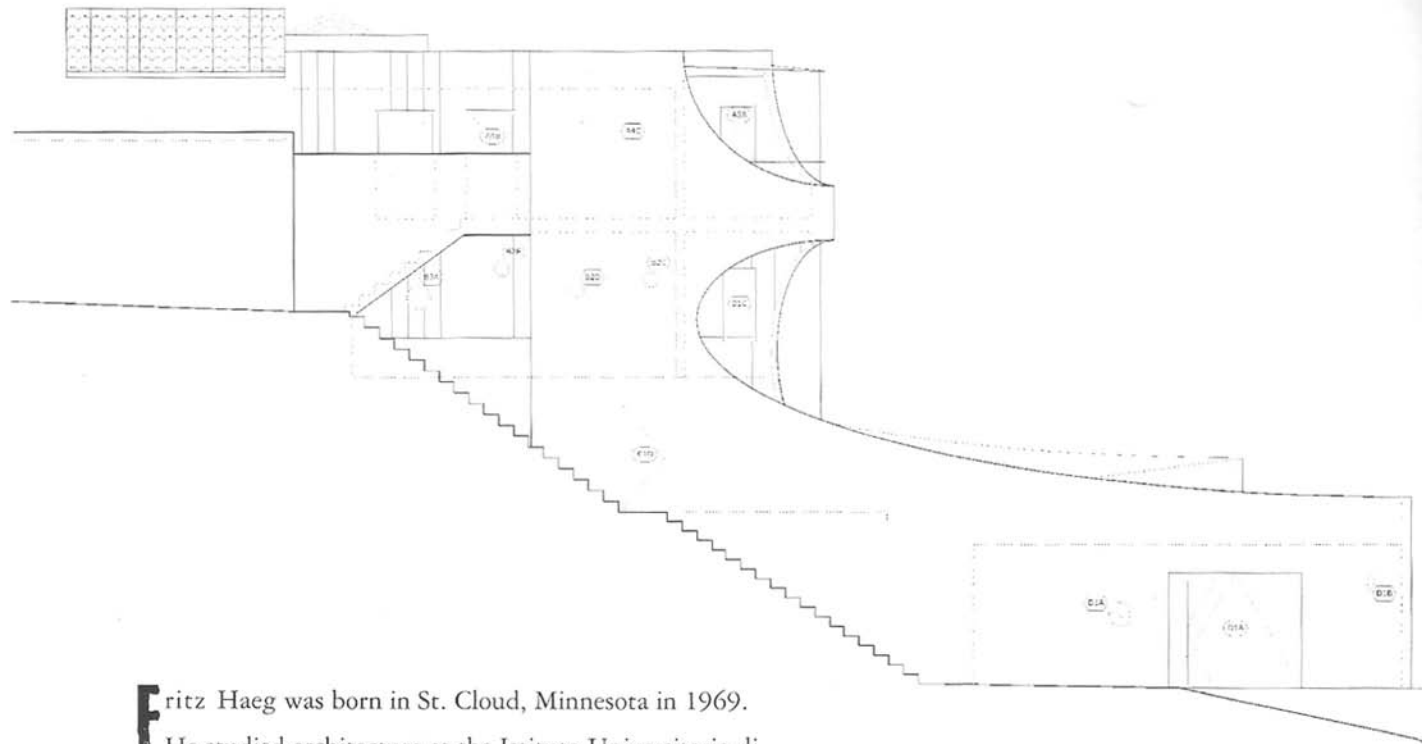


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An Interview with **Fritz Haeg**

Erika Figel



Fritz Haeg was born in St. Cloud, Minnesota in 1969.

He studied architecture at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia and Carnegie Mellon University, where he received his B.Arch in 1992. He has been a faculty member at Parsons School of Design in New York, U.S.C. School of Architecture and Art Center College of Design. Since establishing fritz haeg studio in 1995 in New York City and later moving the practice to Los Angeles in 1999, a wide range of his architectural, landscape and design projects have been realized.

