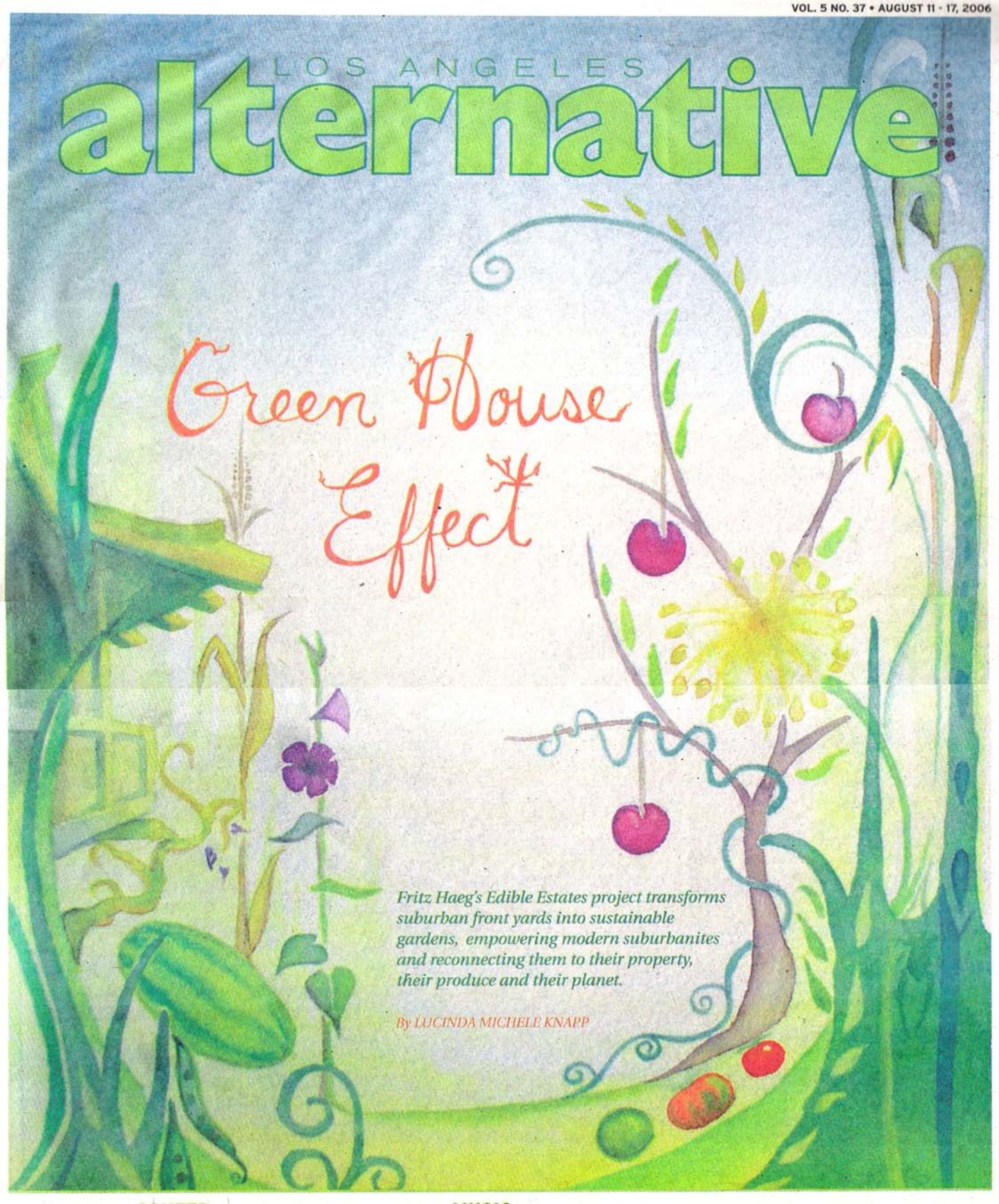


LOS ANGELES alternative

Green House Effect

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By LUCINDA MICHELE KNAPP

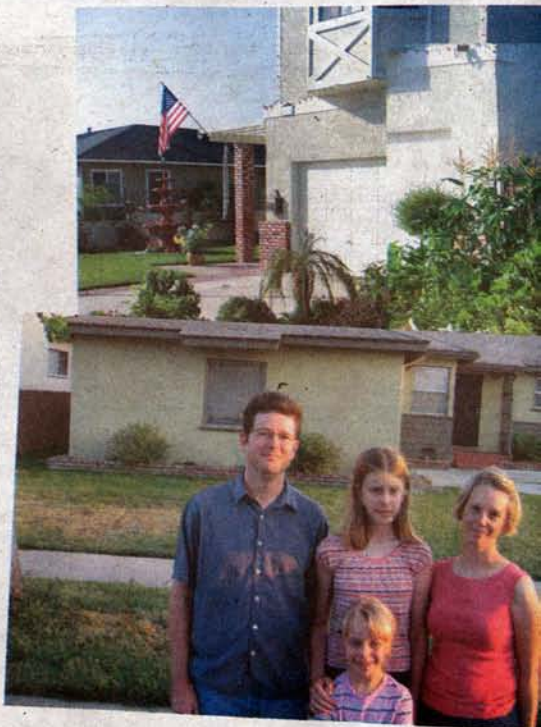


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To forget how to dig the earth and to tend the soil is to forget ourselves.

—Mohandas K. Gandhi

Urban sociologist Mike Davis made an unfortunate blunder when he called L.A. a city of quartz. Davis' dim view of Los Angeles' present state could be blamed on his gross error. If we were indeed built on quartz, we would be in desperate need of sunglasses. As it happens, though, our city stands on some of the richest earth in North America, and living things can—*theoretically*—grow very well here. L.A.'s shifty ground is actually a vast bowl of primordial runoff soil from the surrounding San Gabriel, Santa Monica and Santa Ana mountain ranges. In the geologic center of the Los Angeles basin, where the Los Angeles and Rio Hondo rivers merge in the city of South Gate, the rich alluvial dust extends an Everest-deep 30,000 feet downward before hitting solid rock.

Only 12.7 miles from that world-class inverted summit of dirt, the city of Lakewood languishes under a dusty, pale sky. Lakewood is best described as flat. Mid-century housing developments unfold for miles like identical origami boxes. It seems vaguely somnambulant. The meter and rhythm of the evenly spaced streets and strips of verdant Bermuda grass is soothing, lulling the urbanite—unused to its hypnotic regularity—into a calm little reverie: Could life really be this perfect, this Stepfordian? Taught all my life to mistrust suburbia's soothing siren song, I reel around, shell-shocked and unblinking, in this neutered and seductive environment, its precise concrete sidewalks safely removed from downtown's entropy.

