

sculpture

May 2009
Vol. 28 No. 4

International Sculpture Center
www.sculpture.org

**Nature and
Culture**



\$7.00US/CAN



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Above, left and right: *Edible Estates Regional Prototype Garden #5: Austin, TX, 2008.*

Before and after views of work installed at the Sierra Ridge apartment complex. Below: *Animal Estates Regional Model Homes 3.0, 2008.* View of tree swallow estate at MIT, Cambridge, MA.

Fritz Haeg's





Alternative Possibilities

BY MARTY CARLOCK

Fritz Haeg doesn't like to make objects. He is a mover and shaker who parachutes into a locale and shows people what's possible: "Working with local people, I'm a catalyst for something to happen." He admits that his role isn't clear. "What is art? What is an artist, a designer? I have no idea—that's the point. I'm thinking about how people occupy the land. How do I live here?"

Visitors to the 2008 Whitney Biennial encountered some of Haeg's objects in *Animal Estates 1.0*, a multi-part installation in the courtyard and on the exterior of the museum. As is usual with his work, it grew out of the site. "The question is," he says, "what can happen here that can't happen anywhere else? What is possible here at this moment?" At the Whitney, he built 12 homes for animals who lived on Manhattan Island 400 years ago and are unlikely to return any time soon—a huge, twiggy eagle's nest over the entrance canopy, a barn owl box looking like a mini-Whitney, and a stylized beaver dam and lodge in the

courtyard. "The point is to acknowledge what was there," he explains. As a follow-up, Haeg and 18 students built 18 birdhouses for tree swallows and American kestrels at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Center for Advanced Visual Studies, using plans from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

Initially, Haeg's work might seem identical to projects produced by a Cub Scout troop. In fact, he seldom creates anything that, on the surface, looks unusual. (His architecture is something else again.) For instance, photographs of his *Edible Estates* depict lush gardens in front of ordinary houses, but the story of how those gardens came to be there is unique. Haeg chose residences in Levittown-type settings, where every house has a tidy, uniform front yard. Finding enthusiastic householders, he designed one-of-a-kind vegetable gardens, recruited volunteers to help plant them, and raised funds for topsoil and plants. It became a community happening, with the

bonus of food for the residents. "After the [2004] election," he explains, "I got hung up on the Red State/Blue State thing. I started wondering, what kind of project could I do that could be viewed and discussed by an art critic in New York, a friend in L.A., my aunt in New Jersey, and somebody in Nebraska, and they would all get it. I realized that the space of the front lawn cuts across every barrier. Almost everybody has one. This space is so charged with energy and so terrible. Cities are engineered for isolation on every single level. They prize as little eccentricity as possible, as much control as possible. How can we introduce evidence of our own lives back? I wanted to create a place for people and plants to have communion."

Haeg envisioned *Edible Estates* as a way to take back this hostile no-man's land, a make-over. "People are ready," he says. "It's a public declaration about who you are." The first *Edible Estate* was built in Salina, Kansas, at the heart of the country, in July



Above: *Animal Estates Regional Model Homes 1.0*, 2008. View of beaver pond and lodge at the Whitney Biennial. Below: Before and after views of *Edible Estates Regional Prototype Garden #1: Salina, Kansas*, 2005.

2005. It was followed by one in Lakewood, California: "I wanted to make it very decorative, so I designed spiral-shaped beds. You'd be walking down the street past dried-up front lawns and see a little cloud of hummingbirds, butterflies, and bees."

The Internet produced volunteers to install the beds and the plants. Haeg likens the process to barn-raising: "Everywhere we did this, kids showed up wanting to dig. It was, 'Can we plant a tree?' The kids take ownership of these gardens." Other gardens have been planted alongside the Tate Gallery in London and at an apartment complex in Austin, Texas. In such places, Haeg says, nobody feels any connection with the land—until the garden is created.

In some cases, neighbors have objected to the departure from uniformity. Showing a slide, Haeg recounted, "One lady hated this garden, absolutely hated it. Every time a bird or a squirrel showed up, she'd call and say, 'You're attracting wild animals.'" But the homeowners themselves love the

gardens. With the vegetable garden in the front yard instead of in the back, passersby stop to chat as the gardeners work, recalling the community spirit and interaction once generated by the front porch.

Building community is at the core of Haeg's work. A native of Minnesota, he studied architecture at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia and at Carnegie Mellon, lived in New York, and then moved to Los Angeles. He has taught at Parsons School of Design and the USC School of Architecture and Art Center College of Design. In L.A., he bought a geodesic dome on a hillside, renovated the interior, and installed extensive gardens. He realized that his house seemed isolated: "I didn't know anybody, and after New York, where everybody lives so close, I didn't know what to do."