[1111]: What was the first piece of architecture that interested you?

When I was little, I was always attracted to the weird houses in our neighborhood. I was like "I love that house! That's my favorite house!" And it's funny, because when I sent my parents pictures of this house after I bought it, the first thing my mom said is that it looked like houses I drew when I was little. I would stay in my room after school and just draw houses all afternoon and all night. I would draw vans and trick out the backs of vans that had round windows and carpeting. You wouldn't call it architecture. But the first serious architecture was in the shows they did at the Walker Art Museum. The curators, Martin and Mildred Friedman, were running the Walker at the time, and they started putting on architecture shows, which is really unusual for a contemporary museum. They had shows with Frank Gehry, Ted Tokio Tanaka, Steven Holl, Todd Williams and Billy Tsien. But the Frank Gehry show in particular.

[1111]: What kind of an impact did Gehry's work have on you?

That was when I was in high school. It probably affected me the same way that his early work affected a lot of people when the modernism movement was in its last gasp. People understood that something else was going to happen, but they weren't sure what. Gehry's work was like that moment of recognition where you realize there's something else; there's another way of making architecture.

[1111]: During college, what was influencing you?

I was totally on my own, on some level. My first three years of college, I was going to Carnegie Mellon. We were all in one building: fine arts, graphic design, drama, and architecture. All my friends were on the top floor. They were all the fine artists, and I would go up to their studios a lot. In my last year of college, I took more fine arts classes, and I was doing a lot of installations. Many of those friends from my last year of college are still my closest friends here in L.A. About five or six of them are all here, and I see them all the time.

[1111]: Is that when you started painting?

No. I moved to Italy for a year and studied architecture at the Venice School of Architecture in Italy. And then I went back to Italy later on, to Tuscany, to kind of run away from architecture and I was just kind of in a farmhouse painting. I think they're pretty horrible paintings. I'm sure they're pretty horrible paintings. When I finally moved to New York, I would kind of alternate between making paintings and making buildings or doing architecture. Painting was this place I could be. In architecture, you're really dependent on other people. You're dependent on clients and budgets, and there's so much crap between you and getting a project done, and I think painting was a way of doing something totally independent where you feel like you have total control over your world. I liked the solitude of it, and I liked the control of it, I think. And it was just those five years in New York that I painted.

[1111]: Why did you leave New York?

I don't know. I loved New York. I was really happy there, and I had a lot of close friends. I think New York was an interesting time for my work because I was doing all these things

simultaneously, and I had no idea how they connected, or if they connected at all, or what the hell I was doing. I was really consumed by each one of them independently, but I was really confused about why I was doing all of them. I think I felt like I was getting stuck in a rut where I wasn't thinking about new things in new ways anymore. It was this oppressive familiarity. I really loved being in New York, but as a designer dealing with space and environment, I felt kind of oppressed there. I didn't have any plans when I left New York. I just knew that what I needed to be doing in my work probably wasn't in New York, and it seemed to make sense here. I didn't know why. There was something exciting about moving to Los Angeles where there was this uncharted terrain for me, and there was just something about it that drew me to it. It's only since the last few years being in L.A. that I feel like things are starting to come together, like my interest in gardening and ecology and art and design. They've all naturally woven themselves together in some way.

[1111]: How is your work interdependent?

The GardenLab project that I started deals with issues of ecology, art, and design, and it informs the design work that I do. The salons are about creating this free, open environment to make and experience art in a social way. I think architecture and design feeds that, because I'm interested in creating environments that nurture these kinds of experiences with art, like communal social experiences with art. And I'm more interested in my practice going in this direction of using design as a way to create environments that nurture those kinds of experiences.

[1111]: How do you initiate these projects?