Lakewood follows in America's grand tradition of naming places after things that are not actually there. Well, there is a lake—Bouton Lake—but it's not natural. It was formed in 1895 when oil drillers broke open an artesian well. Two years later the land was sold to the Montana Land Company, which grew sugar beets, alfalfa and hay on its 6,979 acres. But WWII-era developers already had designs on repurposing the rich soil into thousands of identical little front lawns. The crops vanished. The earth was paved over. That Everest of rich, productive dirt was sealed beneath asphalt and the clawing runners of Bermuda grass. It sustained no one.

Until now, when one Lakewood family, under the direction of L.A. artist and architect Fritz Haeg, unceremoniously tore the front lawn out from under their house like a tablecloth ripped from beneath an Italian meal, leaving the house hovering over the blank earth. In a single Memorial Day weekend they replaced it with—*gasp!*—a garden. A garden of vegetables and fruits; a little outpost of Nature in the midst of the unnatural.

The Lakewood garden oasis is the second issuance of Haeg's Edible Estates project. (The first happily hums away in Salina, Kansas.) It is Haeg's endeavor to change America's mind about the role of the front yard and, in turn, the nature of community and society—by transforming a previously useless suck of water and toil (either that of a gardener, or the suburban alpha male on his ride mower) into a little patch of earth that is productive, that brings people together, and that helps them re-learn a connection to nature and to one another.

