

## Arcosanti\_v2.1.mp3

**Thomas (Host)** Arizona is home to a lot of impressive architecture. About an hour north of Phoenix is a remarkable architectural feat: Arcosanti. It's entirely possible you might drive right past it. The signs for this artist compound are easy to miss, and the buildings themselves are supposed to blend into the landscape. If you do decide to look into the fascinating collection of buildings that seem to sprout out of the cliffside, you'll find a beautiful complex that celebrates the natural environment in which it was built. What is this place called Arcosanti? And why was it built so out of the way? Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast by the Arizona Republic and AZ Central. I'm producer Thomas France. And today, Valley 101 is going on an audio tour of what Ada Louise Huxtable of The New York Times called an urban laboratory, Arcosanti. It's the brainchild of Italian born architect Paolo Soleri. Today, it's a place for artists and environmentalists who believe in Soleri's vision. We'll go over the history of its founding, the way it's evolved into its current experiment. And the man behind the vision of blending architecture with the landscape.

**Liz** Paolo Soleri came to the U.S. from Italy to study with Frank Lloyd Wright, and he was an apprentice for 18 months. And they argued quite a bit about what the future of the city and what architecture's purpose is. So he learned a lot and very much admire Frank Lloyd Wright's philosophy of organic architecture.

**Thomas (Host)** That was Liz Martin-Malikian and the CEO of the Cosanti Foundation. The nonprofit seeks to preserve what Soleri left behind and runs the Cosanti studio and Arcosanti. As she mentioned, Soleri and Wright argued frequently to the point that Soleri eventually left to pursue his own works. But he kept the idea of working with the environment in his mind as he made new plans.

**Liz** The first one here in the United States was the dome house in Cave Creek. And it was a beautiful, very modest home that was sunken below grade to be able to take advantage of having natural cooling and had this very beautiful dome that opened up and retracted. So while you were below into the home, into the space below, you could see during the nighttime the Milky Way and during the day time, a connection to nature.

**Thomas (Host)** Despite their creative differences, Soleri and Wright remained quite close.

**Liz** So we invited him back and Frank Lloyd Wright came in and at that time he was quite old. And so he came in with a cane, big hat and looked around and very intimidating as he normally is and took his cane, has slammed it on the side of the wall that is desert concrete, which is concrete with boulders embedded in it and said this is Frank Lloyd Wright. And then he looked at the dome and the beautiful picturesque and how beautifully it was constructed and made and slammed his cane on it and said, this is Frank Lloyd Wright, because it was looking at a division between the plain of earth and nature above, and that Frank Lloyd Wright felt like he authored that idea and then he slammed his cane on a concrete internal table that went outside and had a connection. And he said, This is Frank Lloyd Wright. And then he slammed his cane on the floor, which had this beautiful silt casting pattern within the concrete and said, This is Paolo Soleri.

**Thomas (Host)** Frank Lloyd Wright was famously arrogant. He only ever credited two of his apprentices, according to Liz. Soleri was one of those two. After Cave Creek, Soleri found a place in Paradise Valley where he began development of his personal studio. He named the project Cosanti. It's a blending of Italian words that roughly translates to against things. Soleri built many distinguished works such as the Soleri Bridge and Plaza in

Scottsdale on the South Bank of the Arizona Canal. The amphitheater, named after him in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and the Ceramica Artistica Solimene, a ceramics factory in Vietri, Italy. He also spent many years as a lecturer at the University of Arizona in Tucson. As an architect, he was regarded as brilliant. But as you'll soon learn, he had deep personal flaws. For most of his life, Soleri argued against the rampant consumerism that comes with urban living. While at Cosanti, he developed an idea that would push back on all the flaws he saw in the 20th century. He called it arcology. He wanted to combine architecture and ecology. Essentially, Soleri thought that the future of cities involved building sustainably and working with the land instead of bulldozing through it. The result of this was the City of the Future, an experimental design that drew from his idea of arcology. He christened the City Arcosanti. Construction began in 1970, but Soleri died before he could see his experiment truly fulfilled. However, his idea of arcology continues on in the people who still live and work at Arcosanti. I went out there to talk to a few of those people who call themselves alumni. They provided their thoughts on what makes this place special to this day. Fair warning. The wind was really blowing when I arrived. The site is on a cliff edge with a deep valley on one side that creates a wind tunnel. The other side is completely flat ground for quite a while, allowing the air to flow without much to break it up. The path to the parking lot is a long, bumpy dirt road. When you arrive, you're greeted by impressive concrete structures that look like they literally grew out of the ground. Arcosanti's education coordinator Taylor Morgan walked me through the site and introduced me to a few of Arcosanti's current residents. He explained how the buildings were set up.

**Taylor** Every structure on this site was designed with the idea of having multiple uses. Café building is a great example of that. On the lower levels, apartments below that is like a open space on plot here or raised columns above. That is at a gallery level at the very top. And then there's a new gallery level that used to be a bakery and the mezzanine, and that's where you enter. And then there's patios throughout that balcony. So a mixed use of purposes.

