

Katie Holten  
*Paths of Desire*

# Edible Estates

Fritz Haeg in conversation with Katie Holten over lunch in New York.

**Fritz Haeg:** Control—it's about absolute domination of the landscape and repressing anything that's unfamiliar or unexpected—the same reason people want McDonalds and chain retail stores.

**Katie Holten:** Yeah, a lot of people seem to feel threatened by the unfamiliar and it seems that that's why my prairie failed to happen in St. Louis. What about your *Edible Estates* project—isn't that imposing an unfamiliar landscape on suburban front lawns?

**FH:** The *Edible Estates* project isn't about convincing anyone of anything. We're working with people and families who want to do it. The owners of the gardens are meant to be avid gardeners already—it's not about converting those people. The garden becomes a spectacle. It's propaganda to encourage other people to do it. A public spectacle of defiance. Demonstrating to people where their food comes from. It becomes a demonstration of how you have a choice about how you use your private land. The most basic thing as humans is growing our own food. Once we stop being nomadic the first symbol of that is to grow our own food. But it's not just a political act, some eco-green, save-the-planet project. A lot of people assume it is, but it isn't. It might sound really tired, but it's true—I think the idea of it is beautiful. The very notion of that act is really beautiful and to me that's enough. And that's all I really need to see happen. And whatever spills out from that could be some revelation of the truth of the world that we're living in, good or bad. And if nobody else does it because nobody has time—that's a truth that we should look at, "oh, isn't that interesting that we don't have time to grow our own food but we have time to sit on the freeway for an hour, watch TV for 3 hours. . ."

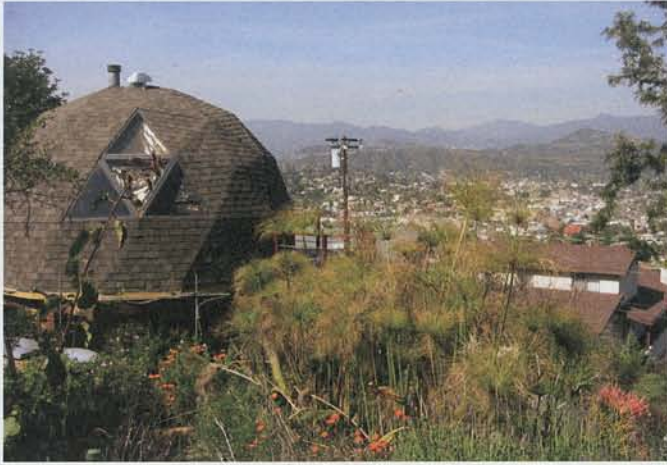
**KH:** When did you start the *Edible Estates* project?

**FH:** Well, you know the interesting story about it is that it all started with the presidential elections in 2004. I'd been doing a lot of ecology projects since 2001 and at the end of 2004 I shut down my life and I went to Australia to take some time off. And then after those elections—after looking at the red and blue states—I really felt very deeply that I wanted to do a project that wasn't so insular. In the art and design world we're so focused on these little worlds in New York and L.A. and we're only talking to ourselves. I wanted to do a project that was for mainstream, middle America—the red states. I wanted to do a project for them. A project that would leap over conventional art audiences. So, I put out the word. I said that I wanted to do my next project in the geographic center of the country. A curator invited me to go do the project in an art center in Salina, Kansas, which is the center of the country, geographically. That's also where the Land Institute is. And then I landed on the idea of the front lawn being the territory to work in. The first garden was done in 2005, right when I met you.

**KH:** That's interesting—I thought the 'lawn' was the starting point—I didn't realise that it came from the elections.

**FH:** The garden and the lawn were just vehicles to have a conversation that went outside these little, hermetic, art and design world settings. I think we both have the same feelings about that. We're both drawn to scrappy, little spaces and places outside this highly commercial art-fair world. I'm really just interested in that basic idea of taking a space that was polluting, toxic, fake, isolating, useless, and hostile, and replacing it with something that's the opposite of all those words. It's gracious, welcoming, productive, healthy. . .

**KH:** Sounds great! That's why I wanted to include *Edible Estates* in *CLUSTER*—it's such an optimistic and hands-on project. It seems to be more about just getting stuck in and doing what you and the people you end up working with want to do, rather than worrying



left and right: Fritz Haeg's garden overlooking Eagle Rock, Los Angeles, 2006.

about it being an 'art project'. Same thing applies to the *Sundown Salons* that you organized in your home. I was sad that we didn't have time to have *CLUSTER* Salon.

