

## Narrating Arcosanti, 1970

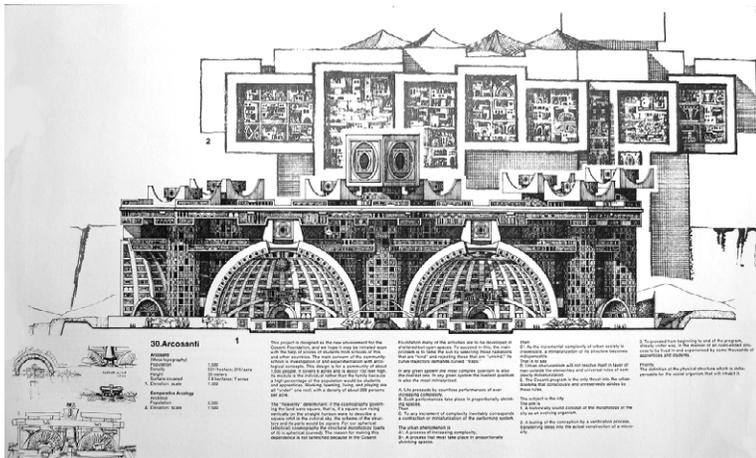
James Graham

Architecture has a way of being there. It is durable—in its material forms, its mythologies, its endless circulation of images—while remaining equally mutable. Buildings are never static objects, nor is its context, whether spatial, environmental, or social. This twinning of durability and mutability is what makes architecture a fruitful site and subject of narrative, and what makes the field architecture itself a narrative practice. Buildings never behave quite like their designers design them to (as with the unruly modernist tower of J. G. Ballard's *High-Rise*). Despite the desire of architects to see buildings as “invaluable devices of collective synchronization,” to borrow a phrase from Mark Wigley—as objects that locate us meaningfully in time—their time is immediately out of joint and their meanings are immediately unstable.<sup>1</sup> It's not just that the world changes around them and we see architecture anew, as so many objects against an animated backdrop of history and life. Perhaps it's more that an encounter with architecture is something like the confluence of two tidal systems, a liquid friction in which building and world rearrange themselves, an ongoing process that a visitor only catches the briefest glimpse of. That encounter is shaped by the ways we *tell* architecture.

This essay is a narrative about architectural narrative, about architecture as a generator of new narratives, and it takes as its subject a collection of buildings that is often described as a kind of fiction, despite its being here in the world—the “desert

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<sup>1</sup> J. G. Ballard, *High-Rise* (1975); Mark Wigley, “The Architectural Cult of Synchronization,” *October* 94 (Autumn 2000): 37.



The original design of Arcosanti (shown with additional background graphics) in *Arcology: The City in the Image of Man* (The MIT Press, 1969). This iteration lists a projected population of 1,500. Courtesy of the Cosanti Foundation.

city” of Arcosanti on the mesas north of Phoenix. Instigated by the architect Paolo Soleri as the 1960s turned to the 1970s, Arcosanti is both building and story, one that congealed into something of an official narrative early on—architecture and architects always exist in a cycle of mythology, with people and places wrapped together in the repetition, reiteration, and revision of such narratives. Arcosanti’s story is bound up in Soleri’s story, a story that emerges fully only when told in multiple, a story that has long been in need of other voices to participate in the telling. Such voices have emerged in recent months, revealing a darker and long-unacknowledged history; such voices can also be found in Arcosanti’s archives, bringing different protagonists and different energies into that history. And further voices can be cultivated, in that objects of architectural fascination like Arcosanti are continually retold and reinterpreted, reflecting the urgencies and imaginations of those who experience them as much as those who ostensibly author them.

Designed in the heyday of the “megastructure” as an object of architectural speculation, Arcosanti was initially envisioned as a new model of the city—a layered urbanism guided by an invented discipline Soleri termed “arcology,” architecture meeting ecology. It was an urbanism of three dimensions, pointedly opposing the

comparatively flat carpet of infrastructure laid down to accommodate the expansion of U.S. cities in the aftermath of the Second World War, and it was to be colossal in scale, weaving all the constituent elements of city life into a unified design. As drawn in Soleri’s *Arcology: The City in the Image of Man*, Arcosanti was to be a fifty-meter-high demonstration of these architectural, material, and social precepts. As built across the 1970s, though, its scale and character resembles that of a village, handmade by medium-skilled labor in site-cast concrete. Where the drawings project a tightly ordered aggregation of half-domes and massive concrete plinths, it was realized as a loose assemblage of vaults, half-domed apses, and cubes with circular cutouts, a testing ground of Soleri’s characteristic devices. The Arcosanti one visits today speaks to a pragmatically manageable process of communal construction more than the singularized urbanity of his arcological drawings.

That Soleri’s arcologies are often received as a kind of science fiction, a “paper architecture” that remained in the realm of fantasy, was in part encouraged by Soleri’s own exhortations. His interest in framing architecture as something of a space-age technology of vertical mobility explains why he would deliver what was surely a rousing, if occasionally mystifying, keynote to the National Association of Elevator Contractors in 1971. “You, the members of the vertical transportation industry, and I are interested in the same thing, although by different aims,” he begins his lecture, titled “The Flight from Flatness.” “Gravity sees to it that a leash will always be upon us (unless we can join the Apollo astronauts) but it is up to us to make it more and more elastic.” With rhetoric like this—an urbanism that even begins to approach the soon-to-conclude Apollo program—little wonder that Soleri’s sketches strike some as cover art to a mass-market paperback about extraplanetary life.

