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An Early Eco-City Faces the Future

By MICHAEL TORTORELLO, The New York Times

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CORDES JUNCTION, Ariz. --

THE pilgrimage began with a black-and-white handbill on a campus bulletin board. At the top was a sketch of an ultramodern compound rising above a desert canyon: a city upon a hill.

Next came the manifesto. “If you are truly concerned about the problems of pollution, waste, energy depletion, land, water, air and biological conservation, poverty, segregation, intolerance, population containment, fear and disillusionment,” the poster began. Then, at the bottom, the remedy: “Join us.”

Occupying the middle of nowhere must have appealed to the students, architects and seekers of the 1970s who founded [Arcosanti](#), an “urban laboratory” in the desert 70 miles north of Phoenix. After following a washboard road to the desolate camp, they would find a kind of kibbutz. Here,

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in workshops, they might build a 30-foot-high concrete vault or plant olive trees or cast bells in silt to sell for construction money.

Above all, they were able to join an ongoing colloquy with the city's visionary designer, Paolo Soleri. In a cosmic language of his own invention (filled with phrases like the "omega seed" and "miniaturization-complexity-duration"), Mr. Soleri proselytized for a carless society in harmony with the natural world. Over the course of 40 years, some 7,000 souls would come and go.

For the most part, though, they left. And last fall, Mr. Soleri joined this group himself, retiring at age 92 as the president of the parent Cosanti Foundation.

Now, Arcosanti is experiencing its own version of Cuba's "special period": a transitional era of privation and possibility. And the man who would be Raúl Castro in this analogy is the foundation's new president, Jeff Stein, 60, formerly dean of the Boston Architectural College.

As a resident of Arcosanti in its heyday, "he has all the qualities to be the guardian of the faith," said Michel Sarda, 69, a foundation trustee and a publisher of Mr. Soleri's books.

But if Mr. Stein can't miraculously transform Arcosanti into a dense eco-city for 5,000 residents — and that was always Mr. Soleri's plan — what should it become instead?

Mr. Sarda speaks enthusiastically about building a retirement tower for golf-shy retirees and the project's alumni. Mr. Stein's immediate proposals are more modest: a canopy for the outdoor amphitheater, a renovated commercial bakery, a storage unit for Mr. Soleri's collection of fantastical architectural models and a half-dozen new apartments.

Whatever Mr. Stein may wish to do, for now it will have to be accomplished with an operating budget of less than \$1 million. That annual sum includes payroll, utilities, food, building materials, insurance: everything. It is, by his estimation, about a 10th of what the community needs to build new housing and attract new residents and businesses. That is, to turn a somewhat derelict complex of a dozen-odd concrete structures into something more like a city.

His first job, perhaps, is to become an ambassador: to remind the world that Arcosanti exists as a going concern. Visitors (and some 25,000 stop here each year) often observe that this city of the future seems more like a city of the past. Part *Mos Eisley*, part *Ozymandias*. But that description fails to account for the 56 inspired souls who continue to live and work and dream in the Arcosanti that exists today.

One such latter-day disciple is Maureen Connaughton, 37, who until last year was a project manager in Philadelphia for a specialty fabrication company. On a cold Tuesday night in January, Ms. Connaughton was sitting with Mr. Stein and a few dozen of her fellow Arconauts in the dining hall, known as *Crafts III* in the local dialect, tucking into a community meal of breaded pork chops and fried tofu. They were bundled in sweaters and hats and Carhartt jackets. Mr. Soleri may have shown a genius for passive solar design, but at Arcosanti he didn't really do central heat.

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If you were an optimist, like Ms. Connaughton, who lives in an apartment beneath the cafe and dining hall, you might note that it's easy to sleep in the cool Arizona winter. Yes, the building's aging concrete has a habit of flaking onto your bed. But "what you get in exchange is just so worth it," she said. "To have this big round window and look out at the canyon."

At a fall building workshop here in 2010, she discovered how much she liked working with her hands. This is the opposite of the paper shuffling (or, worse, paperless shuffling) that defines the modern office job. Back in Philadelphia, Ms. Connaughton loaded up the car ("I need a lot less stuff than I did before," she said) and headed west to cast ceramic wind bells.

"I really heard all the good and bad things people say about it being set in the past," she said of Arcosanti, sipping a \$2 glass of wine from the cafe's tiny liquor cabinet. "And I want to see it set in the present. Because it's my present."