In any metropolis it takes effort to remember that one is part of a natural sphere, a life cycle, an organic system. We apply sunscreen, stay indoors or in cars—little biospheres of conditioned air. We do not feel the earth under our bare feet—instead we walk barefoot only in our homes. Outside is dangerous, with used condoms on the ground and killer bees in the air. It's particularly easy in Los Angeles to miss the seasonal changes: the jacarandas in summer, the sycamores sending dry leaves rushing around our ankles in autumn Santa Ana winds, winter's ozonic rain in eucalyptus trees, spring's lemon blossoms and early lilies. We do not often breathe deeply. City lights dim the stars and the phases of the moon into inconsequentiality. We are usually too busy staring at screens or steering wheels to look up at the sky or out at the land.

But the land is there. I'm one of the few L.A. natives who actually grew up with a small farm next door. In the west end of the San Fernando Valley in the '70s and '80s, some small, lonely little remnants of un-built land pushed up exuberant spring wildflowers and hot summer mustard plants. My parents owned one such plot and we lived in a small, green house next door. On the quarter-acre of property we planted squash, corn, tomatoes, zucchini, cantaloupe and eggplant. I played in the rows of dirt, pushing seeds into the earth with my stubby kid's fingers, and gazed up at a decidedly gentler sun than today's as it glazed yellow light through tall corn stalks swaying in an indistinct sea breeze off the Santa Monica Mountains. The earth wants to grow. All it needs is space.

Space is something most Angelenos don't really think they have, and most of them never grew up with a garden out their window that they could lose themselves in (either metaphorically or, in my case, literally, as I was quite small at the time). But Fritz Haeg's Edible Estates project reminds us that we do really have space: we just ignore it. We forget it's there. It's our front lawn.

"There's so much wrapped up in the front lawn, that empty piece of land," explains Haeg when I visit him in his Mt. Washington home. His dogs, Ivy and Oli, are big and wiggly and overjoyed at the prospect of tasting visitors. "No licky, Ivy," admonishes Haeg, and a dejected Ivy floppily rolls off the bench she'd clambered up onto.

Fritz is tall, lithe, and has the graceful look of a regular yoga practitioner, with huge luminous eyes that lend themselves to the overall impression of an artistic visionary or a visitor from outer space. He explains the role of the lawn in Western society as Oli leans onto my back, snorfling in my ear. "It's loaded with symbolism: a lot of issues about how you relate to your neighbors and how you relate to whatever place it is that you live in. I think there's a lot that's deeply repressed by the lawn. When you have a lawn, you don't really have to engage with your neighbors. They don't engage with you. You don't have to deal with the place you're in. You just dump a lot of water and plant grass on it."

Historically, "the lawn is a display of a form of wealth," says Mark Allen, director of Machine Project, an interdisciplinary art gallery that will host a number of Edible Estates-related events in the fall. "The lord is doing well enough that there is spare acreage that doesn't have to be farmed or grazed." Think of the vast, elaborate gardens of European chateaux and palaces. "An analogy would be Las Vegas, where opulence is represented by how much water you can use in the middle of the desert for fountains." Allen channels Louis XIV and the classic obnoxious next-door neighbor of suburban legend simultaneously: "I'm so rich, look at my big unused grass patch."

"The project's really about the particular space that exists between you and the street, and how you deal with it," Allen continues. As soon as you plant a garden you have to think, "Oh, what's the climate again?" and "When does it rain?" and "What do I want to grow and what do I care about?" You have to start thinking about who you are, where you live, what your neighbors want, how you eat—so as soon as you remove the lawn, everything that's been repressed becomes revealed. It's a very precious kind of space."

Haeg chose the Lakewood home after six months of careful consideration: the garden should be in a neighborhood where it would have the maximum impact, where the family could be articulate spokespeople, and where it would find the love and patience it required. The Fotis were ideal: they'd already been nurturing a small backyard garden and a chicken coop for some time, were progressive and socially-conscious, and were willing to rip up their front yard to replace it with a vegetable wild card.

