

Carnegie Mellon

# Today

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Students  
Not Gone  
**Wild**

*Carlton Reeves  
And His Classmates  
Break Away*



# Food for Thought

In these heightened political times, Fritz Haeg, like many of us, has perceived a polarization in the United States. But he hasn't acquiesced to the all-encompassing "liberal" or "conservative" labeling of friends, family, and strangers. Instead, the Carnegie Mellon alumnus has used his architectural, creative prowess to bring neighbors together again. *by NAZBANOO PAHLAVI*



It can't be avoided. It's on every network, on every cable news station, in every newspaper. The map. Red states versus blue states. Conservatives against liberals. George W. Bush may have won the presidency, defeating his opponent, John Kerry, but to Fritz Haeg it felt like everyone lost—and not because of which candidate won. His malaise went well beyond politics. He would articulate it three years later in the preface to a project that unknowingly to him began to germinate on November 2, 2004.

*We watched as the media informed us that the United States had just split*



into red and blue. I was devastated by the results of the election, but I was also alarmed by the popular story that our country was cleft in two, with supposedly irreconcilable opposing points of view. For us or against us; it seemed like the lines had been drawn and you were meant to take a side.

It's often said by artists—writers, musicians, painters, actors—that to gain perspective of your country, you have to leave it. Not long after the 2004 presidential election, Haeg left the United States for a six-week residency in Australia.

*I wanted to use this break as an opportunity to consider the direction of my work.*

Haeg's work wasn't easy to define. He was schooled as an architect, earning his degree from Carnegie Mellon in 1992. But during his collegiate days, it became evident that he wouldn't end up in an office of some skyscraper. In his final year, having fulfilled his requirements, he mostly enrolled in art classes.

The course selection didn't mean he abandoned his future as an architect. The profession had been his life's ambition since he was a youngster going to middle school in Minneapolis where, for fun, he studied copies of *Architectural Record* at the local public library. His dad noticed his son's interest and took him to meet an architect working down-

town. Haeg remembers it distinctly, "the endless grid of fluorescent lights and little desks and drafting tables." And he remembers thinking, even then, that wasn't exactly what he wanted.

In search for what he was looking for after graduating from Carnegie Mellon, he worked and taught for a number of years in Connecticut, New York, California. Along the way, he became difficult to label professionally—architect, environmental designer, artist, teacher. Not long after settling in Los Angeles in 1999, he initiated Sundown Salons, which were a series of community gatherings for knitting, reading, dancing, drawing, performing, and conversing. At

the University of Southern California, he taught “Workshop in Architecture” for non-majors and an interdisciplinary course, “Manifesto,” at the Art Center College of Design, where the class “read the writings and manifestos of 20th-century artists and designers” culminating in the class having to “orally present our own manifesto on the final day of class.”

Haeg was a man who had more depth than simply being classified as someone blue or red. Yet, as he left for Australia, the country was defining itself by only those colors. He recalled his misgivings, politically and culturally, before embarking on his trip of introspection:

*In spite of my migrations, I realized how limited my experience of my own country was. I was also beginning to feel uneasy with the insular, self-referential, and hermetic nature of the contemporary art and architecture community, of which I consider myself a part. Are we elitist, separatist, or just disinterested? Today's media climate allows you to filter your news and stories to only those with which you agree. Have we given up on any sort of real dialogue and returned to our corners to talk among ourselves? What is the appropriate response to the current state of the world, its politics, climate, and economics? What should I do next?*

During his stay in Australia, Haeg explored Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens, the Queensland's Daintree Rainforest, and the nearby Great Barrier Reef. It's there his country began to come into focus; what it was, what it could be—the political divisiveness of Americans back home and the interdependence of the indigenous organisms in Australia that thrived on collaboration. The germination of what would become his project had taken another step—to transplant onto the American landscape, in a unique and socially conscious way, that spirit of nature's collaboration.

*I realized how completely interdependent each organism is upon the others. Remove one and the whole system can eventually degrade and collapse. This seemed to be a good lesson at a*

*time when our obsession with independence is perhaps naïve and oversimplified. Sharing resources—water, air, streets, neighborhoods, cities, countries, and a planet—all of our destinies are more intertwined than ever.*

He had his creative direction—wanting his next project to symbolically engage all Americans in a space we collectively occupy. The question for him was in what medium. When he returned to Los Angeles in 2005, he was unsure what his project would entail, but he knew where he wanted it to start—in the center of the country, the heartland, the symbolic starting point for an American project.

From there, a serendipitous sequence follows. Haeg, known for his hybrid projects in diverse media, is invited to speak at an event at Grand Arts in Kansas City. He meets curator Stacy Switzer, to whom he mentions his intended geographic starting point. Some months later, Switzer is asked to curate an exhibit on food and eating at the Salina Arts Center in Salina, Kan., about three hours west of Kansas City. Switzer immediately thinks of Haeg, whom she contacts to submit a proposal. Haeg doesn't know anyone in Salina, but being very near the geographic center of the country, the location is just right, and he jumps at the chance to participate. He flies out for a site visit to see where Salina will guide him creatively.



nce there, Switzer and Haeg take a drive through the countryside. Although Salina is a cultural hub for the towns nearby, this city of 50,000 residents is very much agricultural, with classic vistas of prairie plain and farmland—a unifying landscape connecting disparate homeowners—a precursor to the manicured lawns that have taken over the American landscape from New York to California in the post-World War II era. In fact, it is on the front yard in suburban Minneapolis where Haeg remembers

spending hours mowing the lawn in the '80s—a stretch of green space, which like a farm takes great amounts of labor, but without an accompanying harvest.

“I think the front yard is a space that we take for granted in this country, and it extends from coast to coast, and we all collectively share it across all geographic, political, religious, and economic boundaries in this country. It's one of those rare geographies that really connects us,” he says.

