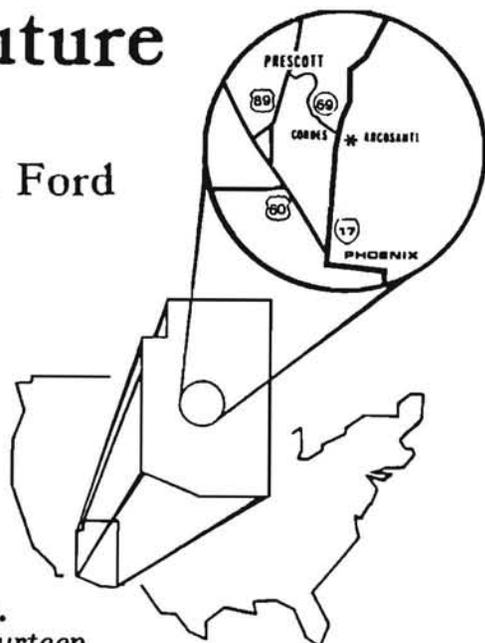


# Arcosanti Solar Greenhouse

## A Hope for the Future

by Bill Ford



### EDITOR:

*Although this article deals with describing a recent seminar, it serves as an introduction to a very large project. This important project has been under construction for fourteen years and is in the forefront of Greenhouse and Passive Solar technology. Arcosanti uses concrete as a primary construction material, but does use silt extensively as a casting medium. Cosanti, a smaller scaled site used mounded earth as forms for construction.*

### AUTHOR:

Having obtained a B.A. in architecture at the University of Arizona in 1982, I subsequently worked in Palo Alto and later Tucson, drawing, designing, and on several occasions building with emphasis on residential and contextual remodel. Quite at home again in Tucson, I have rekindled an admiration for its rustic adobes, unique vernacular, and relatively few examples of passive solar.

Of additional interest to me are the monumental problems that counter Tucson's charm; pollution, water, urban sprawl, soaring growth, erratic building activity, and environmentally unresponsive, underbudgeted development. The outcome is a wasteland of paving, numerous energy intensive structures, and the kind of segmented planning that has come to characterize the southwestern city.

What we see is no less than environmental and social irresponsibility. Urban building and planning must, above utility, be sound. These concerns are what attracted me to Arcosanti. Despite its unpolished edges and seat of the pants existence, it represents an acknowledgement of this soundness, and how I feel about the built environment.

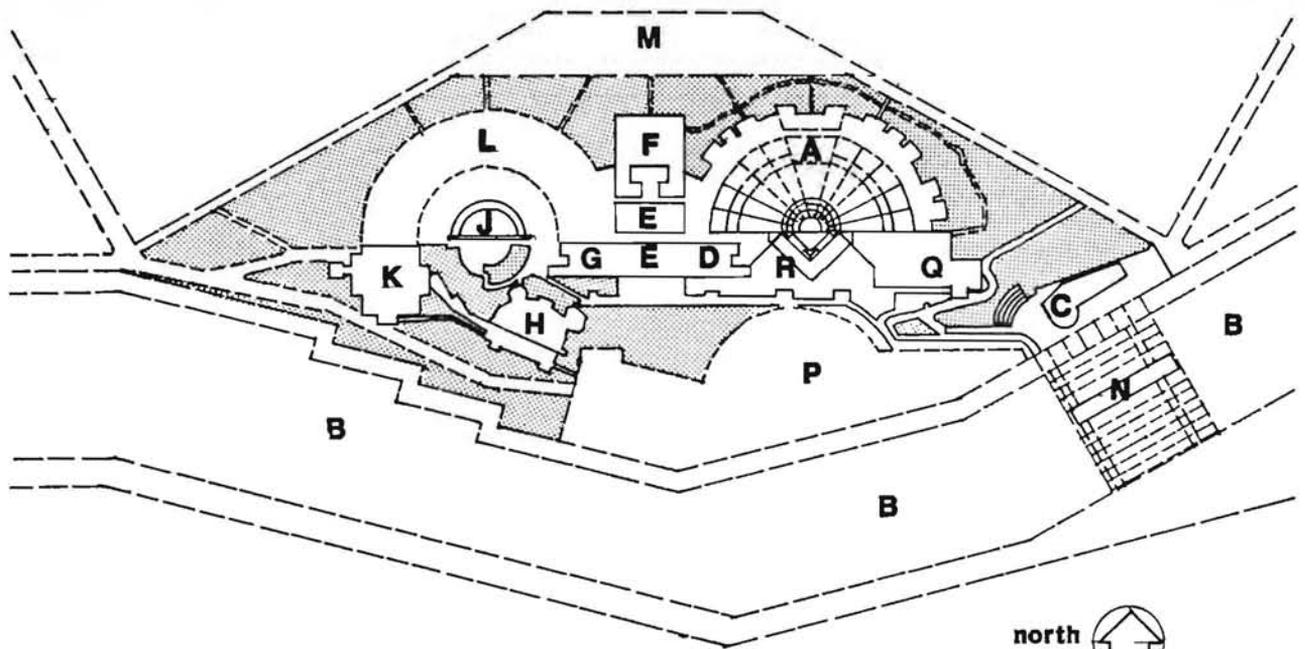
We hit the rush hour traffic about 4 p.m. as my colleague, Bob Vint, and I entered the megamania of Phoenix. We were on our way to a weekend conference at Arcosanti and were beginning to wonder if we would make it on time. The traffic moved at a snail's crawl through a lingering cloud of smog. There was plenty of time to think about the coming events during our 160 mile drive to Arcosanti.