I know for sure, and I've known for a long time, that I would never be the kind of designer or architect that waits for clients to come to me to do projects—for example, private residences. I like the idea of actively producing them. I like to do the kind of work that nobody asks me to do, but that I seek out on my own because I feel like it needs to be done. And I think, in that way, I've been really inspired by Buckminster Fuller, who invented the geodesic dome, because at a certain point in his life he decided that he was going to identify the problems that exist in society and then create solutions to them, not just as a designer but as a human being who was extremely intelligent and capable on all these different levels. He would design maps, buildings, and cars. He was an inventor. He was a speaker. I'm really inspired by this idea of being an active agent in the world, not passive in waiting for people to ask you to do things—but instead being a person that looks for problems and solves them. He had this faith that if the problems he was solving were important enough, the support would come for them. And I think that's such a beautiful way of operating the world, and I think it's really foreign to young people. Students today are trained to have this trade, this craft, and then you go out and you sit around and wait for people to ask you to do that for them and to pay you to do it. I like this idea of going out and actively identifying the places in need and then proposing things for them.

[1111]: Is there a consistent ideology behind everything that you do?

I don't know if I set out an ideology or if it slowly reveals itself to me. I think what I've done, at least since I've left New York

maybe, kind of without questioning it, is go to what I'm drawn to and then let that take me wherever it is that's supposed to go. For example, I moved to L.A. \$10,000 in debt with no jobs and no prospects. But in that moment, of all things, I took a scrappy piece of dirt in my yard at Silver Lake and went more into debt by buying plants every day and experimenting with plants. Literally, I was out in the yard every morning, day and night for two months, planting stuff and gardening. Meanwhile, I was unemployed and in debt. And at the time I felt like this is absurd, this is ridiculous. What the hell are you doing out here? You should be hustling for work. But in retrospect, I realize those were two of the most important months of my life, because it was really reflective and meditative. It was exactly what I should have been doing and wanted to do in L.A., which was to be outside exploring plants and gardening and my connections to these natural cycles. You can't really put a price on that. That wasn't an important job for me to do at the time, but I felt like it was something I needed to do. And I think, ultimately, those two months are the seeds for what I'm doing now. So I have this attitude towards my time: doing what I feel I should be doing. I'll put some thing off for months. I just won't be feeling it. But then when I think I'm ready for it, I'll do it.

[1111]: How do you feel your work can affect political ideas?

I believe in the potential of gardening as a radical political act. I don't think I've managed to practice in that way. But I do think that gardening represents an intense connection to our natural cycles, and I think the way we live today as a society is so disconnected from that. The woman who just won the

Nobel Peace prize, Wangari Maathai, has her whole work based on this idea that most wars and most violence and bloodshed today is a direct result of our environmental policy. If we solved our environmental problems, if everyone had enough to eat, and if we solved our energy problems, most wars wouldn't be fought. And her ideas were that peace and the environment are related—and they are, if you look at it. I mean, look at what we do for oil. You look at what we do for basic resources, you start to understand that that's true. I just feel like that is the most important issue of our time. I just think that's it, and the students that are in school right now are going to have their faces in this stuff. They're going to have to deal with it whether they like it or not. And I don't think the solutions are going to be solved in a simple way. They're really complex, and I think it's going to take a lot of different people from a lot of different disciplines to think about it. It's really exciting. I mean, to me, it's like the most exciting thing today, and I feel like in my work I've only begun to scratch the surface. For me, I've just identified it as the most important thing, and I don't think I've made any real contribution.

[1111]: Are these ideas a large part of why you teach?

Oh yeah. I'm totally militant about it. That's something in all my classes. It's the same thing in all of my work. I get fed by it, and I get very inspired when I'm teaching and being around students because I think it's a very fertile environment that can't exist in a commercial world or design practice. I'm interested in students telling us what they need, and I don't think today's generations of designers are prepared to deal with the problems we have in our society. And it's going to be up to them. I'm concerned about the state of education today in our

schools. I don't know if it's preparing students properly in a design practice sense. And I don't even know if I'm prepared as a designer to deal with it in a sophisticated way. I know I'm not.

