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by
JADE
CHANG

GREENING THE

FRONT LANS



Fritz Haeg's joyful assault on the front lawn aims to put nature back into our denuded landscapes.

London photos, courtesy Heiko Prigge; Salina photos, courtesy Fritz Haeg



SALINA, KS

Fritz Haeg is very good at naming things. Sometimes the name stems from a bit of alliterative luck. Sundown Salon was the natural moniker for a five-year-long series of genre-bending salons that Haeg began hosting as soon as he moved into his iconic geodesic-dome house, which happens to be located on Sundown Drive, in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Mt. Washington. When these morphed into a more structured educational experiment, the venture was easily dubbed the Sundown Schoolhouse.

And sometimes the name is inspired by one of his idealistic antiheroes: Buckminster Fuller, Rudolf Schindler, the 1970s art collective Ant Farm, Gordon Matta-Clark. The latter's Fake Estates project led Haeg, at least nominally, to Edible Estates, an act of "radical gardening" in which suburban front lawns are uprooted and replaced with edible gardens, and its counterpart, Animal Estates, whereby native animal habitats are reintroduced into urban areas.

The Minnesota-born artist and architect has a talent for names

EDIBLE ESTATES

Corn, okra, and bitter melon have marked the Cox family's entlawn in Salina, Kansas (above), while a communal London garden has grown a vibrant salad of raspberries, tomatoes, peas, and more (below).



LONDON



MAPLEWOOD, NJ

Haeg was surprised by the special bond he forged with the homeowners here. "I'm permanently a part of these people's lives now."



is debonair; in the spangly outfit and eye makeup that he once wore to a Sundown Salon, he could be a backup singer for Ziggy Stardust; in his regular getup of worn jeans topped with an array of simple shirts made out of some avant-garde fabric, he's both attractive and slightly alien. And he has the credentials: after graduating from Carnegie Mellon and studying architecture in Venice under Aldo Rossi, Haeg worked with Cesar Pelli in New Haven and Frederick Fisher in Los Angeles while also teaching at Parsons, USC, Art Center, and CalArts. His layered, narrative-rich work has found a ready place at the Tate Modern, MASS MoCA, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, in Philadelphia, among others; his first book, *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn* (published by Metropolis Books), appeared last month.

But Haeg says, "I like the idea that my projects are better known than I am. More people probably know what the Edible Estates project is than who I am, which inverts what's more common today, where you can know someone really well but have no idea what they've ever done." In an era that loves to make stars, "artists are going to want to circumvent that and posit alternative ways of making art or being creative—for example, does art always have to be solitary?"

Though Haeg approaches his architectural work in a traditional studio way—at least the process is traditional—all of his other work depends on collaboration. "The actual thing I'm making may be quite modest, almost nothing really, like a birdhouse, but then there'll be all of this focus on it and all of this

that tell a story, names that are as accessible to a grandmother in Salina, Kansas—home of the first Edible Estates project—as they are intriguing to the art-world arbiters who help fund Haeg's works through grants and museum commissions. The names all juxtapose something warm and familiar—sunset, food, animals—with something that sounds institutional—salons, schoolhouses, estates—to merge the cozy with the apparently official. The projects themselves often feel like giant collaborative happenings where catalytic combinations of dancers, artists, scientists, storytellers, chefs, designers, and architects delve into a common theme.

Haeg's own name, though, is not nearly as important to him. It would be easy for someone with such a singular look to turn himself into a figure, a designer-as-mascot, the face of some sort of nouveau-localism art movement. He is tall and graceful: in a fedora he

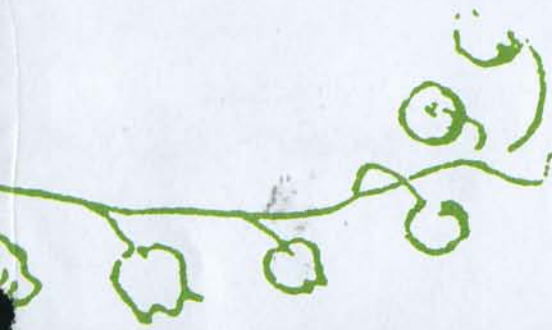
"I like the idea that my projects are better known than I am," Haeg says, "which inverts what's more common today."



FRITZ HAEG

We're living in a garden state, Haeg believes. "The air quality has changed," he says, "because the climate is changing, temperatures are changing, foreign

species are coming in because of transportation. Now that that line isn't there, how do we fold the wild or the natural back into where we're living?"



With Edible Estates, families offer up their front lawns and ecologists help determine the types of farm and garden crops that would do best.



the greatest variable of all, the audience.

In all of that there remains one constant: the dome. "The thing I love about the dome is that it was invented and not designed," Haeg says. "To me, it's emblematic of a really sophisticated, thoughtful way of making spaces for people. I like the idea of appropriating it as a readymade in architecture, as opposed to this need to be so powerfully creative that you have to invent a new space each time."

