Horning discovers energy of Arcosanti

By Julie Asher

Energy, energy, energy... the shortage of it has caused major concern for the country this winter. However, for the beginnings of a new city in Arizona the problem is non-existent. Energy comes from the sun and the people working there.

Arcosanti is the name of the project and is located in the Arizona desert near Scottsdale.

Jerry Horning, assistant professor of Fine Arts, spent four weeks last semester with his wife, Mary Jo, at the city of concrete structures.

"It stands as an example of one man's energy and what he can get done if he wants to," Horning said. "It's impressive."

The man responsible for the project is Italian architect Paolo Soleri. His plan for Arcosanti is based on a unique study called Arcology, a blend of ecology and architecture. Architecture, ecology, philosophy and religion are incorporated into Soleri's plans.

Haystack meeting

The two men were brought together by the Haystack School of Crafts in Maine. Horning, an assistant director of the school, conducts ceramic workshops at the small crafts center each summer.

Soleri visited the school as a guest lecturer in 1971. Horning and other Haystack leaders saw a connection between Soleri with his Arcology and artists who take a similar approach when they create art from natural materials. So, Soleri agreed to Horning's 1976 visit.

Horning explained the plan behind the city. He said the work on the city is slow—in seven years only six buildings have been completed. Horning and his wife lived in a 12 x 16 foot room in a ceramic apse structure. An apse is a quarter of a sphere.

When finished, Arcosanti will consist of a main building, shaped like two truncated cones, for living quarters to house 3,000 inhabitants, the existing buildings at its base and a long greenhouse. Each person will have a cubic footage to decorate as they wish. Of the 825 acres Soleri has in Arizona, he will use only eight acres for the city.

Trees, flowers and food

The dimensions of the main building will be 24 feet high, 2,000 feet long and 400 feet wide. The greenhouse will be utilized for growing trees, flowers and food for the city. Additional heat from the greenhouse will be channeled to storage areas.

The structures are made of concrete, rock or other materials which store heat and surrender when needed. According to Soleri, two-thirds of the world's population live in climates where the principles of Arcology would be effective.

A typical day at Arcosanti for Horning started at 5:30 a.m. with a small breakfast. Then, Horning began teaching his 10 students from 6:30 until 9:30. The instruction included the reintroduction of old techniques which the kiln is fueled with wood rather than gas. Each day was spent for learning ceramics and observing the life of a craftsman Horning said.

Once a week Soleri would lead a group into the desert to talk about his concepts and answer questions about Arcology. Horning said he went along sometimes.

The 57-year-old Soleri patterns his beliefs at his way of life after the thinking of the late Jesuit philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Soleri believes in frugality and poverty. This is his lifestyle and the residents of Arcosanti will live somehow the same.

Believes in frugal life

"He wouldn't have to live a frugal life if he didn't believe in it," Horning said. "He chooses to live without an air conditioner and other things."

Funds for the construction come from the sources. Horning said the 200 workers are students of Soleri's concepts and they pay $510 to work for a period of six weeks. Also, there is the sale of bronze bells and tours are given to visitors. Horning made his own contribution of 80 ceramic soup bowls for the restaurant which recently opened there.

"In Arcosanti's goal is to miniaturize typical U.S. city by building Arcosanti. Horning said the idea is analogous to the miniaturization of adding machine by the production of a calculating machine. Just as the calculator reduces the materials, less space and less energy with more efficiency, so will Arcosanti use less but run more smoothly than a city, he said.

For Horning, the value of the Arcosanti experience comes from the discovery of "gadgetless living" and the realization of the tremendous waste in our society. "Suddenly you realize how much you can get along with," Horning said.

No transportation

Horning said Arcosanti has no need for transportation because a walk from end to end will take only 10 minutes when the city is completed. He said he feels this will be an important way for people to meet one another.

Horning said a city like Arcosanti would eliminate many social problems. He said he realizes privacy is important, but that it seems very easy in our society to become too isolated.

"It's easy to live an insular life," he said. "However, people need communication with other people. People help people stay healthy.

If given the opportunity, Horning said, he would like to live at Arcosanti. He finds Soleri's though provoking especially with the energy situation this winter. Also, Horning believes Arcosanti has a healthy atmosphere where communication and honest and straightforwardly in our world.

Conservation and communications are the keys to Arcosanti, and Horning feels it is a "great place to start a productive life."