

PAOLO SOLERI
January 22, 1999

Ann Townsend: Anne Andeen and myself, Ann Townsend, interviewers for the Town of Paradise Valley Historical Committee, are privileged today to speak with Dr. Paolo Soleri, artist, visionary, creator, in residence in Paradise Valley. Thank you, Dr. Soleri, for allowing us to visit with you today. May we have permission to quote you in part or all of our conversation today?

Paolo Soleri: Yes you may.

Ann Townsend: Tell us a little bit about yourself. You were born in Italy.

Paolo Soleri: Yes. In Torino, in the Po Valley in northern Italy.

Ann Townsend: When did you come to the United States?

Paolo Soleri: The first time, in 1946.

Ann Townsend: And what brought you to the U.S.?

Paolo Soleri: Frank Lloyd Wright and Taliesin. And in the east for one season.

Anne Andeen: How long were you here.

Paolo Soleri: All together, 18 months.

Ann Townsend: And then you started out on your own?

Paolo Soleri: In a way, yes. Mark and I camped on Camelback for about a year. Then, almost by chance, we got to build a little house for someone who would be my mother-in-law.

Ann Townsend: I've seen pictures of that. The concept looks so wonderful, the idea of rotating ceiling so you could see out. I just marvel at it. What happened to the house? Is it still being lived in?

Paolo Soleri: It is used by Abel, the man working in Styrofoam. He lives there.

Anne Andeen: And is that located in the Town?

Paolo Soleri: No, up in Cave Creek.

Ann Townsend: What did you do after you built the house in Cave Creek? I understand you married Mrs. Leonora Wood's daughter, Colly, for whom you had built the house.

Paolo Soleri: Yes, then we went to Torino and lived in Italy for 4-1/2 years and came back here to Arizona.

Ann Townsend: Do you like Arizona? What fascinates you about it?

Paolo Soleri: The landscape and the light.

Ann Townsend: You are very conscious of the light in your work.

Paolo Soleri: Yes, I like the sun. I am a sun worshipper.

Ann Townsend: I'm curious, what in your life makes you want to create a type of communal living structure like at Arcosanti?

Paolo Soleri: I was always very much against the communes. I thought they were an experience that young people might be interested but very brief experience.

Fundamentally, they were not worth very much.

Ann Townsend: I guess I see Arcosanti as a structure for more community living, with everyone cooperating.

Paolo Soleri: Yes, in terms of urban conditions.

Ann Townsend: Do you see the necessity for this type of structure like Arcosanti?

Paolo Soleri: Arcosanti is just an attempt to implement some ideas. The idea is the urban affect which is what made civilization. The point I am making constantly is that we have to re-invent the city in order develop our civilization.

Ann Townsend: I think Arcosanti is a marvel. I've been out there several times and the concept is very new for mankind.

Paolo Soleri: Yes and no because the urban affect is really an affect that takes in all of life. I am an urban affect myself. You are an urban affect. All organisms are urban affects in the sense that they are gathering so much worth, so many things together to accumulate what we call life consciousness. Without this implosion of the environment into an organism or into association organism, you don't have really very much to deal with. This pattern that we are promoting now will finish, for example, fundamentalist anti-life.

Ann Townsend: I read your book on archeology and your principles in the various aspects of life that it considers. It's very fascinating and I think you are right on target but very much a man before your time.

Paolo Soleri: It gets very boring.

Ann Townsend: You mean people have told you that before?

Paolo Soleri: No, I mean to be before your time it's very annoying.

Ann Townsend: I'm sure there's a sense of impatience because when is mankind going to catch up?

Paolo Soleri: There's some arrogance in it, but I really feel that we better change our priorities.

Ann Townsend: Priorities or points of view? What I wonder about is how are we going to get mankind to live kinder with each other so we can live in your structure? That really bothers me. Because we are at odds with each other on everything, even little stuff.

Paolo Soleri: We have become a society of confrontational people and we need to litigate constantly.

Ann Townsend: What's it going to take to turn us around so we can live in your structure?

Paolo Soleri: A change in our make-up.

Ann Townsend: What do you think needs to happen for us to change?

Paolo Soleri: It could come about with catastrophes, or it could come about with becoming more aware of the necessity of living and working together.

Ann Townsend: And how we need each other. Right now people do not feel we need each other.

Paolo Soleri: When our self-centered notions are satisfied, we are very opportunistic. But we belong to a phenomena which is opportunistic. All of life is opportunistic. But there is a difference between other kinds of life which are opportunistic of the species of the populations. In our species, whatever suits me, I'll do it. But for an ant, a horse, or a bear, they have to fit their own genetic needs. So it is an altruistic kind of opportunism. Our opportunism is not altruistic, it is self-centered.