His lecture continues by conjuring a grand showdown between the elevator as a heroic figure of urbanity and the true urban Goliath of the twentieth century, the automobile: “The battle will be waged between the ‘horizontalists’ and their hordes of intruding machines, and the ‘verticalists’ and their (at present) slim battalions of self-effacing riding boxes and ramps.” With a subtle sleight of hand, Soleri upends the question of just whose vision of the city is science fiction and whose is humane realism,

portraying an American Dream of infinite automobility and ever faster, ever more extensive interurban transit as a greater fantasy than his own immodest propositions:

Velocity is contradictory within the urban diaspora. It pre-supposes science fictions like instant acceleration and deceleration. It pre-supposes the submission of people, including children, the ill, the aged, etc. to many G's of pressure. It pre-supposes incredibly sophisticated and grimly expensive hardware. It pre-supposes utopia in its most fraudulent [sic] schemes. This is where you "verticalists" are in agreement with the true logistics of life.<sup>2</sup>

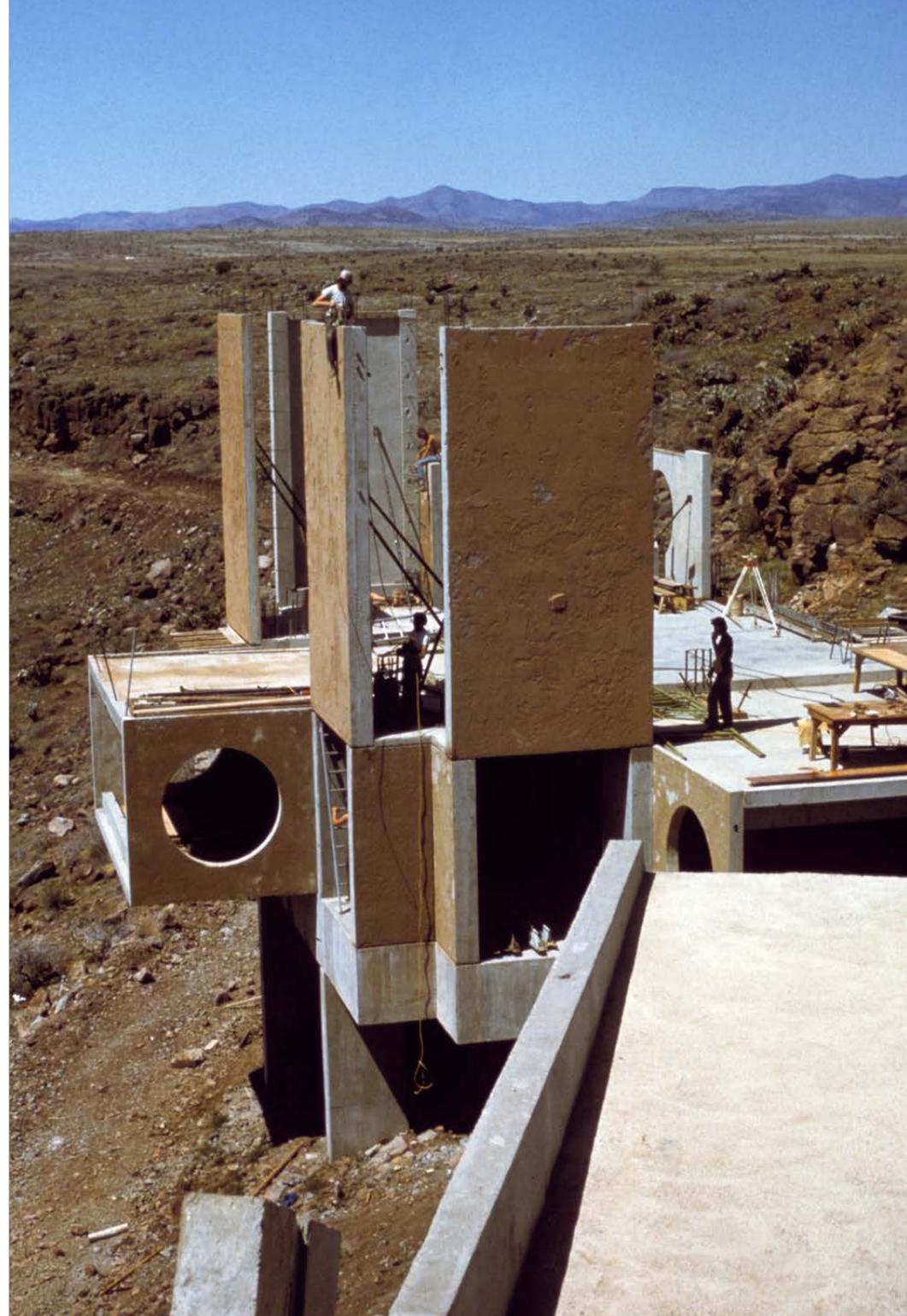
Yet this is perhaps too easy a reversal, arguing against a utopia of velocity that never claimed to be one in favor of his own utopian thought that here pretends it isn't—never mind the fact that elevators are the likeliest site for humans to experience the mechanical modification of gravitational forces.

Even so, this lecture speaks to Soleri's rhetorical sensibility, the grounding of megastructural thinking on government-scaled technoscience, and the centrality of such narrative rhetoric in promoting urban ideas—and to the fact that in the early 1970s, it seemed that arcology might legitimately contain the possibility of its realization. The year before, Soleri had been honored with a publicity-garnering exhibition of his arcologies at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., highlighted by the dramatic model of his "3-D Jersey" project. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development, under an urban renewal demonstration contract, granted \$10,000 to the printing of a catalog. Then-Secretary of Housing and Urban Affairs George Romney described this as part of "a continuing HUD endeavor to support institutions in their efforts to bring outstanding new design work to the attention of the public."<sup>3</sup> Federal investment in imaginative proposals for housing—that alone sounds like science fiction to the contemporary observer.

<sup>2</sup> Paolo Soleri, "The Future: The Flight from Flatness," *Elevator World* (1971): 31–32.

<sup>3</sup> This news necessitated an exclamation point in the American Association of Museums' newsletter. "Department of HUD Funds Corcoran Gallery of Art!" *AAM Bulletin* (March 1, 1970).

Construction of the "Crafts III" building at Arcosanti, 1970s. Courtesy of the Cosanti Foundation.





Soleri being interviewed by CBS News in front of the model for his 3-D Jersey project, 1970. Photograph by Ivan Pintar. Courtesy of the Cosanti Foundation.



A building at Cosanti now being used as a shop and visitors center.