**FH:** *Edible Estates* was a wonderful experience. The first one we did was in Salina, the second was in Lakewood, California, and the next one will be planted in New York. That's going to be at the end of May. ABC news productions is really interested and they're pitching it to cable networks. It's interesting because the whole project grew out of wanting to do a profoundly rigorous project that was for the broadstream American public. So, it's actually. . .

**KH:** Made for TV. . .

**FH:** Yeah, in a way. It plays into a lot of TV models. I've come 'round to the idea and ABC is really behind it. If the TV thing doesn't happen then I'll just produce it myself.

**KH:** Do you think the TV show will really work—aren't you worried that you could be misrepresented?

**FH:** The TV show is a weird incarnation of the project. I can imagine that with some projects the TV show could ruin the whole premise. But with this I hope the TV show will make it more pronounced. Who knows? I hope so! Have you seen the documentary *The Future of Food*? It was an exposé on industrial food production, Monsanto in particular.

**KH:** No. But it sounds like the *Omnivore's Dilemma*, which I'm going to read with the book club in St. Louis. I heard Michael Pollan on NPR when the book came out. He was so coherent.

**FH:** Yeah, I'm such a Michael Pollan fan. I've written him a fan email! I want him to contribute to the *Edible Estates* book. I think the interesting thing about him is that he's a writer first. I think that's really important. There are a lot of people interested in these issues but they can't communicate them. . . Do you spend much time in Ireland?

**KH:** Everytime I travel I pass through my mum's house. It's my base, I suppose—all my banking's done from there! I love my mum's garden and living on the edge of the bog, surrounded by fields.

**FH:** That's what I've enjoyed about L.A.—it's a very watered-down suburban version of the ideal—having a garden, a quiet, productive life connected to the outdoor world while being a part of everything. I'm craving a life that's much simpler, that doesn't involve cars at all, which you can't have in L.A. Or you can, but it takes a lot of work. There are people who don't have cars in L.A. They bike everywhere. It's a beautiful idea, but I'm super-efficient and I need to do everything super-speedy. There's too much I want to do in a day and I couldn't do it on a bike!



Fritz Haeg's *Edible Estates* in Lakewood, California, 2006.

**KH:** Yeah, I heard about cyclists when I was in L.A. but I never saw any! Okay, so as you don't cycle, do you have time for your garden?

**FH:** No—Katie you would be so depressed if you saw my garden! The irony is that the more time I spend on *Edible Estates* and everything else, the more my own garden just languishes. When I moved into my house I wanted to plant everything—so I planted a lot of things that need water and a lot of looking after. But now everything that needs help I'm letting go. I'm only going to plant natives and edibles. The fruit trees are staying.

**KH:** Weeds, what do you think about weeds?

**FH:** [Chuckles!], I guess I discriminate. Grass is my problem—not wild grasses, but lawn grass seed—that's the one thing. My ideal garden would have some profound underlying structure in terms of organization and geometry and paths and spaces—highly structured with basic perennials, woody things, fruit trees, vines and things like that—that then is allowed to fall apart. So you can have wildflower seeds pop up in unexpected places.

**KH:** Like an English wildflower garden?

**FH:** I like a fusion of both—of hyper-controlled French and Italian lineal paths—that you then let fall apart in places! You've seen my garden—it has some of those things already.

**KH:** Yeah—paths, pond, trees, and the view—the grand vista with the mountains on the horizon. It's almost a classical garden. A fabulous location to hold your funky gatherings—the *Sundown Salons* and *Sundown Schoolhouse*—bringing a wild mixture of people to hang out up on the hill overlooking the city of Los Angeles. . .

**FH:** The idea that always sticks with me is that 150 years ago, with the industrial revolution at the turn of the century, there was a period of 50-100 years where, basically, we threw out millenia of development in terms of how to build, how to plan, how to just be connected to where we are. With plate glass, air conditioning, steel, cars, cheap energy, we were given this little bubble of time where we felt like research possibilities were endless. We had the luxury, if you can call it a luxury, of not having to pay attention to specificity of place anymore. And that's going to be a very short window as we realize that we can't do it anymore. We just threw away thousands of years of understanding of place. It's like a break in the line of communication in development. You look at animals developing over millenia, like termite towers—so much smarter than anything we could do. We're starting all over again, in some ways.