

CONTROL



ISSUE SEVENTEEN

Buildings, Gardens & Happenings

My background is in architecture. That is what I have wanted to be since I was six years old. I don't think it would be overstating things to say that I was obsessed with buildings. During long car rides in my teens I would bring a tall stack of Architectural Record Magazines to study. I would analyze each building, the floor plans, walk through it in my head. I had little interest in people. I suppose I was something of a loner through high school. Buildings were my escape, a place of perfect control. Messy problems were solved in a permanent and stylish manner. But I have gradually strayed from the straight path of the architect.

I think most people that become architects want to exert some sort of control or influence over their world, and by extension, the world of those around them. This is the sort of person that actually believes that they know what is good for other people, or how they should live, or move, or look at things, or relate to each other. That requires a very particular sort of person. Along with this, often goes the belief that architecture is actually permanent, which of course is not the case at all. In Los Angeles, where I live, many buildings are actually quite disposable. Many are built to last 30 years, which is a blessing. Most of these buildings we would not want to pass down to the next generation anyway. We build for the moment. We build what will turn a profit, fulfill a momentary need and pay for itself right away.

I have become very ambivalent about the making of buildings. There is something so violent and willful about making a building, so much hubris, so much energy and waste. I always have to think twice about making a building. Since moving to Los Angeles from New York in 1999, I have become much more enamored with gardens. I never have that hesitancy associated with buildings. A garden is always a good idea. There is something so benevolent about it. I think the garden in its purest form is the ultimate human creation that acknowledges our complete connection to the land. The garden that you eat from demands a certain attention and care. It is understood that what goes out the window into that garden will ultimately be ingested. The circle is complete and evident.

In 2005 I started an on-going project that I call Edible Estates. It involves removing domestic front lawns and replacing them with highly diverse and organic edible landscapes. A space that once divided residents from their neighbors now connects them. A space that once contributed to pollution and guzzled fresh water now produces food. I'm creating a series of regional prototype gardens around the world. These gardens may encourage others to follow suit, but I am really most interested in setting up a chain reaction of thought. People might be lead to think "I own land and I have a choice to make about how I will use it". In a capitalist society, one of the most powerful tools that the individual has for change is how they choose to use the property they own. Suburban Edible Estate gardeners become performers for their street. Children see first hand where their food comes from.

Since moving to L.A. I also started staging a series of salon events at my geodesic dome house in the hills of Mount Washington. After moving from New York I thought I would be swallowed whole by the suburban

oblivion, never to be seen again. A series of gatherings of writers, dancers, artists, performers, musicians became a way to galvanize a community and a moment of physical connection in a city that is engineered for isolation. Again, I considered these salons to be a model, and not just some random one-off parties. What if everyone used their home as more than just a place to live? Dead neighborhoods with nobody on the street, miles from any store or school or park would be activated by a diversity of gatherings and functions. When people are isolated from each other, the fabric of that society begins to deteriorate. When the public is not provided a forum to gather, share ideas and make their opinions known in large or even modest ways, they no longer feel they are a part of the society they live in.

This interest in gatherings, events and happenings most recently manifested as an event in midtown Manhattan. The Whitney Museum had invited me to do a project at their space on 42nd Street across the street from Grand Central Station. It is the center of buzzing business activity, everyone in suits rushing from subway to office, to cab, to lunch, to elevator, to train. Bodies are hunched up, shoulders high, arms locked, legs in rhythmic marching or shuffling movement. What may be true in mild weather is exaggerated in the coldest days of winter when people move from point A to B with little pleasure or expression in between. For this space in mid-January I developed the project "Dancing 9 to 5". A recent obsession with dance inspired me to consider how people move in this space and how other ways of moving could be offered. I invited some of the most innovative dancers in New York to propose movement workshops that would be offered for free in the space for one day. From 9am until 5pm anyone could register or drop in for a free opportunity to reconsider how they move. Over 20 diverse classes were offered. In one class, students learned the dance from Michael Jackson's Thriller. In another, we were taken on a very slow and methodic three hour journey from total stillness rolled up in fetal position on the floor to a frenzied thrashing on our feet. In one of my favorite workshops, students walked in step with the teacher. First they walked to one end of the space and then turning around together they walked to the other end. Again they turned around, feet in lock-step. This went on for an hour until the last lap, when they didn't turn around, but instead walked together out the front door and into the thick of midtown rush hour foot-traffic.

On the surface it appears I have moved quite far from buildings and the job of making them. But in some ways I have never felt closer to it. I have become keenly aware of the complex and unpredictable human life that buildings need to accommodate. I have become more respectful and humble in the face of the almost sacred natural ecologies that we place our buildings in. Lately I have come to regard buildings as nothing more than fluid membranes that some how need to reconcile the needs and desires of the lives inside with impossibly varied environment outside. The building becomes a shell that is useful for a moment and can then be changed, rearranged or even reconstituted. It is a record of a momentary human thought or need that needn't be precious or fetishized. Now I am much more interested in people and places, and buildings that don't acknowledge the messy thrill of these become a bore very quickly.



Dancing 9 to 5



Edible Estate

Fritz Haeg