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Simplicity and solitude Living experiment in Arizona desert is supported by making wind bells

By Eric Noland, MEDIANEWS STAFF
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CORDES JUNCTION, Ariz.
GIVE THEM points for effort.

In Arizona's high desert between Phoenix and Sedona, a stubborn knot of nonconformists is participating in a grand communal experiment, one that rejects many of the conventions of urban and suburban habitation. It is Arcosanti, a 37-year work-in-progress that presents an alternative to the American norm of living one place, working another, and spending half a lifetime creeping along roads in between.

It is the design baby of Paolo Soleri, an architect who came to Arizona in the 1940s as a disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin West. He set about establishing the sustainable community of Arcosanti on the lip of the Agua Fria River Canyon in 1970, and, uh, just might finish it one of these days.

As a side enterprise, Soleri achieved commercial success with his signature wind bells of cast bronze and ceramics, which with the slightest breeze emit haunting tones that seem perfectly attuned to Arizona's stark exteriors.

The approach to Arcosanti, from Interstate 17, involves bumping along a dirt road for a couple of miles. Then it can be seen in the distance, rising incongruously from the desert landscape like an interplanetary outpost, as if sprung from the imagination of George Lucas. It's a jumble of boxy towers, arches, giant porthole windows, glass-dome ceilings, odd protrusions, slanted roofs and random accents of wood. A construction crane — idle throughout my visit — looms over it all, an apt metaphor.

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Guests are welcomed to Arcosanti for tours, overnight stays, week-long seminars and month-long workshops. There's a bakery and a cafe on the premises, and of course a place to purchase bells — a stunning, sun-washed gallery where hundreds of them are

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