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MONTHLY
JULY 2008

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The Incredible Edible Estate

FRITZ HAEG BRINGS HIS REVOLUTIONARY IDEA FOR THE FRONT YARD OF THE FUTURE TO DESCANSO GARDENS.

BY JANA MONJI

Want to make the local news? Dig up your front lawn and plant tomatoes.

“Every single time I plant these gardens, the press is there,” landscape designer and artist Fritz Haeg said in a recent interview. “It’s hilarious to me that you can remove a lawn and plant food, and it can be news.”

A few days later, Haeg is at Descanso Gardens in La Cañada Flintridge, signing copies of his recently published manifesto arguing for a tasty new suburban paradigm: “Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn” (Metropolis Books; February 2008). Sure, some home gardeners already have plots of vegetables and fruit in their backyards, but that’s not what Haeg is talking about. He’s proselytizing on behalf of nothing less than a landscaping revolution. He calls it “full-frontal gardening,” and to demonstrate his idea around the country and in London, he has asked people to dig up their conventional front lawn and plant a vegetable and herb garden instead. Haeg didn’t want people to think this was a project for “crazy hippies or radical environmentalists,” so he searched for “a respectable title.” Ergo, the name Edible Estates. He has documented these “edible estates” — seven in all — with blogs and photographs.

Tall, with closely shorn hair and an unassuming, relaxed manner, Haeg, 39, seems an unlikely candidate to spawn a subversive idea challenging a basic building block of suburbia — the manicured green lawn. Back at Descanso, visitors pass by the man the Whitney Museum of American Art calls “one of

the 81 most interesting contemporary American artists currently working today” without a second glance, more interested in studying the chickens penned in the Edible Estate Demonstration Garden he planted there. The chickens — Rhode Island Reds, Chinese Silkies and a Frizzle — are just passing through. The birds from Town and Country Carriage, a mobile petting zoo based in Lancaster, are making their monthly visit to do their part for the project by eating insects and contributing natural fertilizer.

Several Edible Estates, which introduce a rural touch to urban and suburban landscapes, were commissioned by art institutes and sited at single-family homes as personal gardens. But the Descanso project was designed as a public space to show visitors how it can be done. Begun in January and running until November, the Descanso Edible Estate is built around the frame of a house to drive home the idea for potential private gardeners. On one side is a traditional lawn, planted for contrast. Haeg says that when the lawn went in, people came by and admired the perfect green surface. That, of course, was counter to his intention to bring a “shift in what we consider beautiful in terms of a landscape.” The suburban image of the immaculate lawn is “very limited and oppressive.”

“Fritz is challenging you, if you own your own land, to grow your own food,” says Brian Sullivan, Descanso’s manager of horticulture. While some of the food grown there has been used in demonstrations, some is dropped off

at Union Station to feed the homeless. Because no pesticides are used, Sullivan wants people to “pick, take and taste.” Lettuce leaves are ready to eat during Haeg’s visit, with strawberries and grapes coming down the pike.

Herbs like chamomile, rosemary and various thymes are thriving, and pumpkins will mature by the fall. All the plants and seeds were bought locally and are watered by hand.

Descanso recruited Haeg after an audience responded warmly to a talk he gave there last September as part of the garden’s GreenSpeak series. Sullivan says that the landscape artist “really tapped into something people are thinking about: how we spend our time, how we use our resources, how we use our land.”

At the time, Haeg was also known for organizing artistic and intellectual gatherings called the Sundown Salon. He also taught classes in product and environmental design at CalArts, Art Center College of Design, Parsons School of Design and the USC schools of art and architecture — he studied in Venice, Italy, and earned his undergraduate architecture degree from Carnegie Mellon University.

Indeed, Haeg is highly unusual as a landscape designer and environmental activist who’s also considered an important artist at the highest levels of the New York art world, which recently gave him one of its most prestigious imprimaturs: an invitation to participate in the Whitney Biennial 2008. The exhibition is comprised of artwork the museum deems among the most significant currently being made.

“It was extremely exciting to be included and especially to have a new project commissioned for the front of the museum,” he says. That new project is not an Edible Estate, but one that combines Haeg’s love of animals and his background in architecture — Animal Estates, model homes he has designed for wild creatures displaced by urban development.

His Whitney installation consists of empty homes for a dozen animals native to New York, including a northern flying squirrel, barn owl, wood duck, bald eagle, bobcat and an opossum. Haeg consults with zoologists and conservationists to construct custom-made, ecologically sensitive and site-specific dwellings, designed to invite the resettlement of native species (although it might be some time before a bobcat hops the Madison Avenue bus to the museum). As with his Edible Estates project, Haeg challenges people to approach the subject from a fresh point of view — in this case, the animals’: He says he “looks at animals as clients” and considers “how animals could live in cities in a more beneficial way — to actively design for them.”

Animal Estates 1.0, which opened at the Whitney on March 6, has been extended beyond the Biennial’s June closing until Aug. 14. It’s the first of eight regional Animal Estates Haeg has planned for the U.S. and abroad this year.

None are yet scheduled for Southern California, but an edition commissioned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is planned to open this month at various spots around the city.



Fritz Haeg



Descanso's demonstration garden



The garden's frame house

Haeg, a Minnesota native, isn’t a gardener, landscaper, horticulturist or botanist by training. When he moved to Los Angeles from New York in 1999, he experienced a lot of firsts: his first car, his first garden and his first dog. He dubbed his new home Sundown Gardens; there he constructed a dome for yoga classes and meetings of his salon.

Haeg launched Edible Estates in 2005, planting the first garden in Salina, Kansas, at the home of a plant geneticist and an Indian-born artist. The prototype was designed to accommodate specific needs: to survive the extreme prairie climate and provide vegetables for Indian dishes. The next estate was planted in Lakewood the following year. The New York Times called Haeg an “ersatz Frederick Law Olmsted,” referring to the landscape architect who designed New York’s Central Park and Stanford University’s campus in Palo Alto.

Compared to Olmsted, Haeg’s gardening concept is less grand and showy. He doesn’t like aspirational design, the kind of “glossy images you see in fancy design magazines of homes that look like nobody lives there.” Front lawns fit in that category, he says. “Any garden I do, I want to make any person walking down the street imagine that this is something they can do.” His gardening ideal is ever-evolving.

In 2007, he planted an Edible Estate in London, where he found people “way ahead of us on these issues. There’s a huge community interested in urban agriculture.” He designed that project for a communal garden in the middle of London rather than a private home. Located in Southwark, the garden is a 10-minute walk from the Tate Modern, which commissioned it.

This garden, regional prototype garden #4, is included in his book, “Edible Estates.” He has a new book, documenting his thought-provoking gatherings, coming out this fall — “Sundown Salon 2001-2006 in Words and Pictures: A Project by Fritz Haeg” (Evil Twin Comics). During those years, he invited a wide range of people to his salons. His approach may be iconoclastic, but his reach is broad. Says Haeg: “Any garden I do, I want to make any person walking

down the street imagine that this is something they can do.” **AM**

Descanso Gardens’ Edible Estates Demonstration Garden is in the Center Circle area. Located at 1418 Descanso Dr., La Cañada Flintridge, the gardens are open every day from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission tickets cost \$7 for adults, \$5 for seniors and students and \$2 for children ages 5 to 12. Members and children under 5 are admitted free.