With its strength, adaptability of form, and optimal surface-area-to-space ratio, Fuller's geodesic dome retains an integrity of concept even as its structure is ever adaptable, making it the perfect symbol for Haeg's projects. The Mt. Washington dome house, where Haeg took up residence seven years ago when he moved west from Manhattan, has been the backdrop for almost all of the Sundown Salons and Schoolhouse sessions. The three-tiered structure morphs from an underground cave (Haeg sleeps in a tiny pod reminiscent of a Japanese capsule hotel) to a loftlike kitchen and dining area with million-dollar views to a giant tree house painted shades of blue with random panels open to the sky and a purple octopus mural sprawling across the wooden floor. His spry dogs, Oli and Ivy, perch on adjacent steps of the spiral staircase or rush through the grassless garden.

The dome becomes a symbolic element in much of his other work. Haeg has four geodesic tents that he uses for his traveling

In a typical 1950s suburb, the Fotis were already raising chickens in the backyard; now they have about 75 varieties of edible fruits and vegetables in front.

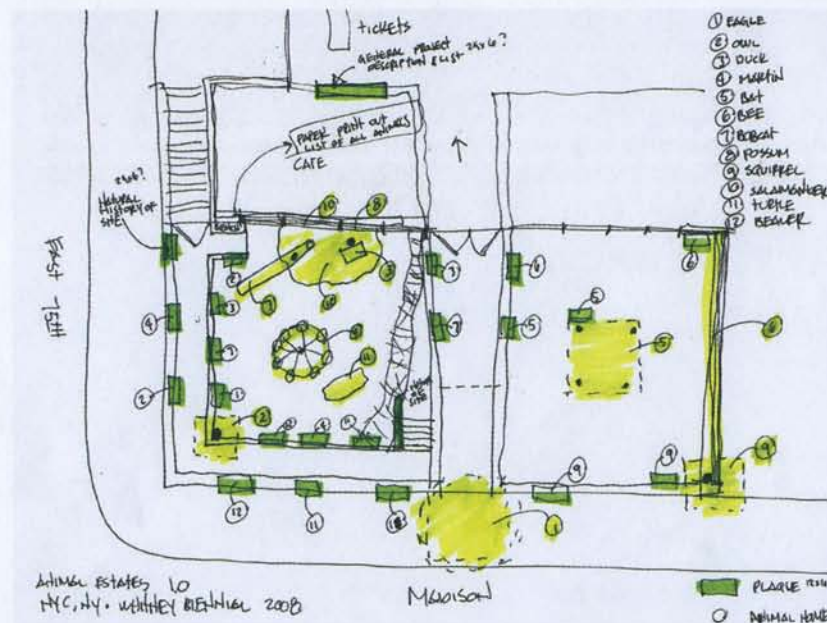
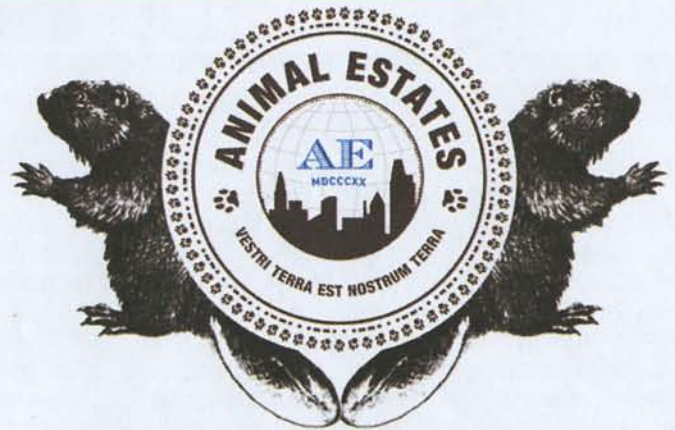
LAKEWOOD, CA

activity around it." Animal Estates, which is currently showing at the Whitney Biennial, includes installations of animal homes, Sundown Schoolhouse Guided Estate Tours led by animal enthusiasts, and weekly performances of animal-inspired movements choreographed by local dancers. "You take this little thing and you blow it way up," Haeg says. "You focus all the attention on it and you pick it apart."

"A lot of my projects are predicated upon contrast and a general 'What if?' postulation. You know, 'What if we grew food here instead of a lawn?' 'What if we made a home for animals here?' So that thought is super important, and whatever comes from that is fine. Typically what happens when an architect receives a program, or has some active influence in generating a program for a project, usually the attempt is, 'How do I wrestle with that program and make it mine? How do I control it, define it, and develop it in a way that I bring myself to it?' But for these projects, the program is the most creative gesture of all. Whatever path it takes beyond that I'm totally open to."

Most of the things that Haeg brings to a project are variables. First there's the vari-

able of the open-ended question that begins the process. Then there is the local variable: the participants that he brings in to create the project. With Animal Estates, animal-behavior specialists and zoologists will help determine the types of animals indigenous to each location to build dwellings for and where to place those dwellings. With Edible Estates, families offer up their front lawns and ecologists help determine the types of farm and garden crops that would do best. After that comes the social variable: the network of artists and performers that create events around the project. Finally, there is



ANIMAL ESTATES

Haeg's latest project is currently featured at the Whitney Biennial. An early sketch (left) shows the arrangement of the habitats. Below is the space where Haeg installed the project at the Whitney.