The upstanding citizens of Lakewood watched from behind their Three Day Blinds as the Foti family and Haeg broke every rule laid down to the suburban home dweller—Thou shalt not risk uncouth growth, wildness, or possible ugliness in thy Front Yard. Thou shalt not have stuff that turns brown in thy Front Yard. Thou shalt not Hang Out in thy Front Yard. Thou shalt underpay Other People from Other Countries to deal with thy Lawn.



The Foti homestead, before and after the Edible Estates transformation.

"Anything as easy as having a lawn - there's unhealthy side effects to anything that mindless."

- Fritz Haeg

The drive to the 'burbs takes me two and a half hours in supermarket checkout-line traffic, and I pull into Lakewood a full half-hour late. The city is resurfacing the Foti's street and it rattles my jaw like an old dirt road might; but the identical rows of houses on either side and their flawless, manicured lawns iterate that, rough road or not, this is Suburbia™. I can see the Foti's home from far away as the stalks of corn strike upwards toward the eggshell-pale sky. Parking my little car covered with rock and roll stickers, I feel as out of place on this street as the garden.

The Foti girls are in the front yard: June, age 7, rollicking through it with the energy of childhood loosed upon a similarly wild object, and the more restrained Cecilia, who is 13, standing up from tending a plant, regarding me with that blend of shy, sullen and gazelle native to young women her age. She walks me in and I am introduced to their father, Michael Foti. It is here, amid the family dynamics and the Foti's tidy house with its spare, modern interior (why I had expected dusty English rose décor and paintings of geese with bonnets, I don't know), that another truth about this garden becomes clear: it isn't just Fritz's art/design/concept project.

It's their front yard, for crying out loud.

"You put your fallibility on the line, with a project like this. It could turn into an eyesore very quickly," explains Mike, who spends his non-gardening hours as a computer programmer. He looks too young to have a middle school-age daughter, with his beaming Opie cheeks and a lopsided smile. But behind his wire-rims his eyes are all Dad: slightly squinty with can-do enthusiasm. His wife, Jenny, joins us as we talk; the sun dips lower, and a sea breeze washes across the suburban grid outside.

"The first month, I spent a lot more time in the garden than I needed to," continues Mike. "It put strain on my wife. I can be very obsessive." Jenny shoots me a long-suffering look. "The upside of it is the physical activity, and the convenience of fresh vegetables," she says. "But the downside—it's just not the driving force for me that it is for him." Gardening isn't for everyone, in other words.

"I'd like people to understand it's not gonna be instant gratification," says Jules Dervaes of Pasadena, an "urban homesteader" who, with his family, converted their own home into a virtually self-sustaining city lot where they brew their

own biodiesel, provide organic greens to local restaurants, and teach workshops on everything from permaculture to knitting. They began their process in the '80s. "It's like a baby: it needs more attention in the beginning. Only after a few years does that garden start walking on its own... be prepared for failures and setbacks. We had one blueberry one year. One. I told my kids, with all the work we put into it, 'This is a \$100 blueberry,'" says Dervaes.

"It takes a lot of work to have a vegetable garden, to plant edibles like this, and it's a lot more work than a lawn," admits Haeg, whose own hillside backyard behind his geodesic-dome-topped home is planted with fruit trees, a grapevine, and other productive plants. "But that's the point: anything as easy as having a lawn—there's unhealthy side effects to anything that mindless, where you don't have to pay attention."

Mike Foti says as much to me. "I don't get this concept of a 'low maintenance' lifestyle. I don't think it's good for people. It makes you withdraw from your fellow man."

