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MAY 2008





“LAWNS ARE NOT GOOD OR BAD IN THEMSELVES. IN ENGLAND, THEY MAKE A FAIR AMOUNT OF SENSE CLIMATICALLY. I’M INTERESTED IN EXPLORING HOW THEY’RE USED IN OUR SOCIETY TODAY.”



Call him a Renaissance man. Or maybe a hippie. Either way, Fritz Haeg won't mind. One day, he might be hosting a highly curated artists' event at his Los Angeles home; the next, he could be planting zucchini. His new book, *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn*, documents his efforts to replace front lawns with organic fruit and vegetable gardens, starting in Salina, Kansas, in 2005. A series of *Animal Estates* – sculptural dwellings for animals unwanted or displaced by humans – is currently on view as part of New York's Whitney Biennial. And this month, he delivers a keynote address at New York's International Contemporary Furniture Fair. *Azure* contributor Josephine Minutillo met up with Haeg in February to talk about his growing interest in putting human well-being and collaboration before the creation of physical objects and spaces.

**Josephine Minutillo:** You've been given a lot of labels: architect, designer, artist, landscaper, environmentalist, educator, activist. Do you prefer one?

**Fritz Haeg:** I like to have them all out there in circulation. Before I moved to Los Angeles seven years ago, after living in New York for five years, I was doing all these things simultaneously, straddling different disciplines. I was very confused by it. In New York, we tend to like our disciplines highly divided, with capital letters: art with a capital A, design with a capital D. People come to New York ambitious to pursue a particular discipline and immerse themselves in its

community. That's beautiful, but it can also be constricting if what you want to do isn't that clear.

**JM:** You have your own very interesting way of labeling your projects, though – *Edible Estates*, *Animal Estates*, *Sundown Salon*.

**FH:** My work involves anything from dance to making buildings to planting gardens, so I found it helpful to give things names and identities. I hate when people talk about branding and marketing; it turns me off. Yet in some ways I realize that's what I'm doing. *Edible Estates* is hopefully a very savvy marketing campaign to give identity to something that doesn't have one. Previously, people growing food in their front yards were seen as crazy hippies, whereas now having a book and a name and a title has legitimized their actions.

**JM:** So they're not crazy hippies anymore?

**FH:** No. Now people can say, "I'm making an *Edible Estate*," and it sounds very legitimate and proper.

**JM:** Why is community involvement such a focus in your work, even if with the *Edible Estates* that just means neighbour reactions?

**FH:** Architecture had always been my focus. That's my training, and that's how I still practise at times, using all those skills and ways of bringing complicated things together. But instead of being focused on physical object making or space making, I've become more and more interested in gardens, people, movements, dance, gatherings and happenings. So the focus is always first on life activity in some way, and then on whatever grows out of that. But the generator isn't form or esthetics. Any esthetics or beauty in the work is a natural by-product.

**JM:** Let's discuss the title of your book. It's intriguing that you called it an "attack" on front lawns, as if they were evil.

**FH:** The title comes from the first sentence of Jane Jacobs' book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*: "This book is an attack on current city planning and rebuilding." It grabs you and basically just says that what we're doing and the way we're heading is crazy. I'm really fascinated and excited by these moments in culture – theory, architecture, art, writing, whatever – when someone comes and sizes up a situation: everyone was looking in one direction while Jane looked in another. The first message I want to try to get away with when I talk about my book is that a front lawn is neither a good nor a bad proposition. To me, the project is more a provocation toward thought.

**JM:** So no moral judgments involved?

**FH:** Lawns are not good or bad in themselves. In England, where they come from, they make a fair amount of sense climatically. It's just how they're used in our society today that I'm interested in exploring, specifically what happens in that space between the public street and the private house. You have a choice in how you occupy your land,

especially when we're facing these global environmental crises. How does an individual react to challenges that are no longer regional but global? In a capitalist society, one of the few places you can enact real change immediately is your private property. One of the early ideas about the American front lawn is it was a democratic space, and by tending your lawn you were tending part of a communal, semi-public space covering the whole country. But it's also a very repressive space that assumes a very homogeneous society. I like the idea of a landscape that is very diverse and reflects local tastes and cultures, personal tastes – one that encourages expression rather than repression.

**JM:** How does making your front lawn an *Edible Estate* make it more public?

**FH:** Because as soon as you're growing food in your front yard, you're out there every day, and by nature you're seeing people every day. And they, conversely, are wondering what you're up to, asking questions, making suggestions.

**JM:** Tell me about the experience in the six *Edible Estates* you've worked on so far. Was it difficult to find people to volunteer?

**FH:** In Salina, it wasn't difficult, but in L.A. it took me about seven months to find a family, because I really wanted the project to be on one of those endless streets. I found the family in Lakewood, one of the early suburban housing developments outside L.A., dating from the same time as the creation of Levittown, New York, where the American front lawn was born in some ways. The families are really important. They should be gardeners and willing to engage people about the project.

**JM:** Why is it important for you to have an art institution sponsor each of the *Edible Estates*?

**FH:** A lot of the original concepts for the project came out of an idea to partner science and art. It's not strictly a political, environmental, scientific or artistic project, but all of them put together. Contemporary art is one of the few places in our society where there's freedom to explore things that don't have a commercial market.

**JM:** It's interesting to see the kind of press the project has garnered from so many different outlets.

**FH:** Yeah, the Christian Broadcasting Network did a piece on it. A lot of mainstream media do stories on it, not understanding its background in the contemporary art world. I like the idea that there's this project that all these different communities are looking at, without being aware of each other. The environmentalists may not be aware that the project is part of contemporary art culture, but they don't need to; the same thing goes for the art community. And that's the point. I want the project to speak to everyone. I want my relatives in the Midwest, who don't know anything about contemporary art, to have an equally valid experience with the project as an art critic in New York.