

The ages of Arcosanti

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Abstract: Back in the history, Paolo Soleri's Arcosanti shows fifty years of evolution, from meta-project to potential new town, then prototype or urban laboratory, and now – almost four years after the death of its *deus ex machina* – looking for an identity, challenged by the risk of being frozen, but hoping to be adopted by an Institution able to confirm his role as a lab of research and training. Being in posterity, this evolution can be read looking at the dialectic between the Soleri's creative, exploratory and doubtful process, and the way to participate of co-dreamers and inhabitants. Finally a town, even if born on the idea of a single mind, it is an expression of many actors, and stands up to *zeitgeist* and *genius loci*. So the architectural body of Arcosanti continues to confirm and regenerate the urban model proposed by Soleri, while the man-made component of the city evolves...

Keywords: Paolo Soleri, Arcosanti, Cosanti, *Arcology*.

Today, almost five years after the death of Paolo Soleri, Arcosanti is governed by a board made up of four co-presidents, three of whom are construction pioneers and one from the academic world. The board, together with a much larger committee made up of residents and alumni, still looks for a way to relocate the present and the

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future of this experimental settlement. This situation of extreme stasis immediately brings me back to the memory of a fairly recent moment in which Soleri tried to chase his collaborators, exclaiming that if he had posed so many problems and doubts before any choice, he would still be sitting on a rock in the middle of the desert to wonder whether to start the construction of Cosanti. With this invective Soleri tried to chase his collaborators and his work group to restart the building site, through a research and construction program² that we were working on so to move, we hoped, to the dimension of the so-called *critical mass*.³ This image of Soleri sitting on a stone thinking about what was to be done evokes an event that happened some 50 years ago, when a truck loaded with cement bags stopped in the Scottsdale desert, a few miles from Taliesin West⁴; there was only a thin man; the truck driver asked him where the workers were to unload the truck; Soleri told him that there was only him, that he would be the one to unload the truck and then to build the settlement; the driver got out of the truck and helped Soleri, becoming, for a few minutes, the first volunteer, the first of over 15,000 volunteers who helped in the foundation and construction of what will be called the *urban laboratory* of Paolo Soleri.

Cosanti⁵ was born; and from the architectural experimentation, from the understanding of the urban value of the interstitial spaces of its architectures and from the consequent school of thought that will lead to the meta-design of the *arcology*,⁶ the desire and the will to found Arcosanti on the Mesa desert plateau arises. The founding act of Arcosanti gets on the epic dimension, in seeing this large number of volunteers converge in the place of the foundation and pull up, with primordial procedures and experimental technologies, the first block of

2. In 2004 Arcosanti realized the construction phase called EC5 - fifth phase of the East Crescent; the first half of the East Crescent was built in four phases in about ten years of construction, while for the second half it was decided to implement a different program that led to the completion of the work in a few months. The executive project was drafted by the undersigned adopting experimental casting methods in shaped formworks in polystyrene, with the project management of Antonio Fragiaco and the technical contribution of expert volunteer workers coming from Italy and Mexico.

3. Critical Mass is the minimum size of a settlement for which urban phenomena can trigger such as to generate a supply-demand process that justifies the spontaneous birth of services.

4. Soleri was a student of Frank Lloyd Wright in Taliesin West (Arizona) in the years 1947/48.

5. Cosanti is the first settlement - consisting of a dozen architectures created spontaneously by Soleri in the years 1956/70 - founded in the Scottsdale valley, a city that will then be incorporated into the extensive growth of Phoenix.

6. Arcology (Architecture + Ecology) is the urban theory published by Soleri in 1970 with the book meta-project "Arcology, the city in the image of man".

vaults.⁷ The foundation already manifests the presence of the different contributions that will then characterize the evolution of Arcosanti. On a side the *deus ex machina*, Paolo Soleri, who provides both the school of thought and the technological system, on the other the large number of volunteers, potential inhabitants and in fact actors, not simple figures. A startup of the city therefore in the hands of active inhabitants, in dialectical convergence between an individual idea and a willingness to participate. On the other hand, apart from Soleri, the actors are volunteers: neither workers nor co-opts, as happened in the cities founded by regimes, but rather volunteers. This attitude is generally based on a creed or an intention; it therefore underlies everyone's own vision of the reason why he is participating. And it is not certain that this vision is always coincident, constant and shared. In a passage from the theory of *Arcology*, Soleri introduces the concept for which the anthropic habitat tends towards a virtuous phase, even if intermediate, in which the *organism of a thousand brains*⁸ guides evolution. This phase would already be an overcoming of the current dichotomy between *congruence* (of nature) and *fairness* (of man)⁹, for which man has been able to diverge from the natural path. But the foundation of Arcosanti, and its evolution to date, are already an example of an organism with a thousand brains (therefore effectively a startup of arcology), or still belong to the first context (chaos generated by the dichotomy congruence Vs equity)? And if Arcosanti was already an *arcology*, how would it be doing its metabolic process of birth, evolution and decomposition? These are just some of the questions that today, as posterity of Soleri, we could ask ourselves to begin to summarize the experience of Arcosanti, crossing it with the complex theory of its founder. But it is interesting because it investigates precisely the aforementioned coexistence of different contributions, between the original idea of the founder and the vision (convergent or divergent?) of the numerous actors. Symbolic was the fact that Soleri did not live in Arcosanti –he stayed in Cosanti and went once a week to Arcosanti – not to influence the *modus vivendi*. Symbolic, but effective? Among the first meetings I had with Soleri, some of my remembrance are explanatory