We finally began to pick up a good pace along the northbound Black Canyon Highway, I-17. The character of the landscape changed appreciably. The highway meandered through rugged high desert mountains, in a land becoming increasingly difficult for urban sprawl to follow. Seventy miles north of Phoenix we

reached Cordes Junction, a small town buzzing with activity as travellers stopped between Phoenix and Flagstaff or Sedona. Cordes Junction also benefits from the 40,000 annual visitors to nearby Arcosanti, barely visible from the highway. A brief jaunt along a graded dirt road brought us to the ominous setting of Arcosanti, at the edge of a rugged canyon. The founder of the settlement, Paolo Soleri, refers to the site as marginal land, preferring that the gentle canyon floor be reserved for agriculture.

At 66, Soleri is entering a period in life in which many architects of his caliber and dedication bring to fruition the best of their lifelong pursuits. Frank Lloyd Wright was one such

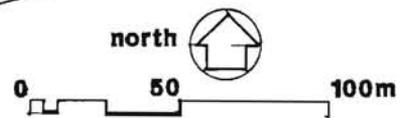
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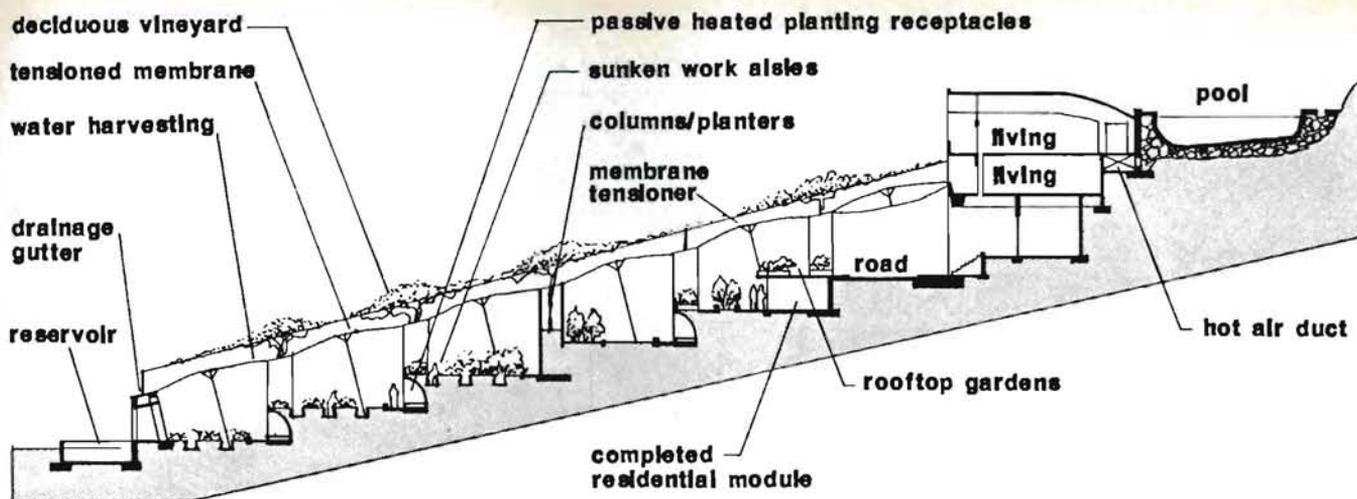
## MODEL OF ARCOSANTI