HOUSE ON THE HILL



"I wasn't just looking for an architect, I was looking for an idea," film producer David Bernardi says. "That's why I chose Fritz." His new home, in Los Angeles's Silver Lake district, is several ideas in one beautiful form. A renovation of an existing Spanish-style stucco house, Haeg's joyous design retains some of the sober white-stucco exterior but carves it into sweeping layers that expose a warm interior of redwood and brightly colored rooms, with a lush glass-enclosed terrarium at the center. It goes beyond the Modernism-meets-Arts and Crafts style that is popular in Los Angeles today, with a potency that Haeg attributes to the fact that it is designed for a gay couple by a gay man. "Every gay person has had that moment of reckoning

in their lives, and for a lot of them that's led to freedom from conventions," Haeg says. "This house is a celebration of that freedom."

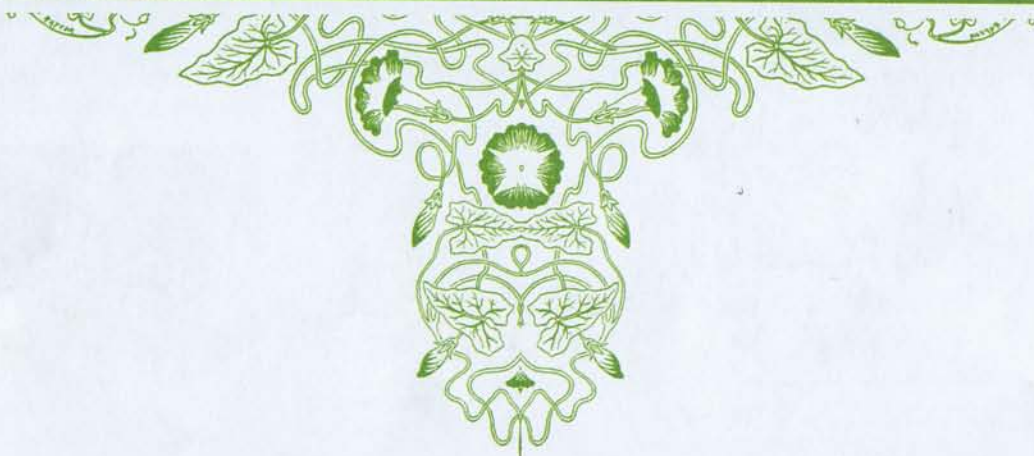
Bernardi was open to built-in furniture throughout the house (the only pieces not designed by Haeg are three Wegner chairs in the dining room), which mirrors the curves of the building. Some of the ideas in the house got their start in the Peres Projects gallery, completed three years ago. There, Haeg created a space that has a floating wall in the middle. Above the gallery is an office dominated by an oval table; below is a work space defined by an oval pit. The shapes and spaces reflect one another like the walls and windows do in the Bernardi house.

projects. One will be the headquarters for an upcoming Animal Estates installation at SFMOMA, and another acted as display space in a recent MASS MoCA show. "My work would have taken a wildly different direction if I hadn't moved in this house and had those salons. The schoolhouse, the garden lab, the Edible Estates, my design studio—those things all feed off each other in a way that I never could have preconceived. I think if I'd just done the garden, it would be very easy for that work to be ghettoized as environmental work and not seen as much else. The same if I'd just done the events or the architectural work—it's very easy for any of those things to be discussed in very narrow terms, and because I do all these different things, the conversation around each one of them is opened up a lot."

That expanded conversation allows Haeg to draw the interest of more mainstream institutions, such as the Descanso Gardens, a decades-old site near Pasadena, California,



Courtesy Fritz Haeg





THE DOME

A laboratory, a home, a social experiment—Haeg's interconnected projects mirror the structure of his geodesic dome, built in 1984. Opposite page, below right: Haeg's ground-floor work space.



more familiar with camellia festivals and watercolor classes than subversive gardening. Now headed by David Brown, former president and CEO of Art Center, Descanso recently invited Haeg to install the exhibition *Edible Estate* at the entryway. On the highly visible plot of land sits a frame house with a water-guzzling lawn to the east and a garden of edible fruits and flowers to the west. One staffer dubbed it the “polemic garden,” which Brown loves. “It’s artistic, it’s political, it’s cultural, it’s based on the way people use the land,” he says. “Fritz comes from a long lineage of artists who reshaped

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SUNDOWN SCHOOLHOUSE

A recent Sundown Schoolhouse project in Manhattan had choreographers teaching dance to neighborhood office workers.



land as a form of artistic statement, people like Robert Smithson and Richard Long.”
Henriette Huldish, cocurator of this year’s Whitney Biennial, has been aware of Haeg since friends of hers participated in a salon. “He is extremely interesting and relevant in embracing a number of disciplines in his art practice; he has an architecture background and a very pronounced interest in education. He bridges different artistic disciplines and is always reaching out to a broader general public. He’s invested in social practice and is always anchoring his spectrum of activities in things that will be accessible to a broader public.”
They’re impulses that seem to be reflected in the contemporary-art **continued on page 216**

