

# ART PAPERS

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REVOLUTION  
URBAN GREENING  
AS ARCHITECTURE

TARGET  
WALTON CREEL'S TRADE  
IN SOUTHERNESS

SPECTACLE  
OR CRITIQUE:  
OLAFUR ELIASSON

LABOR  
LAND AND LOSS:  
Yael BARTANA







TEXT / BERIN GOLONU

There's a revolution spreading across the United States. It aims to green urban and suburban spaces and turn them into agricultural sites. Although such initiatives are also occurring in other parts of the world, they seem especially relevant in a country that has one of the largest carbon footprints on the globe. They signal an important shift in consciousness, which may, hopefully, trigger a shift in lifestyle. Such initiatives hold the promise of alleviating interrelated social and environmental ills: to fight climate change and reduce our reliance on fossil fuels through localized food production, to provide urban—and especially low-income—dwellers with better and more affordable access to fresh produce, to reduce the dumping of pesticides into the soil and groundwater, and to restore humankind's integral relationship with the land that yields its sustenance. It may not be surprising that such concerns are in the public consciousness these days. Perhaps more unexpected is the fact that, among the activists, environmentalists, and farmers engaged in these initiatives, many artists are leading the cause and lending shape to what our green and bountiful cities of the future may look like.

Although many of these projects have occurred on a grassroots level through personal initiative, certain persuasive individuals are managing to give their efforts greater traction by convincing institutions, policymakers, and government officials to get behind their utopian visions of an urban agrarian future. Profiled here are a handful of American artists and architects who have both introduced prototypes for urban sustainability into the public sphere and gained material and moral support for their ideas, thanks in part to their highly effective collaborative practices. Principals Amale Andraos and Dan Wood of WORK Architecture Company (WORKac) recently won the commission from MoMA and P.S.1's Young Architects Program for a temporary design of P.S.1's courtyards to host the institution's summer concert series. Going far beyond the predictable beach theme, WORKac proposed to build a fully sustainable and productive urban farm, complete with roaming chickens. *Public Farm 1 (P.F.1)* required the collaboration of over thirty other artists, designers, engineers, farms, and green suppliers and adhered to highly progressive standards of sustainability.

At around the same time, on the opposite coast, artist and architect John Bela was hatching a plan with Slow Food Nation to build



ABOVE, TOP TO BOTTOM: Civic Center Victory Garden market, 2008 (photo: Kristen Loken); John Bela, day 2 of Civic Center Victory Garden (photo: Naomi Starkman/Slow Food Nation) / OPPOSITE: seedlings for Civic Center Victory Garden (photo: Scott Chernis)





***GREENING THE REVOLUTION***



*Civic Center Victory Garden*, a temporary farm outside San Francisco's City Hall, marking the opening festivities of this organization's August 2008 conference. Bela took his cue from fellow San Franciscan artist Amy Franceschini and her collective Futurefarmers, who have been reviving war-era Victory Gardens in backyards all over San Francisco. *Civic Center Victory Garden* transplants an urban farm to the lawns of the city government, a site that hosted Victory Gardens during the First and Second World Wars to compensate for a diminished agricultural labor force.

The idea of turning water-thirsty green lawns into food-producing gardens has also been embraced by Los Angeles artist and architect Fritz Haeg, who launched his first *Edible Estates* project on Independence Day in 2005. With the support of various art institutions, Haeg has selected seven other urban and suburban front lawns since then—six in the U.S.A., and one in London, England—and worked with their owners and residents to turn them into edible gardens. With the publication of *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn*, a recent book chronicling his projects, Haeg has declared an all-out war on irresponsible water and land use.<sup>7</sup>

Art's reverence for nature and the environment is nothing new in this country. It has taken many forms since the nineteenth-century Hudson School landscape painters used their canvases to pay homage to America's natural beauty. A number of recent art projects do, however, trace a more direct historical lineage as predecessors to contemporary urban greening initiatives. Cited most often are Bonnie Sherk's *Crossroads Community (The Farm)*, 1974-1980, in San

Francisco; Agnes Denes' *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*, 1982, in Battery Park City, New York; and Mel Chin's *Revival Field*, 1991, in the Pig's Eye Landfill of St. Paul, Minnesota. These artists made a conscious decision to opt out of the production of commodities for consumption and exchange and to engage in social practices that give back to the environment and to society. They also paved the way for their contemporaries, making previously unorthodox practices not only acceptable, but respected by the art establishment.

