OUR UNIQUE VISUAL WEALTH

COSANTI, PARADISE VALLEY, ARIZONA

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" . . . to make conditions in the future a little better than they are now . . . that's the function of architecture. "

– Paolo Soleri

Paolo Soleri will be dead eight years this April 9—13 days before Earth Day 2021.

But his legacy as architect, ecological pioneer, urban philosopher, artist and craftsman remains at two of Arizona's most architecturally significant sites: Cosanti in Paradise Valley and Arcosanti in Cordes Junction, 70 miles north of Phoenix.

Many know Soleri from the one-off bronze and ceramic Cosanti Originals windbells produced at both sites or the Soleri Bridge crossing the Arizona Canal at Camelback Road in downtown Scottsdale, but his achievement at Cosanti should be more widely celebrated and utilized, says Scott Jarson, who with wife Debbie is celebrating 31 years of azarchitecture Jarson & Jarson Real Estate, Scottsdale, which specializes in the sale and purchase of historic properties.

"Cosanti is a genuine experiment in living, combining wood, silt and concrete and ingenuity," he explains. "For Paolo Soleri, it was a way of totally integrating life and work. Here he walked the talk for some time."

In 1958, Jarson's parents purchased a home a quarter mile north of Cosanti on Mockingbird Lane in what was then the Doubletree Ranch area in Maricopa County. "I used to ride by here on my bike and watched the Ceramics Studio and other structures being built," he explains. "I spent a lot of time there."

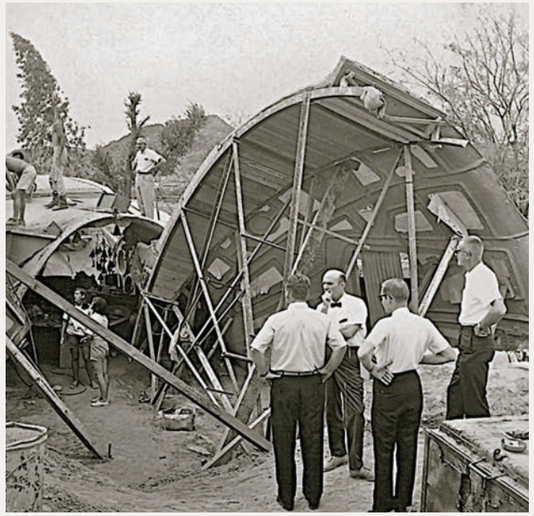
Cosanti significantly influenced him in his life's work. "I remember speaking with my high school art teacher and telling him that the CatCast House at Cosanti was the kind of home I wanted to build one day for myself," he recalls. "That would be great, I thought."

Fortunately, a new partnership between the Cosanti Foundation and The School of Architecture, formerly at Taliesin, is offering architectural students from around the world hands-on education at Arcosanti, and in a limited capacity at Cosanti as well. In January 2021, the first students began studying and working in person at Arcosanti under this plan.

In 1932, Frank Lloyd Wright founded the school as an apprenticeship program; it is accredited by the National Architectural Accrediting Board and the Higher Learning Commission, offering a project-based Master of Architecture degree, focused on an immersive, hands-on educational experience. The school left Taliesin West in May 2020. In 1965 Soleri and his wife Colly (Carolyn Woods) established the 501(c)3 educational nonprofit foundation to further his ideals of ecological and architectural accountability.

As students live, attend classes, and design and build their traditional shelters at Arcosanti, the collaboration also envisions guests and tourists better enjoying the structures at and lessons of the earlier Cosanti.

"We see the school's new location and leadership as an opportunity to reinvigorate our dedication to our entire community, including students, faculty, staff and alumni," says Dan Schweiker, chair of the governing board for the school and a 20-year resident of Paradise Valley, where he served on the town council for 12 years. He now lives in Scottsdale. "Cosanti is an iconic place in Paradise Valley, and we look forward to working with the foundation for many years," he adds.



