

# Sketches





Guests find their welcome to Arcosanti at the end of a washboard road.

About two miles east off of I-17 north of Phoenix, down a road that rides more like a neglected mule trail, lies an experimental eco-community called Arcosanti.

Construction began on Arcosanti—a car-less utopia from the mind of visionary architect Paolo Soleri—in 1970, but it is no hippie colony. Rather, the site is billed as an “urban laboratory.” Its research objective is to provide a more eco-centric and less egocentric alternative to urban sprawl.

When complete, the project is designed to house 5,000 Arconauts in the shadow of a series of towering, concentric, concrete and steel half-domes that will cover about 12 acres. Today, a dozen or so space-ship-earth-style structures support about 30,000 annual visitors and a resident population of fewer than 100, most of whom work on site.

Now, after more than 40 years into the project, many detractors have questioned whether its completion is anything more than a pipe dream. According to *The New York Times*, Jeff Stein, who took over for 92-year-old Soleri as Cosanti Foundation president last fall, the current operating budget of about \$1 million is only 10 percent of what they would need to continue construction as planned. Nonetheless, students from around the globe continue to flock to Arcosanti hoping to gain some insight from Soleri's tutelage.

Though this city of the future may be momentarily frozen in time, nobody there seems to notice. “People are here only because they want to be and they are doing the work they want to do,” says Stein.

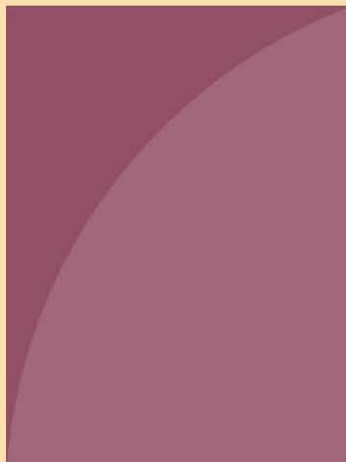
And there is plenty to be done. Though a few residents are needed to operate the largest building—a visitor's center complete with a gallery, bakery, and café—many full-time Arconauts put in time in the open-air foundry and ceramics studios where famed Soleri wind bells are made and sold to support the project.

“Not bells,” corrects head ceramist Dave Hutchens, “...sounds of the earth.” The clay used to create the ceramic bells is made on site from silt gathered nearby. Soleri-esque designs—something resembling an intergalactic petroglyph—are carved into the bells as the clay dries. The bronze bells, too, are made in conservative fashion—heat from the blast furnace warms the apartments located above the foundry.

The half-dome design, too, has a special purpose. Due to the seasonal position of the sun relative to the horizon, “the entire structure shades itself in summer and floods with light in the winter,” explains Stein. It also has the effect of making the surrounding landscape a part of Arcosanti's architectural experience—the very definition

Story and Photography by Craig Baker

# of Arizona's Artistic Micro-communities



**Top left to right:** The Arcosanti vaults shade the community's main public area and provide a venue for everything from daily morning meetings to large-scale events.

The ceramics studio shades itself in summer and floods with light in winter.

The Visitors Center receives 30,000 guests a year and offers visitors a chance to visit the gallery, have a bite to eat and begin a guided tour.

**Bottom left to right:** Soleri brass bells

A 92-year-old Soleri still takes time to visit and speak with his students and resident Arconauts once a week, though he now lives in Scottsdale.

Soleri's concrete half-domes are built into the earth.

A view from the upstairs gallery into the café in the Visitors Center. A large bronze bell is the centerpiece.

Clay bells are formed and dried in plaster molds.

Cosanti Foundation President Jeff Stein discusses architecture in Arcosanti's amphitheater.





of Soleri's notion of arcology—a term he coined that draws from “architecture” and “ecology.” An architect himself, Stein says, “If you want to feel connected to your surroundings... you just don't build the fourth wall of your building.”

The result is both humbling and inspiring. The shapes of Arcosanti's environment—the soft curve of the hills and Agua Fria River, the sharp angles and inclines of the canyon—can be seen in what is created there: bells and buildings alike.



A scale model of a completed Arcosanti depicts currently existing structures in gray. The white structures have yet to be built.

### Rancho Linda Vista

Though unique in design, Arcosanti does not have a monopoly on the creative community endeavor in Arizona. A less formal model, Rancho Linda Vista, in Oracle, Ariz., functioned as a dude ranch in the 1930s, attracting the likes of Gary Cooper and Rita Hayworth. In 1969, the land and buildings were purchased by a group of artists largely associated with the University of Arizona.

For artist and teacher Andy Rush, who worked on a dude ranch in Colorado during his teenage years, the start of things at Rancho Linda Vista “was like coming home.” The ranch is made up of a handful of buildings, many of which have been repurposed to support working artists, and is home to about 30–35 people “depending on which children are home at the moment,” says Rush.

The ranch, he says, has gone through a number of phases since it began in the late 1960s, including just about every hippie commune cliché. “In the early days, we almost came apart—it was chaos,” recalls Rush. But things, he adds, have calmed down since then. Through the years, the artists on the ranch were forced to learn new ways of living together as life continued to happen around them. “The old community idea that everybody belongs to everybody is bullshit... the idealism all came apart in the first three years,” says Rush.

But for those who stayed, it was

art that kept them there. According to Rush, “the mutual love...and practice of art has been the basic belief.” And in one of three public gathering places on the 40-acre ranch, it shows. The yard is filled to visual capacity with sculptures of various sizes, subjects and media. A handmade brick kiln stands beneath an awning; a freestanding covered bar adorns the patio in front of the open woodshop. Visible through the studio windows are suggestions of oversized paintings, unfinished sculptures, junk collections.