### Partial Area Plan Showing Core Development And Proposed Construction

- A east crescent
- B greenhouse
- C pool
- D east housing
- E vaults
- F lab building
- G west housing and library
- H foundry apse
- J ceramics apse
- K crafts III (visitors center)
- L west crescent
- M parking
- N first residential segment of 12 living units comprising a typical greenhouse bay
- P Tellhard de Chardin cloister
- Q recently completed drafting studio and gallery
- R music building



*Model of core development and future structures not yet built.*



## SECTION THROUGH TYPICAL ARCOSANTI GREENHOUSE

**ELEVATION:** 3700'

**LATITUDE:** 34° NORTH

**GENERAL CLIMATE:** HIGH ARID DESERT,  
MODERATE WINTER DESIGN

**GREENHOUSE BENEFITS:** GRADATION OF MICROCLIMATES,  
INCREASED GROWING SEASON,  
COOLING AND VENTILATION THROUGH THE CHIMNEY EFFECT,  
AND PASSIVE HEATING

*(Continued from page 24)*

architect, some of whose greatest works were realized in these later years. During the first half of this century, Wright's work caught the attention of young Paolo Soleri in Italy. Soleri had just completed his doctoral degree in architecture at the Turin Polytechnical Institute and decided to work for Wright at Taliesin West in Scottsdale. He arrived in the United States in 1947, worked for 18 months as an apprentice, then left, later forming the Cosanti Foundation, a small, informal development of habitat and workshop near Scottsdale. Organic in its architectural form, Cosanti was founded on the lofty premise of advancing the human condition, furthering the conservation of nature and investigating new patterns of urban development.

Soleri's theory of ARCOLOGY, in which architecture and ecology work in harmony, draws its inspiration from Wright's concepts of organic architecture. The theory was put to test in 1972, when ground was broken at Arcosanti. Since its inception, Soleri has viewed Arcosanti as an experiment. Calling it an urban laboratory, he uses the ongoing conferences and workshops held there as a primary means of learning and discourse. Topics range from architecture and technology to philosophy, theology and biology. Al DiPippo, a philosopher and guest lecturer at this fall's conference, describes Arcosanti as philosophy in action - a rare achievement in that much philosophy remains bound in textbooks.

This being my third conference, my familiarity with the project became useful upon our late arrival. The Visitor Center (or Crafts III building) was emp-



*First core unit module in the construction of the greenhouses.*

ty except for staff members preparing for later events. Other conferees were attending a scheduled concert. Bob paid for a handful of brochures and books; we registered, hurried to the music building at the east end of the complex, and stepped inside shortly before the first piece by the Tucson Chamber Players was performed. The music building, dedicated to Soleri's late wife, Colly, is among the newest completed structures. The building is a dynamic expression of concrete form, with an interior of oak and plaster. As we listened to the graceful sound of harp, flute, and cello, our attention became captivated by a beautiful sunset reflecting off mirrored mobiles suspended from

the red cliffs across the canyon.