From the mid-1950s through the mid-1970s, Soleri and a cadre of apprentices and volunteers students designed and built Cosanti. Those dozen or so visionary dwellings and structures, including the Earth House (1956), Pumpkin Apse/Barrel Vaults (1967), Soleri Studio (1959), CatCast Home (1965), Gallery (1961) and canopied Pool (1966), represent Soleri's pioneering vision to create a habitat balancing human needs and the environment.

Designated a culturally significant site on the Arizona State Registry of Historic Places, Cosanti is also where Soleri perfected his "earth-casting" technique for building structures and procedures for casting bells, where he created his great bridge designs and where he wrote *Arcology: The City in the Image of Man*, which inspired him to build Arcosanti.

"Soleri's Cosanti studios and experimental structures, while modest on their five-acre site, are architecturally as important as Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin West residence and studio," says Will Bruder, FAIA, the celebrated Valley architect who apprenticed with Soleri in the 1960s, helping build Cosanti structures such as the two-level CatCast. Jarson remembers watching Bruder, about ten years his senior, labor at his work; today he and Debbie live in a Bruder-designed home in Paradise Valley.

"With this structural variety and the complex's poetic continuity, these varied structures appear to link together in an organic wholeness," adds Bruder, who lives and practices in Portland, Oregon.

With the name Cosanti, Soleri blended two Italian words, "cosa" and "anti" ("before things"), to describe his belief that humanity's direct access to nature should also connect organically with its structures. The concept is aligned with his arcology, a portmanteau of architecture and ecology: "environment in harmony with man and nature."

"Cosanti represents the legacy of a thinker, artist, and architect combined in one location," Jarson says. "A sculpture of buildings and a must place to go for architects as well as anyone interested in our environment, Cosanti is the work of a visionary who thought about environmentalism,

sustainability, and climate change long before those concepts became mainstream."

TURIN, TIME WITH WRIGHT AND THEN COSANTI

Born in Turin, June 21, 1919, in the Po Valley of northern Italy, Soleri visited the United States in December 1946 after receiving his master's degree in Architecture from the Politecnico di Torino. Here he spent 18 months in fellowship with Wright at Taliesin West and Taliesin. For philosophical and personal reasons, they parted.

In 1950, Soleri and wife Colly traveled to Italy where he designed his only commercial commission, Ceramica Artistica Solimene, in Vietri south of Naples on the Adriatic. During the design and construction of the factory, he learned ceramics, a skill he used later to make his original bells at Cosanti.

The couple returned to the Southwest about four and a half years later, inspired by what Paolo called its "light and landscape" in a January 22, 1999, interview with Anne Andeen and Ann Townsend, Town of Paradise Valley Historical Committee members. He recalled: "We were in Santa Fe for one season and we found out that it was too cold for ceramics, the ceramics would freeze when we were working outdoors. So we came here because by looking around, we ended up finding these five acres for sale."

Here they settled with their daughter, Daniela, today a researcher in California. The family first lived in the Pink House, a still-standing redwood home built in 1920s, perhaps the oldest structure in Paradise Valley. At the time, the home was owned by painter Lew Davis and his wife, ceramicist Mathilde Schaefer. In 1963, the town annexed the area which includes Cosanti.

"Paolo fell in love with the unique environment of the desert. Here he found a place where you can live in harmony with nature and with others, using materials of the earth already here," says Patrick McWhortor, former president and CEO of the Cosanti Foundation and an ex officio member of the board of directors. "It all started at Cosanti."

"Paolo found the silt on the floodplain of the Indian Bend Wash great to work with. He could make molds with it and it could withstand concrete poured over it, as he and his students did with a number of the buildings," says Victor Sidy, former head of school and dean of the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture, and managing principal of Victor Sidy Architect in Phoenix. He remains a board member of the school with others such as alumni, Bing Hu, founder and president, H&S International, and John Sather, managing partner, Swaback Architects + Planners, Scottsdale.

Soleri also designed his only other Arizona homes, the Dome House in Cave Creek (1949), built for Colley's mother in Cave Creek, an inspiration for the Earth House at Cosanti, and the Deconcini House (1984), once owned by Arizona Senator Dennis Deconcini and his brother, Dino, in Phoenix.

