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EDIBLE ESTATES: ATTACK ON THE FRONT LAWN
By Fritz Haeg, with texts by Will Allen, Diana Balmori, Rosalind Creasy, Michael Pollan, Eric W. Sanderson, Lesley Stern, et al.
Metropolis Books, 2010 (second edition)

Rarely does a manifesto so thoroughly convince readers of its adversary’s virtue as does Fritz Haeg’s Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn, now in its second edition. The title advertises affirmations that our garden is, indeed, holier than thy lawn, but the book’s nostalgia for a nation’s starry-eyed egalitarianism is unexpected, equally surprising in that it might be the most persuasive element in Haeg’s argument.

The American lawn is, at its heart, an assertion of our democracy. Conceived as a vast, lush, open space roamed freely by children and maintained by diligent citizens whose tidy homes are embedded in it, the lawn symbolizes the collective, protected only by neighborly obligation — no aristocrat’s high garden walls here. It’s a vision first laid out by Frederick Law Olmsted at his Riverside, Illinois development in 1868. Decades after it unfurled west and east, the costs mount: our crowning monoculture demands water, labor, petroleum, and pesticides at alarming rates.

Fritz Haeg is the founder of the Edible Estates Project, which proposes nothing less than “the replacement of the domestic front lawn with a highly productive edible landscape.” Haeg helps us see that we may be clinging to the lawn as a symbol, even as it proves to be an inefficient vehicle for the ideals it represents, and encourages us to consider edible gardens as a more effective expression of those ideals.

Six thoughtful essays, cultivated on their own 10-page plots, present context and history on the lawn/garden balance, including a healthy dose of criticism. Haeg traces the lawn from English estates to Jefferson’s Monticello to sprawling suburbs, hopeful that front-yard gardens can fulfill our desire to make our families, neighborhoods, country, and planet healthy and sustainable. Michael Pollan follows with a clear articulation of the lawn’s cultural significance, which forms the basis of a compelling argument for their tilling. Lesley Stern lingers on failings that haunt lawn culture and American democracy by extension, implicating slavery and Jeffersonian hypocrisy. A page later, Rosalind Creasy shares how her front-yard garden began as a solitary endeavor but soon became the nucleus of her community. She is surprised that she reached not just her national audience of gardeners, but her own neighbors as well.

Detailed case studies of regional prototype gardens follow, providing inspiring can-do examples from the everyman suburbs. Selected accounts by front-yard gardeners not formally part of the Haeg’s project are also included; one hails from Needham, Massachusetts. The second edition has added notable new gardens, such as the White House kitchen garden and a garden at Manhattan’s Hudson Guild, which draws upon that island’s Native American past to suggest a future.

The double-income, soccer/piano/karate lifestyle may or may not accommodate a gardening revolution. Even so, a few hours with this book will challenge the fundamental assumptions we make as individuals and as a nation.

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GREAT PUBLIC SQUARES: AN ARCHITECT’S SELECTION
By Robert Gatje
W.W. Norton, 2010

Robert Gatje is one of the most successful architects you’ve never heard of. A partner of both Richard Meier and Marcel Breuer, he has written one previous book, a memoir of his time with Breuer. In it, Gatje writes as a keen, if not terribly critical, understudy of the man known to his friends as Lajkó.

Great Public Squares treats its subject in a similar fashion: as a detailed and appreciative examination. Though not incisive or exhaustive, it serves well as a basic sourcebook. The author has drawn the squares at the same scale and orientation, and his data on their dimensions (hiding out in the last two pages) reveal tantalizing details. Who knew that Rockefeller Center and Michaelangelo’s Campidoglio share similar shapes, orientation, and width-to-length ratios?

Though the book is limited to the US and Europe, a handful of little-known gems qualify as great, among them Fountain Square of Hippocrates (Rhodes, Greece), Piece Hall (Halifax, England), and Place des Cornières (Monpazier, France). Gatje dutifully scopes out such megastars of urban space as St. Peter’s in Rome and St. Mark’s in Venice, but farther off the trampled path, he introduces us to the Münsterplätze of
Freiburg and Ulm, Germany; the Jardin du Palais-Royal in Paris; Louisburg Square in Boston; and Pioneer Courthouse Square in Portland, Oregon—all effective urban designs spanning the 14th to 20th centuries.

