

CITIES WITH MINI (NOT MEGA) FOOTPRINTS

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The architect and urban visionary Paolo Soleri says that the "urban effect" is the act of miniaturizing our habitat. It is the reorganizing of our habitat into "an intense, interlocking, interweaving, interacting set of elements" that creates an urban consciousness rather than just a structure. Soleri's philosophy, blending architecture and ecology, called "arcology", is about imploding the sprawl that has become the urban paradigm of our times. The only way to save our planet's rural and wilderness areas, Soleri contends, is to radically redesign our cities, and the suburb is the most dysfunctional part of our urban landscape.

Americans have perfected the design of the suburb and made it glamorous. It was a very clever, intelligent design of a fundamentally wrong idea, and so it legitimized the wrong idea. Soleri argues that "when you try to improve upon wrongness, you make it wronger. You make wrongness successful." The suburb wastefully creates reliance upon the automobile by separating the vital urban functions of dwelling from economic and social activity. The suburb also lacks the critical mass to support great cultural institutions such as concert halls, great museums, and other institutions. Suburbs kill cultural development. Soleri's arcologies emphasize both density and privacy, as well as the integration of spaces for living, working, shopping, culture, and recreation. Public and social life are stimulated, but not at the expense of private life. Most suburbanites are highly skeptical of words such as "density" and "mixed use", for they conjure up images of congested, noisy, inner-city concrete jungles. But some urban renewal projects now successfully demonstrate that it doesn't have to be that way.

Piet Blom's Cube Houses

An excellent example of high-density living that doesn't feel high-density is the cubic housing project in Rotterdam by the Dutch architect Piet Blom. The cubic houses are built on top of a pedestrian bridge, a public space containing a park, shops and cafes. The houses are cubes tilted on one corner, so that the living space and kitchen in-



side the houses look down onto the public space, and the private bedrooms and bathrooms look up into the sky. Public space and private dwelling overlap, creating a very small footprint on the land. Shopping is easily accessible by walking, and the neighborhood is quiet and uncongested. However, Soleri's vision goes far beyond housing. Soleri wants to engage the entire city, and he has built an urban laboratory in the desert north of Phoenix, Arizona to test his ideas. His city is called Arcosanti, and I had the opportunity to stay there for two weeks in 1994 and to attend lectures and workshops with Soleri. As someone who normally prefers rural settings, Arcosanti changed my perception of high-density living. The apartments at Arcosanti are literally right on top of each other, back-to-back, and stacked over the working and public spaces. However, massive concrete walls ensure sound-proofing from your neighbors, and the balconies and terraces of each apartment are situated so that no living space looks upon another. I was amazed to find that I had an even greater sense of privacy in this high-density housing than I did in my suburban home in California, where I was constantly exposed to the sounds of traffic and my neighbors. The promise of spaciousness and privacy in the suburbs is largely an illusion.

Soleri demonstrates that these things can be achieved in an urban environment, and that with a coherent design we can implode our cities, making them more functional, more livable, and most importantly more sustainable. Soleri points out that the construction of human habitats "are massive interventions on the biosphere." Arcologies aim to minimize our impact on the biosphere, while at the same time making our constructed human habitats more fit for human habitation.