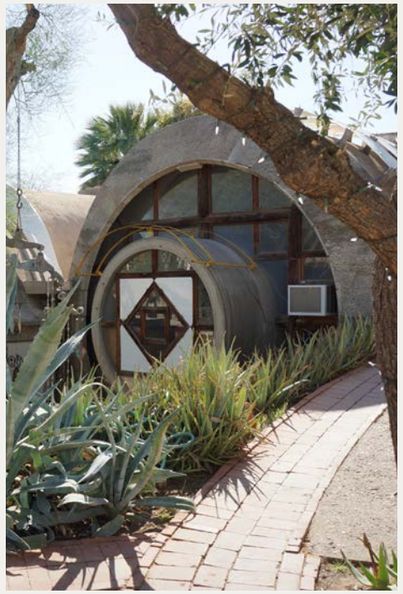
In 1970, he and his students began building Arcosanti ("Architecture" + "Cosanti") to test Soleri's concepts of urban planning, how future cities can be more pedestrian-centric and less automobile dependent, more multi-use, and more vertically dense to alleviate strain on planetary resources.

Described at the time an "urban laboratory" by Ada Louise Huxtable, the New York Times architecture critic, Arcosanti was featured in a 1976 Newsweek article, which called it ". . . probably the most important experiment [in urban architecture] in our lifetime." Adds Jarson: "The concepts formulated at Cosanti are taken to a macro level at Arcosanti. They become huge."

"Arcosanti is just an attempt to implement some ideas," Soleri said in the 1999 interview. "The idea is the urban affect which is what made civilization. The point I am making constantly is that we have to re-invent the city in order develop our civilization."

Only a few buildings, such as Antioch (1974) were completed at Cosanti after work at Arcosanti began, but molding and firing the windbells continued here and at Arcosanti, where Soleri focused most of his efforts on his city of the future.

There he is buried in a private cemetery next to Colly.



THE COSANTI ACHIEVEMENT

The Earth House was the first experimental structure, built shortly after the family purchased the land. "The roof, it's buried so that it was below grade," Soleri recalled in the Andeen and Thompson interview. "The desert is very flat, so I shaped the desert by hand, then we cast the roof, then we excavated under the roof to make this space, we put walls in and divided it. So you do the roof and then the foundation."

The Gallery is similarly constructed. Jeffrey Cook, AIA, described the innovative process in *A Guide to the Architecture of Metro Phoenix – Central Arizona Chapter, American Institute of Architects*, published 1983: "Moist earth was piled up and shaped as a mold for concrete construction. Rib shapes were cut into the mound of earth to hold the structural thickening and reinforcement. Polyethylene plastic film cut into patterns was placed on the earth-mold to defined smooth curved panels. The entire earth mound was sprayed with "gunite" . . . After the concrete hardened, the earth was removed from underneath with a bulldozer" (p. 189).

Bruder notes that Soleri and his students built every structure with similar care and craftsmanship.

"From the apse shells of the bell works to the sunken courtyards of the Earth House to the earth cast roofs of the CatCast Residence and the hovering concrete canopy over the swimming pool, each structure was 'shaped' and integrally carved with patterns and ornament by Paolo's hands along with the support of his interns and apprentices," he says.

Because of keen siting and construction, the campus is also an "an oasis of passive climatic comfort," Bruder explains. "The site's structures are thoughtfully recessed into the natural grade of the desert floor that surrounds them, creating a catchment of cool air along the pathways and courtyards connecting the buildings. The series of concrete apses and canopies is carefully oriented either to the north to optimize their shading from the heat of the summer sun or to the south to catch the warmth of the low winter sun angles."

Sidy adds that the interior spaces provide shade and cooling: "They exhaust the hot air through an evaporative-cooling effect. Here is experimentation in a similar way as Wright. In fact, he engaged with the extremes of the desert much more than his teacher."

