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# greener than grass

Architect Fritz Haeg is on a mission to turn America's front yards into farms.

The Los Angeles-based artist and architect **Fritz Haeg** wants to destroy your front lawn. Having declared war on lush tracts of what he sees as pointless green, Haeg can regularly be found donning yellow garden clogs to labor in the dirt, tearing established sod from suburban earth and replacing it with food-producing gardens. Under his movement, Edible Estates, instead of sweating out summers with lawnmowers and weed whackers, you could be harvesting juicy tomatoes, crisp green beans, plump eggplants, and enough exotic herbs to make your foodie friends jealous.

But it's not just about the food. "The lawn is an actively antisocial space that also requires a certain amount of maintenance and resources, which are wasted on something we don't even use," the 38-year-old Haeg tells me when we meet up in New York. "Growing food is one of the most

signers like Capability Brown, and proudly rolled out at George Washington's Mount Vernon and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. But it has since lost its image of opulence. Hoping to inspire homeowners to follow his lead, Haeg is in the process of establishing nine prototype front-lawn gardens, each with a unique design tailored to its regional climate. Using volunteer labor and plants donated by local nurseries, he symbolically established the first garden in Salina, Kansas—near the geographic center of the continental United States—on Independence Day, 2005. "Like most homeowners, I was tired of cutting the grass," admits owner Stan Cox, who, along with his wife, Priti, was happy to see the lawn go. Instead of grass trimmings, the couple now harvests everything from strawberries and peaches to Swiss chard and green chilis. "We probably met more of the people on the block, and had more interaction with them, because of the garden," says Cox, who is quick to point out

that he spends about as much time pruning and weeding as he previously invested in mowing, but that "it's much higher quality time." And he's had no complaints from pesky neighbors.

Putting calls out on the Web for other willing homeowners, Haeg soon found families in Lakewood, California (a suburb of Los Angeles), and Maple-

wood, New Jersey (a suburb of New York), and deftly disposed of their lawns as well. London's Tate Modern caught on to what was happening and commissioned him to build one for a public-housing complex in a neighborhood just south of the museum.

Those first four gardens, along with a number of essays about the evils of the lawn, are the subject of a new book, *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn* (Metropolis Books). In it, Haeg lays out a call to arms—or at least shovels. "A small garden of very modest means, humble materials, and a little effort can have a radical effect on the life of a family," he writes. Still eager to prove his point, Haeg recently landed in Austin, Texas, for a grass



**SOD OFF**

One of Haeg's prototype gardens takes root in suburban Maplewood, New Jersey.

basic acts of civilization. And yet, we've come so far away from that."

Edible Estates aims to address a host of issues, including water usage, pesticides, global food production, and human relationships. "Private property is one of the

few places where each individual has some control over the direction they want the world to go in," says Haeg, who, standing six foot three and sporting a shaved head, looks like he's not afraid of getting his hands dirty. "I'm interested in people rediscovering their sense of power."

The closely cropped lawn—once a status symbol—was popularized in the 18th century by English landscape de-



## LAWN SOWER

The Edible Estates pioneer at his geodesic-dome house in Los Angeles. Comme des Garçons coat.



extraction, and is gearing up to establish another prototype garden in Baltimore, Maryland, under the auspices of the city's Contemporary Museum, later this month.

"Fritz deliberately chose the suburban lawn because people spend so much time cultivating uselessness there," says Shamim Momin, a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, which recruited Haeg for this year's Whitney Biennial. "He is reconceptualizing it as something that brings people back to ideas about where things come from, what they are, and how we live in the world. If you imagine these things virally moving out, the kind of effect they could have is extraordinary."

Yet just as Edible Estates is gaining momentum, Haeg is using the biennial to launch a new chapter—Animal

Estates. "I'm making regional model homes for different animals," says Haeg, who already has seven related projects planned for locations from Anchorage, Alaska, to Utrecht, the Netherlands.

Populating the Whitney's entrance and sculpture court until June 1 are a 10-foot-wide nest for bald eagles, a pond and lodge for beavers, a hollowed-out tree for bobcats as well as thoughtful structures for barn owls, wood ducks, purple martins, brown bats, mason bees, opossums, flying squirrels, tiger salamanders, and mud turtles. "Basically, I made homes for 12 animals that used to live on that exact piece of land 400 years ago," Haeg says. "I'm still practicing as an architect. I just have animals for clients now."

—TIM McKEOUGH

*a&d* >80

Photographed by Alex Hoerner