Soleri took 3-D Jersey seriously as a possible urban form, and unlike many of his later arcologies, he saw it as a project of corporate and political organization as much as a project of speculative design. It is usually said that the project was pursued in partnership with the Ford Motor Company and Rutgers University (though archival evidence suggests that the collaboration never came to fruition), and Soleri maintained a long list of corporate partners—US Steel, IBM, Boeing, GE, Bell, American Airlines, Alcoa—who might be persuaded to join the team.<sup>4</sup> Even a company as staid as Prudential was using Soleri's arcologies in an advertising campaign after underwriting the Corcoran show. His tireless pursuit and promotion of 3-D Jersey, in particular, signaled a faith that the ideas might move beyond his inimitable drawings, painstakingly drafted by his various apprentices and sometimes rendered in charcoal on scrolls the length of a room.

The moment passed, for 3-D Jersey and the megastructure more generally, as the political impossibility (indeed undesirability) of concentrating administrative authority so centrally became clear, and as the federal government stepped back from its Great Society ambitions. But the turn from the 1960s to the 1970s nonetheless cemented Soleri's public stature and marks something of a before-and-after hinge in his work. After a sojourn at Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin West in the late 1940s and a move back to his native Italy in 1950 (with his wife, Colly, the daughter of an early client), Soleri returned to Scottsdale, Arizona, in 1956. He spent the next dozen years establishing a bell-casting operation (which continues today) at Cosanti, a rambling compound of his workshop's experiments in earthcast concrete, domed apses, and the vaguely biomorphic formal gestures he became known for. One version of Soleri is prominent in these environs—the idiosyncratic desert craftsman, fabricating charismatically bespoke objects out of mineral materials.

But it was the years around 1970, as he entered his fifties, that the second Soleri emerged into public view: Soleri the urbanist and inventor of cities. *Arcology: The City in the Image of Man*, which continues to define his reputation, was published in 1969; the Corcoran show followed fast on its heels. This was

<sup>4</sup> "3D Jersey Original Written Materials" binder, Soleri Archives, Arcosanti.

the context in which Soleri and his cadre embarked on the construction of Arcosanti in July 1970. Though the premise of arcology is that it could ground both versions of Soleri in a single manner of thought, these two poles of his work are in other ways strikingly irreconcilable, with craft and scale pulling against each other as a central motivation. The former could be represented by the delicate apses and skeletal forms of Cosanti, the latter by the infrastructural 3-D Jersey—though certain formal signatures trace through both, the differences in their means of realization far outweigh any continuities. Arcosanti can be seen as his attempt to subvert that binary of craft and scale, not through form but through social configuration, with each resident becoming something like a citizen-builder. Despite its pretense to being a laboratory or a new urban prototype, the potential replicability of Arcosanti was always strictly rhetorical, a story told in the name of drawing a community of citizen-builders to the site. What commenced in 1970, then, was not only the construction of a building but the construction of a narrative.



To say that Soleri's reception has generally followed a template would be an understatement. His critics wax poetic on the structures at Cosanti, reading them as they imagine anthropologists (if not paleontologists) might, as evidence of a different kind of civilization. They faithfully describe Soleri's ideas with just enough metaphor to render them folksy; the word "visionary" is never not used. They quote Genesis.<sup>5</sup> They rarely fail to describe the man himself, a wiry, slight, enigmatic object of fascination with a childlike streak. The final paragraph of many reviews of the Corcoran exhibition read like a rallying cry, describing how Soleri was fixing to put the plans into action at Arcosanti (an early model of which was exhibited at the Corcoran). Even the resolute Ada Louise Huxtable found herself enamored of this "labor of

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5 Soleri invites this theological bent with his own texts. See Dana F. White, "The Apocalyptic Vision of Paolo Soleri," *Technology and Culture*, vol. 12, no. 1 (January 1971): 75–88; Edward Higbee, "Soleri, 'Plumber with the Mind of a St. Augustine,'" *AIA Journal* (1972); and especially James Edward Carlos, "The Community of Souls: Arcology/Theology," *St. Luke's Journal of Theology* (1971): 45–53.

love," rendering its optimism as a kind of romantic stubbornness:

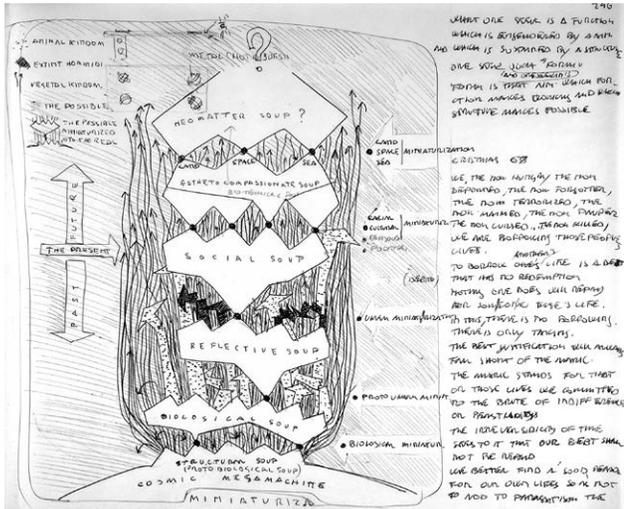
He has bought 800 acres of land 70 miles from Phoenix for Arcosanti, and must meet a partial payment of about \$50,000 by June. He has no money... To build Arcosanti, he now has six shovels, some rakes, a cement mixer, some stouthearted graduate students and a firm intellectual conviction. Arcosanti is to be a "self-testing" urban environment. If it is a dream, it is the very best kind.<sup>6</sup>

There are dissenters, to be sure—a reviewer in *Landscape Architecture* identifies Soleri's work as a kind of "containerized megamadness" (though the same review arrives at the rather grim pronouncement that what Soleri has made clear is that the only alternative is "a limitation on population").<sup>7</sup> But the Soleri discourse industry revolves largely around believers and interested observers. Even in the later years, when "what was left had curdled into the sluggish but pleasant pace of a nonprofit foundation," as a 1998 workshopper named James McGirk put it, the man himself carried an aura that belied the ways in which The Idea had begun to feel like an anachronism. "He was spry and leathery, and against the sun-baked concrete swoops and apses and arches and circular doors, he looked like a character from a J. G. Ballard short story, the caretaker of a long-dead monument," McGirk recalls. "He had us all squat with him on a mat in the planning room. We could ask him questions."<sup>8</sup>

