

mood swing
DESIGN SPRING 2008

A Fertile Imagination

THE ARCHITECT-ACTIVIST FRITZ HAEG DOESN'T LET THE GRASS GROW UNDER HIS FEET. SUSAN MORGAN DIGS HIS VIBE.



Garden party A gathering at one of the architect Fritz Haeg's Sundown Salons in Los Angeles.

In the late spring of 2006, Fritz Haeg spent a frenzied Memorial Day tearing apart a suburban front yard in Lakewood, Calif., a tidy postwar planned community 25 miles south of Los Angeles. Working with a crew of volunteers, three sod cutters and a temperamental rototiller, Haeg ripped out all the neatnik grass, turned the soil and planted crops. "It was so stressful," he recalls. "We had all our machinery break down. After three days of planting, I was destroyed." Although the lawn didn't even belong to Haeg, the big idea behind the transformation, Edible Estates, was his alone.

An ingeniously subversive landscaping manifesto, Edible Estates proposes that homeowners banish grassy vanity lawns and replace them with harvestable gardens. Since its inauguration on July 4, 2005, in Salina, Kan., the project has delawned yards and planted regional vegetables as far away as Maplewood, N.J., and London; a demonstration garden is also growing at Descanso Gardens in Los Angeles County. Last month, Metropolis Books released "Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn," which chronicles the first four makeovers.

Among the book's contributors are the environmental journalist Michael Pollan (a contributing writer for *The New York Times Magazine*) and the landscape architect Diana Balmori. Haeg's own essay, "Full-Frontal Gardening," is a vibrant mix of memoir, history and wake-up call. "Jefferson reinforced an attitude toward our national landscape that we are still living with today," he writes. "Roll out the lawn and hide the crops! Given Monticello's early influence, how would American neighborhoods look today if Jefferson had decided to plant his food in front of his house instead?"

By training, Haeg is an architect. But his genre-defying work displays a brilliant synthesis of refined design principles, optimistic spectacle and homegrown activism. "I like the idea that all these projects happen under the rubric of an architectural practice," he said on a recent afternoon while pouring tea in the kitchen of his Los Angeles home, a vintage

geodesic dome. "As a discipline, architecture is highly collaborative. It's really an organizing principle, a way of bringing disparate things together that spans the arts and sciences."

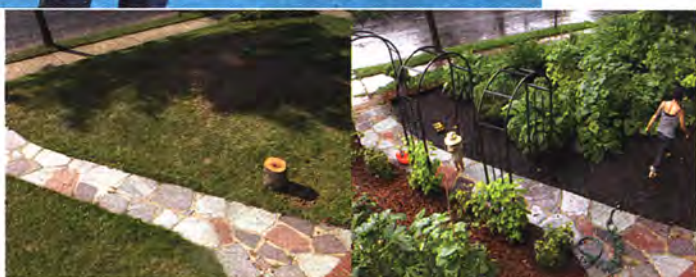
When Haeg, 38, bought the dome near Mount Washington, just north of downtown Los Angeles, in 2000, he was a recent transplant from New York, a young architect with an expansive, idiosyncratic outlook. "It's really outsider architecture," he says. "Half dome, half subterranean cave." He reckoned that since the dome wasn't particularly domestic (it is, in fact, now on the market), he would reconsider it as a semipublic setting and invite people to stage events in the "absurd spaces." Over the next five years, the Sundown Salon provided a venue for hundreds of artists, musicians, writers and designers. "Each salon was catalyzed by a friend with an idea, an inspiration," Haeg says. "Knitting, boys, animals, haircutting — and it grew from there."

His own work also grew, with one thing inevitably and organically leading to another. In 2001, while teaching in the Department of Environmental Design at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, a school that produces both conceptually driven artists and high-profile car designers, Haeg made an observation: "I noticed that nobody at school ever went outside." (The main building is a glass-and-steel rectangle designed in 1976 by Craig Ellwood.) He established an on-campus community garden and called it Gardenlab; faculty, students and staff were encouraged to claim one of 30 designated plots within the school's 175 wooded acres and use it as "a laboratory for messy experimentation and observation of natural cycles."

Gardenlab sprouted from what Haeg acknowledges as a "utopian fantasy": he had imagined that people would become passionately devoted to designing in sync with ecological cycles, and he could picture the black-steel Modernist box of a building looming over a lush, productive garden. Although the reality fell "somewhat short" — the gardens failed or flourished, were neglected or plundered — Haeg remained optimistic. "I



Seeds of change
Haeg in his dome,
above, and his
transformation of a
suburban lawn.



realized that ecology projects related to design were a permanent part of my practice,” he says. And the front lawn seemed like an especially fertile place to create something in the public realm. “It really cuts across all layers of American society,” he says. His idea is that the traditional lawn — a functionless monoculture — devours natural resources, contaminates the environment and eradicates native plants. The Edible Estates project has escalated rapidly, a sort of grass-roots movement without the grass.

The eldest of five children, Haeg was born in St. Cloud, Minn., and grew up in the suburbs of Minneapolis. Architecture was his first love: on family road trips he would sit in the back of the car, reading *Architectural Record* and studying floor plans. Haeg’s father and several uncles had been educated locally at St. John’s University, a campus famed for its collection of buildings designed by Marcel Breuer. “Being there, and around those amazing Breuer buildings,” he says, “had a big influence on me.”

By the time he arrived in Los Angeles in 1999, his architectural obsession had already evolved into a substantial professional life. A 1992 graduate of Carnegie Mellon University, he’d studied with Aldo Rossi at the Instituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia and worked for Cesar Pelli in New Haven. After establishing his own studio in 1995, Haeg was doing what he refers to as “the kind of projects that young architects do, apartment and loft renovations,” and making paintings that he is considerably less keen to remember.

“I’d spent a year between architectural jobs, living on very little money in a farmhouse in Tuscany and making really bad art,” he recalls. “My parents came to visit and wanted to know what I was going to do next. I said that I’d probably go back to New York and get another architecture job, and my dad said, ‘No! You should get a job as a waiter so you can be an artist and do your own work at night!’” In a wonderfully comic reversal of parental expectations and filial responsibilities, Haeg returned to New York and tried to get hired as a waiter. “After several weeks, I finally gave up,” he recalls. “Within one day of applying at architectural firms, I was back in an office.”

Haeg doesn’t have a succinct answer as to what initially brought him to Los Angeles. “A lot of projects were finally wrapping up, and I knew I wanted to have more connection to the natural landscape,” he suggests tentatively. “There is something liberating about living here — the sense of experimentation, freedom and space. The clichés are actually true.”

Meanwhile, Edible Estates continues to spread, promoting further architectural cross-pollination. For the current Whitney Biennial, Haeg has developed *Animal Estates*, a variation on his theme. The idea is to reintroduce animals that have been displaced by urban expansion. “The way that architecture is practiced tends to be very passive — waiting for clients,” he says. “With *Animal Estates*, I know who my clients are and I’ll make work for them.” Among his Whitney clients are a bald eagle, a big brown bat and a northern flying squirrel, all original Upper East Side residents. Their newly created homes will be situated along the entry bridge and within the sculpture court of the Marcel Breuer-designed museum. “My dad,” Haeg says, beaming, “is very excited.” ■