**Thomas (Host)** Taylor described Arcosanti sorta like an old world village where everyone works and lives in the same space. This makes all of our society feel lifted as you walk through the grounds.

**Taylor** He was saying.

**Thomas (Host)** Referring to Soleri.

**Taylor** That his monumentally vertical plan of Arcosanti is actually a much more practical, realistic vision for human habitation than to sprawl. Because if sprawl keeps, we run out of earth to build, right? We can go pretty high and stay out of nature and allow for our habitat, which is humanity, to be separate from natural habitat because the way we live is not the same way that they live. And we depend on them for the earth to live and for us to be sustainable.

**Thomas (Host)** As the idea evolved, the design shifted. It was decided that the tall building concept would be put on its side so that it became a long series of buildings that all connected in some way. The café and gallery area flows into the ceramics apse. This is where they make iconic Soleri Bells to sell to the public. For those listeners who, like me, aren't familiar with architecture terms and apps, looks like a half moon dome. They're often used in cathedrals, but Arcosanti uses them to cool off the space in the Arizona summer and lock in the heat during winter. This is where I met Angela Pierro, the current ceramics

manager. She told me a bit about the process of playing in the dirt to create beautiful looking and sounding bells.

**Angela** We have those beds over there, kind of like the semi-circle of beds with the red tops, and they scale down to different depths to push down different size bells into the soil. We gather silt from the riverbed and we bring it up and put it in those beds and we'll cycle that out. Maybe every year we will mix the silt up and sift it so it's really fluffy. And then we have these positives of the cone shaped bells that will push into the silt, which will make a mold. And if it's the right consistency with the right combination of water, that hole that we make will stay and then we will use the slip, which is a mix of clay and water, and pour it into those holes and then we will let it dry for a little bit. Eventually there will be a rim that forms and we wait till that rim gets about half an inch thick and then we'll take a suction bulb or kind of like a turkey baster looking thing and suction out the clay.

**Thomas (Host)** Angela was drawn to Arcosanti because she loved the idea of living in the type of community on display. She came to Arizona from Massachusetts and lived in Phoenix for a year before moving up to Arcosanti. She described it as intimidating at first to live in the same space as you work, but the other residents become like a family. To the point that the whole place has an "ask your neighbor for a cup of sugar" type of feel to it. But on a much grander scale. Speaking of a grander scale, the same technique that makes the ceramic bells was used to make the apse in which the bells are made.

**Angela** They had a huge mound of silt that they had a framework to make into a dome shape, and they put pigment on the silt, which you can see the different colors on the ceiling. And they used knives to carve out into the cell. And then just like we do with the bells, they made concrete slurry and poured it on top of the silt mounds. And then they excavated all the dirt out from underneath, which left us with this stone here, which I think it's kind of cool, like we make bells inside of a big bell.

**Thomas (Host)** One level down from the ceramics apse sits the bronze apse. Here, artisans mold bronze into more bells. Continuing the tour, Taylor shows a vast public space just past the two artisan apses. It's a huge flat space with walls that curve up into a beautiful ceiling. This area is used as a meeting space for Arcosanti residents, as well as a spot where they held performances pre-COVID. It was here that we ran into another alumnus, architect Nadia Bègin. Nadia added more context to how Arcosanti is designed.

**Nadia** And it brings a cultural feeling, you know, where people live close together, but also protect the landscapes so that they can go out when it becomes too much. Inside, you could be saying, Go and enjoy nature. It's right at your doorstep. And then how we design it by compacting it, then it becomes an organism that works well on its own. And so if it's well oriented to the south, then it minimizes how much energy it's using. I think the idea evolved and is thinking about how or what the city should look like.

**Thomas (Host)** Taylor then took us down a hall that opened out into a breathtaking space, a circular area with residences around the outer ring and a sizable amphitheater in the middle. The residences, as with everything at Arcosanti, are multi-use areas that have private studios, classrooms and the Arcosanti archives. The Amphitheater presented more proof of the arcology concept using nature in the design.

**Taylor** This is the Colly Soleri Music Center and we've had many events here, live performances, dance, music - both digital performances as well as live throughout here. So we'll go down it using the natural slope of this site. Kind of like the Greeks used to do.

The Romans would build their amphitheaters from nothing, and that's why the Colosseum was this massive what was a skyscraper for the stage. But the Greeks would build it into this side, into the hill like this is here, and use the natural topography. And if you see down here, this is a moat. So they can actually turn on the water main and there is a waterfall that will come down here all the way into the moat.

**Thomas (Host)** Taylor is pointing to a section that splits the amphitheater seating in two.

**Taylor** During hot, super hot days, the surface of the water starts to evaporate and that conditions the air cooling it. And we also have a massive military grade parachute for large objects like a pallet. And that strung over those lines there also sheds the area.

