

FRITZ HAEG

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There were around 25 established fruit trees, mostly apples, but no gardens when I got here seven years ago. I've planted around 25 more trees, including cherries, figs, pears, persimmons, and plums. We share an apple press with the neighbours and have a big communal pressing twice each fall. With the juice we make our own apple cider vinegar, SCF ACV. The wild food and flower gardens are a perpetual work in progress, gradually terracing the land, building the soil, and establishing areas for everything from perennial herbs to annual vegetables.



I built this addition to Cabin 1 Orchard (pictured in the next few pages) by myself over the course of a couple of years. All the wood was sustainably harvested from the land and milled by a neighbour. The interior panelling is all redwood sapwood and all of the slab counters and lumber came from one massive fir tree that was in bad shape and shading the orchard. All the doors and windows came from a neighbour who has been salvaging and selling them for decades. And a provisional landscape of local thrift-store rugs everywhere.

During the lockdown, stuck in my apartment, living through screens, observing environmental disasters and massive failures of infrastructure in-between Zoom meetings, it was easy to daydream about a better way of living. A possible alternative emerged on Instagram, where Salmon Creek Farm presents its aestheticised update of communal living to 38,000 followers. Given the new global circumstances, the perception of their approach shifted from retro-counterculture fantasy to a well-organised, pragmatic solution. Last June, my partner, four friends, and I escaped New York City to discover the reality behind the digital façade of what appeared to be a thriving nature-centred utopia.

Seven years ago, the artist Fritz Haeg purchased Salmon Creek Farm from the commune's original founders. Located in Mendocino (a coastal town in northern California that has a rich history of intentional living experiments), the 33 acres of redwood forest sit on top of a ridge. The dramatic landscape includes a main house, nine cabins, a greenhouse, an outdoor kitchen, a hot tub and sauna, a triangular sundeck, a pond, a creek, an apple orchard, and a vegetable and flower garden. When Haeg took over the property it was being used for rentals. With the help of a rotating community of guests he painstakingly completed a breathtaking restoration. This year, the community is celebrating its 50th anniversary.

Haeg has queered the originally heterosexual commune, which means more than a focus on inviting mostly queer guests, but also adhering to a concept of beauty as political power and a structural shift that favours a transient community over a fixed set of residents. (Haeg and his life partner, fellow architect Jeremy Schipper, are the only members that have made the place their primary home.) After a week as a guest at Salmon Creek Farm, I resolved it felt like a hybrid, drawing elements from many different typologies: nature sanctuaries, artist residencies, kibbutzim, eco-resorts, youth hostels, bed and breakfasts, summer camps, and wellness retreats. Haeg's approach to hosting shares the rigour and full-life philosophy of the Martha Graham Dance Company but combined with the celebration of queer freedom of the Radical Faeries sanctuaries. But after having the opportunity to sit down with the community's de facto leader in his recently completed kitchen, it became clear that beyond all of these other references, what you're actually living in is Haeg's most ambitious art project and every visitor plays a role in Salmon Creek Farm's grand experiment.

I read the essay you sent me this morning. The way you describe growing up gay really struck me. You said that gay kids are 'foreigners in their own families, in their own homes'. I'm impressed that your solution was to become an architect.

That's where my obsession with making environments started. There wasn't space for me, so I realised early on that if I wanted to be happy I needed to design my own space within the house I grew up in.

That impulse is the birth of queer space. Currently there's a lot of academic and institutional interest in this phenomenon—why and how people make environments that challenge societal norms.

It's something I've always been really interested in. I go back and forth between doing the work that I'm drawn to and pulling back in order to be critical of it, asking, 'Why am I doing this? What does it mean? How does it relate to other things? What's the history?' I can't act and question at the same time. In the period before Salmon Creek Farm I lived in a geodesic dome in Los Angeles where I hosted a series of salons and an alternative school. My house was an engine for my work and it was the centre of my social life. It also helped galvanise a community of LA artists at a certain time.

Were you conscious of using the dome as a project space when you bought it?