A meal and discussion followed in the nearby Crafts III Building after which conferees began to seek their selected nightspots; in our case, Bob and I walked to the music building where visitors may stay for a small carpet camping fee. We found there a group of Arcosantians watching a spaghetti western. Bob immediately went back out to explore. I stayed to chat with Russell Ferguson, an Arcosanti resident on and off since 1975. He told me of two projects similar in nature to Arcosanti - Auroville, in India, and Findhorn in Britain. Russell had spent five weeks at Findhorn through a scholarship. In an article for the Arcosanti newsletter entitled *Fer-*

guson's View from Findhorn, Russell references these two projects with Arcosanti as being in the forefront of societal evolution. He summarized two viewpoints in assessing the priorities of these communities; we see either community emphasized before structure or vice versa. The former applies to Findhorn, where social/spiritual development is a primary concern. Auroville is characterized by a balanced approach; architectural and structural aspects play a major role in a strongly spiritual community. At Arcosanti the priority is clearly the architectural form as setting for social relations.

This hypothesis best explains why some have been disappointed with community life at Arcosanti. Current trends indicate a potential reverse in this thinking with the new greenhouse dwelling; the complex is becoming increasingly more livable.

Ensuing curiosity drove me to the library to find a book recommended by Ferguson, *Linking the Future*, an in-depth analysis of Auroville, Findhorn and Arcosanti. I read till well past midnight before returning to the music building, where I ran into Bob who had been counting the stars and avoiding Clint Eastwood.

In the morning, the traditional bronze wake-up bell sounded to announce the commencement of the day's events. The 40 conferees met along the banks of Agua Fria river, where thirteen years ago the initial base camp for Arcosanti had been set up. Soleri was already there, handing each a sprig of strongly scented lemon grass.

The camp is situated in the most arable portion of the entire site, and includes a greenhouse, a kitchen, a small octagonal community building and several simple dwellings. It is surrounded by giant cottonwoods along the riverbank to the east, cultivated fields and a peach orchard to the south, mesquite groves to the north and the higher ground of Arcosanti proper to the west. Along the mesa where the main site lies, we could see a small truck headed our way with hot

coffee and rolls.

The coolness of the high desert morning was lessened as we sipped our coffee. Soleri spoke briefly of plans to remodel the camp area for use by a small inter-denominational monastic group. New residents and workshop participants will inhabit a large greenhouse/dwelling complex under construction at the main site. Soleri then cajoled Roger Tomalty (an early resident and now agricultural supervisor) to elaborate on the concepts of the prototype greenhouse where we were gathered.

The clearest innovation is the tiered section, which allows temperature differentials to stratify at each level - thereby increasing the variety of crops that can be grown at one time. For example, winter crops (spinach, broccoli) can be grown at lower levels where the air is coolest. Further up the hillside, the microclimate is suitable for summer vegetables (peppers, tomatoes). This principle is being applied on a large scale in the first six-unit module of a new greenhouse and residential complex. In addition to food production, heating and cooling needs will be served as well. Now under construction, the new structure steps up the sloped mesa and will be spanned by a cable and membraned roof.

After breakfast the first lectures began. We gathered in the drafting

room, at the east end of the site. Al DiPippo (Professor of Philosophy at San Jose State College) introduced the conference theme, TECHNOLOGY AND THEOLOGY, by bringing into focus varying concepts of technology. Our word technology is rooted in the Greek TEKNE, meaning art and skill. This evolved to an operative concept combining art, craft, and skill and with a set of rules forming a system of making/doing/creating. In this view, it is not simply nuts and bolts, but a process which gives meaning to the term. Nuclear reactors, the space shuttle or skyscrapers are not themselves technology, but the product of a technological base involving creativity, methodology and collective knowledge. Technology, DiPippo argued, is neutral and universal. It provides us at once both the means for global destruction or solutions to worldwide human problems.

Soleri has theorized an OMEGA POINT in which technology is finally infused by theology - a culmination of human social evolution. DiPippo referenced this thesis with Christianity and its emphasis on the beginning (Alpha Point) and a heavenly end - with the distinction that humans are not conceived of as having a role in the creation of the omega point. Soleri contends (Continued on page 28)

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View of the core development with the campsite and gardens below.