**Thomas (Host)** Finally, the buildings after the amphitheater hold additional classrooms, as well as the offices dedicated to the running of Arcosanti. Shortly. Beyond that, you'll hit a cliff, at the bottom of which sits the Agua Fria River, where they get all their water that keeps them self-sustaining. If you go behind the buildings, you'll find a lovely little walking path, sometimes referred to as the walking garden. It's a place to relax and think. With a stunning view of the Arizona landscape to look at while doing so. Back in the cafe part of the first building, Taylor introduced me to two of the people focused on agriculture at Arcosanti. Part of their sustainability efforts, as Nadia mentioned before, includes growing their own food so they don't have to rely on outside produce. Walker Simpson and David Tullis told me a little about those efforts.

**Walker** We've had a long history of growing crops. There's been several people throughout the project that have kind of spearheaded agriculture for chunks of years at a time, and so Dave started it up about four years ago now. And I jumped in with him and I've been farming for about nine years. Him and I are the main farmers, but we're volunteers we get we use. But between us we are able to get a large chunk of the property, including our greenhouses, orchard, food forest, our field, and our composting system and a lot more.

**David** I've always been interested in the agriculture part. Growing food here. A couple of years ago, they gave everybody the opportunity to start our own businesses. So we tried that four years ago now and I proposed to start a business of doing the agriculture and having workshops and teaching people how to work with the land and do agriculture within this arcology community setting. So I called it Arco-Agritecture, combining agriculture and architecture.

**Thomas (Host)** David has been looking into how plants grow the last couple of years and combining that with observations on how people interact with plants. He constantly compares buildings and plants and buildings for plants. Meanwhile, Walker has been planning on doing one of the things Arcosanti does best, educating through workshops. He wants to implement at least two, one in May and one in September, focusing on farm to table education.

**Walker** How to get people in the city to produce more food for the city. We want to find people who already have some interest or maybe a little bit of training in one of the areas, farm or table or any part in between. And we want to kind of make them well-rounded. So we want to show people how to grow. We want to show people how to process store properly, and we want to show people what they can do with food. And hopefully that gets people energized into using produce more.

**Thomas (Host)** Arcosanti's agricultural program isn't just geared towards engaging the public, David explained what is possibly the most exciting thing they're growing.

**David** We're also doing some really interesting work with a Hopi farmer, Michael Kotutwa Johnson. And he's bringing his corn that he's grown for I learned 45 years up at his place in the Hopi Reservation, and he's helping us grow corn. Teaching us his techniques. It's just amazing that he's willing to help us with that. And hopefully we can have people from his reservation come down and work with us and we go up and help them work with greenhouses and maybe help this idea kind of take root with the Hopi. The deal is all the corn we grow, half of it we give back to Michael and the Hopi, and then half of it we keep. His ask is that we don't sell it, we keep it to eat and then we keep half to plant for the next year.

**Thomas (Host)** While Paolo Soleri was a great artist and a visionary creating Arcosanti, he was also a deeply flawed man. In 2017, four years after his death, his daughter Daniela, came forward about the sexual abuse she endured from her father growing up. The board members of the Cosanti Foundation supported her decision to open up releasing a statement that said, "We are saddened by Daniela Soleri's trauma. Her decision to speak out about her father's behavior towards her helps us confront Paolo Soleri's flaws and compels us to reconsider his legacy." They went on to encourage people to separate the work from the man. Celebrating Soleri's ideas while acknowledging his faults. And they urged us to think that supporting those ideas does not condone the actions of the Creator. Liz, as the new CEO and executive director, gave me her thoughts on inheriting this tainted legacy.

**Nadia** Part of that is really beginning to look at not really deemphasizing Soleri because he really created the backbone of what this place is about and the philosophy, but really developing and celebrating all the people that have contributed and built this place. And so the idea of confronting that, being open about it, really acknowledging those that have helped develop this place and move forward. We have something called the Cause Bells. Every year we have a specific cause that we give to. We're currently working with a local nonprofit that is single mothers empowerment to become part of the community and help work within and help develop their standing in life and help support and empower that. We're going to make a cause bell that helps support that. And then a certain percentage of the sales goes towards that. The idea is like one nonprofit is helping another sister nonprofit.

**Thomas (Host)** Liz says that the focus when thinking about Arcosanti should be on all the people throughout the years that have made it what it is and the new younger generation that will help to continue building this philosophy into the future. The concept of arcology, building while keeping ecology in mind, is state of the art, and Arcosanti as an experiment seems to be something of a success. Having started in 1970 and still going strong, it's a gorgeous place with several trails leading off from the main campus that visitors can hike. The building designs use nature as an advantage, and all of them have at least more than one use. They are completely self-sufficient with their homegrown crops, and the artisans work to pay the bills, both by creating the artful bells to sell and by teaching the public with their workshops. Is this place out in the middle of Arizona the blueprint for the City of the Future? If arcology were to spread, it would certainly have to function in a way specific to the ecology of each new place that's built. For now this is a uniquely Arizona town, one that continues to grow and develop, just like the people who nurture it. Thank you for listening to today's episode of Valley 101. Have you been out to visit Arcosanti or gone to see the Cosanti Workshop in Paradise Valley? Share your thoughts and photos with us on

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