Yes. After college, I lived in New York City for five years and when I moved to California I was shocked. In Los Angeles, your community isn't delivered to you, you don't run into like-minded people on the street, you don't naturally make the connections that happen so easily in New York. So when I bought the house in Glassell Park, isolated on top of a hill, it just seemed apparent to me; if I was going to find my people and be part of a community I would have to create it myself. The house was perfect for that. It functioned as a magnet. The second or third month I was there, I hosted the first Sundown Salon gathering and continued to host them every month or so for six years. Each was centred around a topic: knitting, literature, dance, animals, gardening, etc. Each was an opportunity to explore the different strands of interest that I would later pursue in my own work. Reflecting on that period in my life now, I'm also interested in the history of the salon and the tendency for disenfranchised groups—women,

Jews, homosexuals, people of colour—to use their homes as a place for soft power. They didn't have agency in society, but their homes were one place where they could have control and exert influence. In France, certainly, you think about Gertrude Stein; I'm fascinated by how she used her home.

Because salon culture became well known through successful writers and intellectuals like Stein and Franz Kafka it's easy to misunderstand that history and view it through a lens of bourgeois privilege instead of outsider-activist culture.

Using one's space as a place for more than just private daily life is something that I've always been interested in. All my work addresses how the home can be more than a place for just private activity.

I admire that in all your projects you willingly experiment with your own life, in many regards: socially, philosophically, environmentally, and even economically. You've never been afraid to put your money where your mouth is and live fully in your ideas, trying things out, even if they're not fully resolved. During my time in LA I was figuring out who I was and what I was doing. I was trained as an architect. I worked as an architect, but I was no longer interested in making buildings. I was designing little independent projects. I never even went through the trouble of getting a licence. In that period, I didn't really have a private life; I was single and I was just voraciously interested in what other people were doing. I needed to get outside myself and outside the discipline I'd chosen. The salons let me extend myself, explore different arenas and spend time with people I was interested in. I hosted 30 events and many of the people that were involved are still friends and collaborators. All the work I've done since was catalysed in some way by those gatherings.

Sundown Salon was an elaborate platform, a unique, collaborative way of growing your creative roots, so to speak.

Those events made it clear to me that it isn't the powerful, top-down, institutional culture that's spoon-fed to us that excites me. I learnt that, at least as an artist, the most meaningful, rich culture is the one that you create yourself, among friends, and even at home.



I designated a different window trim colour for every cabin, and my cabin got my favourite, chartreuse, which I have been using on various projects all the way back to architecture school in the late '90s. I like how it vibrates with the redwood. I found this cast-iron sink lying in the meadow behind the cabin. It's still all banged up; I didn't bother to do any cosmetic patching or repairing.





The library is the heart of Orchard cabin now, and the most transformed space. It occupies the first room built on the land, a one-room communal space where the kitchen used to be. I built all of the shelving with our lumber from the land, including the fir-slab table. The fancy fern-print drapes, which protect the books from the sun, were inherited from my interior decorator uncle. And the arched window feels like it has been here forever but was in fact installed a few weeks before this photo.

Legend has it that the low-ceilinged first floor of Cabin 6 River was built by a very tall woman, requiring the construction of a higher-ceilinged bedroom above. River residents have taken the pink theme very seriously over the years and thrifted exclusively within that colour story for all furnishings, linens, and knick-knacks.

Cities are transient, which means that, creatively, your peers aren't necessarily people that share the same age as you. What's more important is the time frame you experience together in a particular scene. You end up sharing a unique worldview.

Yeah. You have the same references and the same forces informing you, like siblings. They may not even be part of your chosen family, but you end up collaborating with them because they happen to be the people moving culture forwards in your particular place and moment. 'They are your people right now' is what I would tell my students about their peers and contemporaries. You're not going

and significant to me in a way that I couldn't explain at the time. It just demanded my attention in a way that was more than just an amateur side hobby. Before I started Edible Estates I was in an extended rut, where I was confused and frustrated.

How did you come out of it?

By giving even greater focus to those peripheral activities that I was already doing and loved: the gatherings at my house, teaching, and gardening. All those activities are typically gendered female and they're all marginalised in our society. If you're coming from the great disciplines of architecture, painting,



to do anything interesting on your own. You need to be part of a community, part of a dialogue. They're part of the world that you are developing in, like it or not.