(Continued from page 27)

that we participate in our own evolution. He further holds that civilization is in its infancy! God is, in a sense, technology - our collective being and understanding - or what Soleri calls the URBAN EFFECT. The cumulative effect of the tremendous forces let loose by technological advance will be the Omega Point (the culmination of evolution) or oblivion (the invalidation of evolution). Of course we all play a role and bear responsibility for the outcome of this struggle.

This idea of evolution with a destination was earlier advanced by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), French priest, philosopher, and biologist, and a major influence on Soleri's thought. Chardin held that the human species stands in the flow of its own evolution and gains meaning from its role in that process. As a Christian, he foresaw a time when faith would be guided by reason, marking a divergent change in theology. DiPippo calls this taking the leap of faith posed by the Enlightenment and 19th Century Rationalism, which had subverted the Western world view. Kierkegaard and later Existentialists saw despair, fatalism and nihilism as the only alternatives; Chardin, while recog-

nizing humankind's isolation, believed that we can build by ourselves, meaning and value. Soleri actively champions this hope.

In closing, DiPippo asked Soleri to elaborate on his theory of the INFANT GOD - a reference to the civilizing Urban Effect - that self-guiding creative process currently in its infancy. Soleri cleared his throat, thanked DiPippo for putting him on the spot, and spoke of his background and interest in Chardin. A baby in the room (truly in her infancy) cooed contentedly, setting a warm tone to proceedings. Soleri described a theory of complexity used by Chardin in explaining the natural process of evolution of an organism. Chardin extended this biological law of increasing diversity and complexity as a metaphor for human society and its evolution. Soleri has continued this line of thought in a theory of complexity, diversification and miniaturization, applied to human social evolution and its various expressions (artistic, technical, architectural). A simple way to grasp this idea is through the history of the microchip, which evolved from a large energy-intensive system to its present compactness and efficiency. A tiny wafer replaces a

roomful of vacuum tubes and transistors.

Soleri contends that in nature all organisms undergo complexification and miniaturization in their evolution, bringing them to maximum precision and efficiency crucial to continued existence. Our cities and civilizations must adopt the same tendencies or ultimate efficiency, so we may survive in a world of limited resources and growing need.

Although Arcosanti is thought by some to be a mega-structure; Soleri explains this is not the case. Cities like Tucson or Phoenix or L.A. are the true mega-structures, being twenty to thirty miles wide, with a costly and wasteful expanse of infrastructure (water, sewer, electricity, roads, etc.) used in a highly inefficient way. An ARCOLOGY (of which Arcosanti is a prototype) represents the miniaturization of the city, to conserve resources and promote community and cultural life.

Overcoming current world trends among developed nations will require profound global, political and economic changes, in addition to surmounting the age-old human obstacles of greed and self-centeredness, prejudice and hatred. It will be the evolutionary pressures of resource shortages and threatened physical and cultural destruction that could bring humankind to a new level of being. The alternative, of course, is that we humans may prove unfit as a species for further development. It is the vision of Chardin and Soleri that an evolutionary advance is within our grasp.

Following this powerful series of ideas we found a little time to stretch and get some fresh air. I explored the sunlit space of the drafting room, with its south atrium wall a pleasant place to work or meet. The drafting room forms the eastern limit of the East Crescent complex currently in construction. The semi-circular crescent, when completed, will pivot around the music buildings to meet the large existing vaults. Directly below us is yet another project ready for construction - the apse-shaped Teilhard de Chardin Cloister, which will become the focus of the night's final event.

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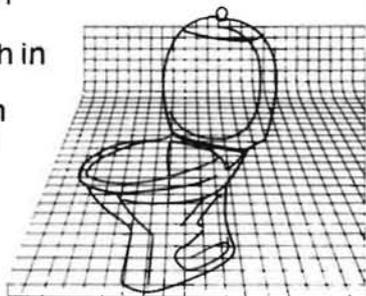
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Returning to the conference, we were introduced to Raimundo Pannikar, an unpretentious U.S.C. philosophy teacher of East Indian and Spanish origin. Dressed in simple robe-like attire and endowed with enthusiasm and a uniquely expressive vocal manner, Pannikar sought first to dispel the elitist view that lecturers must be distinguished or separate from the masses. Satisfied he had made his point that he was NOT distinguished, he went on to make several distinctions in his attempt to evaluate Soleri's work. With the famous baby again, babbling in the background, Pannikar discussed the intentions evident at Arcosanti as ecological and human habitat, grounded in the quest for equity. Soleri's Omega Point envisions a time when the world will achieve substantial material equity, and humanity will be freed from physical want, free to pursue philosophical, artistic or spiritual goals. This represents the fusion of technology and theology, as well as an example of faith guided by reason. Arcosanti itself is a physical expression of his philosophic intent.

