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

The residents I encountered were an interesting mix of workshoppers attending a weeks-long program that teaches arcology and other eco- and arty topics; interns who practice their trade in those specialties; and full-timers, who in many cases become long-termers.

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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)

Some have lobbed the word "commune" at Arcosanti; "tightknit community" is a better description. Minutes after settling into my simple room with unobstructed desert views, I was invited to a party the next night. The theme was [Rubik's Cube](#): Wear three of the cube's colors, and by the end of the night, you should be a solid. Clever -- or Arcosantis Gone Wild. (I missed the fete but heard that the clothes started flying after midnight.) I also met my next-door neighbors, parents of resident Anna Greenberg, a 23-year-old from Washington.

Greenberg, who works in the foundry and the bakery, led our tour, a colorful guide in purple overalls, pink Crocs and a silver stud above her lip. At each building, she stopped to point out the innovative constructions and features. The heat from the foundry, for example, warms the apartments above. Evaporation from a moat encircling the amphitheater stage cools concertgoers. Olive trees salvaged from Phoenix produce shade and a Mediterranean flavor in meals.

"This is not the perfect arcology, but it's a place to experiment," Greenberg said, admitting that the city is still on the grid, must order food from outside sources and is only about 5 percent complete. "It is designed to human size; Phoenix is designed to car size."

How true: For the next 48 hours, I wouldn't even start up my rental.

* * *

Before you park the car, a field trip is advised. During his younger days, Soleri studied under [Frank Lloyd Wright](#), attending the acclaimed architect's school at Taliesin West. After a series of scampish behaviors, he was kicked out, but not before Wright's ideas on organic architecture

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During a tour of Taliesin West, about an hour south of Arcosanti in the Phoenix suburb of Scottsdale, our tour guide led us through Wright's home and office. "He got his ideas from nature," she said. "Nature was his religion, with a capital N."

Some of Wright's main themes, which reappear in Arcosanti, are the use of site-specific materials and multi-functional elements: A pool of water works for swimming, extinguishing fires and cooling the air. Wright also found unsightly the guts of industry and threatened to raze Taliesin West after electric towers were erected, sullyng his view. In the end, he decided to simply turn his back on them, shifting his focus onto the mountains in what was now his front yard.

Arcosanti also blots out the less attractive hallmarks of an industrialized, auto-dependent society. The highway is not visible from the property, nor are the [McDonald's](#) golden arches in nearby Cordes Junction. At night, the glare of Phoenix doesn't dim the star-bright sky.

Despite his preference for a natural setting, Soleri spends part of his time at Cosanti, his gallery, studio and home in nearby Paradise Valley. (He spends the rest of the week in an apartment at Arcosanti.) Built in the 1950s and recognized as an Arizona Historic Site, the five-acre property does its own sprawling, with seven surreal structures that include the apprentice quarters, supposedly [Steven Spielberg's](#) inspiration for the Ewoks' habitat in "Return of the Jedi."

Cosanti is also a giant exhibit hall for Soleri's signature ceramic and bronze bells, which hang from every imaginable surface. When the early evening wind swept through, the noise was more fairy tinkle than [Philip Glass](#).

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