DURING Mr. Soleri's long tenure, Arcosanti evolved into a surprising anachronism: a company town. The product line? Handmade bells and heady theories about imaginary cities, or "arcologies." Ordinary capitalism — independent businesses and privately held homes — was anathema.

Mr. Soleri never bought into the standard American real estate hustle, Mr. Sarda recalled. "He would say, 'Developer: it starts with 'D,' like 'devil' and 'demon,' " Mr. Sarda said. "I cannot say that Paolo is a man of compromise."

Or as one longtime foundry worker put it, "Who ever tried to build a city by selling art?"

At the most basic level, Mr. Stein seems to share Mr. Soleri's knack for avoiding personal wealth. "The typical American c.e.o. makes 325 times what the company's average worker earns," Mr. Stein said. As the new director, "I'm two times the average salary." And at Arcosanti, the average salary is minimum wage.

Yet smart young volunteers continue to trek here from faraway places like Australia, South Korea, Mexico, Chile, Italy and Jordan, paying to enroll in the construction workshops. A few of these folks will decide to stay, taking a job on site.

The commute can't be beat. The Wi-Fi signal is strong. And residents pay just \$160 a month for room and board. Yes, the room might be an unheated 8-by-8-foot cube in the psychedelic shantytown known as Construction Camp. But this is part of the experience, or the experiment, or whatever you want to call it.

"There are intentional communities all over the country," Mr. Stein said. "This isn't one of them. It's almost an accidental community. People were drawn here by Paolo Soleri and the power of his ideas. And by the beauty of the place."

The architectural intern Youngsoo Kim, 32, followed the beacon of Mr. Soleri's writing to this sparse outpost from the megalopolis of Seoul.

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On a bright Wednesday morning, Mr. Kim and his colleague Yasaman Esmaili were stretching a measuring tape across the curved concrete entryways of the East Crescent. This development (unfinished, of course) includes an outdoor amphitheater, administrative offices, a rec room, a handful of residences, the Soleri archives and the scenic guest quarters called the Sky Suite.

Though the cubes and apses of Arcosanti have been sketched and photographed in countless books and exhibitions, the site and building utilities are more of a mystery. In simpler terms, no one seems to have the foggiest idea where to find a light switch.

Prompted by Mr. Stein, the pair has been trying to remedy this situation, assembling up-to-date building information models. The construction “could have been done much better,” Mr. Kim said. “But it was also meaningful for it to be built by the people who learned the concept.”

The great masses of concrete act as a thermal sink, absorbing heat during the molten days and then radiating warmth at night. But the compound’s heating, windows and insulation — the foundations of most green building — seem to have been an afterthought. Ms. Esmaili, a 26-year-old graduate of the University of Tehran, hopes to study these systems while she waits to hear from Ph.D. programs.

Mr. Soleri originally envisioned a series of greenhouses that would occupy the hill below the complex. Hot air would rise from these conservatories into a complex of tunnels that could heat the East Crescent. At present, two trial greenhouses have been finished. For now, a single volunteer has been charged with growing what she can. For better or worse, the national food-gardening craze seems to have skipped Arcosanti.

Meanwhile, the project has only dabbled in popular technologies like solar panels, rain barrels and composting toilets, off-the-shelf gear that can be applied on a small scale.

“I should have them,” Mr. Soleri said during a recent visit to the project. Yet for most Americans, he maintained, chasing these technologies can become a game unto itself. “We are passionate collectors of gadgetries,” he said. “We can’t resist.”

Mr. Soleri likes to say that he “is a scatterbrain at this point.” But he still projects a commanding presence. Upon meeting a visitor outside on a frigid morning, he raised his hand and waved it to the side, as if to say, “Kindly step out of my sunlight!”

He seemed more comfortable after an espresso, back in his former apartment, a vaguely austere 700-square-foot studio with a two-burner cooktop and an open shower next to the toilet. The paint and the carpeting, now 30 years old, seem to be original. But then, no one ever accused Mr. Soleri of personal extravagance. As Mr. Kim said, “His humbleness and frugality shocked me.”

For several years, Mr. Soleri has lived in a tumbledown ranch at the nonprofit’s Cosanti campus, on the outskirts of Scottsdale. Though his former apartment now belongs to the new chief, Mr. Stein knocked politely at the front door. He worked alongside Mr. Soleri for eight years, in the 1970s and ’80s. And if he has a skeptical thought about his mentor’s legacy, you won’t hear him voice it in public.