And there were surely questions, if the workshoppers could figure out where to begin. Soleri's sketchbooks contain familiarly architectural kinds of exploration—site plans and sectional sketches adorned with the olive trees and Mediterranean cypresses that would eventually take root on the mesas of Arcosanti—but his thought and public pronouncements were also elaborated in these sketchbooks in a cryptic but all-encompassing language. A characteristic diagram of his idea of "miniaturization,"

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6 Ada Louise Huxtable, "Prophet in the Desert," the *New York Times*, March 15, 1970.  
7 Neil H. Porterfield, "Arcology: A Simplistic View of Man Apart from Nature," *Landscape Architecture* (April 1971)  
8 James McGirk, "Remembering Life in Arcosanti, Paolo Soleri's Futuristic Desert Utopia," *Wired*, April 11, 2013, <https://www.wired.com/2013/04/arcosanti-paolo-soleri>.



A diagram of Soleri's philosophy of miniaturization, from his sketchbooks (sketchbook 6, page 246). Courtesy of the Cosanti Foundation.

a term that guided much of his work despite its megalomaniacal scale, includes indications for past, present, and future; the animal kingdom, the vegetal kingdom, extinct hominids, and "the possible"; and a series of "soups," whether biological, social, "esthete-compassionate," or "neo-matter"—with all of this grounded on the "cosmic mesamachine." A less enigmatic version of the same can be found in the "Announcement of the Inception of Arcosanti," a text prepared in spring 1970 as Soleri began to formulate the workshop structure that would bring students to the site. "The Arcosanti thesis is simple," his text reads in distinctive Copperplate Gothic, the preferred font when Soleri's wife, Colly, would type documents on their IBM Selectric. "Arcosanti proposes an urban doctrine and will make itself the guinea pig for it. Arcosanti will be a town laboratory engaging its makers and users in the verification of the subject of their learning."<sup>9</sup> Here, Soleri's philosophy is distilled into a somewhat more plainspoken variant, guided by four principles:

<sup>9</sup> "Announcement of the Inception of Arcosanti, Spring, 1970," binder of the same name, Soleri Archives, Arcosanti.

1. The city is a bio-mental organism contained in a mineral structure.
2. The city is an organism of a thousand minds.
3. The city is an organism in a constant process of growing complexity. Nature shows that for all organisms or societies of organisms with any increment of complexity, there is a corresponding spatial and durational contraction of his functions! MINIATURIZATION AND COMPLEXITY ARE MUTUAL FUNCTIONS. [...]
4. The enormous tide of complexity working itself into the social organism of today makes a correspondingly enormous contraction of its urban container mandatory. [...]

The miniaturization rule, a direct injunction of the logistics of matter-energy, must be respected universally.<sup>10</sup>

That this organicism insisted on being at once biological, organizational, architectural, and metaphysical explains something of the breadth and abstraction at play in his writings and teachings.

It is not surprising, then, that the narration (or perhaps narrativization) of Arcosanti relied on public testimonials from others—and that one of Soleri's greatest skills was attracting chroniclers. The most prolific of these in the early years was the writer Richard Register, whose name shows up with startling frequency in Soleri's clippings file, placing stories with the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Los Angeles Free Press*, the *Arizona Republic* ("What Are We, Men or Frogs?"), the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and the *Detroit News* in 1970 alone. But Register's most substantive, if less widely distributed, contribution was a 1975 manuscript titled "A New Beginning" (later published in 1978), which proselytizes for arcology while providing a detailed—and immensely partisan—account of Arcosanti's earliest days. Register is interested in the ideas, translated into a more straightforwardly environmentalist stance on urbanism. He is interested in the man, comparing Soleri to a mythical "first architect...reading between the structural elements like reading between the lines of a story," in which

<sup>10</sup> "Announcement of the Inception of Arcosanti, Spring, 1970," 3. The original reads "contraction if its urban container" and has been corrected here for clarity.

“all the ghosts of the future could be seen waiting.” He is interested in the “first citizens” of the place, especially those “paying \$350 for the privilege of working six hot, dusty, sweaty weeks in the sun at manual labor.”<sup>11</sup> But he is most interested in providing a kind of scenography to the origins of Arcosanti, rendering it in literary and picturesque form.

In a chapter simply titled “July 23, 1970,” Register records the first day of work on the site. “Towering white thunderheads were already rolling up in the clear dark blue sky and beginning to rake their rumblings back and forth across the desert mesas, hills, and mountains; an appropriately dramatic beginning, I thought, as we walked down into the valley to start setting up the permanent camp for the construction.” During the afternoon working shift, after Paolo’s 1 p.m. siesta, another cloud rolls in.

The sun angled in underneath and kept us bathed in sunlight while the cloud drenched us with a ten-minute cloud burst. We collected the fresh rain water trapped in the sagging plastic roof which we had just erected, and drank a toast to the new city... It was the first day of a new age; I was absolutely certain of it. The rainbow assured me of it... The solution seemed so close you could reach out and touch it.<sup>12</sup>

This messianism is both a product of, and producer of, the narrative that surrounds Soleri and Arcosanti. Register was well aware of this, his text crafted to serve precisely that purpose. “A word about myths,” he writes in an early chapter that reimagines the Adam and Eve story. “The concept of myth used here does not mean fantasy, fairy tale, or false belief, but rather a rich fabric of legend and reality that gives direction or coherence to a whole people... A myth vacuum is a dangerous place, culturally somewhat analogous to depression in the individual; a time of confused directions and ill-considered and frequently self-destructive decisions.”<sup>13</sup> The supposedly unifying power of myth—an idea that refuses to consider the question of whose myth counts, or

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<sup>11</sup> Register, “A New Beginning,” 1975, manuscript, Soleri Archives, Arcosanti, 42, 45.

<sup>12</sup> Register, “A New Beginning,” 43–44, 47.