Gatje’s intent is also to update scholarship by Camillo Sitte (Der Städtebau, 1889) and Paul Zucker (Town and Square, 1959), whose groundbreaking analysis treated the “organized space” of squares as an artistic creation essential to urbanism. Like Zucker, Gatje considers urban squares to be outdoor rooms, defined as much by their ceiling (the sky plane) and walls of buildings as by their layouts.

So it’s curious that his drawings are limited to plans, whose color-saturated pavements, fountains, trees, and café awnings are purposeful but cartoonish; heavy black poché spilled into the building footprints further distracts from the negative spaces Gatje wants us to see (the diagrammatic mappings and overhead perspectives in Ed Bacon’s Design of Cities are more compelling). There are no axonometric or perspective drawings bringing the squares to three-dimensional life, so ground-level holiday snapshots have to suffice for experiential detail.

Even so, Great Public Squares is an accomplishment. Its simple but ambitious aim of collecting these inspirational spaces into a single volume, drawn with consistent scale and technique to invite comparison, has been fulfilled. Gatje’s text explaining the origin and current use of the squares strikes the right balance between research and readability (the unusually critical section on St. Peter’s Square is especially insightful), and the 35 selected locations are diverse enough for a study that is serious without being overwhelming. With a graphic reboot, Great Public Squares would itself be a great work.

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THE WILDEST PLACE ON EARTH: ITALIAN GARDENS AND THE INVENTION OF WILDERNESS

By John Hanson Mitchell
Counterpoint Press, 2001

Some books stay with you: they talk to you, persuade you, and change your view of the world. The Wildest Place on Earth: Italian Gardens and the Invention of Wilderness argues for an embedded connection to wilderness, wildness in all of our constructed landscapes. Accepting the argument would change how we build—and and what we preserve.

John Mitchell is the author of 10 books and countless essays and, since 1980, the editor of Sanctuary magazine, published by the Massachusetts Audubon Society. His books and essays are thoughtful, funny, often a little sad—and sometimes almost irrationally encouraging. I can think of no better companion on a journey to explore the connection between the built and natural worlds.

The Wildest Place on Earth is a very personal, and delightfully erudite, tour through the idea of gardens from prehistory to today, an exploration of the wilderness in what we have termed “wilderness.” Pan, the half-man, half-goat god of mysterious places is the guide, and the Italian Renaissance garden, with its mixture of culture and wildness, is the destination.

For much of human history, wilderness was thought of as a separate reality, a place apart. But, as our perceived dominion over the earth increased, we began to include a representation of wilderness into our constructed environments. English designers attempted to transform the landscape into a romanticized notion of wilderness, but early Italian designers chose to leave a section of their gardens untouched, an admission of the futility of ultimate control. Now, there is no part of our planet that we have not observed and very little that we have not walked. When we walk, we make a path, and with a path we transform wilderness to landscape. Our world has become a garden; now we must decide upon a design.

Our transformed world is unpredictable and often threatening. John Mitchell was tempted to retreat. He withdrew to a house in what a visitor dubbed the “Great Forest” and hoped the changing world would pass him by. It didn’t, so he moved on. He built another garden, wrote some more, and advanced the dialogue about the design decisions before us.

Today, many of our landscapes are merely obsequious accessories to the buildings they accompany. What if we reversed the equation so that our landscapes preserved and represented the natural world—and our buildings took their cues from the landscape? What if we could walk out of any building and follow a path through a garden to Pan’s domain?

Thoreau argued that in wildness is the preservation of the world; Voltaire concluded that we should tend our garden. John Mitchell persuades us that in a garden, an Italian garden, is the preservation of the world.

David Parish was formerly the director of housing and community investment for the Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston and a member of the board of directors of the Boston Society of Architects. He and his wife Shirley tend a garden in South Natick, Massachusetts.