You're forced to respond to them in some way or another.

Yeah, and this feeling of camaraderie can be beautiful and it doesn't require being best friends or even being constantly in touch.

Did Edible Estates grow out of your salons?

At the time it started I was becoming more and more interested in gardening, as an activity but also as a metaphor. It became urgent

and sculpture, they're not seen as profound or taken seriously. They're also modest.

They don't offer their participants the biggest prizes of capitalism: fame and fortune. You're not engaging in those activities to get to another reward; the gratification has to come from the activity itself and the personal exchange with others in your circles.

Precisely. Gardening, hosting, and teaching are all verbs. They're actions. They're based on engagement with community and ecology. I let myself surrender to them and just said, 'OK, this is what I'm doing. This is what I care about'. At first I was disappointed that



Cabin 7 Cedar has a beautifully crafted Irimoya hip-and-gable roof, very complicated. It was built by a commundard named Slim who still lives nearby. She happened to visit us a few weeks ago and told us what a pain it was to haul all of those huge pieces of scavenged first-growth redwood lumber all the way down the hill. And she was cursing fellow commundard Moonlight, who started his simple shed-roofed cabin at the same time and was already comfortably moved in while she was still working away on the rough framing of this cabin.

I wasn't becoming an artist or an architect in the traditional sense, but I decided I needed to take my interests seriously. I didn't let them just sit on the side. Even if other people were going to marginalise them, I wasn't going to. I folded them into the centre of my practice and said, 'These activities are important. This happens to be what I care about'. That became the foundation upon which all my work is built.

Do you mind quickly explaining your Edible Estates series?

It started in 2004 during the re-election of George W. Bush. I was thinking about the

lawns, but rooftops and a community garden in London. Many are still functioning today.

At what point did the idea of a commune come into the picture?

Salmon Creek Farm was a former commune, but I wasn't necessarily looking for one. After many years of being itinerant and urban I really was dreaming of a life that was settled and rural, but I also didn't want to be isolated and alone. I wanted to be part of something bigger and still stay connected. That was the core of my idea. I would say it was a good decade of planning, plotting, and dreaming before I found Salmon Creek.



divide between red states and blue states and I felt this urgent need to engineer a project for middle America, to get out of the echo chambers of New York and LA, and I wanted to do something for the general public. I started in Kansas, the geographic centre of the country. The curator Stacy Switzer invited me to do a project in Salina. It involved an open call. I found a homeowner willing to rip up their front lawn in order to grow food and document the long-term evolution of that garden. That was my first Edible Estate, in 2005. Over the next 10 years I planted gardens in 15 cities around the world, each commissioned by a museum or art institution—not only front

After many years of public projects were you like, 'OK, I'm finally ready to take these ideas to a much higher level of commitment?'

It was a very precise moment. I was raised in Minneapolis. I grew up going to the Walker Art Center, and it really formed me. In 2013 they invited me for a year-long residency and solo show. I planted the final Edible Estate garden in the suburbs, another garden in their sculpture garden, and installed a related exhibition in the galleries. Bringing this work back to my hometown felt like the right moment to move on, a moment of resolution with that series of work, which made me feel like I no longer needed to continue it. I love dramatically

apartamento - Fritz Haeg





Cabin 3 Dawn was named after original commundard Dawn Hofberg, now our neighbour to the west, who built half the cabin, and it's been gradually growing over the years. In the early days I selected it as our communal cabin and spent the next few years fixing it up and bumping it out wherever we could to make more room for big groups to cook, eat, and lounge together. We dug out the back of the hill to make a cosy seating nook and pantry, added a front porch, popped in a triangular bay window facing the view, and replaced most of the doors and windows too.



apartamento - Fritz Haeg

ending things and dramatically starting new things—the clarity of it. You can't really open yourself fully to something new until you've closed something else. Your life is a series of strands. It's not like you stop something and then it's in the past. It permanently remains a part of you. I like that feeling of addition over time, of adding more and more layers. Every seven years or so I become an amateur or a beginner at something new. It's this beautiful way to always stay young and humble. I did this with gardening, movement, and dance, then it was handcrafts and fibres, and now it's carpentry and using power tools, which I'd never done before I moved here, and now I'm thriving with it.