<sup>13</sup> Register, “A New Beginning,” 6–7.

how one negotiates between myths, or whether the concentration of myths with singular people and places is advisable—is at the center of Soleri’s endeavor, with the participation of the Registers of the world. Arcosanti was always meant to be precisely a myth in that sense, a myth that brings Soleri and Arcosanti into a kind of seamlessness, a tale of conversion and conviction with a wandering band of apostles to spread the good word.



From the northern edge of Phoenix, after passing suburban enclaves with placeless names like Happy Valley and Anthem, it’s about forty-five miles up I-17 to Cordes Lake. I pulled enthusiastically onto the interstate shoulder to photograph my first saguaro cactus in the wild, a decent specimen, before realizing the obvious a mile or two later—this is a landscape littered with them. The road climbs from something like a thousand feet in Phoenix to 3,700, from a landscape of alluvial deposits through sedimentary rock formations up into the volcanic basalt that undergirds the mesas around Agua Fría. A right and a quick left and the rental car rumbles over an old cattle guard onto the premises of Arcosanti. In 1971, when some of the workshop participants were undertaking self-guided projects, a workshopper named Sheri spent time trying to build a replacement for this basic bit of infrastructure. “The cattle-guard did not work, but it was a beautiful job—even the cattle liked it,” reports that summer’s journal.<sup>14</sup> The driveway passes a sign reading “Arcosanti: An Urban Laboratory,” but as the radio cut off with the engine and I stepped out into the sun-baked gravel parking lot, it was not urbanity but a kind of stillness that greets you.

Silence, it turns out, is one of the devices that shapes Arcosanti. As one of the staff members took me around the site, we passed the apse where bell casting takes place just as the pouring of molten bronze began in front of a resident-guided tour group (and the pouring always seems timed with the arrival of a tour group). A hush falls over the assembled audience as the bronze is poured with monastic rhythm and rigor. “A bit of

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<sup>14</sup> “Jerry,” *Arcosanti* journal, April 22, 1971.

ceremony,” my guide whispers to me. The underpopulation of the complex lends itself to solitary moments, certainly, in contrast to the well-honed performances of craft and construction that occupy those same places at other times. But there is also a lingering sense that the current occupants are following a script that was penned quite some time ago. Arcosanti—like all architecture, though more polemically than most—is as much a carefully designed schema of participation and authority as it is a place. This social character is a part of the architectural vision, with the buildings serving as a reminder of their guiding authority.

Someone once asked Soleri, during one of the public salons he hosted from time to time, who he’d voted for in the Bush versus Gore presidential election of 2000. As the story goes, he replied that he didn’t vote. Why? He didn’t like it that his vote counted the same as everyone else’s. During my own visit, which took place during the first year of the Trump presidency, I spent a meal talking to a resident who had arrived there after becoming disillusioned by the 2016 Democratic National Convention. He described how he and many others came to this outpost in the Arizona desert because of their politics, and only later found that Arcosanti itself, by dint of its removal from city, by dint of a creeping fixity across the decades, by dint of an insistence on a particular kind of order, ends up resisting the practice of politics, urban or otherwise. And indeed, as my interlocutor memorably put it, Arcosanti is a place that attracts those who have the luxury to be surprised at the state of American politics—a luxury not afforded to many of those who live in the urban conditions that Soleri sought to reinvent. And yet, he continued, optimism is a muscle, and he came to Arcosanti with the intention of exercising it. This is one of the qualities of the place, or rather the people who populate the place. The idea of optimism as a kind of practice permeated those who came to join the experiment in the earliest years, and it seems to persist.

Still on East Coast time, I woke up well before sunrise each morning and walked up the mesa just south of the main Arcosanti complex. One morning I disturbed a family of deer who’d bedded down in the grasses; on another I was greeted outside my door by a roadrunner. These things are not a part of my daily life, nor is the cool air of a predawn desert. The first human sound other than my own would be the footsteps of whoever was on breakfast

duty, walking up from the camp in the valley—a collection of concrete cubes that date from the earliest working seasons on the site—to get a head start on preparations, soon to be followed by the distant sounds of early stirring. Then the sky warms and the sun skims across the mesas, casting Arcosanti’s vaults in a light that makes them appear out of time and place, a quasi-Roman ruin in an unfamiliar geography, an effect that explains the perhaps apocryphal tale that Arcosanti was among George Lucas’s inspirations for the *Star Wars* planet of Tatooine. It’s possible to know that you’re inhabiting clichés and still feel them—as dispassionate as I intended my research trip to be, I found myself recapitulating something like Richard Register’s encounter, down to the desire to put animals and weather into what could surely be a less self-involved account of things. This simultaneity of presence and distance—or perhaps believing and doubting—is part of what makes Arcosanti such a complicated place to come to terms with, a complication that was there from the beginning and remains still. Perhaps a visit to Arcosanti asks you to indulge in the “what if” of the project—not Soleri’s “what if” so much as a kind of possibilitarianism (to borrow a term from Robert Musil) that’s always up for redefinition.

To what does one owe this experience? Neither the genius of an architect nor a *genius loci*, though those are both answers that have tempted many critics and visitors across the past almost-fifty years. Nor does Arcosanti qualify as a kind of land art, framing the natural world anew. Nor does the communality of daily life draw most visitors into imagining their own participation. What snaps you to attention, I think, is something closer to tautology—you’ve arrived at a place that’s been designated as an “urban laboratory,” despite the utter absence of anything resembling either urbanity or rigorously scientific research, and your mindset is primed to be attuned to the difference between this and your own life, to view yourself as a potential test subject within this supposed laboratory. This is the narrative of Arcosanti doing its work.



In November 2017, as this book was going to press, an essay written by Soleri’s daughter, Daniela, began to circulate on the

internet.<sup>15</sup> It is a devastating but clear-eyed account of her molestation, beginning in her adolescence, and eventual attempted rape at the hands of her father, Paolo—a “fierce narcissist” with a petulant sense of sexual entitlement in private that was masked by the gentle charisma and restless intelligence that he displayed to the world. This is not just a family affair. We have seen the way the esteem around artists and others in the public eye secures the silence of those who have been violated, and as authors of architectural discourse—a discourse that has collaboratively made that character “Soleri,” the celebrated and idiosyncratic “prophet in the desert”—we have our own inventory to undertake. For the victim, “sorting it out turns into a threesome,” she writes. “You, him—and it is usually a ‘him’—and his work.”