"What makes Cosanti so special to me is the marriage between the earth and structure, the buff color from the silt integral in the concrete, for instance," Jarson says. "The decorative work is also so beautiful, an homage to indigenous people who carved petroglyphs," he adds, noting that Soleri also learned from Wright, early Roman builders, even Chinese designers.

Jarson's favorite space is the Studio. "I remember looking through the windows as a young man, and there was Paolo Soleri at the same table that's still there, designing," he recalls. "It was very special then, and its magic remains with me now."

OPPORTUNITY, RESPONSIBILITY

Surrounded by pricey El Maro Estates in Paradise Valley, one of the country's wealthiest zipcodes, the Cosanti land is worth about $1.5 million an acre and continually increases in value, Jarson says, adding that this doesn't necessarily jeopardize the future of Cosanti but remains a factor when discussing the preservation of a state treasure.

Also, the Taliesin School of Architecture and Cosanti Foundation hope to generate more attention to Cosanti through opening the venue for more tours, already expanded to weekends, explains McWhortor, who says the Foundation's board is also considering pursuing a National Register of Historic Places designation for Cosanti.

The site should be reimagined as a uniquely public place in a town of superlative private places. "Cosanti and its history should serve as a point of pride for Paradise Valley," Sidy explains. "It's a remarkable record of ingenuity."

Cosanti should be celebrated as a place where environmental responsibility, especially in the water-poor Southwest desert, was pioneered. "We have to remind ourselves that we are fooling ourselves if we think that we are preserving the desert the way we are going on," Soleri said in the 1999 interview. "We are not preserving the desert, we are not preserving us, we are really destroying ourselves. In order to change that trend, we have to change our minds."

Bruder sees Cosanti architecturally aligned with Antonio Gaudi's late nineteenth-century masterworks in Barcelona, Spain and Simon Rodia's early-20th-century sculpted towers in Watts, California. "Cosanti has been, since its inception, a pilgrimage site of both architects, sculptors and artisans from around the world," he explains.

"It is extremely important that these fragile architectural inventions of genius find the resources and commitment of professional restoration and landmark status to protect their structural integrity from the failure of age and ensure continued access for the general public and scholars alike," he adds.

The revenue from the sales of Cosanti Originals windbells, sized tiles, vessels, planters and pots provides revenue support for Cosanti. In addition, The Cosanti Foundation is funded by its members, individual donors and charitable foundations and, in nonCOVID-19 times, through tours, hands-on workshops and performing arts events. But more funds will be needed to renovate and restore this important American place.

"This is where the highest level of thinking took place," Jarson says. "Bucky Fuller lectured here, and Mark Mills, another Wright apprentice who went on to great things. Its intellectual legacy for all of us is the furtherance of ideals in architecture, creative construction and living.

"This is a fragile and delicate place, and we need to restore it so that a new generation can get a glimpse of how Cosanti was created," he adds. "You won't see anything like this anywhere in the world. It is inhabited sculpture and it is sacred."

For more information, visit cosanti.com and arcosanti.org.

David Brown is a Valley-based freelancer (azwriter.com). This is the third in an ongoing series celebrating Arizona's "Visual Wealth."

EDITORS NOTE

Dr. Daniela Soleri was a classmate and neighbor of mine since childhood. For some time, she has been bravely and poignantly honest about the abuse she experienced by her father.

Dr. Soleri has published an important public essay that must be read in order to balance any blind admiration of Soleri's work in context with that of Soleri, the man.

Knowing this, how then can we consider any celebration of Cosanti the place? Our article is meant to remember and explore Cosanti, the existent works and structures. Many sincere, creative and talented people contributed to that built environment. The sculpture of these spaces remain compelling and have inspired many to go on to do good works.

I share personal remembrances of Cosanti and Paolo Soleri in this article, as the creativity and ideas (especially those of the 1960's to early 1970's) were indeed special. Perhaps we may be permitted to consider these concepts, and experience the locale, but not without balance against personal truth and cost.

You may read Dr. Soleri's essay here:
Read https://medium.com/@soleri/sexual-abuse-its-you-him-and-his-work-88ecb8e99648

Scott Jarson