

Avant Gardeners

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Foreword by Martha Schwartz

Fritz Haeg

Los Angeles

Provocative horticultural installations in suburbia.

Fritz Haeg is an artist, architect, teacher, activist and gardener, and Gardenlab (the name a satire on the idea of the computer lab) is one of several ongoing projects in his portfolio of work. 'American colleges have invested a great deal in "technology" to support the curriculum,' Haeg explains. 'Computer labs are always a priority. Meanwhile, the principles of the natural organic cycles of our ecology that define the world we live in, and upon which we all depend, go unnoticed. The designers and artists who will shape our future environment need to understand the complexity of the natural world they will be affecting.'

The Gardenlab manifesto reads: 'Inspired by the garden as metaphor and laboratory, Gardenlab initiates ecology-based art and design projects. Gardenlab seeks to fundamentally shift the current self-reflexive culture of art and design, where formal novelty, hermetic discourse and the latest software dominate. The Gardenlab provides a balance to these forces by provoking thought on the interdependent relationships that define our communities and environment.' The ecological activism of Gardenlab is so strongly focused that its physical incarnations effectively tip the work over into the realm of conceptual design, even though Haeg's impulses and ambitions are quite different from those of most other designers featured in this book.

The most successful Gardenlab projects have been the Edible Estates at Salina in Kansas and Lakewood in southern California (opposite); another is being constructed in metropolitan New York, and a further eight are planned countrywide. Edible Estates are agit-prop artistic

RIGHT Haeg orchestrates a wide range of activities from his headquarters, a geodesic dome in a garden setting that serves as both studio and schoolhouse. Sundown Schoolhouse, Los Angeles 2004.





statements about the redundancy of the American lawn, in that the front lawns of two suburban plots have been taken up and replaced by vegetable gardens. 'I dislike the idea that plants grown for food are ugly, while the lawn is beautiful,' Haeg says. In brochures printed to accompany the Edible Estates initiatives, Haeg writes stirringly of his mission: 'Edible Estates is an attack on the American lawn and everything it has come to represent. Why do we dedicate so much land to a space with so little function, but [which] requires the consumption of so many precious resources and endless hours of maintenance while contaminating our air and water?'

'The American lawn is almost entirely a symbolic gesture. Exactly what it represents has shifted from its ancestry in English estates to today's endless suburban carpet of conformity. The lawn divides and isolates us. It is a buffer of antisocial no-man's land that we wrap ourselves with, reinforcing the suburban alienation of our sprawling communities. The monoculture of one plant species covering our neighbourhoods from coast to coast celebrates puritanical homogeneity and mindless conformity. The lawn devours resources while it pollutes. It is maniacally groomed with mowers and trimmers powered by the two-stroke motors responsible for much of our greenhouse-gas emissions. To eradicate invading plants, it is drugged with pesticides which are then washed into our water supply with sprinklers and hoses, dumping our increasingly rare fresh drinking water down the gutter.

ABOVE This Edible Estate project is the prototype garden, located in a Los Angeles suburb. Planted over Memorial Day weekend in 2006, the garden was the basis for the Machine Project exhibition later that year. Edible Estate, Lakewood (California) 2006.

Edible Estates proposes the replacement of the American lawn with a highly productive domestic edible landscape. Food grown in our front yards will connect us to the seasons, the organic cycles of the earth and our neighbours. The banal lifeless space of uniform grass in front of the house will be replaced with the chaotic abundance of biodiversity.'

Haeg views this initiative as a way of reconciling two big problems facing the West: land use and food production. 'To some people [the idea of growing your own food] is shocking. In the US we have become profoundly disconnected from our food.' The relationship between humans and the Earth's ecology represents the conceptual core of all Haeg's activities. He adds: 'The garden is the perfect example of how we as humans can learn to occupy the planet in a more thoughtful way. The garden is what humans make to feed ourselves. Where we grow food, it's scary, industrial, there are chemicals and machinery. But when you eat out of your garden, you don't dump things in it that you don't want to eat. It's very direct: you understand the connection. The more disconnected we become from the garden, the more reckless we become with the way we occupy the planet.'