Ann Townsend: Is this unique with the people of the United States or has the disease spread over the world?

Paolo Soleri: Some of it is because democracies are very, very difficult because it entails self-responsibilities. It entails humility. It entails limitations on ourselves and it entails some kind of tolerance and self-restraint. We don't have very much self-restraint in this country or anywhere else. So as soon as we acquire a limited amount of purchasing power, we believe and we feel we can do whatever we please. There is no other species that can think that way. What to do? Whatever is the best of course for the species, within it the individual can flourish.

Ann Townsend: We have a tough row to hoe. Using Arcosanti as an image, how does it fit the needs of the people of the 21st century and on? Please be more specific.

Paolo Soleri: At this point the question of balance comes in because we go about now feeding ourselves, over consumption, it doesn't fit the esthetic balance. So if 10 millions of people become American dreamer, it will be a catastrophe. For the money we can spin our dream for 250 million people because certainly to the amount of men we are putting on the planet. If we separate and go, if the Chinese become the super affluent as the Americans are, then China is going to be destroyed.

Ann Townsend: And they will.

Paolo Soleri: And they will because General Motors and everybody else goes there and says we're going to outfit you for the automobile, which means 600 million automobiles in China, which means the destruction of the Chinese land because they don't have that much land there. Any village that we see now is subsisting because of extreme frugality that they have to abide to, is going to explode into the Phoenix mode and all the land sustained by the village is going to be destroyed.

Ann Townsend: Then you will have to feed not only those people but also sharing and feeding people of the world.

Paolo Soleri: India, South America. We are outfitting ourselves for this. Unfortunately, the American dream on top of the list. The dilemma is clear.

Ann Townsend: When you have nothing and you have the opportunity to have it all, and the Americans have it all for the most part, you have to reach the satiation point and then maybe we'll wake up.

Paolo Soleri: Yes, but there is no limit to satiation because there is the notion of growing and growing so there might be an imposition from the outside since we are unable to impose on ourselves a measure of frugality. I bicycle around noon in a very wealthy backdrop. There was a party in one of the houses, and 90% of the automobiles were those gigantic Chevrolets, the new wave of European cars, they were all there. We are exploring every direction unlimited.

Ann Townsend: You are saying that new things will keep getting invented or improving to entice everyone so there is no end to our satiation?

Paolo Soleri: Yes, it makes money and power so everybody is after money and power.

Ann Townsend: They think it's the "all."

Paolo Soleri: That's about it. Mostly they're coming up with all sorts of troubles.

Ann Townsend: How scary for us.

Paolo Soleri: Very.

Ann Townsend: I read the little booklet on archeology but for our readers who will read this article from our interview with you, could you tell us a little about it? I really

found it very fascinating. You were very succinct and yet it makes your point very well in the archeology books. Can you give us an example?

Paolo Soleri: It's in a way a radical redesign of the city because it goes way back, having roots in something very, very old. The very old roots, as I was saying is that we cannot consider ourselves as individuals unless we consider the group to which we belong, the human species, for instance. In order to do that and to know our faculties, especially the mental faculties, we are to work together in very, very tight quarters.

That's because there are reasons since before that, like gravity, dynamics, all the rules and laws of nature that says if you have to have something, you have to pay for it. We are exhibiting now the fact that we do not believe in that. Since we get wealth, we can go around and pick up whatever we want and manipulate it however we like as a consumption society. I think that's not how nature used to work but we are moving away from nature. We have to acknowledge that there are limits to what we think we have the right to and this is not part of the American dream. It reminds us also that we are in the America dream, out-of-pocket rich, which is hardly acceptable since we are so wealthy.

Ann Townsend: The have and the have-nots are becoming farther and farther apart and greater in number so the greater the tension.

Paolo Soleri: And the cruelty that comes with it.

Ann Townsend: Yes, one of the scary things I listened to today on NPR is Science Friday which I enjoy the program very much. They were talking with some scientists who are meeting in California now about oceans and the increasing micro-organisms that they can't even identify yet. They don't know whether it's a virus or bacteria that is

growing very fast in our oceans that are going to threaten our food source. It hasn't advanced enough to impact us yet.

Paolo Soleri: Those kinds of drama have been happening since the beginning of evolution.

Ann Townsend: Yes, all along, but it's speeding up at such a tremendous rate.

Paolo Soleri: Naturally, now we have a system which is higher in intelligence, in work and in complexity, so it is more costly. But when oxygen came about on the planet, it was poison. Most of the species were disposed of. Then the new culture based on oxygen developed in what we are now. So there are catastrophes always. Now the catastrophe is about intelligence, intelligent people and conscious people, so the prize is going to be more suffering, not only pain but also suffering.

Ann Townsend: The smarter we get, the dumber we are?

