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August 29, 2008 - 4:16PM

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Ancient meets avant-garde at Cosanti

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[Michael Grady](#), Tribune

“Otherworldly” is an overused term, applied frequently to historic museums and ethnic restaurants. But a stop at Cosanti — architect Paolo Soleri’s Paradise Valley laboratory — does actually feel like another world.

Thousands of sculpted bells and wind chimes dangle from the ceilings, shading walkways that dart between sunny atriums of sand-molded concrete. "This is called an apse," education director Roger Tomalty says of the clamshell studio where ceramic bells are cast. "It was molded in pieces, which interlock. It's an ancient technique, used by the Etruscans."

Cosanti fuses the ancient and the progressive so well, the site was considered by "Star Wars" location scouts for Luke Skywalker's home planet, Tatooine.

"They came out here, and really liked the place," Tomalty recalls. "But developments were already going up to the south, and I think that would have interfered with their shots."

Cosanti is the real-life home and original studio of Paolo Soleri, a cutting-edge architect and former student of Frank Lloyd Wright who reconceived urban living. "His concept was the opposite of urban sprawl — which is a cancer to city planning," Tomalty explains.

In 1970, more than a generation before "green building," Soleri unveiled Arcosanti, an urban community concept that banished the car, drew inhabitants

together in cleverly designed living and social centers, and freed the surrounding land for eco-friendly use. "It is interesting to see ideas he espoused back then coming back into favor now," Tomalty says.

Arcosanti has become the 89-year-old architect's Mount Rushmore. Work on it proceeds up in Cordes Junction, funded in part by Cosanti's harvest of bells.

"We pour the bells in the morning, in a series of two 'heats,'" Tomalty explains. The painstaking process — liquefying bronze, pounding molds out of foundry sand, then pouring the molten brew into them — makes good theater.

"People like to watch our apprentices pour, and ask questions," he says. The molds are taken from original Soleri designs. Apprentices score them with their own repertoire of totems and insignias to give each one an individual flair.

"And (Soleri) still creates his own new designs, as well."

The end result is tethered into the chime-and-bell ensembles that swing like lazy vines from the curving ceilings of Soleri's exotic redoubt. "Some people buy bells for the look," Tomalty says. "Some buy them for the sound — you can always tell that group, because they're here tapping bells for hours."

Cosanti is at 6433 E. Doubletree Ranch Road. It's open seven days a week, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday. For more information on Cosanti, call (480) 948-6145. For a look at their bells, visit

www.cosanti.com.

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Tuesday, September 2, 2008| 9:31 am



Bronze wind bells on display at Cosanti in Paradise Valley.

Tim Hacker, Tribune

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