The contemporary projects of a younger generation of practitioners share many of the aims of their predecessors. They attempt to remedy urban environmental degradation by reclaiming various sites for productive use; they deploy rural practices in the urban sphere to engage in a critical examination of both labor and land use; they delineate space for communal activity and ritual where diverse urban populations can come together; and above all, they create public awareness about environmental concerns. But today's efforts are much more than symbolic or grandiose gestures aimed at creating public awareness. Contemporary practitioners turn such awareness into direct and immediate public action. As we face the very real threats of devastating climate change, a global food crisis, and oil shortages, they address environmental concerns with an unprecedented urgency. As such, their aims are twofold and connected: discursive and practical. By generating discourse they disseminate new possibilities for social and environmental change, and by setting achievable and practical examples that yield tangible results, they build convincing arguments that can be adopted by others.







Some may question whether art practice can effectively produce practical solutions to social and environmental concerns. Scholar Victor Margolin considers this question in his catalog essay for the exhibition *Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art*.<sup>2</sup> "How do we think about art that moves from discourse to action, art whose intent is to produce a useful result," he writes,

and by what criteria do we evaluate this work? ... In the never-ending debates on the difference between art and design, the distinction usually comes down to the primacy of discourse in artistic practice.... But when artists want to achieve social results without identifying themselves as designers, how should the critical community respond?

"Once artists enter a realm of action," he continues, "it is difficult to characterize their projects differently from those of other actors such as landscape designers or even architects... the discursive has spilled over into the practical, and the practical has become more discursive...."

Significantly, artists who blur the boundaries between art, design, and architecture in their creative practice spearhead the three projects I discuss in this article. The principals of



ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: WORKac, renderings of *Public Farm 1* [P.F.1], 2008 [courtesy of WORKac, New York]





WORKac are trained architects, but they have collaborated with a host of other artists, sculptors, sound designers, and engineers on *P.F.1*. The construction of the farm's vertical structure, which houses tubular cardboard planters clustered in clover configurations, was supervised by sculptor Art Domantay, who has produced numerous outdoor public art commissions. Artist Elenie Blanchard made the fabric wrappings surrounding the columns near the wading pool to animate the structure with color and texture. Creatives working at Electronic Crafts have designed and engineered the sound and video environment, featuring the calls and portraits of various farm animals residing at the Queens County Farm Museum. Atlantis Energy Systems fabricated the solar panels that power these electronics. The list of collaborators goes on, too lengthy to note here. In this, and with all of its interlinking components, *Public Farm 1* is a visionary environment that eludes classification. Is it a farm? A playground? An art installation? Or is it an educational model for sustainable building and design? It is all that and more. As a result, it is poised as a multi-use environment that can serve a wide variety of different audiences and needs.

But what about the location of *P.F.1*? Does its placement in the courtyard of an art institution confirm the structure as "art," thereby giving it a more discursive intent? Andraos and Wood explain that

they wanted the structure to serve as a space for leisure and relaxation. They also wanted to give it a didactic purpose. As such, they turned a section into "The Grove," an educational environment near the pathway leading to the museum's entrance, which contains information panels with facts about *P.F.1*'s green collaborators. These facts are also peppered with eye-catching inspirational pull quotes such as: "Over the three months of summer, *P.F.1*'s rainwater collection system will collect 6,000 gallons of water for irrigation," or "NYC's 14,000 acres of unshaded rooftop could host over 400,000 *P.F.1*s."