In addition to praising Arcosanti, Pannikar offered several criticisms. He observed that as Soleri stands firmly in the Western tradition of thought, he is mono-cultural in his approach. Eastern civilizations have developed very different attitudes about progress and technology. A weakness in Western concepts of technology is the assumption that what's good for "me" must be good for others. This is an ethnocentric view which Pannikar calls techno-simplicity. The original Greek TEKNE is distorted, Pannikar feels, into TECHNOCRACY, wherein the products of the technical base are revered, even worshipped. Technology really refers to our ability to understand our work, and that knowledge is sorely incomplete. Yet people continue to intervene confidently in the world, with unforeseen consequences. This anthropocentric view of the world (man as the center) has led Western nations to dominate the world.

Pannikar closed with an anecdote describing the fate of a technocratic society. He told of a young man with tears in his eyes and a letter in his hand, saying he has written for two years to his fiancée - and how she writes back that she's married the postman! So, too, have Western civilizations been writing love letters, for four centuries, through the intermediary technology and find ourselves in love with the means, having forgotten the end.

Following applause for a vibrant lecture, the morning's final speaker introduced himself - Tom King, a Jesuit priest and professor of Theology at Georgetown University in Washington D.C. King's main interest at Arcosanti, he explained was the presence of the spirit of Teilhard de Chardin, the liaison between technology and theology. The human creature is firmly rooted in both

these subjects; we are both tool-making and symbol-making beings (which set us apart from the rest of nature). Chardin's lifelong search into science and religion was for answers to the proverbial "Who am I?" of philosophy, that fundamental human question. His thinking encompassed Freud and pre-figured much of present day behavioral theory. Chardin understood how we are each formed by external and internal forces beyond our knowledge or power, although we conduct ourselves as though we are in control of our own lives. In technological man's shortsighted search for meaning, the precarious bubble of

control is often burst. King cited Freud, who counted three great insults to humanity which shook the religious foundations of Western Civilization. The first came from Copernicus, who showed that the earth was not, after all, the center of the universe! The second was from Darwin, who demonstrated that humans are but a single twig on one branch of the tree of evolution. The third great insult came from Freud himself, who showed that the ego is not master within its own house.

These assaults on the religious view of life opened the abyss formerly bridged  
(Continued on page 30)



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(Continued from page 29)  
by faith. Chardin, King explained, attempted to reunite the ordered cosmos shattered by onslaughts of reason. Paolo Soleri, in his life and work, is also seeking the resolution of the antithesis between spirituality and reason.

With plenty of food for thought it was then time for food for the body, as conferees, panelists, and Arcosantians proceeded to Crafts III. The fiery desert sun filled the floor of the dining room, and following hearty lunch we resumed the last of the days lectures.

Scheduled to speak were Richard Payne (publisher and priest) and Gerald LaRue (psychologist and atheist). The afternoon began with the soft-spoken Payne, who paused while a gaggle of tourists filed by. I wondered what these curious onlookers thought of our group!

Payne's talk brought to light the pervasive masculinity of our world. The dominant societies are hierarchical, aggressive, and violent. We need to recover values of feminine origin, which were present in many ancient societies. As an example he noted the Native American reverence for the nurturing Mother Earth. The idea today that we shall CONQUER nature must be balanced by the goal to REVERE nature.

