

“The Search for a Lean Alternative”

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(excerpt from a paper to be published by the ASU press)

Is Arcosanti, a Lean Alternative?

The Lean Alternative (LA) is a challenge to the marketplace. Given the relative size and power of Arcosanti, the challenge is minuscule, ephemeral. That is one reason why being absorbed by the market now is unwise. One tenet is that prototyping is not profit oriented. It ceases to be prototyping the moment it enters the straight jacket of profitability and its strict rules of “I’ll do it if it pays,” because the pay is to be granted and fast coming, stifling the Alternative because the Alternative is not proven. If proven, the Lean Alternative would be no longer open to the nimbleness of novelty; it would have skirted the risk of challenging the market. If the market is the youngest of theologies, challenging, it equals blasphemy. *Adieu*, alternative.

The intention is good, but the results will be the absorption of the Lean Alternative into the marketplace. It is the “Let me tell you” and then, “let me show you” procedure that the market establishes on the site. Prototyping, laboratory, and leanness are put aside or astutely absorbed, diluted in the marketable commodity. As the non-marketable commodity, the alternative is automatically discarded.

We are prototyping nutcrackers, sewing machines, artificial hearts, lung machines, refineries, submarines, space probes, telephones, vaccines, computing machines, soup cans, chairs, soaps, wireless, electric razors—you name it. For all, trial and error have been the originators or bottlenecks to success, when success cometh.

The country spends billions of dollars on a super bomber that never reaches the assembly line and billions in space probes going nowhere. We have been prototyping habitat for thousands of years, but in taking the most complicated and most complex problem of all, the production of culture inside habitat, we have been less than coherent. We must try and try again, but we must be more focused and less shortsighted. At stake are the lives of billions of people and the considerate symbiosis with the life that made and makes us: the biosphere. We need urban laboratories. We must prototype. Haphazardness on the base of “I do what I like if I can get away with it” is inching closer and closer to irresponsibility in the name of freedom, democracy, happiness, and Utopia (the great fiction?).

Since Arcosanti is the place for the alternative, the marketplace must adapt to it and not vice versa—that is, Arcosanti becoming a successful commodity for the marketplace. To pay lip service to the Lean Alternative and then go the marketplace way does not help anything or anybody. It is *muda* (waste).

There is something between the clumsiness of Arcosanti and the slickness of loans redeemed. This something is the access, genuine, into the lean prototyping with all the unproven, untested ambiguities of prototyping.

The market would have never accepted, endorsed, or financed the Old Town (the existing structures). The mesa would be there, pristine and untouched if we persevered in trying to bring the market. None of the four to five thousand people that built the Arcosanti Old Town asked for stocks, ownership, guarantees, public debate, or a decision-making voice. They came, worked, and left. I think none of the workshoppers/residents came out the worse for it. Now, we have a working fragment of a Lean Alternative. It should not yet be drowned in the oceanic marketplace. (And, by the way, the Evolutionary Coherence Bubble is probably with us.) While the market wants to convert us, we only want to suggest an alternative to the market. The market, as it does in science, technology, medicine, education, sociology, industry, and so forth should help (finance) us, not for profit, but for understanding, learning, and knowledge, not to mention an insurance policy. Let's be real! You accept, work for, and endorse the Lean Alternative, or you pay lip service to it. This is evidently not a sin, just indifference.

The Cosanti/Arcosanti project has been a modest attempt to become a testing ground for lean society. We have been at it for about forty years. The only help from society comes from being a not-for-profit project.

We had to generate resources for constructing the in-the-making town, Arcosanti, while residents—averaging seventy people—carried on with dignity and some rewarding experiences. The awareness of being in a domain of excellence *vis-à-vis* waste, pollution, environmental disruption, and disavowing segregation of people and things has been the constant reward. We'd like to submit a proposal for accelerating Arcosanti's construction to corporate and non-corporate America. Speeding up Arcosanti's construction would produce more persuasive alternatives to the problems of hyper-consumption and materialism, which are inseparable twins. Extending the experience of lean culture from one hundred (or so) people to a thousand (or so) people is the main goal; a thousand or so people is Arcosanti Critical Mass.

At the Arcosanti Lab, we are dealing with an alternative way of sheltering individuals and society. Why is it sheltering? Because what we have elected to be the optimal sheltering, suburbia now mutating into exurbia, is rapidly destroying our physical and mental resources. The word rapidly is used because the self-perpetuating labor of technology, inventiveness, and our innate greed (opportunism) are conjuring the planetary hermitage we might find, too late, to be lethal. Self-isolation—only virtually broken by the microchip—is what the gregarious, convivial body-brains that we are, will be unable to cope with. The environmental impact generated by the most extraordinary waste intrinsic to the one-house-one-family will overwhelm people, animals, and the green life on which all other forms of life depend: a planetary *muda* on the production line.

Arcosanti has forty years of work and thirty years of lean experience, which we like to propose as an alternative to hyper-consumerism. To expedite the work and strengthen the experience, we invite the academic world to participate in the process. We, the Cosanti Foundation, are willing to explore a long-term use of Arcosanti and its land's holding for committed participation in the Lean Alternative Laboratory of Arcosanti. Express your interest via mail, fax, or E-mail, and we will send you more information.

Lean Alternative Network

The Lean Alternative Network would be an offshoot of the Arcosanti project now intent on developing the Lean Alternative Laboratory of Arcosanti; it appeals to individuals or groups converted to the idea that conditions are ripening for the universal proposal that lean society is an alternative to hyper-consumptive society.

Lean society is a realistic proposition that could embrace *have* and *have-not* alike. Lean society is evolutionarily more coherent than the hyper-consumption society. Evolution might well be poised for an unparalleled acceleration, courtesy of learning and doing's new technologies.

That is why a true concern for desirability—even at feasibility's expense—is gaining an urgency not known, if and where survival's constraints marginalize the human condition. Now, we are reaching the threshold of food, shelter and education for all people. We are far away from equity's threshold.

Lean society could be lethal for greed and materialism by de-contaminating single people and groups of people. De-contamination fights the over-stuffing that's besieged our

environments and minds. Leanness is agile, quasi-mercurial, sensitized, and alert about the always-precarious condition of people that gets buried in materialism's obesity.

Arcosanti has displayed a sampling of leanness in its thirty years of experience. Inviting groups of people to get a five (or more) day experience onsite is the Lean Alternative Network's main task. The program is made of discreet groups of ten to fifty people being briefed and made part of Arcosanti's life, existing characters, and potential virtues.

The program, in tandem with press and Internet, can generate the network indispensable for faster development of the lean habitat, making it more persuasive and consequently, more influential. The Lean Alternative Laboratory of Arcosanti could reach the Critical Mass within a decade and possibly trigger similar initiatives in diverse lands and circumstances.

The Lean Alternative imperative is as significant in consumerist countries as it is in *have-not* countries. In consumerist countries, the Lean Alternative needs to abate consumerist aggression. That is, the *have* countries should spare the *have-nots* from hyper-consumption's ills and excesses that are the mirage of the *have* countries. The planet at large would be the winner.