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Mr. Soleri, however, will discuss his marvelous, flawed creation with disarming frankness. Has Arcosanti, for instance, lived up to its potential?

“No. Don’t be silly,” he said, and then laughed. “If you become a writer or you become a sculptor or a scientist, most of the time you’re able to generate yourself a means to carry on.” An anti-commercial architect, by contrast, must depend on selling his creation to investors and tycoons.

The upside is that Mr. Soleri’s theories about pollution, waste, energy depletion — all the plagues listed on the poster — have never been more compelling in the marketplace of ideas.

With the interminable [recession](#), Mr. Kim said, “I think there are lots of Americans out there ready to simplify.”

He has coined his own Soleri-like catchphrase: “the banality of consumption.” And he has advanced Mr. Soleri’s ideas in a compilation, “[Lean Linear City: Arterial Arcology](#),” just out from Cosanti Press. Perhaps, he said, the book will influence the cities rising from bare earth in India and China.

Nadia Begin, 41, an architect and planning coordinator at the project for almost 18 years, seemed to speak for the whole community when she said, “Arcosanti needs to be part of the conversation.”

Yet it’s hard to argue that this skeletal settlement represents the city of tomorrow, said Dennis Frenchman, 63, who has created large-scale developments in South Korea, China and Spain, and is a professor of urban design and planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Mr. Frenchman expressed amazement at the beauty and intricacy of Mr. Soleri’s drawings, and the boldness of his invention. But “I don’t think it’s taken seriously as an urban model,” he said. “It’s really a historical curiosity” — a place whose beautiful handicrafts and Utopian spirit recall a Shaker village. The Shakers, he noted, have their furniture, the Arconauts have their bells.

Arcosanti is like a Shaker village in one other regard: the community has never bloomed with children. At last count, the number was four.

Ms. Begin gave birth to two sons at home, in her arresting apartment above the bronze foundry, where the slanting silt-cast walls create a kind of sunken space capsule with porthole windows

But Mr. Soleri, the master of frugality, didn’t design a lot of spacious three-bedroom units. Which explains why Ms. Begin and her husband sleep next to a crib that holds their 4-year-old son.

ARCOSANTI needs children. And new living quarters. And working greenhouses. And people to plant them. Above all, this bulwark against modern capital needs money.

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Just about everyone is hoping that Mr. Stein, with his management experience and professional network, will be able to revitalize Arcosanti. At Taliesin West, another countercultural colony with quirky buildings to maintain and tourists to serve, the succession process has dragged on for more than 50 years, since Frank Lloyd Wright's death in 1959.

Jeffrey Grip, 64, a management consultant who is the chairman of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation board, laid out the options for a place like Arcosanti. "You can become essentially a museum: preserve and display what was created there," Mr. Grip said. "Or you can become an educational foundation that furthers the works" of a great architect. A third path, he said, is to hope that a new mission will metamorphose in the chrysalis of the magical buildings.

If that future doesn't materialize, what's the worst-case scenario for Arcosanti?

"You're looking at it," Mr. Stein said.

His quip is less pessimistic than it may seem. Everything here is paid for, he said. "We don't have a mortgage." So even in its current state, Arcosanti must be more practical than the 460,000 housing units sitting empty in Arizona, according to recent census data.

Let's say that the shuttered bakery in the Crafts III building never reopens in a renovated form — one of Mr. Stein's priorities. Instead, it continues to be a gathering spot where Ms. Connaughton, the ceramist, meets friends after dinner. She likes to bake treats for visitors and tourists: giant sheets of lemon bars and peanut butter cookies.

On a recent night, a half-dozen friends joined her there, clustering around the warmth of the commercial oven. A few students from the Kansas City Art Institute, here for a two-week residency, were finishing sketches they had begun that morning. Their professor, who lived at Arcosanti in the 1970s, recalled bacchanals at the Construction Camp. Something about a nude public bath and an indoor bonfire.

A few decades removed from those madcap days, the youth of Arcosanti have graduated to a never-ending game of Othello. It took this happy crowd two hours to finish a six-pack. Ms. Connaughton spooned out another batch of cookies while Anita Carter, June Cash's sister, crooned over the boombox. When the evening wound down, home was just downstairs.

For decades now, visitors have asked what it would take to finish Arcosanti. Maybe it's time for a different question. Why doesn't everyone choose to live this way?