Haeg started hosting Sunset Salons, themed gatherings open to all comers, recruited by his postings on the Internet: "In practicing architecture, you sit and

wait until somebody comes along with money and *allows* you to build—or in art, to show. I decided to create my own opportunities." Haeg's salons were usually all-day events. There was an all-day knitting session—"people all over the house, knitting, teaching other people to knit." Friends wrote and performed *Nightmarathon Hextravaganza*, a six-hour morality play. There was a literary salon, when people read from their works, then split up and wrote on their own. Unlike ordinary, invitation-only parlor salons for artists and literati, Haeg's events are open to anyone and gather people who don't know each other beforehand: "I don't know if this would have been possible without the Web site. On the Internet, you can find a community of people of like mind." The salons became so popular that Haeg decided not to post notice of them until the day before, "so things wouldn't get too crazy. I would have 100 people at my house. These things galvanized the sense of community."

In Los Angeles, Haeg began growing his own food: "Events and gardening became my art factor." *Edible Estates* is an outgrowth of that interest, and *Animal Estates* is a spin-off from that. Similarly the salons became *Schoolhouse* events—a 12-hour day once a week for 12 weeks to delve deeply into one idea: "In *Schoolhouse*, for the first two hours, we didn't speak. It was entirely non-verbal—movement, dance, yoga. We got to know each other physically by sharing space."



One event centered on the theme *Tobe apart*. Haeg explained that it was about “how to maintain your identity and be a whole individual, but also become part of something bigger. It was surprising how quickly the group bonded.” The session ended with the members taking a 12-hour bicycle tour to each other’s homes. One participant made red capes for everybody to wear as they progressed through Los Angeles: “There’s a feeling that if you’re serious about something, you should be alone. Anything social is dismissed.”

His events, Haeg says, come from “a desire to understand the role of art. What does it mean to make art today? When you go to a performance, that’s an experience you buy for yourself. You expect to have sacred experiences in churches, or in art museums, profound experiences. I’m suspicious about the forces around those places of power. I have the salons to demonstrate that religious places and museums aren’t the only places for a profound experience.”

Lately, he’s been obsessed with dance: “The forms are so ephemeral. It’s like gardening. In gardening, everything changes all the time.” He recently organized *Dancing 9 to 5* at the Whitney Museum. Dancers led various segments with differing movements, one as simple as walking back and forth for an hour. Haeg says that his aunt from New Jersey showed up and participated: “It’s my litmus test. If kids can’t get into my art or my aunt can’t get into it—there’s not much there. What I’m after is an art that doesn’t marginalize itself so that only an elitist group can enter into a discussion of it. But you don’t want the lowest common denominator, either. Art should touch something that we all share.”

After 10 years of teaching in colleges, Haeg has realized that formal education is a “highly isolated separate way. You go to classes, and you think that’s where learning happens; you leave and you think, ‘OK, learning stops now! What most people think of as wasted time, ‘junk time,’ is where the most meaningful learning happens. I’m creating bridges.” Haeg’s goal is to show people alternate possibilities: “All you need is that door into another way of doing things.” He loves the juxtaposition of community gatherings made possible



Above: *Edible Estates Public Demonstration Garden: Descanso Gardens, 2008. View of Installation at La Canada Flintridge, CA. Below: Edible Estates Regional Prototype Garden #4: London, England, 2007.*

by a Web site, saying, “On the surface, you have a sort of primitive, stone-age project, but it’s propped up by technology.”

As a long-term project, he envisions a capitalist commune: “I’m interested in failed utopias, why they didn’t work. This one would recognize that we live in a capitalist society, but we can take from it what we want. We would all own our own land, but we would grow our food together. We have fetishes about technology, and we totally ignore issues about occupying the planet.” Haeg is direct about his skill at promoting his ideas, saying, “I have to develop an identity for a project. I hate the terms ‘branding’ and ‘marketing,’ but in this case I’m ‘branding’ something that has no market—the thing we desperately need but nobody’s going to pay for. Language is so powerful; if you give something a brand, it has legitimacy.”

Questioned about the fact that the movement toward local food has thousands of people already growing gardens, Haeg said, “The project as I framed it is promotional.

I’m not an expert. I consult experts. I consult *The Complete Guide to Edible Landscaping*, published 30 years ago. The point is to give people license to do things they’re not professional at. We feel we don’t have license to step out of these little boxes. For the rest of it, I depend on the experts.”

He adds, “I’m in the art world right now because there’s no other place for what I do. It’s one of the only places in society that doesn’t demand an economic return. Projects can fail, do fail. That’s part of the story. I dislike art that tries to solve social problems. I’m interested in revealing the stories about how we’re living today, in making work about it. It doesn’t mean you solve it or change it. I’m bearing witness. It’s being an honest voice for what you see around you. It’s not necessary for people to have a profound experience with the work. I don’t make art *about* things. I make art that totally *is* the thing.”

Marty Carlock is a writer living near Boston, Massachusetts.