Paolo Soleri: In a way, that might be the price we have to pay.

Ann Townsend: Was architecture your first love?

Paolo Soleri: No, I'm very systematic in many ways.

Ann Townsend: Did you want to be an architect when you were a little boy in Italy?

Paolo Soleri: No, I got interested in it in my 20's.

Ann Townsend: Did you study architecture in Italy?

Paolo Soleri: Yes.

Ann Townsend: And then?

Paolo Soleri: I got my license in Italy before I came to this country.

Ann Townsend: Why did you want to come to Taliesin?

Paolo Soleri: I was called to front of the line at the end of the war and I wasn't excited about this.

Ann Townsend: You were more interested in experimental things, breaking lots of molds. I also know that you are creating a wonderful bridge over the canal in Scottsdale. Is that still going on?

Paolo Soleri: Wonderful? It's a small bridge.

Ann Townsend: But it's wonderful for the Town and wonderful for us. When we see it, we'll remember you and think of you and realize how much we've missed not allowing you to create even more for us.

Paolo Soleri: It's an interesting point because when I'm asked, I say, "My feeling is this it is hardly making use of me and I'm sorry..."

Ann Townsend: I am, too. But I think this is where I feel you are such a visionary and a man before your time that we haven't caught up to you yet. It is our loss. What's going to happen to Cosanti and Arcosanti when you're gone?

Paolo Soleri: One thing that we have which is very important we have a little business in bronze and ceramics bells, which sustains the process. So that is going to go on so we can maintain a certain cash flow that will allow the two projects to develop. We just to maintain and refurbish it and maybe to put some facilities. But Arcosanti has to grow because it is too small.

Ann Townsend: And it has to grow because it's going to be needed.

Paolo Soleri: Yes, if we can grow more, we can be more persuasive.

Ann Townsend: I'm glad to know the project will continue.

Paolo Soleri: Good.

Anne Andeen: I'm curious, when did you actually construct Cosanti here? When did you come into the Valley?

Paolo Soleri: We came in '54 or '55, with my wife and one daughter, we have two daughters. After about a year, I began to feel that I needed more space for what we were doing so I began to experiment. Every year, there was a new experiment built with young people and my family. All the buildings are experiences and experiments.

Anne Andeen: How did you happen to acquire this particular piece of land?

Paolo Soleri: We were in Santa Fe for one season and we found out that it was too cold for ceramics, the ceramics would freeze when we were working outdoors. So we came here because by looking around, we ended up finding these five acres for sale. The studio took a start in the Valley, in my house, a very old 70 or 80 years old. Having the five acres, being no rules and regulations then, I started experimenting. Each year, I felt we need some space for something, so we built around that need.

Anne Andeen: When you build, do you excavate first?

Paolo Soleri: No, the little house was the first experiment. The roof, it's buried so that it was below grade. The desert is very flat, so I shaped the desert by hand, then we cast the roof, then we excavated under the roof to make this space, then we put walls in and divided it. So you do the roof and then the foundation. The building is probably about 50 years. Most of buildings here were built in the '60s. Then in the '70s we started Arcosanti.

Anne Andeen: I know you had a fire.

Paolo Soleri: We had a little shack around the pump house and that burned down one night. I was doing ceramics there. Then there was a fire three years ago in the gallery. It was mostly smoke, but it destroyed everything inside.

Anne Andeen: It looks like you have recouped.

Paolo Soleri: We had to refurbish it. After the fire, we had a heavy rain and it saturated the ground. The ground became very mushy. The ground was the foundation so the whole building was beginning to sink. We had to redo the support and a few other things.

Ann Townsend: I understand we have the privilege to talk to you for just a short time because you have a very busy day. We really appreciate you sharing some of your very busy time with us. Is there anything that you would to say in conclusion, a message to humankind, or Paradise Valley in particular? You're very welcome.

Paolo Soleri: Number one, let's be less litigious and try to understand that we need each other. Number two, we have to remind ourselves that we are fooling ourselves if we think that we are preserving the desert the way we are going on. We are not preserving the desert, we are not preserving us, we are really destroying ourselves. In order to change that trend, we have to change our minds. There are no short cuts or quick fixes. There isn't.

Ann Townsend: We have to pray for a miracle then.

Paolo Soleri: Well, it's now at an age to do miracles. We have to make up our mind. We may have more knowledge, more education, it's fundamental really. We are now entering into a glut of information, in cyber space and so on, which every answer is very

important but we are not able to assimilate which is the difficulty with the knowledge.

Without knowledge, survival is unfeasible, without wisdom we are fooling ourselves.

Ann Townsend: Thank you very much, Dr. Soleri, a man of the future, a prophet.

We appreciate very much the opportunity to speak with you.

Paolo Soleri: Thank you.