

Ethical Beef • The Return of the Poetry Scene • Go Geothermal?

august 2008 issue no. 50

urbanite

50th ISSUE



TRUE STORIES

Shocking tales of drama and intrigue from...
Jessica Anya Blau • Andria Nacina Cole • Tim Kreider • Richard O'Mara • Jim Sizemore

photo by Leslie Furlong



Lawn art: Clarence Ridgley in his yard, now an art installation by artist/architect Fritz Haeg.

Gardening on the Edge

On a blustery day last February, internationally known artist/architect Fritz Haeg took a tour of Baltimore front lawns. The lanky 38-year-old, whose studio is in a geodesic dome in the Los Angeles hills, pulled his jacket tight as he visited nearly a dozen yards; he was looking for one that was “iconic,” “conventional,” and “American.”

Haeg had come not to admire a lawn, but to destroy one. Baltimore was to be the next location for one of his “Edible Estates.” In his book, *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn*, he dubbed the concept “a place-responsive landscape design proposal ... a conceptual land-art project ... a defiant political statement ... and an act of radical gardening.”

Haeg had created these high-concept installations in yards from New Jersey to London, and in early 2007 Baltimore’s Contemporary Museum commissioned him to create an Estate here. The museum sought out homeowners willing to have their front yards transformed into art. Haeg poked around several prospective candidates with little enthusiasm. Then he reached Clarence and Rudine Ridgley’s trim brick home in the city’s Callaway-Garrison neighborhood, just north of Forest Park.

Clarence, a nighttime supervisor at a plastic bottle factory, had run across the Haeg proposal online. He’d been looking to do something different with his yard. “I had zeroed in on blueberry bushes,” he said.

Haeg liked the yard—and its affable owner—right away. “I liked everything about it,” the artist said later over hot tea. The project “will really stand out on his street. You will be very aware that something radical has happened.”

Haeg, who grew up mowing a lawn in Minneapolis, created his first Edible Estate in 2005 in Salina, Kansas. The artist was dis-

turbed by the way the 2004 election seemed to divide the nation into Red and Blue camps. He saw front lawns as something that both united us and kept us apart. “The front yard is just an enormous amount of space that we dedicate to something that has no function and actively isolates people from any sort of public realm,” he said. “This is a very strategic intervention on a piece of land where public and private meet.”

Two months later, over a long weekend in late April, Haeg arrived at the Ridgleys’ house with more than forty volunteers, including several Maryland Institute College of Art students. They joined the Ridgleys’ friends and family in a cross between a community cook-out and an Amish barn raising. The workers buried the Ridgleys’ grass beneath mounds of rich compost donated by the city and installed plants, many provided by Mount Washington’s Green Fields Nursery. Clarence got his blueberries, along with twenty-eight other types of fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Where the Ridgleys’ front lawn had been, there was now an organic garden.

Six weeks later, photos, tales, and a video of the making and maintaining of the Ridgleys’ Edible Estate became part of the Contemporary Museum’s *Cottage Industry* show, which runs through August 24 (see www.contemporary.org). A photo of the yard appeared on *Time* magazine’s website.

On a balmy summer afternoon, Clarence trotted down his front steps to inspect the progress of his art installation. A few baseball-sized tomatoes were beginning to redden but weren’t ready for the salad bowl yet. The finger-sized zucchini were likewise too small for eating, but he hit pay dirt at a nearby beet patch, pulling up a handful of plump, bulbous roots. “I’ll cook these tonight,” he said. “My mother just gave me a recipe for them.”

Past Edible Estates have sparked controversy. In some communities—parts of Columbia, for example—strict land-use covenants prohibit front-yard vegetable gardens. “Neighbors sometimes see the gardens as something wild and unwelcome,” Haeg said. “They represent anarchy to some people.”

Up Clarence Ridgley’s way, however, all had been warm and welcoming. Many of his neighbors had worked wheelbarrows and shovels on planting day.

“Yeah, my neighbors love the garden,” Clarence said with a grin. “They send their kids over here to eat my strawberries.” ■

—Brennen Jensen

Web extra: See more photos of the Ridgelys’ yard at www.urbanitebaltimore.com.