The Cosanti Foundation has since issued a statement in support of Daniela Soleri—a statement that came six years after her resignation from the foundation’s board because of this abuse—maintaining that it “separates the man Paolo Soleri from the ideas, regrets the failings of the man, and honors the ideas.”<sup>16</sup> Daniela Soleri writes poignantly of her own fantasy of separation, that the monster and his artistry, which she was still able to find beautiful, might be somehow sequestered from each other:

I used to dream the same thing over and over. I am a child at home, and there in our living room is my father, Paolo Soleri, in a large cage, fuming. We, my mother and sister and I, quietly hand paper, pencils, crayons, and charcoal to him through the bars, or we hand in clay, or Styrofoam and a woodburning tool, or large flat trays of moist, densely packed silt with knives to carve it, powders and washes to color it. He draws, forms, carves, shoving the beautiful results back out angrily, yelling his fury.

But these kinds of cages cannot be built, within a family or within an economy of architectural esteem that has long relied on evading hard truths. “It was a clumsily literal dream...a child’s solution

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<sup>15</sup> Daniela Soleri, “Sexual Abuse: It’s You, Him, and His Work,” *Medium*, November 13, 2017, <https://medium.com/@soleri/sexual-abuse-its-you-him-and-his-work-88ecb8e99648>.

<sup>16</sup> John Walsh, “#METOO,” March 8, 2018, <http://arcosanti.org/metoo>.

to the problem posed by a man who I, and everyone around me, saw as the center of the universe.”<sup>17</sup>

That there should be dark secrets lurking here, as there are in so many places and histories, is a truth whose exposure should be welcomed. Arcosanti is a part of that darkness, not only because the early phases of its construction occurred during Daniela’s adolescence (she seldom appears in the documents of the period, though she was there on the first day of work at the site).<sup>18</sup> “His work” is what garnered him recognition and something of a guru-like status, but architecture is no inert thing. “His work” is also the organizational structure that he assembled to make it all happen—the very possibility of a self-built arcology links architecture-building to institution-building. “For me,” Daniela Soleri continues, “this was the grand flaw that plagued Soleri, his work and his organization: his single-minded control enforced by the deference of all to him... Ultimately, for better and for worse, it became a group held together by their commitment to him, or more accurately, what proximity to him did for them.”<sup>19</sup>

Creating that commitment was as much a part of the architectural craft as the structures themselves, providing us with yet another illustration of how concentrations of prestige, authority, and vision might conceal a kind of viciousness at their core. Arcosanti looks different in this light—and it’s important that we be unflinching in making use of this light, and this building, and the grim histories that Paolo Soleri’s architecture housed, lest we run the risk of meeting one silence with another. Daniela Soleri’s story is not one that runs parallel to Arcosanti—it is another thread in narrative knot that we pick at when chronicling and re-chronicling the architect and his architecture. Narratives change, and in a different sense than its original intentions, Arcosanti now has a new role to play in how we imagine the betterment of our world. “Truth is hopeful,” Daniela Soleri writes, “and inevitable.”

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<sup>17</sup> Daniela Soleri, “Sexual Abuse: It’s You, Him, and His Work.”

<sup>18</sup> Richard Register, “A New Beginning,” 1975, typed manuscript, Soleri Archives, Arcosanti.

<sup>19</sup> Daniela Soleri, “Sexual Abuse: It’s You, Him, and His Work.”



We need not have waited for Daniela Soleri. While those acts of violence were known only to a few until recently, there has always been much to say, and much left unsaid, about the authoritarian strain that undergirded Soleri's socioarchitectural experiments. In a lengthy profile in the *New York Times Magazine*, published on July 26, 1970—three days after the construction of Arcosanti began—the author relays a story about “a couple of emissaries from Timothy Leary's tribe of acidheads” who arrived at Cosanti “to enlist Soleri...as their architectural guru.” Soleri's wife, Colly, proudly describes how Paolo ran them off. “This is no commune,” she says. “It's a dictatorship in which Paolo's word is law.” The author goes on to tell of “a few militant types” who, in the summer of 1969, “tried protesting the ‘undemocratic’ working arrangements.”<sup>20</sup> That stories like these rarely altered anyone's opinions of Soleri's genius, despite being aired in as public a forum as the *New York Times*, points to how unsurprising it is that architectural practice has long been a province of small-scale despots (in that regard, Soleri learned from one of the finest in Frank Lloyd Wright) and that the discipline has long relied on structural hierarchies of all kinds for keeping its labor in line.

But the workshopers kept coming, and Arcosanti is theirs, too. Among the items in Arcosanti's archives is a journal that was kept on site over two months in the summer of 1971, a remarkable document that offers another vision of what the place actually is—a community of people, some there for the long haul but most just passing through, some paid for their work but most paying \$350 for the privilege of donating their efforts to the cause, each struggling with their own vision of the experiment. In this journal, seven voices emerge to tell something of a counter-history of the early making of Arcosanti, a counter-history of the nascent city in which Soleri appears as both presence and absence.

On March 15, 1971, a new cadre arrives for the second year of the Arcosanti workshop. Their first two days are spent in an orientation at Cosanti—including a screening of KAET-TV's

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<sup>20</sup> S. D. Kohn, “Paolo Soleri Thinks Very Big,” the *New York Times Magazine*, July 26, 1970.

documentary film *Paolo Soleri*, in the so-called Pumpkin Apse, and a meeting with a zoologist and a geologist—before decamping to the site around noon on that Wednesday. The journal of this working season begins matter-of-factly enough, with a simple summary of the projects undertaken, written in architect's script with a purple felt pen: “March 17. First day at site; pits on mesa for soil engineer; trench for water line; general clean up in batch plant; set cube forms; gravel from river, work on crane shed on mesa.” The first setbacks come quickly. “March 18 ... Cubes moved (2 walls). Footing failed; general clean up. Water line. Paolo up with film people. Will do cubes sanely.” That Soleri's presence in the workshop and on the site is often mediated is a leitmotif in the years before the completion of his own house on the mesa. “March 19. Crane maintenance; set up cube forms; gravel up; kitchen repair now OK. But food hurting; possible mutiny but if that's all that's bothering everyone no sweat. Shed on mesa hitting rocks.”<sup>21</sup> The weekend comes mercifully, one imagines, with the workshopers dispersing back to the city or for their own weekend travels. The chronicler from the first few days musters up just three more entries the following week before his hand disappears from the journal's pages.

