



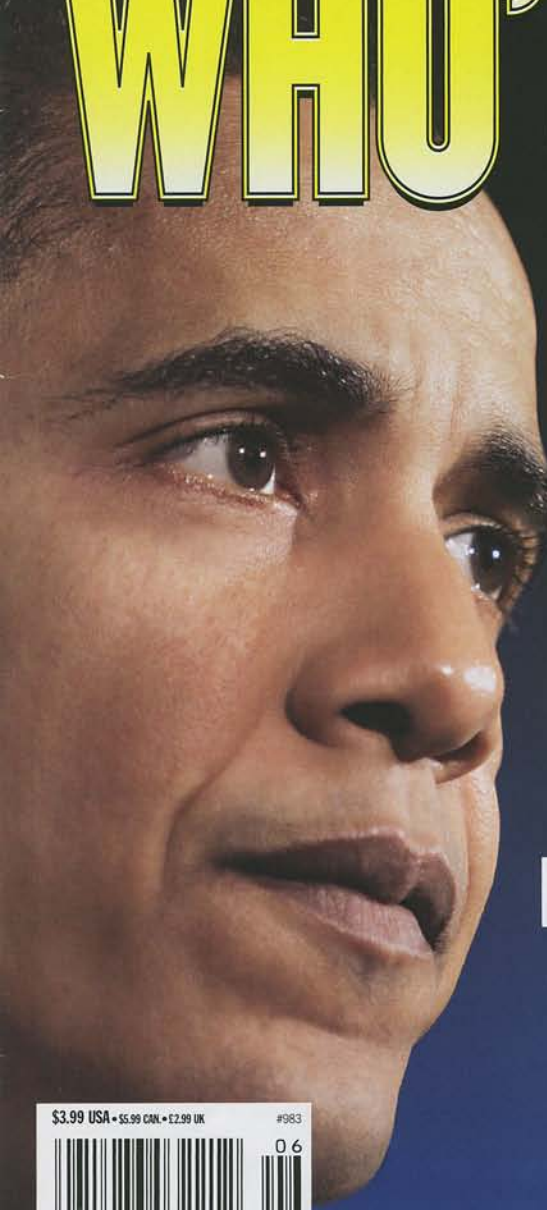
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## PEOPLE

# The greening of Fritz Haeg

Architect Fritz Haeg was a Manhattan power player who designed all the right spaces. Now he's creating the good life in Los Angeles with a hip school, edible landscapes, and one really gay house **By Rachel Dowd**

**F**ritz Haeg's house feels like the kind of place where daydreams are hatched, secret messages are decoded, and mysteries are solved. Maybe it's the birds' nests on the windowsill or the sleeping nook hidden behind a painting. Maybe it's the circular staircase descending into a subterranean space or the kitchen windows looking out into tree branches. It's not exactly the vibe I had expected from an architect living in a geodesic dome in the hills of Los Angeles. But it suits Fritz Haeg perfectly.

"The house is bizarre, but it has played a huge role in my work," explains Haeg, 37. "I'm a big believer in this idea of architecture and environment and the space you occupy dictating the life you're able to lead. There's a life that grew out of this house—it was the catalyst."

It's safe to say that whatever you first learn about Haeg isn't the half of it. He's been an architect for more than a decade. In his high-profile days in New York City, he worked on notable projects like the Tate

Gallery and Peter Jennings's apartment.

These days he's into a more West Coast sensibility. He's the creator of the Los Angeles-based project Edible Estates, which replaces suburban postage-stamp front lawns with cultivated gardens of fruit, herbs, and vegetables. And he's the founder of the Sundown Schoolhouse, a 12-week course focused on "the gently radical design, literary, performing, and visual arts" operated out of his home.

But Haeg, who's out, is also a lecturer, ecologist, sculptor, gardener, thinker, yoga practitioner, and ring-leader. Everybody knows him or knows someone who does.

"He has so many different kinds of things going on," says friend and photographer Eve Fowler. "He comes from a big family, which is probably why he feels comfortable with chaos. He'll have 100 people in his house. It's very Andy Warhol."

Haeg's creative life seems chaotic, but only from ►







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A school day in the dome

the outside. “We’re so quick to compartmentalize people: ‘Oh, this is the ecology garden person who probably drives a Prius and does yoga,’” says Haeg, who actually drives a Volvo station wagon. “Part of my work is involved in making beautiful things, and sometimes my design is just about that and isn’t obsessed with saving the world.”