Gerald LaRue, a warm grandfatherly man who professed Secular Human-

ism, provided a lively overview of religious thought through the ages. Beginning with the Babylonian creation myth, he illustrated how people have always sought answers to the unanswerable by constructing belief systems which, when commonly held, make perfect sense. In Babylon, the Sky God (whose head was at the East and feet at the West) mated with Mother Earth, who bore the first humans. Water surrounded both earth and sky at the horizon, which is why rain falls from the above, etc. LaRue's point was not to ridicule religion but to put human aspirations in perspective as a reflection of our fundamental dilemma. Non-believers such as himself, he noted, have no answers - only questions. As to whether evolution is going somewhere, as Chardin and Soleri have held. LaRue will not hazard a guess. He sees history as somewhat like a car careening down a highway, out of control.

As LaRue carried on, I watched thermal air currents carry an eagle over the canyon, while the sun beat down on the mesa rim. Wind swept in gusts through the atrium, loose windows banged in their jambs. Soleri moved from his seat in the audience and secured the windows.

I left the discussion early to attend an optional SILT-CASTING workshop with Bob and three others. Silt-casting of concrete is a technique pioneered by

Soleri for the creation of both large and small scale building components. The principal is to use silt (fine grained inorganic alluvium, widely found in Arizona's dry riverbeds) as a mold to form concrete elements. The colored concrete panels of Arcosanti's large vaults were poured on the ground over mounds of painted silt, then lifted into place with a crane. In our case, we were to cast small concrete blocks (approximately 8" x 16") which will one day be incorporated into the new Teilhard de Chardin Cloister now beginning construction. The intent is to face the entire ceiling of the central basilica with thousands of individual designs created by visitors and workshop participants, providing color, relief, and variety to the surface.

Leaving the realm of ideas to dirty our hands with earth and concrete was a striking contrast! Yet physical creation alongside mental exploration is a reflection of Arcosanti's premise: to build a place of thought. Artistry becomes a fusion of intent and technique.

I was the first one at the site, and began preparing and moistening the red mesa silt so it could be compacted into wooden molds. When full, the mold is placed upside-down on modular steel plates and lifted, leaving a firm block of silt to be carved in a three-dimensional design and painted. A border is placed around the plate and a cementitious mixture is poured over the silt block. The slurry quickly hardens, picking up a negative colored image of the carved silt. The silt is cleaned from the relief and several of these modular designs are cast together into larger panels of concrete. A prototype of a vault has been built about fifteen feet tall incorporating dozens of colorful modular designs. The technique promises spectacular results for the larger structure.

The rest of the conference attendants had now come down to inspect our work at the future cloister site. The sun was setting as we finished our blocks, and after cleaning up we joined the group a little late for dinner in Crafts III. Baked chicken, brown rice and various delectables filled my plate. I sat with a diverse group of residents and guests and spoke with a charming Dutch woman, perhaps in her sixties, who regularly attends workshops at Arcosanti. Her son has also spent time there during his architectural training. She allocates time at Arcosanti every year as she would for vacation.

Following dinner, Dickran Atamian, artist-in-residence, delivered a powerful piano concert. His music seemed charged with electricity as he tensed with emotion. His audience, captivated, was put in the right mood for the final event of that Saturday evening, the christening of the Teilhard de Chardin

(Continued on page 54)

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**Progress at Arcosanti**  
(Continued from page 30)

Cloister.

The candlelit trail started down the side of the canyon, then hairpinned west to where the site for dedication had been selected. We joined hands under starry heavens, while Soleri stepped forward to light a ceremonial bonfire. Our faces lit like day and the warmth of the fire gave comfort to the night's chill. We observed a minute of silent meditation upon the Cloister's inception, and spoke of the disastrous earthquake in Mexico City - news of which had reached us that afternoon. As we were dedicating a

new structure, people in Mexico were struggling with the ruins of their city.

Soleri requested we follow him across the canyon to view Arcosanti from a distance, illuminated against the night. We watched and spoke quietly with Soleri. What we were looking at, he explained, was 30% of where he intends to be in ten years. Ever an optimist, he projects quicker growth than in the past. 1985 marks the first year that Arcosanti has realized a profit. Income is generated by bell sales (over \$1 million gross for '85), workshop tuition and tour fees from over 40,000 annual visitors.

