

By Paul Gustafson

A vision of a beautiful city sparkling in the sun, a structure designed to house an entire future community. The city might be from the 21st century, but its beginnings are already here. Seventy miles north of Scottsdale, Arizona, in the middle of the desert, a skyline emerges. The name of the place is Arcosanti, Arizona, and the man directing the project is the controversial architect, Paolo Soleri.

Soleri is building this proclaimed "future city" with volunteer college students, meager funds, and an untested theory. A theory which he calls "arcology". Arcology is a philosophy of combined architecture and ecology, or the ecological application of architecture. A major part of this theory suggests that man has not yet reached his highest stage of evolution. Soleri believes man will continue to evolve on an intellectual level. According to Soleri, Arcosanti sets the stage for the "cultural explosion" of the human race.

He hopes to achieve this stage by designing Arcosanti to accommodate a population density of 215 people per acre (New York has a population density of 33 people/acre, Delhi, India has 72 people/acre). This high density is designed to allow increased social interaction to take place, which is what Soleri claims is needed for man's next evolutionary stage. Also, high population density conserves practically everything. Use of both energy and land becomes more efficient, and resources are conserved.

Despite this attempt at conservation of resources, there are many critics. Prof. Wesley Shank,


who teaches urban design and architectural history here at Iowa State, argues, "With dense population comes confusion, noise, and lack of free space. He's not working closely enough with social science people."

Besides the high population density, Soleri incorporates many incredible physical structures into his plan. Moving sidewalks and escalators to transport city dwellers are in the blueprints, as well as a giant greenhouse to grow much of the city's food. In addition, the primary source of energy will be the sun. Realization of these features; however, is far ahead.

Since construction began a decade ago, only two percent of the entire city has been completed. During that time, most of the work has been carried out by college students; students who pay \$400 each to attend a five week workshop. During Soleri's workshop, they learn various aspects of construction by actually working on the project. Also, they attend discussions dealing with the arcology philosophy and the future of Arcosanti. From these few weeks; students gain little academically. The workshop at Arcosanti lacks accreditation and less than 100 schools accept transfer credit (Iowa State does not). Arcosanti thrives and expands on each student's motivation. Because it is new, interesting, and idealistic, students believe in its concept.

Financially, Arcosanti has problems. Funding comes primarily from Soleri's ceramic bell sales, book sales, and tuition fees. There has been no consistent funding from government,

businesses, or foundations since the project started in 1970.

Theories shaping the project are untested, sources funding the construction are insufficient, and workers need more expertise and skill. Despite these shortcomings, Paolo Soleri keeps going. He commands respect simply because he doesn't just theorize and dream, he puts his dream to work. His work provokes thought. Some experts believe he may have an answer to the urban problems of today, but others think of Arcosanti as a big sandcastle in the desert. Perhaps, the real meaning of Soleri's work lies somewhere between the opposing views. Time will tell. 

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Expert Opinions:

Jerry Knox, (Prof. of Community Regional Planning Iowa State University)

"It has no real reason for existence. Arcosanti is just one man's vision and really has no relevance to the future."

"In the real world, in real cities, there are real problems. That place (Arcosanti) just doesn't relate."

Charles Quinlan, (Prof. of Urban Design, California Polytechnic State University)

"I've been associated with workshops in Arcosanti the last five years. The work going on there is extremely important. When twenty percent of the population is involved with the automobile industry, as energy supplies dwindle, an alternative living structure is in demand."

Bharat Gami, (Assistant Prof. of Architecture, Iowa State University)

"Soleri is not an average architect, he's not hireable to work for a firm and design things in an ordinary sense. He's more like a pioneer. He has strong ideas but they have no meaningful use. He's very unique, and uniqueness is his asset."

Leila Pearsall, Tour Coordinator, Arcosanti Visitor Center

"We are all uneven in our talents. Dr. Soleri has strengths and weaknesses like anybody else. He might be less talented in the area of communication skills. That weakness has kept him from convincing potential financiers of the importance of the Arcosanti project."

Wesley Shank, Prof. of Architecture, Iowa State University.

"The value of what he does kindles imagination and it may be possible, but he seems a bit carried away with his vision, it's beyond practical means. His visionary ideas are nice, but his hypothesis needs to be checked. To follow theory without small scale experimentation is both dangerous and foolish."

"Soleri's ideas provide direction, but the actual application lacks technical knowledge."

Paolo Soleri—

Paolo Soleri was born in Torino, Italy, in 1919, where he was educated and received his degree as doctor of architecture. He came to the United States in 1947 to work for a year and a half at the Frank Lloyd Wright Fellowship, and then returned to Italy for five years. There, in, 1950, he was commissioned to design and build a large ceramics factory. Since 1955, he has made his home in Scottsdale, Arizona, the site of the Cosanti Foundation.

Soleri is the author of several books explaining his philosophy: *Arcology; City of a Man, The Sketchbooks of Paolo Soleri, Mat-*

ter Becoming Spirit, and most recently *Omega Seed*.

For more information write:
Cosanti Foundation
6433 Doubletree Road
Scottsdale, Arizona
85253

Paul Gustafson is a sophomore majoring in Engineering Operations.