7. The South Vault (1971-72) is the first element built up and it shapes, together with the sister company North Vault, the agora in the center of Arcosanti.

8. The city can be a self-conscious hyper-organism, given by the transcendence of the many physical brains that compose it - ref. point 11 of *Archology*.

9. In the congruence of natural evolution man has built his own philosophical principles of equity - ref. Point 5 of *Archology*.

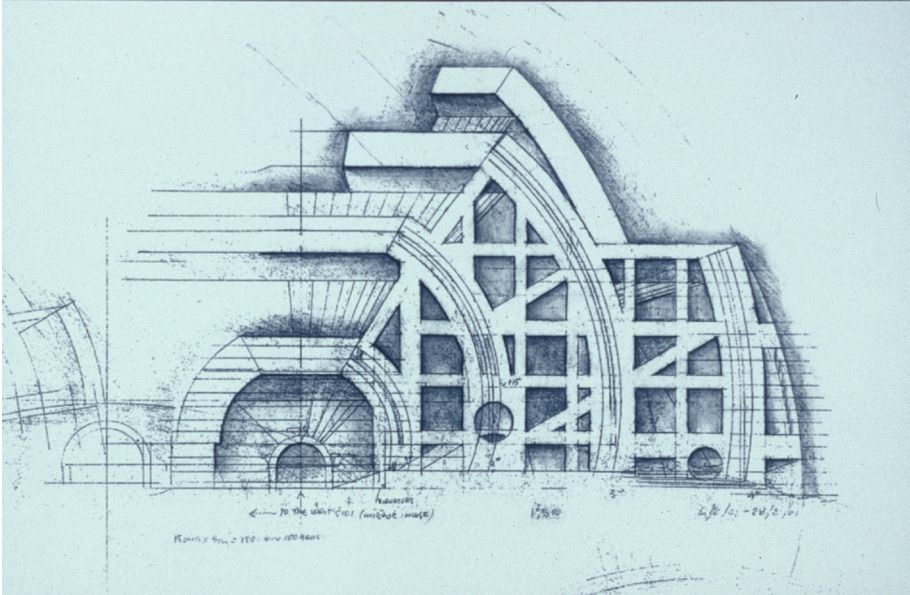
to the context in which this experimental will was implemented. For example, I remember when, after my first day in Cosanti, having dinner with Soleri, I realized that from the panoramic window of his studio he had observed every movement of mine while I was walking around. I analyzed the spatiality and urban potential of his prototype, and he analyzed the effects of his prototype on me. Was I a mouse in his urban laboratory? No, I do not think so. I was a potential contributor to his lab, a thinking and independent contributor; and it was not easy to be, in a context dominated by his charisma. Because indeed his presence was very charismatic, as evidenced by the indelible memories of, I believe, all the comparisons we had.

Crossing these direct experiences with the testimonies collected by those who participated in the construction in different periods, more or less epic, we can then investigate the questions posed. On the one hand we have the evolution of Soleri's thought, and of the label that he attributed to Arcosanti. On the other hand, the different ways of participating in volunteers. "Officially" Arcosanti is founded as the first *archology*, to be built on the basis of the Solerian meta-projects, with empirical acts elaborated in daily evolution, stratifying cycles of *miniaturization-complexity-duration*.¹⁰ After a heroic rapid growth, Arcosanti slows down and is renamed, by Soleri, *urban laboratory*. Several times Soleri tried to push Arcosanti towards the *critical mass*, the size necessary for the laboratory to become a real prototype of arcology; up to his latest project, the *parasol*, with which Soleri identifies a future for Arcosanti linked to the merging of the laboratory function with the prototype dimension managed by research institutions (universities and cultural institutions), opposing the natural tendency towards monumental crystallization of the historicized experience. Unfortunately this is still the trend. Five years after the death of Soleri, Arcosanti is led by a group of residents, already pioneers of construction, in search of a balance between the museum, the transformation into a holiday center and the possibility, all to be explored, to remain itself (a laboratory?). This evolution, which here I have tried to bring back from critical readings, can in turn be re-read through various point of view. On the one hand it can be flanked by the evolution of Soleri's philosophical thought, from the assertive to the doubtful phase. On the other, it can be