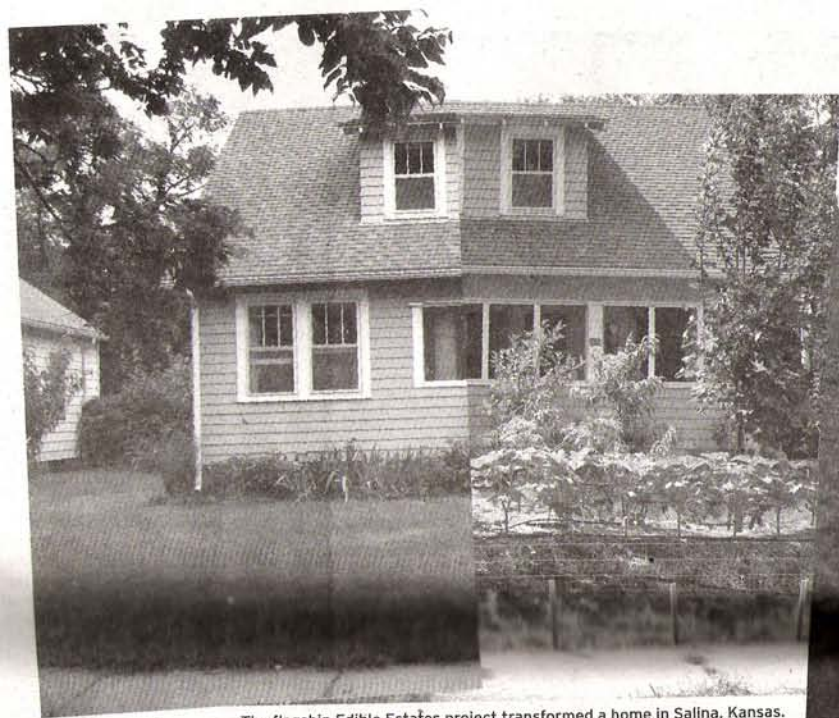
The Edible Estates project has indeed prompted countless connections for the Fotis where none would otherwise have been, from me showing up at their front door, to attention from local news outlets, online visitors to their website, and even the New York Times, to quite possibly some of the most important connections: their own neighbors. "Most of the people around here really like it. People walk by from this street, from the next one over, and then from farther and farther," says Mike. "They make special trips to drive by when they hear about it."

"When you live in a community like Lakewood, that has 30,000 front lawns," explains Haeg, "and you remove one of them, hopefully that's a catalyst, and it starts people thinking about other possibilities. So the project is partly utopian, saying *why can't we all do this?* But it's also kind of an absurd conceptual project, saying *how pathetic is it that we live the way we do, that something like this is so radical. How bizarre that it's radical to be planting food in your yard?* It's shocking, and to some people, quite unseemly."

"There are a few who don't really like it," says Mike as he walks me through the garden's three varieties



Edible Estates pioneer Fritz Haeg has a yard boasting fruit trees, a grapevine, and other productive plants.



The flagship Edible Estates project transformed a home in Salina, Kansas.



Jules Dervaes converted his Pasadena property into a virtually self-sustaining city lot.

of eggplant, their leaves edged in violet, Thai basil exuberantly outgrowing the edges of the planter, sage, chamomile, peppers, artichokes. "I have a hard time understanding why it would be such a transgressive act," he shrugs. The sunset throws the corn into relief against the soft yellow sunset, and the sea breeze cools significantly. My heart softens a little bit toward Lakewood as I count the patty-pan squash hidden beneath wide, heart-shaped leaves, and Mike points out kumquat, plum, pomelo and Eureka lemon trees. It seems easier to breathe next to this dense little plot of vibrantly alive organisms. Jenny brings a bag of cocoa mulch for me to smell. "It's great for the plants," she begins, "...and it smells like chocolate!" volunteers June, careening by. I stick my face into the bag and inhale. It's rich and peppery—and yes, smoky with the aroma of chocolate. The mulch deters pests and keeps the soil light. Like Mike, I find it hard to understand what could be disagreeable about the project. Apparently there are just a few grumblers, worried about property values.

Haeg says of the bigger picture, "The project can be described as reconciling global food production and land use issues, with a little modest garden. In another way the garden is just a vehicle to talk about something else. It's not really about gardens or food—it's about our relationship to each other and to our environment."

But it also is about gardens and food. This little front-yard plot has transcended Haeg's purposes for it (which may have been his intention all along, as an artist), just as much as its greater symbolism transcends Lakewood's few naysayers. As much as this may have started as Haeg's conceptual art project, it's become a prosaic and profoundly human-scale organism.

"It's enhanced our relationships with a lot of our neighbors," says Mike. "We've shared the produce with as many friends and neighbors as possible. And we've just finished canning. Canning feels like honest, productive work. It's been fun for me and my wife to do together." He smiles.