The journal revives on April 12, four weeks into the first workshop and a week after fresh reinforcements arrive (known in the journal as the “freshman workshop”), this time in the hand of one the participants. “Words are important,” begins this first entry penned by one Jerry. “Sometimes concepts can live or die on the choice of words. This is basically a ‘construction gang.’ But at the same time it is a community. We are building to see an idea become a reality.” That community emerges in Jerry's first entry, seven pages long, as a cast of characters—some forty individuals with their own personalities, talents, and shortcomings to be teased about, from Billy's “good hash” to Cory's “inept” plumbing, from Anita's tendency to “make other people feel good” to Joe's perpetual lack of letters when the mail comes. The entry makes some attempt at documenting the day's progress, though Jerry is more intent on registering the crew's various enthusiasms

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<sup>21</sup> These entries, and the ones that follow, are found in a binder titled “Arcosanti Journal 1970–1971” in the Soleri archives at Arcosanti.



Construction of Ceramics Apse at Arcosanti, 1970s. Photograph by Ivan Pintar. Courtesy of the Cosanti Foundation.

and qualms. Despite a number of “questions and doubts,” he reports that “there are more positive than negative feelings. The reason for this seems, still, to be the work. It’s almost an enigma.” He ranks the food as the next most important aspect of morale, while “the idea, Soleri’s idea, does not rate even second-best in the real-life, nitty-gritty, day-to-day life here at the site.” Perhaps this is not just one observer’s reluctance to valorize the figurehead of the place, but a largely unheeded warning to the architectural historians of the future—a reminder that the experience of architecture rarely aligns with its intentions and is never single-minded. “Criticism on my writing thus far,” Jerry writes as he brings this entry to a close. “Tomorrow, an attempt to be less opinionated.”<sup>22</sup>

Jerry is the most prolific, and the most critical, entrant over the next ten days—believer enough to be there, doubter enough to cast aspersions freely. Soleri’s defenders respond in kind. An anonymous contributor writing in a calligraphic serif describes a vision of Arcosanti grounded in humanism, happiness, and above

<sup>22</sup> “Jerry,” Arcosanti journal, April 12, 1971.

all love, rebutting Jerry by arguing that “we must have an *idea*, a direction in the future to work towards. Soleri has an idea and it is a good form to work towards.”<sup>23</sup> The most cramped of the handwriting, eschewing the use of capital letters like a proper modernist, advocates against critique altogether: “i have almost always found that when i criticize or think negatively about someone or something that the fault lies in me, not in those i criticize... keep the faith, this project is just beginning.”<sup>24</sup> Others simply articulate their own vision of what the experiment is about. Sheri, who worked on the cattle guard (“I have held a personal grudge against that first barbed-wire gate ever since I arrived”), describes her hope for a city of personal freedom and spiritual warmth. An environmentalist New Yorker reports in a tight cursive on an “inconsistency in terms of the idea” of Arcosanti “and the reality of non-polluting.”<sup>25</sup> Dick weighs in with a terse, two-sentence request for a mailbox at the Junction. “Has to happen eventually.”<sup>26</sup>

A woman named Emile is the most reflective contributor to the journal, and she dwells particularly on the implications of life in the high desert. “April 19th. It’s interesting how weather affects attitudes. Today was wet and cold and I think everyone felt it. It makes you wonder just how important geo-politics could be.” Weather reports make constant appearances in utopian thought, and Emile’s climatic view of the project observes the way that taking care of the self—food, comfort, trust—is at the core of redefining life. Immersion in Arcosanti means being oriented away from the world outside, with all of its complications and politics, and toward the knowable hierarchies and the climatic cycles of the immediate present. In that regard, Emile has perhaps already answered her next question that follows on this thought: “Why does Soleri choose to live in the desert and to build his prototype there?” (“if anyone knew that they would be the genius and not soleri,” interjects the decapitalized hand. “ask paolo.” Emile responds in the margins: “OK—I will. But I doubt if I’ll get an answer.”)

<sup>23</sup> Anonymous, Arcosanti journal, April 13, 1971.

<sup>24</sup> Anonymous, Arcosanti journal, April 21, 1971.

<sup>25</sup> Anonymous, Arcosanti journal, April 18, 1971.

<sup>26</sup> “Dick,” Arcosanti journal, April 20, 1971.

But Emile's question is a larger one, cutting to the core of what it means to design a city:

One of the most frustrating things I have found since coming here is the inability to communicate with Paolo and many of the people here. I think a lot of this is because Soleri and most of those here are too close and too intense about the concept of arcologies to discuss objectively it and *other* alternative futures. Perhaps this intensity is needed to work here—perhaps to question the basic premises now would be like arguing with the captain 100 miles out to sea, but for myself, I'd hate to see any system become the *only* alternative for the future. Diversity and variety and even the unknown and disorderly are positive aspects in a society. It is not disorder that causes the decay of a society—it is the need for complete order and tranquility that drives people away from the 'liveliness' of life into the suburbs and slowly insane.<sup>27</sup>

Her metaphor—that these citizen-builders might have embarked on an expedition of sorts that demands nothing short of whole-hearted and unthinking commitment—is a vividly romantic one, echoed by any number of Solerians, but one that suppresses the dream of other alternatives, other beginnings. Emile resists that act of aggrandizement, offering perhaps the clearest testimony on record that some at Arcosanti imagined not only a different outcome but a different structure for arriving there.