The free-flowing nature of artistic ideas at Rancho Linda Vista is eminently apparent. In this small interactive community, a creative dialog is inevitable. Friendships form, and those bonds influence the work. Rush, for instance, has made thousands of dollars by selling his sculptures, though his formal education focused strictly on two-dimensional art. He credits all of his experience in sculpture to the influence of fellow ranch resident and sculptor Joy Fox McGrew.

In fact, as an artist, Rush is hesitant to accept complete responsibility for any of his success. “If you really look at what makes me work, it's that I have the support of so many people,” he says. And apparently a little help can go a long way—many public artworks around Tucson and Oracle bear the names of two or more ranch dwellers.

Even more than his personal connections, though, Rush says the primary appeal of the small community is its remoteness. “I like the isolation of being in the country for my work...it's quiet here...my attention can be on what's important to me.” It's a sentiment enthusiastically echoed at Arcosanti.



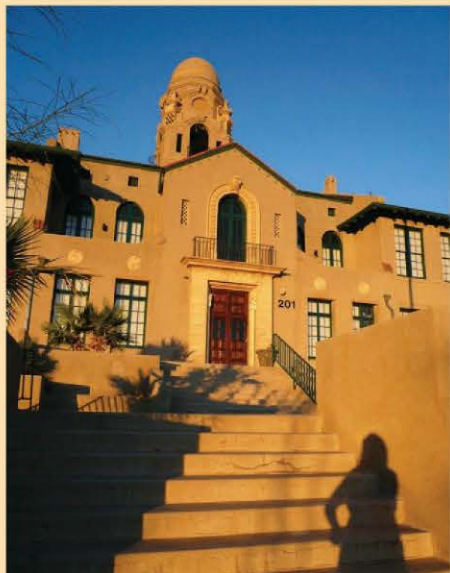
Top to bottom: Resident artist Matthias Düwel prepares for a gallery show in Los Angeles.

Sculptural art dots the landscape at Rancho Linda Vista.

An area outside the Rancho Linda Vista Gallery is used for public gatherings.

The Rancho Linda Vista Gallery displays work from what residents call “friends of the ranch.” The gallery is open to the public on Sundays.

Andy Rush, a Rancho Linda Vista resident/working artist, appreciates the opportunity to work in a country setting. Though now a somewhat modern art retreat for permanent and semi-permanent residents, Rancho Linda Vista still holds on to much of its dude ranch flavor.



Curley School, Ajo, Ariz.

### Curly School

Two-and-a-half hours west of Tucson, in the former mining town of Ajo, one nonprofit has made the artist's love of the remote and scenic a means of both profit generation and community beautification.

A decade ago, Ajo was under the threat of becoming Arizona's next ghost town. After the copper mine shut down in the 1980s, it took about 60 percent of the population with it. The town's historic buildings, many nearing a century old, were left to crumble. But where many saw ruin, the International Sonoran Desert Alliance (ISDA) saw opportunity. It bought the Spanish mission-style schoolhouse in the city center, refurbished it and reopened the property in 2007 as a 30-room apartment complex reserved for working artists. Says ISDA Executive Director Tracy Taft, by the end of the year all rooms had been leased and the property has been "operating in the black ever since."

But the Curley School residents are more than just artists. As part of their lease agreement, they are required to perform at least five hours of community service every month, at the school or in greater Ajo—they call it the give-back principle. As a result, the artists "energize each other...and they really become good community members," says Taft.

The Curley School's influence can be seen around town. To help the rest of the population of Ajo (many of whom live in poverty), ISDA offers a wide array of low-cost or free programs, such as a GED (General Equivalency Diploma) program, job training, business planning and funding assistance, a free ceramics studio and a woodshop, with a community kitchen in the works. They have been so suc-

cessful, in fact, that ISDA has been able to purchase the rest of Ajo's central plaza, on which renovations are already underway.

The artist living/workspace model is even making its way to downtown Tucson, where ISDA is assisting the Warehouse Arts Management Organization with the refurbishment of the Steinfeld Warehouse on Toole Avenue. Not only do they hope to duplicate the success of the Curley School there, but they also

intend to offer Ajo artists some metropolitan exposure through Steinfeld's on-site gallery. Ultimately, says Taft, "our goal is to help artists revitalize the Ajo economy." So far, it seems to be working.

Though it may seem paradoxical, "community self-selects the most independent people there are," says Andy Rush. But there is some sense in that logic.

There are specialists in small communities, sure. But the inherent limits on human resources mean that everyone has to do a little bit of everything. Big projects often require the help of more than a few residents, whether or not they are trained in the necessary skill. As such, all members of the community are forced to constantly adapt and to take direct accountability for the well-being of those around them. In doing so, all individuals play an active and obvious role in the improvement of their community at large.

Though the effect of our individual efforts may be harder to see among a larger population, our effect on each other is real, whether we are aware of it or not, contend members of these artist communities. "Self-sufficiency," says Paolo Soleri, is a "totally, totally, totally, nonsense proposition." This from a man who set out to build a small city.

For most of us, our dreams are more modest, but art and architecture aside, perhaps the most important thing Arizona's micro-communities have to offer us is a lesson in how to live with each other. We are, after all, in this together.

DL

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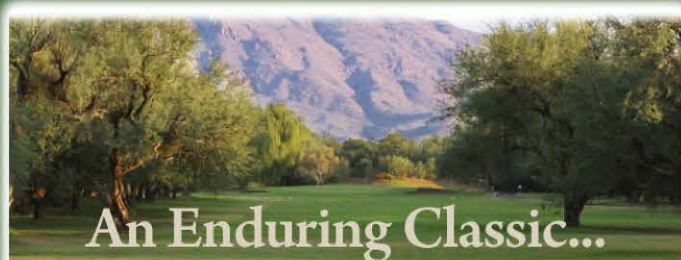
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