The founder of this great urban experiment led us back to the main site along the narrow moonlit path.

I rose next morning at 5:30 and decided to substitute a shower for the day's first event (a sunrise service by Tom King). Too early for breakfast, I walked through the site with Bob and a resident named Mike. Exploring the shapes, forms, and spacial layering of the richly composed habitat, we ended atop the central vault. From here we could observe the Ceramics and Foundry Apes (where bells are produced), and a variety of living quarters for permanent residents. We talked and enjoyed the Equinox sunrise, then climbed down for breakfast.

We gathered again in the drafting room where there was a lively discussion, involving all panelists, which served to summarize the weekend's proceedings. All were free to participate, and the session ran a full three hours. It was interesting to watch panel members interact; at one point Soleri and Pannikar held a lengthy dialogue over a diagrammatic analogy of human evolution which Soleri had drawn on the chalkboard, regarding the current split between technology and theology (or thinking and feeling, if you prefer). The consensus gained was clearly one of renewed commitment to bridge this gap in all areas: architecture, cities, politics, scientific research, the arts, and philosophy.

The conclusion of the conference was a very simple and moving event. We gathered beneath a grove of mesquites on the canyon floor where several weathered wood benches were arranged in a circle. We sat in silence and were served a bowl of thin soup, a crust of bread and a swallow of wine. In contrast to the lavish dining which the Arcosanti kitchen had provided for us all weekend, this frugal meal was a powerful reminder that many in the world lack even such meager sustenance. Soleri circulated ladling soup. The only sound was the tragic universal human sound of spoons against bowls. We are all, in fact, equal.

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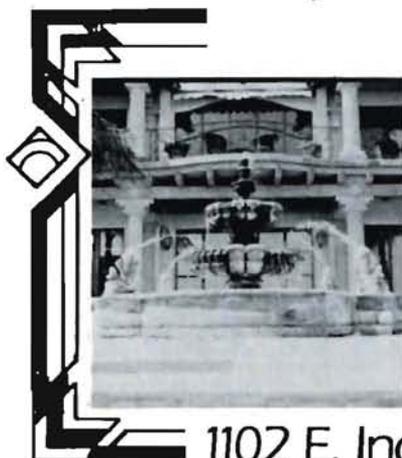
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After eating, some read poetry, or articles, or spoke their thoughts. The frugal meal is an Arcosanti tradition, also called the Tiger and the Flea; the tiger being reality and the flea, of course, us.

On this humble note, we parted with goodbyes and address exchanges and good wishes. Bob and I said goodbye to Soleri and went on our way. We decided to detour across the canyon for some panoramic photographs of the project. Seen from the opposite cliff face, Arcosanti compliments the harsh landscape with sculptural forms expressive of the technology that created them. There is also evident, a sense of purpose, the intention of allowing the forces of nature to shape our environment, while it remains clearly the work of human intelligence and compassion set into the natural world. Arcosanti also demonstrates the potential to create cities that preserve the landscape, and in their forms, patterns and scale enrich human life.

It is thirty-six years now since Soleri left Wright's Taliesin West to plant the seed of Arcosanti, and one must conclude that he is a remarkably patient, compassionate and consistent man. He believes that the spirit of this project will pervade, and that others will continue long after he has passed, to finish the construction of the first Arcology, a visionary experiment of architectural and community form. The purpose and creativity embodied, can be no less than (in Soleri's words) matter becoming spirit, the realization of the intangible force within us.

Beyond the facade of opulence we see in North America, the human species is facing unprecedented challenges on a global scale. Of course, Arcosanti is no panacea that could provide deliverance for the world's inequities. Its value lies rather in pointing the way to a more rational use of resources as a beacon for future development. As resources and energy grow scarce, global society will be pressured to adapt new ways of life, new expectations and new forms of community. Whether Arcosanti is literally emulated or not, it will be a model and a symbol of hope.

After unloading my camera, Bob and I made our way back across the canyon, gathered our gear and headed for Tucson. We were equipped with plenty to think about along the way, and the sun was still high enough to ensure a good part of the trip back to present-day reality would be in daylight.

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