In addition, WORKac is teaching a seminar at Princeton University on cities and ecology, premised on the notion that ecological concerns can, have, and should influence future urban planning efforts. They believe that ecology works best at a citywide scale to effect change, and that it's hard to make a real difference on an individual level. When asked whether any government officials were responsive to *P.F.1*, Wood replied that the New York Council on the Environment was a big advocate, and even helped facilitate the installation of the rainwater collection cistern that irrigates the farm.<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, artist John Bela is looking to gain citywide support for his urban greening initiatives. A multidisciplinary practitioner, he is also a designer and landscape architect. Bela was approached by Slow Food Nation to oversee the implementation of a temporary garden

ABOVE: Fritz Haeg, *Edible Estates regional prototype garden #5: Austin, TX*, 2008, installed at Sierra Ridge apartment complex, commissioned by Arthouse, Austin, TX





that would host a series of events during the organization's conference. Instead of building a temporary garden, Bela suggested that they launch a farm right in the middle of San Francisco, and donate its produce to the city's homeless population. *Civic Center Victory Garden* won the support of San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom, who temporarily lent the project land in a very visible location right outside of his office. Highly symbolic, the mayoral gesture and the garden's location are both integral components of the garden as they assert the leadership of San Francisco and the surrounding region in tackling environmental concerns of the future. Bela, along with other artist/gardeners such as Franceschini and the Futurefarmers, plan to turn such a gesture into reality.

The vision is to create a network of community gardens on public land throughout the city. "We can't afford to keep inert urban landscapes anymore," states Bela. "Alongside our soccer fields and our dog parks, we need to have productive food gardens."<sup>4</sup> He notes that there is public interest and support for such a vision in the Bay Area, and that a convergence is occurring as other cities such as Philadelphia, Detroit, and Chicago have also launched urban agricultural initiatives. What would it take to make such a vision a reality in the Bay Area? "A greenhouse, some tools, and an experienced volunteer labor force." *Civic Center Victory Garden* has garnered tremendous attention and

gained valuable support over the course of its run, not only from other community gardeners around the Bay Area, but also from the general public. Originally scheduled to run through late September, it will now close in November with a Thanksgiving harvest. The hope is that public support for the garden will translate into this future volunteer labor force.

The city would also need to take a few other immediate steps in order to promote urban agriculture, remarks Bela. First, suitable urban agricultural sites need to be identified. Second, a temporary occupancy permit approval process needs to be put in place, allowing farmers to temporarily tend to private lands. Third, the city needs to set up an urban agricultural land trust to protect land in perpetuity and earmark it for food production. "We need to get a round table together with all the players, see what our shared needs are, and figure out how the city can help us," states Bela. "I've recommended that the city create a position titled Director of Urban Agriculture in order to help us do that."

Unlike Wood and Bela, who seek to inspire sustainability efforts at the city level, Haeg believes that effective change can and must start with the individual. His *Edible Estates* intend to empower individuals to undertake such change on their own turf. Trained as an architect, Haeg has been making inroads into the artworld by having art insti-

ABOVE: *Edible Estates* regional prototype garden #3: Maplewood, NJ, 2007, sponsored by Garden Supplies (photo: Curtis Hamilton/Canary Project)



tutions support each project by identifying local households willing to turn their front lawns into *Edible Estates* "prototypes." In order to meet the goals of the project, he adheres to fairly strict selection criteria, which he outlines in his book. The house needs to be "on a somewhat lengthy typical residential street lined entirely with uninterrupted groomed front lawns." The front yard should be "very visible from the street, with regular car traffic." The prospective *Edible Estates* owners should be: "super enthusiastic about the project, and committed to and willing to continue the *Edible Estates* prototype as long as they live in the house."<sup>5</sup>

Haeg's criteria prove that he seeks to lend the project both practical and discursive potential. On a practical level, the front lawns should become organic, food-producing gardens maintained over many years by their owners. The immediate benefits of such an effort are plentiful: *Edible Estates* owners would reduce their water intake; they'd stop dumping pesticides into their soil and their ground water; and they'd reduce the number of carbon miles required for produce to reach their plates. However, the discursive power of the *Edible Estates* may even be more impressive than its practical potential. Rather than siting the gardens in residents' backyards, Haeg situates them on their front lawns, "on streets with frequent car traffic," in order to maximize their visibility. The idea is that each of these gardens should serve as a prototype for the neighborhood, so that other residents may look upon them with a tinge of guilt the next time they power up their gas-guzzling lawnmowers or dump a bottle of Roundup Ultra onto the grass where their kids play. As a matter of fact, Haeg's intention is to locate these prototypes in sites and neighborhoods that are as typically Middle-American as possible, in order to question the conservative values that promote wasteful consumption and land use. Past *Edible Estates* gardens have primarily been located in suburbs such as Salina, Kansas; Lakewood, California; and Maplewood, New Jersey, among others.