[1111]: How do you discipline yourself when your studio and home are one?

Lately, it's been important for me to have office hours, which I've never had before. So from 8 to 5, that's office hours, and I need that because otherwise I get distracted and I can just go and wander out to the garden and start planting or something like that. It's an issue that you have when your studio and your house are connected, because basically I'm always working. And I think that's part of who I am, but it gets exacerbated when your studio and home are together. I have a feeling on some level that's just going to be my life; they're just so connected, they're hard to pull apart.

[1111]: How is collaboration important to you?

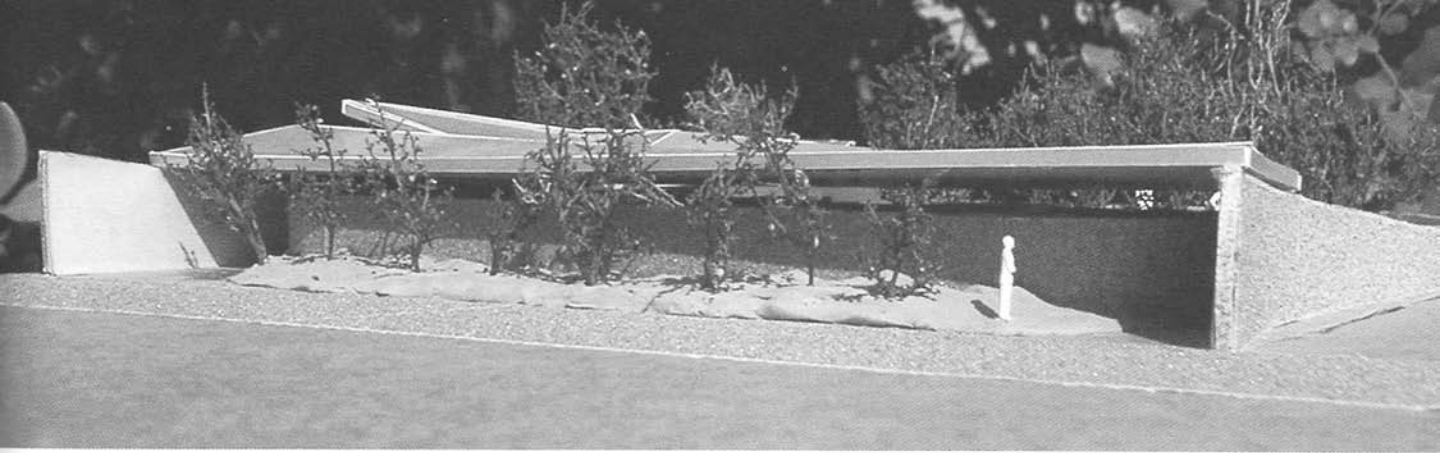
Well, doing architecture is extremely collaborative. I mean, usually with most projects like the GardenLab project or a design project, I start out with some rough kind of armature of what the controlling aspects are going to be, but it's always loose enough that it allows other people to get inside of it and participate to have an effect on it, too. I think people that think they're in control of their work are always fooling themselves. I think there's something kind of twisted about thinking that you're always in control of things, because you're not. I think it's innately human to be collaborative, and I think everything we do is collaborative. If anyone thinks they're not working collaboratively, they're kind of swimming upstream. Even painters that come against the blank canvas

are placing themselves in the story of painting, and they have to understand what that story is. If they plan on having that hang in a museum someday, they have to understand that they are speaking about their time, and they have to understand the time they are living in. And they're not living in it alone. No matter what you're doing, you're always at some level engaged.

[1111]: Does anything intimidate you?