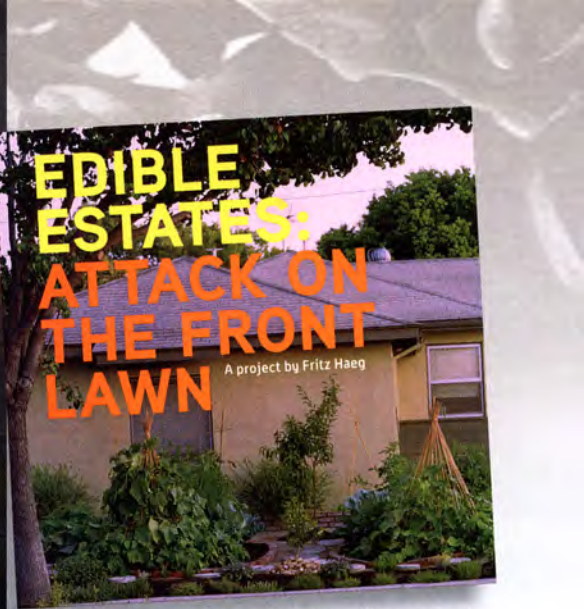
While it was on the front yard where Haeg worked the earth for the aesthetics of perfectly tended grass, it was in the vegetable garden his mother planted in the backyard where his family reaped benefits in the tasty forms of beans and squash used in summertime meals.

After that drive in Salina, Haeg knows the specific medium for his next project. He will commingle the interdependence of nature he witnessed in Australia with his mother's garden and the untapped potential of the American front lawn. The plan is for him to revive the Victory Gardens that Americans were encouraged to plant in their homes more than half a century ago to reduce the pressure on the public food supply and boost the country's morale by giving them a sense of empowerment and self-determination.

Haeg will design, prepare, and plant an edible garden on the front lawn of willing local residents Stan and Priti Cox. On July 4, 2005 (the day of independence), with the support of the Salina Arts Center, is the unveiling of the Coxes' front yard Victory Garden, which Haeg christens Edible Estates.

*An Edible Estate can serve to stitch communities back together, taking a space that was previously isolating and turning it into a welcoming forum that reengages people with one another.*

The Coxes' front yard garden will include many herbs and vegetables that come in handy for Priti Cox's Indian dishes. Eventually thriving are okra, green chilies, Swiss chard, a curry leaf tree, eggplant, and tomatoes. Stan Cox reports that reaction from neighbors and sightseers has only been positive.



Left: Haeg outside his geodesic digs. Above: Haeg's book documents "...an attack on the front lawn and everything it has come to represent."

He recounts one of his neighbors being interviewed by the media. "She told ABC cameras, 'Well, when they started tearing up their yard, I thought, what the heck's going on over there? But once they got it done, I liked it.'"

Clarence Ridgley's home is nearly 1,500 miles from the Coxes', located in a Baltimore neighborhood. When Ridgley decides to expand his small backyard garden in 2008, he comes across Haeg's Web site while surfing the Internet for some how-to gardening tips on planting blueberry bushes. He learns that the Contemporary Museum in Baltimore is sponsoring an Edible Estate. Ridgley applies, and Haeg flies to Baltimore to meet with him and eight other applicants in person because it's important to Haeg to select homeowners who have some gardening skills and will be articulate spokespeople for their garden. Ridgley is the one Haeg chooses.

Ridgley, who has lived in the neighborhood for 20 years, knows his neighbors but mainly through hand waves and head nods. Once his front yard becomes an Edible Estate, though, he finds his neighbors regularly dropping by to visit. One neighbor down the street even uses Ridgley's garden for her own crops.

And when local middle-schoolers come by as a part of a field trip, some of

the students are surprised to learn that tomatoes grow on vines. "They must think tomatoes grow in a supermarket," Ridgley laughs. Now the neighborhood kids like to pick and eat fruit from his garden; his strawberries are the most popular, and because he doesn't use any pesticides, no washing is necessary. Ridgley and his neighbors hope to work together so that they diversify what plants they grow on their respective properties in an effort at collective gardening across many front yards.

In the past three years, other Edible Estates have bloomed across the country—Maplewood, N.J.; Austin, Texas; and Lakewood, Calif. There is also one in London, England. With each Edible Estate, Haeg works closely with the homeowners to create a garden endemic to their needs and wants, both in the architectural design and in the selection and diversity of the edibles. Local neighbors, arts students, and friends help with the planting.

In the process, he says, people get to know each other—Republicans, Democrats, Independents—it doesn't matter. They are bonded by a common interest of how to best use a previously manicured residential resource. And, by the way, they're eating more healthfully and reducing their grocery bills. The evolution of his project is detailed in the book

### *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn* (Metropolis Books, 2008).

Like its creator, Edible Estates defies labels—it's part social activism, part gardening, part art. It caught the attention of the curators at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, who invited Haeg to be one of the artists of last year's Biennial, calling him "one of the 81 most interesting contemporary American artists currently working today."

For the Biennial, Haeg created an offshoot of Edible Estates—Animal Estates. He built homes for animals that are having difficulty sharing Manhattan with their nearly 2 million human neighbors. For the displaced native species, he created a 10-foot-diameter bald-eagle nest, a barn owl nest box on a telephone pole, a wood duck nest box over a beaver pond, a big brown bat house, an opossum rock pile, and a bobcat hollow tree trunk. After the exhibit, many of the animal estates were donated to a Manhattan public park where the animals have rent-free digs.

Meanwhile, the seeds of Edible Estates have taken hold. The author/architect/gardener/artist plans to continue impacting the country—in a way that Fox News and MSNBC can never match—by helping to create more Edible Estates in the United States, not in the red and blue states. ■

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