

Architecture

Prophet In the Desert

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

WASHINGTON. THIS is an age that has only recently ceased to discredit its intellectuals, and still distrusts ideas. It is a society that has enshrined pragmatism and subjects every thought and action to the decisive test question, "Is it practical?"

Based on whether or not it is practical, we have built our world. One practical decision after the other has led to the brink of cosmic disaster. And there we sit, in pollution and chaos, courting the end of the earth. Just how practical can you get?

Take another hard look at that world that is causing so much concern today before you write off Paolo Soleri, visionary extraordinary, philosopher, artist, architect and seeker of "plumbing systems for cities." If you think we've done well, dismiss him. Just say he makes "pretty pictures." He does. His remarkable, hundred-foot-long scrolls of "urban continuums" are some of the most spectacularly sensitive and superbly visionary drawings that any century has known. (Ledoux and Boullée, move over.)

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But if you believe that the human spirit deserves and is capable of better than it has gotten environmentally, go to the Corcoran Gallery in Washington before April 6. If you believe in the human spirit at all, go to the Corcoran. You will meet a lot of other people who do, attending the first and only retrospective exhibition of Soleri's work, a sleeper of a show in this good, gray, bankers' gallery. "The Architectural Vision of Paolo Soleri" is an important and beautiful show. Grants from the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Prudential Insurance Company, and assistance from the Corcoran have made it possible. The Soleri scrolls stretch along classical walls, and models in river silt or plastic expound the esthetic eloquence of his ideas. Nothing shown has

been built. It is perhaps another sign of the times that this exhibition of ideas is being extremely well attended.

For the past 12 years Soleri has lived and worked in the Arizona desert with a group of students, in a kind of "urban research" project, something done with far more fanfare and infinitely less intellectual majesty in "think tanks," where everything must be computerized for credibility. A small, wiry man in his 50's, Soleri carries extraordinary tensions of intellectual and esthetic awareness in a slender, responsive body and an ascetic, poet's face.

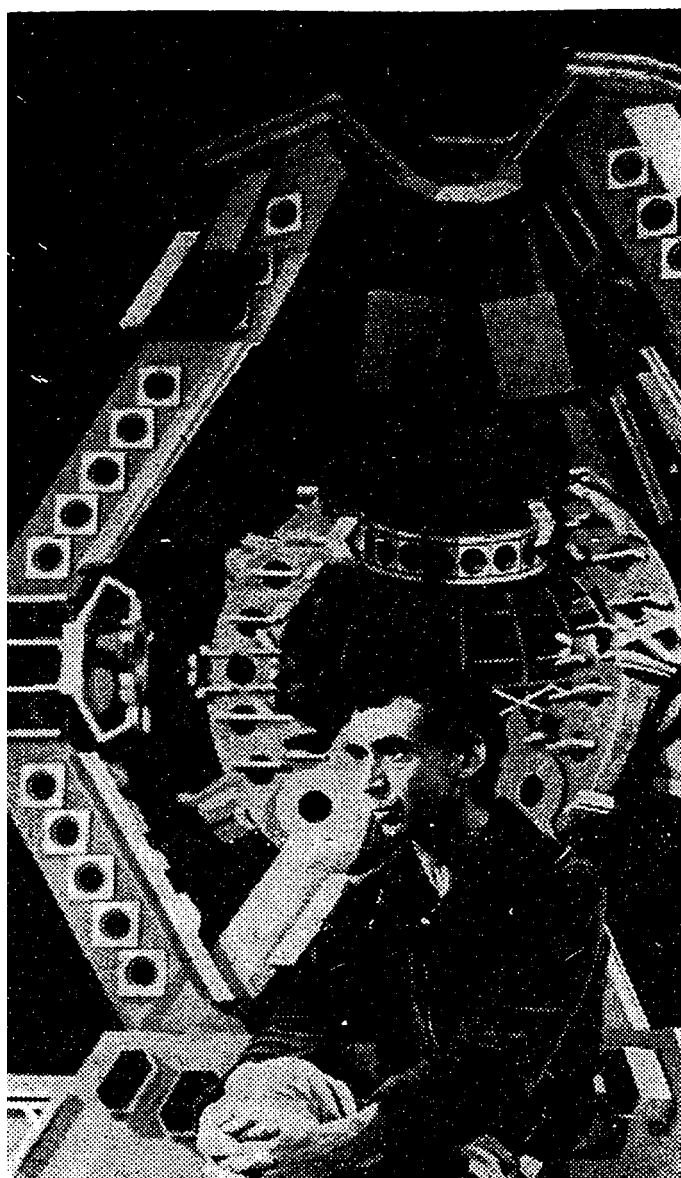
It is customary, of course, to throw our geniuses away. At the best, they offer no immediate solutions; at the worst, they make us uncomfortable. How they enrich human history and consciousness is something the future usually finds out.