I'm still intimidated by making big buildings. I'm in a strange moment of feeling like I'm always amazed by architecture and making buildings. It's extremely overwhelming to me. I'm really impressed by my friends who are building things. Having a building always impresses me. I'm still so much in the beginning of practicing as a designer and making buildings. Practicing as an architect is a marathon. I think if you're going to be a pop singer, that's like the sprint, because it's this youthful thing. You reach a certain age and you're past your prime. Whereas, as an architect, you only really hit your stride in your fifties, sixties, or seventies. And maybe when you're in your seventies, people really start to recognize your work at a certain level. Or when you get hired to do projects of a certain size. It takes a long time to really understand your craft as an architect. I think that doing all these other things I do is like biding my time. Like I said, I don't think I'm ever going to be practicing as a conventional architect. But, I don't know. I'm surprised I live in L.A., and I'm surprised that I'm in between these crazy things. There are all these things I never would have anticipated either.

[1111]: Do you feel like you're part of a tradition that Rudolf Schindler started in the 20s and then Andy



Warhol continued in New York in the 60s?

Yeah, that's interesting to me. Gosh, I'm so obsessed with Andy Warhol. I went to Carnegie Mellon, where he went, and I never really thought of him when I was there. But when I got into New York, I went into a serious Andy Warhol phase where I just read everything and saw all the films, and I was just overwhelmed. If you really study him and look at him you just feel like he did everything. What is there left to do anymore? He was such a prophet of our time. I really think that in a hundred years, he's going to be one of the geniuses that we look back on. So, yeah, Andy Warhol, sure, I feel like definitely I have to reckon with him, you know. I want to be a part of that tradition. I think it's important.

[1111]: How do you view the idea of damage with regard to architecture?

As an architect, you always think you design something, you build it, and that's it, it stands forever. And everyone's happy. I think I maybe lived in like seventeen apartments in the course of seven years from moving around a lot. And it was only being in New York in one place for a while and now owning a house

in L.A. that I start to see things fall apart before me. And I understand that things need maintenance, and that without someone there they fall apart really fast. I understand that even more in the garden, where I would arrange things very specifically in the garden, and then I would see them deteriorate before my eyes in weeks. I would start to understand this play between control and the desire to create things, and to see them deteriorate, and to have to think as a designer and a gardener about those issues. If you look at primitive dwellings and primitive structures, they tend to address flux and change. They are actually pretty dynamic and kinetic. It's only within the last few hundred years that we've forgotten about that, and we've designed dwellings and structures that are more static, and they don't address the natural environment. But I think we see today smarter designers creating environments that are more active and engaging with the environment around them. They change with the environment around them.

[1111]: What keeps you inspired?

It's mostly my friends. When you're younger, you get everything from magazines and books, and that's what feeds

you and inspires you. Hopefully, when you get older, your community and the people around you replace that. So I really get super-inspired by things that I see as much as people who are around me, and I think that's part of what the salons are: surrounding myself with the people that inspire me and feeding off of each other's work. That's what I want to really encourage and nurture. I think by weaving all these disparate things that interest me and inspire me and making sure that they're always part of my life in some way—that's what keeps me inspired. I think I had this idea that I was going to be an architect and then said: what's the path to being an architect? What do I need to do that? And then I jumped through those hoops and wound up an architect. I realized at some point that path wasn't going to keep me happy, inspired, or challenged for some

reason. I'm this kind of crazy person that likes to sit between things and connect things rather than being any one place in particular. Because I think most people can and should be happy in that path of an artist, or in that path of an architect, or whatever. We need that. People have to do that. We can't have a functioning society with everybody sitting between everything. It would be a mess. But for some reason, I think I do well sitting between things. And that's something I'm starting to realize about myself.

[1111]: What idea of community is really important to you, and I was wondering if it was something held over when you were younger, or if it's something you were creating because you were lacking something?

I think about that a lot. I grew up in a very busy household of seven people with five kids. I'm sure on some level that must have something to do with it, because I'm sitting somewhere between the extremes. I love withdrawing and being totally alone, but at the same time I love having that activity. So I think that's probably related to that. []

*Images courtesy Fritz Haeg.

