

Is city a dream of our future or our past?

'Probably the most important experiment undertaken in our lifetime'

BY DAWNA FREEMAN, FREELANCE DECEMBER 30, 2010



Located an hour north of Phoenix, Arcosanti is seen as the blueprint of the city of the future.

Photograph by: Supplied, Dawna Freeman, edmontonjournal.com

The city of the future looks a lot like the city of the past, only greener.

But that's the dichotomy of this controversial place high in the semi desert of central Arizona. Here, carved into the rocky mesa, is a living prototype of the city of the future.

The place is called Arcosanti, a self-described urban laboratory where for the past 40 years, thousands of students and professionals have come from around the world to lend their thoughts and their hands to the creation of this future world city.

Some claim this ergonomic urban model is too economical for today's material world. Others maintain it is simply a trendy reversion to life before the automobile.

In a 1976 Newsweek article entitled Arcosanti: Dream City, Douglas Davis wrote "as urban architecture, Arcosanti is probably the most important experiment undertaken in our lifetime."

The mastermind behind this experimental habitat is Italian architect and artist Paolo Soleri, a 91-year-old urban theorist who believes the next stage in the design of cities will be a highly-integrated alternative to our western suburban sprawl.

Soleri coined the term arcology (ecological architecture) for his vision of a pedestrian-oriented, socially and environmentally conscious city. He began Arcosanti in 1970 as a non-profit educational project to test arcology as a method of reducing human

impact on the environment while improving the quality of life.

This future world city would move people up, not out. It would minimize waste and the use of land and resources and re-integrate the social, commercial and residential.

An author and international lecturer, Soleri anticipated the demise of Motor City while North Americans were busy building superhighways to the suburbs. Now city planners across the continent are drawing up urban renewal sustainability plans that call for higher urban densities, walkable neighbourhoods and better mass transit.

New York City, a compact city of 8.2 million, is going back to the future with transportation plans that will reduce its environmental footprint even further by reclaiming streets and making it easier to get around on foot, public transit or bike.

Soleri earned his PhD in architecture in Turin, Italy, in 1946 and came to the United States a year later to study at Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin School of Architecture in Phoenix and Wisconsin. But his interest lay in planning and designing cities, not buildings.

In 1956, he made Scottsdale, Ariz., his permanent home, setting up a wind-bell business and the Cosanti Foundation to support his lifelong research into urban planning. Soleri was given a lifetime achievement award by Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in 2006. His work is studied at the University Institute of Architecture of Venice.

Yet 40 years later, this future world city is still under construction. Some think the architect's vision is a thousand years ahead of its time. Others, who have volunteered at Arcosanti or studied his theories, say the Italian, who was born in 1919, is reinventing a city more reminiscent of Europe's walkable cities.

Few dismiss the communal living and collective gardening aspects as a throwback to the counterculture of the 70s.

Ironically, this lean city is located 104 kilometres north of Phoenix, a sprawling metropolis of seven million that has embraced suburbia, cars and octopus highways. Until January 2009, Phoenix was the largest U.S. city without a light rail system.

Working the built environment into the Sonoran desert landscape, Arcosanti is situated on a steep slope overlooking a gorge and dry river valley with mountains on three sides. From the parking lot, only the tops of a few buildings rise from the rocky mesa, but once down the entrance steps, one doesn't see a lot of city. There's the Octagon amphitheatre, where public concerts and events are held, the colourful town square apses, which are also giant sundials, the commercial bell-casting bronze foundry and woodworking and ceramic studio, a cafe and bakery, art gallery, apartments and dorms. There's an outdoor swimming pool and a large solar-panel terraced greenhouse built into the slope. Solar energy and recycling reduces the use of non-renewable resources. Heat from the foundry warms the apartments above it.

This place is like an outdoor version of Edmonton's HUB Mall, the shopping mall and student residence that won several architectural awards when it was built for the University of Alberta in 1971.

Arcosanti has that same 70s style concrete construction with geometric circles cut out of walls and sparse but functional furnishings in the common areas.

HUB mall's four-block indoor street with its compact mix and three floors of residential units above the commercial level addresses Soleri's integration theory. To push the simile, the mall even addresses the founder's concern of cultural alienation by linking the 'street' to the faculties of Humanities and Fine Arts on either end of the mall.

Walking around Arcosanti, visitors are greeted at every turn by the purposeful symmetry between man and nature with Italian cypress trees brushing against graceful concrete arches.

It's easy to see why some feel this minimalist urban habitat is more of a construction site than a community.

The only visual clue that a particular concrete building is someone's home is a shirt pegged to a line outside the little patio, or a tree planted outside a painted door.

In addition to daily tours for 50,000 annual visitors, the public is invited to learn and contribute with five-week educational workshops.

Since 1970, 6,000 volunteers-- from students of anthropology, architecture and design to civil and structural engineers, urban and environmental planners -- have come to create this eco-friendly city, participating in ongoing construction, planning, landscaping, agriculture and maintenance projects.

Arcosanti was supposed to house 5,000 people on 25 acres, according to the brochure, but only a small percentage of the project is complete after four decades. Wrote one former student, Arcosanti was supposed to be ready for 600 inhabitants in mid-2000, but earlier this year there were 60 residents and 100 workshopers. To become a resident one must have taken a workshop.

When asked this spring if he was happy with the Arcosanti project, Soleri replies that he's not "happy," but he is satisfied.

The urban theorist had thought arcology might address problems of pollution, social isolation, resource scarcity and population growth. But his new paradigm is just a hypothesis.

Soleri won't predict the future, but he clearly sees environmental and social decay in America's future if people don't alter their consumptive lifestyles. He sees hyper-consumerism as a chronic problem of western urbanization and gestures by the green movement -- solar panels on single-family homes or hybrid cars -- as not enough as long as Americans continue to value their cars and other material and spatial luxuries.

Despite his advanced years, Soleri still walks, swims, and travels internationally. Every Thursday, unless he is travelling, he comes to Arcosanti to give people a chance to ask him questions.

What catastrophe must occur for people to radically alter the way they live? When resources become scarce? When the world population doubles?

It's a question Soleri's been asked many times. And one he cannot answer.

The question he can answer, and does so repeatedly, is that it will take the will of people working through their governments to bring about far-reaching change. City planners are coming closer to the theory of arcology, but their plans don't go far enough.

Arcosanti, the controversial project that challenges our western imperative, will live on beyond its founder; a 3-D incubator of ideas for the world city of tomorrow, its participants are avatars of arcology.

But the city of the future lies not here, but out there, in the real world, where participants take back what they have learned and incorporate it into their own environments, cultural priorities and personal spheres of influence.

Soleri showed the world how to design an eco-friendly, self-sufficient city in the hot, dry desert.

It's time Edmontonians start envisioning the future of their livable, lovable winter city.

Dawna Freeman is an Edmonton writer who visited Arcosanti earlier this year.

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