Soleri is something of an abstraction in these entries, an imagined body around which a set of varying figments of The Idea orbit, though he occasionally enters more directly as the object of Jerry's wry scorn ("the first building is naturally going to be Soleri's home").<sup>28</sup> Only one visit to the site is recorded while the workshopers are in control of the journal, with Soleri employing his usual tactic of making himself available for dialogue. There were few questions—and here, in Jerry's account, Soleri "becomes frustrated and impatient when this opportunity is not

<sup>27</sup> "Emile," Arcosanti journal, April 19, 1971.

<sup>28</sup> "Jerry," Arcosanti journal, April 12, 1971.

Paolo Soleri during construction of the individual siltcast panels for the South Vault, Arcosanti, 1970s. Photograph by Ivan Pintar. Courtesy of the Cosanti Foundation.



questions of him. Essentially he is putting himself at our disposal. He becomes frustrated and impatient when this opportunity is not taken advantage of — that is, when no one has any questions. Tom said something interesting in around this time. He said, essentially, that he feels little, if any, rapport with Paolo. Paolo explained that the briefness of the workshop plus his not very sociable, introverted personality, all ~~make~~ plus his work, all make the possibility of setting up a strong rapport hard to achieve.

I asked my same foolish question, Paolo became his childish, Italian self, called me a few things and succeeded in showing that close-minded side of himself that isn't consistent with a visionary social prophet. This had the expected effect. Soleri has, momentarily at least, lost some of his glossy finish in the eyes of some of the community, particularly among the freshman workshop.

Jerry

Journal entry by "Jerry," a participant in the Arcosanti workshop, April 12, 1971. Courtesy of the Cosanti Foundation.

taken advantage of." At one point Tom says, "essentially, that he feels little, if any, rapport with Paolo." Soleri responded that "the brief of the workshop plus his not very sociable, introverted personality, plus his work, all make the possibility of setting up a strong rapport hard to achieve."<sup>29</sup> This episode draws out the ways in which one might imagine Arcosanti to be displaced from its supposedly authorial hand.

Jerry, however, wasn't ready to take Soleri's excuses as the last word. "I asked my same foolish question," he records. "Paolo became his childish, Italian self, called me a few things and succeeded in showing that close-minded side of himself that isn't consistent with a visionary social prophet... Soleri has, momentarily at least, lost some of his glossy finish in the eyes of some of the community, particularly among the freshman workshop."<sup>30</sup> But perhaps that is the greatest myth of Arcosanti, or of any of architecture's many utopias founded by a charismatic leader—that "visionary social prophet" is a worthy aspiration for a designer of buildings and cities, that the subject of a cultivated hero-worship might not be narrow, petulant, quick to anger. This journal shows vividly that while Arcosanti's leader was maintaining something of a studied distance, there was a great deal of genuine debate worth engaging in, if Soleri had cared to—debate that is naïve or experienced, pragmatic or churlish, but always exercising the muscle of optimism. This is also Arcosanti.



In restaging the myths around Soleri the ascetic genius, the "plumber with the mind of a St. Augustine," time and time again, the architectural discipline's writing of its own history has played its part in affirming The Man and The Work, at the expense of seeing it as something unrulier, something that should be reminding us that buildings are rarely actually about The Man or The Work.<sup>31</sup> Architecture is an object of the imagination, not only in its creation but in its reception, its occupation, its representations, and

<sup>29</sup> "Jerry," Arcosanti journal, April 13, 1971.

<sup>30</sup> "Jerry," Arcosanti journal, April 13, 1971.

<sup>31</sup> The phrase is borrowed from Edward Higbee, see footnote 5.

its distant cultural echoes—and as we stare down the seemingly intractable tangle of crises that will define the twenty-first century, imagination is much-needed. We also need to understand the architecture of a place like Arcosanti as being evidently more than the material stuff up on the mesa. It is in the journals, the stories, the endless students and workshopers and passing visitors who've encountered it in their way (as elusive and innumerable as that community might seem), and it is in the violence of Soleri as well. If Arcosanti is indeed the site of a kind of optimism about living ecologically and living together, the very power of that optimism is grounded in being aware of the problems around it. Only by confronting its dark histories and our unsustainable present can we begin to imagine other futures.

To understand Arcosanti this way means questioning the categories to which we assign Soleri's architectural narrations. The subject of Soleri's fiction was not the city of the future, as much as his drawings are interpreted as something of a post-urban fever dream. Rather, the subject of Soleri's fiction was the city as it existed, the admittedly imperfect one he militated against. The ecocidal, carbon-fired suburbias of the "horizontalists" were an easy and righteous enough target, but it was Soleri's willful if unstated narrative around the urban centers of the United States in the 1960s—a vision of unredeemable crime, pollution, bureaucracy, and disorderly complexity—that anchored The Idea of Arcosanti.<sup>32</sup> It was the insight of the workshoper Emile that Soleri's fiction of the city-as-it-existed was wrong, that diversity, variety, and even disorderliness are what give the city its life, that arcology's insistence on an order that refuses to recognize dissent was its defining limitation. What Soleri wrote out of his vision of the city was the same thing he wrote out of his own organization—politics, difference, those things that make cities difficult by design.

And yet there was nevertheless a kind of politics being exercised at Arcosanti, though not always the politics prescribed

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<sup>32</sup> This vision of the city was rarely articulated outright, though a 1983 article in the *American Bar Association Journal* described an aspiration toward a "crime-free society" by eliminating the "negative stresses" of a "mass urban area." Vicki Quade, "Crime-Free: Arcosanti Awakens in Desert," *American Bar Association Journal*, vol. 69, no. 4 (April 1983): 434.

by arcological urbanism or its figurehead—rather, it was the daily politics of living together and contesting ideas. Emile's attunement to the elements, to the pursuit and sheltering of collective life within a climatic frame, is a vital figuration of mutual care that allows us to see a different Arcosanti in absence of its designer, and to imagine others. The journal comes to a close on April 22, 1971—the second Earth Day—with a last entry from Jerry, who, it seems, was turning thirty. Work ended early for a party, to celebrate that and the going-away of many now-seasoned workshopers after six hard weeks. "The party included ice cream, slides, bonfire."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> "Jerry," *Arcosanti* journal, April 22, 1971.