So a chapter of your life dedicated to gardening, one for teaching, and one for community-building. Each area of practice and study is an essential part of what you've created here at Salmon Creek.

I never anticipated that. It wasn't premeditated and it's funny in retrospect to look back and see that the various fields of exploration and practice were preparing me for something much bigger and much more durational. Doing all those institutional projects, travelling all those miles, writing all those emails and proposals and budgets, and all the logistics left me with a life that was really impoverished in terms of actually being able to live out the values that I was exploring in my work. The life of an artist engaged in executing public projects didn't allow me to practise my values regularly in my own daily life. Really, quite selfishly, I just wanted to wake up and work outside with friends around. I wanted to settle and plant trees on a piece of land that I could watch grow for the rest of my life. I wanted it to be something that would live on after me, where all the things I care about wouldn't be seen as separate. The first few months and years here it seemed a little crazy. There were certain nights going to bed where I was like, 'What the fuck am I doing here?'

Yeah. I mean, you took a giant leap of faith by buying this land and imagining what the future of it might hold for you.

There have been many long periods of living in construction sites with everything turned upside down. It started out very slow and modest and small.

And now you said that over 1,000 people have visited since you took over?

Yes, though I really wanted to focus specifically on cultivating a regular community of people who continuously return.

From the start you knew that you didn't want it to function like a traditional commune?

I could see how people would want that in certain periods of their life, but I wanted something more dynamic, where people would come in with new ideas and leave and go back into the world and take whatever happened here with them, and then return again later. I wanted an exchange and a flow.

Well, that's probably a by-product of it being a queer space; heterosexual communes are typically somewhat organised around sharing the responsibility of child-rearing.

It's true, if you don't have kids in the mix, things can be more fluid; the structure doesn't require as much stability. The original commune had a lot of kids and that informed a lot of their choices.

But the structure you adopted requires the task of continuously organising guests, which has become a big job, I imagine.

It's constant. I'm the administrator, caretaker, custodian, housekeeper, and gardener. People are getting in touch every day about visiting and there's a calendar and a spreadsheet with all the cabins and dates and who's in what cabin, what night. Each season there's a reckoning, 'How well did things work? How should this place function? Who's here? Who's coming? Who isn't coming? Who should be here and isn't? Who wants to be here but can't be? Who has access? Who doesn't?' Originally I naively thought there'd only be one single way that people would be hosted.

We're all equal here. Everyone comes and contributes the same, but in society we're not equal and those inequalities follow us in here. Some people have more time than money, others have more money than time. Some people are eager for manual labour and find that fulfilling, a welcome change from being stuck in front of a screen all the time. Other people don't find manual labour inspirational at all and are looking for something else. There should be room here for a lot of different people who need a lot of different things.

apartamento - Fritz Haeg





Cabin 11 Carpenter is the only one named after someone else, a tribute to queer British writer and outer-cultural figure Edward Carpenter, a contemporary of Walt Whitman. We saved the cabin from the brink a few years ago, gathering a big group to fix it up. That first Carpenter Revival Week was organised by Portland artist/builder Adam Zeek and we've continued the tradition every year with a new barn-raising-like effort to make something new on the land while doing a bit of skill-sharing.

One aspect I feel strongly about is creating a space for those who don't generally feel safe or welcome in rural spaces and providing a sense of sanctuary, specifically for queer people and people of colour, for whom being in nature isn't always easy. For some people there's not even a feeling of basic human bodily safety in rural spaces. Hopefully when you come through the gates you feel like this wilderness is safe and welcoming and you can be comfortable here.

The cabins are some of the most cosy interiors I've ever experienced. How did you approach restoring them?

thing level, it probably will be the only level thing in the whole building. We also host an annual carpenter week.

How do you invite amateur carpenters?

First I invite the community members, and if there's still space I make an open call. I just sent out that email this morning. At the end of that week, we can't believe what we've accomplished. In a place where everything moves so gradually, to have that sudden burst of creation is really fun.

