THE BOSTON PHOENIX
APRIL 25–MAY 1, 2008 | BOSTON'S LARGEST WEEKLY | THREE SECTIONS | FREE

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DIGGING IN
THE FOOD REVOLUTION FERTILIZES ITS ROOTS

This Just In_

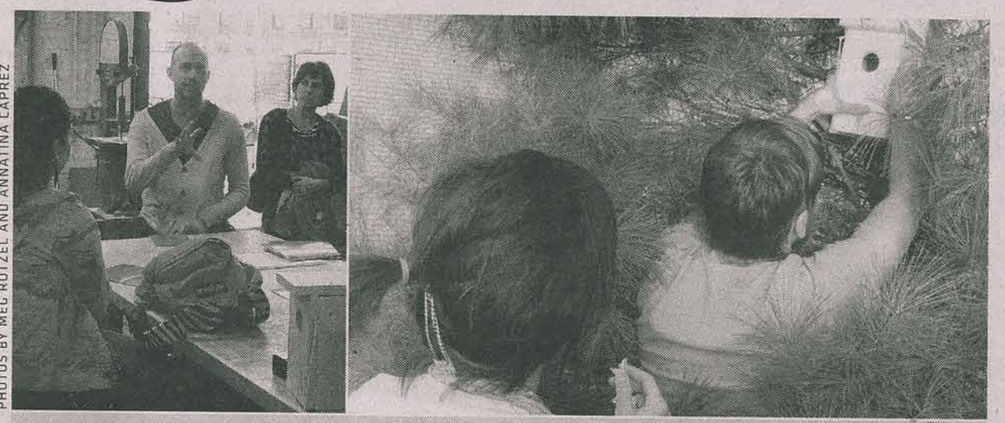
For the Birds

Artful lodger comes to MIT

One of the first slides LA-based architect Fritz Haeg showed this past Wednesday during his lecture at MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) was a 1964 *Time* magazine cover featuring Buckminster Fuller, a Milton-born architect/inventor/designer/whatever remembered best for his work with geodesic domes. Fuller was an odd duck, one who routinely tackled concepts foreign to him. But his picture was right at home, since Haeg, a disciple of Fuller's if ever there was one, has similarly pursued projects outside of his expertise, including his ongoing Edible Estates project — for which he travels to different parts of the country to install gardens on front lawns. An architect by training, Haeg admits that he is not a botany expert; he's picked it up as he goes along.

It's Haeg's latest project, Animal Estates, that brought him to MIT, and once again has him venturing well beyond his comfort zone. Haeg has been commissioned by local art institutions to build habitats in cities across the country for animals, some of whom, according to his Web site (fritzhaeg.com), "have been displaced or unwelcome by humans." He kicked off things this past month in New York during the Whitney Museum's Biennial, where, among other creations, Haeg built an eagles' nest and a beaver lodge. MIT won't be hosting beavers any time soon, but it *is* getting homes for two birds: the American Kestrel Falcon and the Tree Swallow.

"I suggested them because, for both, there are successes in terms of creating artificial structures for them to nest," says Jeremiah Trimble, a curatorial associate in Harvard's ornithology department whom Haeg consulted. Kestrels, more so than swallows, are seeing a decline as of late, says Trimble. "Part of the problem with both of them is that they're tree-cavity nesters. Nowadays, anytime there is a dead tree with a hole in it, it gets cut down just because it's an eyesore, or a hazard."



PHOTOS BY MEG ROTZEL AND ANNATINA CAPREZ

TREE HOUSING Thanks to envelope pusher Fritz Haeg's Animal Estates project, swallows and Kestral Falcons can feel at home on the MIT campus.

The night after his lecture, Haeg held a workshop for those interested in helping with bird-house construction, and I took a friend to lend a hand. It felt like junior-high technology class all over again — except this time I didn't have Mr. Wakefield to do everything for me. The first task was to puncture a hole in a piece of wood using the industrial-size jet press, which reached just above my head. When the kid wearing the Death From Above 1979 shirt walked up behind me, I was pretty sure it was a bad omen.

The majority of the 15 or so other folks there had no such trouble. For Joe Dahmen, a former MIT architectural student building a swallow house (everyone was building swallow homes except for CAVS artist Pam Larson, who was designing the falcon's habitat), the work was relaxing. "It's been a while since I've built something," he said. "It's refreshing to nail stuff together again."

Dahmen, who, it turns out, is an architect-cum-artist, recalled how he'd walked around Boston a few years ago in a "birdseed suit," recording the experience with a camera tucked inside his attire. By the end of the day, he had a trail of pigeons behind him. "It was to get you to think like a pigeon. To draw attention to the pigeon's plight," he explained.

Sam Kronick, an MIT undergraduate I bothered as he took a saw to wood, said he, too, found the work to be soothing. Kronick, part of a group called Cracked (a "rogue artist troupe trying to make art in a technical school"), said he'd been drawn to the event by Haeg's expansive approach to art.

I later looked up to find that Haeg had already left, though most of the attendees stayed behind to stain the outer surfaces of their boxes. On ours, my friend drew two small birds; it was really quite lovely. Generally speaking, though, our bird house looked more like a shanty. The door to it didn't swing open as I imagined it should, and, as my friend pointed out, the other houses didn't seem to make noises when doing so. We have yet to hang it around the school's campus as the others most certainly have, for fear of making life worse than it already is for some poor, homeless bird.

A short while after the event, Haeg's greatest gift became apparent to me. He brings people together to do things they might not otherwise do by themselves. The impulse may very well be there, but many of us need the promise of something more to push us to action. With the Animal Estates project, Haeg offered the chance to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

_Ian Sands