It’s a bit surprising when you consider that seven years ago Haeg was living the architect’s life in New York City, a dream he had focused on intensely from second grade through the architecture program at Carnegie Mellon University. Then, suddenly, he wanted to escape.

“It’s architecture with a capital A in New York,” he says. “I was really in a rut and confused how this was adding up. The

way I saw it, there were two choices: I could start over entirely with a new career, or I could move to L.A.” Haeg spent that first year on the West Coast with nothing but dogs and his garden. Such solitude seems remarkable now that it’s hard to imagine him with a moment to himself.

Haeg says his busy life isn’t completely frantic because all of his work fits into three overarching disciplines: architecture and art, ecology, and education. Or, as Haeg describes them, ecology, “the relationship between us and our environment”; community, “the relationship between us and other people”; and poetry, “the quality of our experience.”

Everything Haeg is or does—whether it’s a one-day performance art project at New York City’s Whitney Museum or a

morning yoga class in his all-blue studio—flows through those channels.

“There’s great freedom in realizing that whatever I wake up interested in that day, or whatever opportunity or project comes along, there’s a place in my practice for it,” explains Haeg, who counts Andy Warhol, Buckminster Fuller, and Gordon Matta-Clark among his greatest inspirations.

“I’ve always been drawn to people who dealt with big, global, societal issues and took on a lot of different media,” he says. “I call it ‘big work.’ Those are careers that age really well. You can be 80 and still discovering new work, and challenging yourself, and doing scary things that are new to you.”

If any one part of Haeg has been underplayed, it’s his sexuality. An article pub-



An edible estate in Lakewood, Calif.





## “A lot of times you come in as the gay architect into the straight family, and you feel like the court jester: ‘Let me make your life all gay and happy and pretty.’”

lished in *The New York Times* last July hinted at his being gay when it described his Sundown Salons, the precursors to the Schoolhouse, which opened this fall: “The once-a-month gatherings...[have] included traditional literary gatherings as well as gay and lesbian performance art and all-night knitting and ‘make your own pasta animal’ sessions.”

“Straight people didn’t notice,” says Haeg, “but all the gay people were like, ‘Ah, you’re gay, right?’”

Truth be told, most of the Salons had suggestions of gay (“Hot Rods ‘n’ Hot Pants”) if not an outright declaration (“Boys! A Very Gay Salon”). “I always liked to think we had these very diverse events with music, art, performance, and dance,” he says, “but I’d go back and think, *This is all pretty gay; every other event has some gay subtext to it.*”

“You would never think Fritz was not queer,” says lesbian poet and writer Eileen Myles. “But I think of his space as one of generosity, which is inclusive. Gayness is one feature in a many-featured gesture.” Frank Smigiel, the manager of adult pro-

grams at the Whitney Museum and a fan, considers Haeg’s take on his sexuality a sign of evolution: “Fritz is of that model of ‘We’re not queer; we’re postqueer.’ Homosexuality is a form, not a content. It’s a master note, but there are a lot of songs playing. It doesn’t have to be paraded as the gay part of the lecture.”

And yet it deserves play, says Haeg. His focus on what it means to be gay and create things in a gay community has become stronger and more obvious. Once again, there’s a house to thank—a mid-century Spanish colonial that Haeg redesigned for a gay couple in Los Angeles’s largely gay Silver Lake neighborhood.

“When I showed up for the meeting we

sized each other up right away,” says Haeg. “We had this moment where we immediately bonded. A lot of times you come in as the gay architect into the straight family with the kids, and you feel like the court jester: ‘Let me make your life all gay and happy and pretty.’ There was a certain sophistication about design and a desire for that to be visible that I think most straight couples wouldn’t be quite so consumed by.”

The house is a balance of high-concept significance and senseless beauty. There’s mica dust glitter in the stucco and a sealed terrarium in the center of the house containing orchids and ferns and epiphytes. Each room is a different color, becoming progressively more colorful the further you go into the house, and they are visible from the outside by holes in the house’s white exterior.

Haeg laughs. “One of my clients said, ‘Oh, my God, this is just like the new Helmut Lang collection with the holes.’” ■