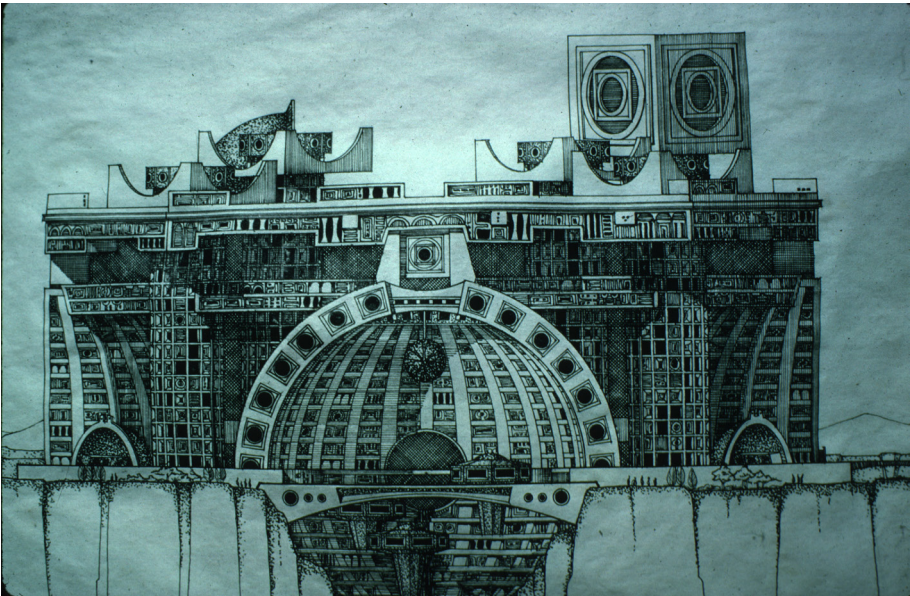
10. The continuous cycles of Miniaturization - random interaction between elements - complexity - reality that arises - duration - consolidation of realities that find their reason to exist - constitutes the principle of evolution - ref. point 3 of Arcology.

compared to the *zeitgeist*, to its cultural and economic components, and therefore to the consequent way of the volunteers to participate and to involve expectations and visions. Soleri's thinking, and his experiences of Cosanti, met dreams and expectations of a generation that in the 60s found ways to change the world. In the '70s then the oil crisis and the maturation of ecological awareness found an almost cosmogonic solution in the arcological model. Involved in mass on the Mesa plateau, volunteers trained in the hippie culture started the materialization of an archology; they adopted it and heroically built it, up to when Soleri perceived the risk of deviation from the original idea. Magnificent events and hippie assemblies surpassed the urban dimension of the built and relegated the experiment to a too-stormy niche. Moving away the sirens, in the 80s Arcosanti had to face a basically antithetical yuppie society. With the death of Colly Soleri¹¹ it loose his organizational engine; Soleri's activity focuses mainly on philosophical production and the city under construction falls back into the laboratory target. The construction slows down but continues, fueled by the resistance of the inhabitants, by the fame and the crumbs of financial support in an era of well-being and few values. In the 1990s the slowdown in construction became increasingly evident; but Arcosanti resists among the pitfalls of a new-age invasion, in a phase that reveals itself to be a transition. With the new millennium, the new generation rediscovers the heroic value of the radical neo-avant-garde and shows a rebirth of interest towards Soleri and Arcosanti. The construction tries to draw new verve, but clashes with the difficulties of an era in which the research goes on new and more immaterial directions, as well as with the generational conflict between the elder pioneers and the "Erasmus" generation. The actual structure remains that of a laboratory; not having reached the critical mass it is not equipped with some services (such as school, independent works, etc.) necessary to trigger important phenomena in the current city model. The needs of families with school-age children are limiting, consequently the generations present among the inhabitants are mainly two: the "young", in post-school age but not yet parental, and the "elderly", whose children are now independent and elsewhere. An urban laboratory of real interest, experimental and communicative: the "people's zoo", as they use to define the inhabitants, while they live under the gaze of continuous tourist tours.

11. Colly Soleri, wife of Paolo Soleri, daughter of his first client (for the Dome House – 1949), has administered the Cosanti Foundation until her death in 1982.



Arcosanti: 1:5000 - project. From the author's Archive.



Arcosanti arcology. From the author's Archive.



Arcosanti vaults. From the author's Archive.



Arcosanti. From the author's Archive.



Arcosanti: volunteer workes. From the author's Archive.