"With a garden, wisdom comes in little increments," explains Jules Dervaes, when I speak with him over the phone. "People knew a long time ago, and we have forgotten. Maybe a century ago most people were farmers, and now our kids aren't even outside. They're not playing in the yard, you don't see them out in the street or climbing trees—they're driven indoors, and it's not right or healthy. With wacky weather and oil shortages, people are looking for something close to home where they can get security. I compare it to the World War II victory gardens. When the nation was in trouble, people said, 'What can we do?' Enron goes bankrupt, oil prices go up—it's not a bad deal to have stability here at home. In a period of disquiet and upheaval, people go back to what's real and what they can hold onto. My kids wanted to protest and saw people taking to the streets during the G7 summits...you wanna be in control, you plant something. Your capacity to change is right there."

*"You wanna be in control? You plant something.
Your capacity to change is right there" - Jules Dervaes*

In his own home, Fritz Haeg is thinking about new projects. "With all my work I'm interested in how people can take what little control they do have, and put that to use. One of the few things we have in a capitalist society is private property. And while a lot of utopian artists and designers have been interested in focusing on public property, my projects are about saying, 'Okay, we don't really have empowered public spaces; instead let's take our little private spaces and activate them.' Let's use that private space for larger societal issues."

To that end, Haeg is opening his own home for a cooperative educational endeavor called the Sundown Schoolhouse (he lives on Sundown Street). Like the Edible Estates project, the plan is to bring together people who might not otherwise have met, with the intention of igniting creative energy. But instead of meeting over peppers and squash, students will come together over co-created meals, self-published periodicals, the migratory paths of plant life, psychedelic journalism [oooh], dance, art and sand castles at Zuma Beach. Classes will be led by Mark Herbst (co-editor of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*), Emily Roysden (Lesbians to the Rescue), Mark Allen (Machine Project), members of the Center for Tactical Magic, the Los Angeles Urban Rangers, the Institute for Figuring and even the students themselves.

"I think everyone's feeling a sense of helplessness right now, a sense that we're drifting off in directions that we don't have control over anymore," says Haeg. "That as individuals we don't feel even remotely empowered to do anything about. Making any dent in it is like turning a huge ship around that's headed in the wrong direction... using your home as more than a place for you to live in alone, or with your family, and opening it up to the public for other functions so people can gather and connect with each other—people leave energized, feeling like they're part of something bigger. And with Edible Estates I think it's the same thing, taking that piece of private land that you own and using that land to declare how you want to live,

and how you want to be part of the world around you."

It's intriguing to see how Edible Estates functions as catalyst, artistic statement and corporeal garden all at once, and for different people. Haeg is clearly concerned primarily with the theoretical permutations of the project, rather than its translation to different formats; when I ask him how the yard-less renters of urban Los Angeles could use Edible Estates as a model, he's almost at a loss. But that's not out of line: Edible Estates was conceived of as a statement about American suburban society, not urban living; Haeg's Schoolhouse project speaks more to the young urban dweller, the decidedly non-landed of Los Angeles. For city dwellers, Edible Estates is meant to be more an inspiration—a takeoff point—than a verbatim instruction manual.

The Dervaes family has ideas, though. "We advise some kind of action wherever you are," says Jules. "A lot of people have small, seemingly impossible places. But you don't need a yard. Self-watering containers are good for balconies; they don't leak, and they have a reservoir. Neighbors get together and share small spaces. Other people do a little piece of their rental property—take space you don't think you have, and turn it into a pint-sized garden. One lady with hardly any space went out and put a little thing in there between her fence and house—people are getting their feet wet and getting experience. When you have several people doing it, it kind of catches on. You break open this blockage where people think, 'I can't do that.' People see you do it, and then they go, 'He did it—why can't I?'"

Dervaes pauses, and I realize he's seen this actually work, time and time again, with people who come to tour his own home and its rainbows of heirloom tomatoes, its long, lush rows of well-loved backyard plantings, and its welcoming, wild front yard, which possibly forecasts the development of the Pot's as the years pass and their garden grows and changes. "With change, like with a garden, you have to persevere." LAA