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EARTH DAY Arcosanti: A 'City' Grows Green in the Arizona Desert

By [Andrea Sachs](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Arriving at Arcosanti, an experimental eco-city in central Arizona, I was acutely aware of my non-greenness. I had spent the morning expelling carbon on my flight to Phoenix. My rental car was messy with empty soda bottles, a few plastic bags and a banana peel that I didn't plan to mulch. A piece of paper with directions had accidentally escaped through the car window, floating off toward a patch of spiky cactus. With this kind of résumé, would Mother Earth's minions still let me inside?

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Guests keep their carbon footprints small at Arcosanti, an urban laboratory in Arizona best explored without a car. (By Chris Ohlinger)

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"Hey, come join us," a guy in a dress, belt and outside personality beckoned. "Have a beer."

The Californian graphic artist was one of up to 80 residents living and working at Arcosanti, a pilot utopian community that champions sustainable living. After a long day of working on passive solar power, gardening and bread-baking, the group was tossing back a few. And for me, after a long day of carbon emissions and gas-guzzling, a mixer with outre environmentalists was much appreciated.

"Put your empties on the rebar before you leave," advised one of the revelers. I slid my glass bottle onto a sharp piece of metal. See, I was already contributing to the environment.

Arcosanti was started in the 1970s by Italian architect Paolo Soleri, a spitfire who seeks an alternative to a car-dominant, hyper-consumerist society. With his so-called urban laboratory, Soleri, 88, hopes to eliminate the automobile, promote frugality and create a functional metro center run on the Earth's resources: food from organic gardens, power from the sun, air conditioning from the shade, building materials from the natural surroundings. Though still a work in progress, Arcosanti in theory offers residents the same amenities as, say, a Manhattanite: housing, commerce, culture and dining.

For the visitor, staying at Arcosanti is an opportunity to soak up the [Sierra Club](#) ideology within a "Blade Runner" fantasy. While more-mainstream eco-resorts feature energy-saving light bulbs,

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organic meals and save-the-sea-turtle outings, Arcosanti goes deeper. It aims to change behavior through workshops, tours, conversations, hikes and happy hour with a man with gender-bending style.

"Arcosanti is both a success and a failure. A failure in that it is less than what its founder had hoped it would be, yet an extraordinary success in that it is actually there, inhabited and changing people's lives," said Susan Piedmont-Palladino, a curator at Washington's [National Building Museum](#) who is organizing an exhibit on green communities. "Its greatest success has been its prescience in the field of architecture and the environment."

In honor of Earth Day (April 22), I recently flew to Phoenix, then rented a car for the 65-mile drive to Arcosanti -- yes, drive. Ironically, the only way to reach the eco-city is by car.

* * *

Arcosanti was founded on the lofty concepts of "arcology," an elision of "architecture" and "ecology" that was coined by Soleri and reimagined by many science fiction writers. The movement envisions superstructures that provide commercial and residential space for the masses, but with minimal environmental impact. They are beehives made for people.

From Interstate 17, Arcosanti is invisible; however, as I neared the parking lot, its grand design became apparent: a hodgepodge of earth-hued concrete buildings with large circular windows, bowing apses and artful detailing. It resembled a World War III bunker for a rich dilettante.

The property sits on 15 cactus-strewn acres, a small wedge of the 860 acres owned by the nonprofit Cosanti Foundation, which also leases an adjacent 3,200 acres from the state. (The foundation raises funds through sales of Soleri's artwork, workshops and other endeavors.) Despite its compactness, Arcosanti contains all the necessities of village life: a cafe, a bakery, an art gallery, apartments and dorms for residents and guests, gardens and greenhouses, a foundry, woodwork and ceramic studios, an amphitheater and a swimming pool, which overlooks a static tide of sand and rocks.

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