The discursive dimension of the *Edible Estates* also extends into art institutions, by way of an exhibition that accompanies each site-specific garden. The actual planting of the garden is a small part of the project. The telling of the garden's story—in as many ways as possible—is his primary motive. Each exhibition takes the form of an *Edible Estates* headquarters, where videos, photographs, written documentation, and hands-on workshops come together as yet another discursive platform. In an effort to reach as broad a cross-section of audiences as possible, Haeg further broadcasts his *Edible Estates* stories in slide presentations and talks in many different locations, from art institutions, to nurseries, to colleges and universities. "I like the fact that when the projects are written about in mainstream media, they're not contextualized as being a part of the art world," he states. "It prevents hard core activists from dismissing it as 'just art.'"<sup>6</sup> There is a great deal of interest in Haeg's *Edible Estates*, from a number of different areas and disciplines. His busy speaking schedule alone is a testament to the projects' popularity and success. But he remains extremely humble about it all, explaining,

The *Edible Estates* can engage people who both care and don't care about art, and neither person will realize that the other is looking at it. I don't make work for audiences who are slavishly trying to make art or slavishly be activists. I just like doing the work and letting it find its way into different audiences.

P.F.1, *Civic Center Victory Garden*, and *Edible Estates* all address Margolin's concerns that discourse can, at times, take prevalence over direct action in matters of art and sustainability. They simultaneously address and transgress these concerns by closely marrying the two, positioning discourse to directly further the practice, and vice versa, allowing practice to generate engaging stories that reach growing numbers of willing participants. Margolin concludes his essay by stating,

imagination is an artist's greatest asset. It can produce bold visions of what a sustainable future might be like.... People can be moved and aroused by powerful environments, innovative designs, and practical demonstrations of active engagement.<sup>7</sup>

It seems as though we're more in need of such bold and promising visions for a sustainable future than we ever have been before.

#### NOTES

1. Fritz Haeg, *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn*, New York: Metropolis Books and DAP, 2008.
2. Victor Margolin, "Reflections on Art and Sustainability," in Stephanie Smith and Victor Margolin, *Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art*, Chicago and New York: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, and Independent Curators International, 2005, 24-27. For an assessment of this exhibition, see Jennie Klein, "Curating Environmentalism in Post-Industrial America," *ART PAPERS* 31:05 (September-October 2007): 18-21.
3. From the author's interview with Dan Wood and Amale Andraos at P.F.1, New York, August 21, 2008.
4. All John Bela quotes are from the author's interview with the artist at *Civic Center Victory Garden*, September 4, 2008.
5. Haeg, 50.
6. From the author's interview with Fritz Haeg, September 28, 2008.
7. Margolin, 28.

Berin Golonu is an independent curator and writer living in New York. As Associate Curator of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco from 2003 to 2008, she curated numerous exhibitions including *The Gatherers: Greening Our Urban Spheres*, 2008; *The Way That We Rhyme: Women, Art & Politics*, 2008; *Peer Pleasure*, 2006; *Underplayed: A Mix-Tape of Music-Based Videos*, 2006; *The Zine UnBound*, 2005; and *Bay Area Now*, 2004 and 2008, among other exhibitions. She is a frequent contributor to *ART PAPERS*.

TOP: before and after views of *Edible Estates* regional prototype garden #2: Lakewood, CA, 2006, owners: Foti Family, produced in collaboration with Millard Sheets Gallery for the exhibition *Fair Exchange* and *Machine Project*, Los Angeles; MIDDLE: before and after views of *Edible Estates* regional prototype garden #3: Maplewood, NJ, 2007 (photo: Curtis Hamilton/Canary Project); BOTTOM: before and after views of *Edible Estates* regional prototype garden #1: Salina, KS, 2005, garden owners: Stan and Priti Cox, commissioned and sponsored by the Salina Art Center, Salina, KS