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In Soleri's book just published by M.I.T., "The City in the Image of Man," his philosophical and environmental perceptions offer a sudden, stunning pertinence for today. He does not need the current bandwagon of despair. He has been preaching environment and ecology for a long time. But his ecology deals with both the natural and man-made world, in a very special, mutual relationship. By his definition, architecture and ecology are two parts of the same thing, inseparable in their effect on man. He calls it "arcology."

The concept of arcology grows out of an impressive process of intellectual analysis. Nature, Soleri points out "is a constant coordination of disparate things into congruous patterns." Man himself is a perfect organism, "a marvel in complexity, compactness and congruence—a miniaturized universe," with, in addition, the power of reason. But the step beyond man, society, is still an imperfect organism, performing badly.

Technology, he continues, moves constantly toward miniaturization, the kind of complexity and compactness



Paolo Soleri, arcologist, at the Corcoran Gallery
An alternative to the end of the earth

that exists in nature. The city, he says, must also move toward "miniaturization"—compact, multilayered and multidimensional, rather than wastefully scattered and sprawled. He advocates centralization far beyond conventional planners' nightmares of density. Hundreds of thousands of people would live in intense, orderly concentration in a few square miles, accommodated in an extremely complex and compact urban mechanism, leaving the surrounding natural land accessible to all.

Unlike the English Archigram group's "Plug-In City," meant for total expendability, Soleri's housing and facilities would plug into a permanent basic structure. The image is the exact opposite of Doxiadis's "ecumenopolis," the oozing urbanism relentlessly covering continents, held up by the Greek planner as the world of the future. This terrible destruction of the land should not be the future, says

Soleri. Such computerized predictions are merely projections of the patterns and errors of the present and the past.

And so Soleri presents his "arcologies"—those "plumbing systems" for society—stratified containers for urban life. They are, he reminds us, his own peculiar "idiosyncratic" visions; only diagrams to express his theories. They range from the organic to the Euclidian, with wonderful names to match: Novanoah, Babel Canyon, Hexahedron. "What you see is a phantom," he says, "the beginning of a process."

These clustered mushrooms and snorkeled megastructures are not to be taken literally, and that is where the public usually loses him. The professional dismisses them as nonarchitecture. The lay observer sees them as pictures of cities, not as abstract schematics, and has one of two reactions. He either bolts in horror or he falls in love

with the vision. Because Soleri's drawings and models, aside from their value as three-dimensional illustrations of his theories, are a strongly seductive kind of art. One can take them that way, if no other, and read his writings for an equally strong, poetic insight. He has been the prophet in the desert and we have not been listening.

For example: "... Man is eminently an environmental animal. If one adds that man is also a social animal, then one sees that environment comes close to being preponderantly the city. The city is the true concern of architecture. ... Architecture redefined may open a door to the quest of the city for a new life. Architecture is the physical framework for the life of man. ... The city is a human problem that has to find its answer within ecological awareness. Short of that there is no answer."

"Speculation can be instrumental to the city; it cannot be its aim. As the city cannot be speculative, so it cannot be a handout by 'authority.' The handout never cares. It is indifferent, just another aspect of the speculative exercise. Any care it may have had at its origin has been lost in bureaucratic meanders and their parasitic agents. Care is a first person undertaking. The care of the citizen is the sap of the city. But one can care only for that which one loves. ..."

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This summer, Soleri will begin a labor of love: a 10-acre demonstration of a town he hopes to build called Arcosanti. 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. All that 12 years of work and study have earned are three foundation grants (from the excellent, small, Guggenheim and Graham Foundations, not the giants) totaling \$25,000. To support his own Cosanti Foundation, the nonprofit arrangement that includes his school and studio, he makes and sells wind chimes and bells. 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.