I bet. Upon taking this place in, I started to think about how much commune aesthetics are co-



The existing cabins were so inspiring. They were built in the '70s, and some were made by kids with no real carpentry skills. The building materials were scavenged from deteriorating chicken coops. They had few raw materials and were building with no power, so they only used hand tools and chainsaws. Since then, there've been all these hands on them over the decades. There's so much love in each of these little structures. There's a fluidity too; they're beautiful and handmade, but never precious. If you're a novice carpenter it's a very liberating place to start building because you're not going to make anything worse; you're only going to make it better. If you've made some-

opted and popularised by commercial entities like hotels, restaurants, furniture and houseware companies. They all romanticise this life. I can't articulate why, but it immediately feels different to experience the real thing.

The cabins are so profoundly human. I do think that when you walk into them, you feel it. Everything here is built at a human scale.

You've perfected a genre of architecture/interior design that's almost entirely dedicated to cuddling.

You can feel all the hands that have been involved in making them. There's a term 'spolia'; it's related to the concept of spoils of war,





Cabin 5 Walden was built, like all the others, by hand, with no power tools but a chainsaw. Quite a few were built by individual women and children on their own. Leona Walden was a single mother with a small child when she built this by herself, guided by a how-to book, with wood she had scavenged from chicken coops that were coming down in Petaluma. We're told this used to be the sunniest spot when it was built in the early '70s. But with the second-growth redwoods growing up to five feet a year, it's now in one of the shadiest spots, in the fern-filled ravine of the feeder creek.

where architectural fragments and materials are taken from one culture to build new structures for another. For example, you would take columns from a palace and repurpose them in a church. Sometimes this was a symbolic way of showing off your domination, but sometimes it was just practical: you need marble and there's marble. We do that all the time here. Our neighbour, Moonlight, who was a part of the original commune, recently replaced their wood deck and we took the best of the old pieces and built a new deck here.

It's a continuous circle, where materials, the redwood trees, the farm, even human waste from the outhouses are composted and re-used. I love your idea that beauty can be utilised as a political agent. Can you tell me more about that?

When I prepared the cabins earlier, I put flowers in all of them. But it's not just for the magazine; whenever we're getting a cabin ready for a new guest there are always flowers brought in from the garden. Our food garden is full of flowers, not just because they're beautiful, but also because they're forage for pollinators and they contribute to a healthy, diverse landscape. A flower's beauty serves a function: to attract pollinators, they're engineered to be attractive. Leaving garden flowers is something we ask departing guests to do for the next guest. It's a way to say that someone was just here, and they cared. They gathered something from outside that we've been caring for and brought it inside for your pleasure.

I appreciated that and it did make me consider the cycle of guests. You also ask former guests to write notes to future guests. Reading them, you understand quickly that you're part of an evolution, that there is no staff taking care of you, that you're taking care of each other. It's a very unique social structure, different from almost all other circumstances of public hospitality, and it's also different from how you would be hosted at a private residence. A questioning of the conventional nuclear family has been a current running under a lot of my work.

I wrote about Cruising Pavilion, a three-part international show on the historic social spaces both claimed and built for same-sex sexual exchange. Their project made it clear that in America, Fire Island and the Radical Faeries

compounds are the only places where residential architecture was not built for the nuclear family. To think about it in those terms is alarming. Queer people live the majority of their lives in an architecture created for heterosexual social structures. In this regard, Salmon Creek is a rare and important addition.

The original '70s communes, and there were a lot in this area, were mostly straight. There were some women's communes, but there didn't seem to be any gay men. I suppose they were enjoying life in the cities. When you grew up gay in a suburb or small town you wanted to escape to the city where all the gay people found each other. You needed to go where your people were, giving us the impression that queers have no place in rural areas. This also happens to be true in our contemporary art world, perpetuating a self-reflexive human-centric culture. This property is in a trust and I'm just starting the process to form an arts non-profit to run it, so that it can continue without me some day. My hope is for Salmon Creek Farm to always be available to offer sanctuary, especially for queers, to commune together in the woods.