Paolo Soleri, in his work as architect and thinker, argues for coherence as a fundamental value, not only for human life but for life in general. His thinking is framed in a vast cosmic-evolutionary perspective and advocates that all the local and historical issues of human life be considered in ways that are consistent and cohesive with that largest scale perspective.

His is a thinking that nonetheless deeply engages the real problems of our everyday world. It is a thinking rich in hypotheses and proposals that seriously address the most critical issues of our global moment. Such issues include: human population levels, environmental degradation, suburban and exurban sprawl, mass transportation logistics, traffic gridlock, commuter rage and loneliness, clean energy, generation, global warming, peak oil and oil wars, biological species extinction and habitat incursion, loss of agricultural land and soil, world hunger, the obesity epidemic, national and global social inequity, interreligious conflict, myriad forms of idolatry, American imperialism, colossal waste of time and resources, materialistic greed, trivialization of culture, mind-body dualism, technological potentials, inadequate and delusory notions of being “green”—and arguably some of the psychic and spiritual maladies of the present age as well: deprivation of natural beauty, depression, hopelessness, directionlessness.

That Soleri does not presume to offer definitive “solutions” should be emphasized. What he does offer are large-scale proposals for addressing these issues head-on, proposals that under the right circumstances might become working hypotheses for individual and collective action, for laboratory-style prototyping, for trial and error social experimentation.

No once-for-all “answers” are promised but rather a general but definite direction for action and a very broad outline as to how to proceed. Some readers will judge Soleri’s proposals to be quixotic or idiosyncratic, impossible, unappealing, or pointless, even objectionable and offensive. But that is not an argument against his laying them out with great persistence. What one critic wrote of Soleri decades ago remains true, “He is not definitive but provocative.” [Jeff Cook review, p. 74]

So then, if you are not convinced by Soleri’s proposals, dear reader, by all means come up with better ones!—but ones that are similarly coherent and do not refracture the urgently pressing issues into multiple incoherent domains, as Soleri found them. For, as he writes in an incidental aside, “Analysis tends to compartmentalize thinking, which tends to segregate knowledge, a contradiction nested in the exploding field of knowledge itself.”

Soleri’s quest has been precisely to grasp things comprehensively that are routinely and myopically sundered. Now that the human population on earth rapidly approaches seven billion (with one quarter of our fellow mammal species threatened with extinction), we need to emulate this rare coherence and comprehensiveness of view.
Until recently in human history, architecture had the luxury to measure its successes according to localized, autonomous, to some degree capricious criteria: grandeur, beauty, monumentality, commodiousness, functionality achieved uniquely for this place. The other side of the world mattered not. From now on, by contrast, to be ethical, to be great, architecture must first and foremost grasp its responsibility to function as the keystone of a new planetary coherence. Paolo Soleri is the architectural thinker who underscores this epochal mandate with the whole of his oeuvre.

Soleri has been typed as a “visionary” and a “utopian” in countless publications over his sixty-year career. As this is the most persistent misrepresentation to which he has been subjected by two generations of interpreters, let us attempt to adjust the record. Soleri’s criticism of “vision” is that it has a tendency to divorce from reality, to convert into delusion, and therefore must cede to critical realism and actionable hypothesis in a collective, harshly conditioned, delusion-prone world. One notebook entry, among many, conveys this:

The makeup of a visionary, the person believing in things that do not exist—a delusional condition. The visionary enters the animistic world: the rock is animated, the stream is animated, the clouds are so, the mountains are so. Out of this delusional make-believe the visionary comes up with all sorts of scenarios: his or her “vision.” The most passionate visionary becomes the founder of theological myths. The world of the visionary takes hold and Homo sapiens becomes captive to it. Evidently I am not a visionary. I conjecture, I simulate, I propose, I anticipate.

Let us posit, furthermore, that Soleri is effectively opposite of utopian. For him there can be no such thing as an “ideal” city or civilization, so there is no point in dreaming of one, wasting time in vapid reverie. Civilization, in his outlook, is all process, no end product. Self-creating organisms cannot in principle achieve an “end,” they can only keep living and evolving or die. “Better” and “worse” have to be tested and arbitrated in engaged action since an “ideal” is nowhere available to set the standard.

Neither is Soleri an evolutionary determinist, as he has sometimes been cast, but the opposite. In his view, now that evolution has produced a consciously self-creating organism, all determinism flies out the window and the course of evolution becomes a thoroughly aleatory enterprise. He offers no prognostication (since the “future” is but a fable promulgated by “visionaries” in the present); only realistic cognizance of the possible as an aid to whatever creative action we hypothesize to be desirable.

Soleri’s existential maxim seems to be: get to work, create, get dirty, don’t sit there and dream. He puts his trust in intelligent hypothesis, to be tested by sweaty effort, trial and error, learning by taking risks, failing, trying again, and embracing the inevitability of falling back at times. These misadventures are built into Soleri’s vision of how civilization evolves, one miniscule effort at a time, for the most part by slow, patient, frustrating bricolage, sometimes accompanied by profligate losses and titanic failures. We can only attempt, perhaps illusorily, to create something better than what we know in any limited sphere, while no doubt inadvertently introducing unforeseeable, undesirable by-products and by-processes.
For Soleri, thinking postulates coherent hypotheses to be tested, it does not establish truths. We cannot act without ideas in our heads of what we are doing, yet those ideas cannot be “true” in any definitive or objective sense. “What if?” is therefore his procedure in all pursuits:

What if we take this to be the case? What if we pursue this goal as something desirable? What are the effects and consequences of acting on this hypothesis? What is “possible” may be extremely remote in terms of likelihood, but it may nonetheless become a sufficient rationale for working and acting in this way rather than another. That is to say, a hypothetical possibility that is highly remote may offer itself as an object for specific action in this very concrete moment of my life—and even so compellingly that I might defend it unto death.

Soleri is clear on his own deepest commitments, and even as he does not mistake these commitments for essential truths, he argues on their behalf as convincing and sensible hypotheses. An entry in his 1995 notebook spells them out clearly:

What have I been doing?
1. I have been working at the demise of the single home for the sake of community.
2. I have been working at the demise of the suburban diaspora for the sake of the urban effect.
3. I have been working at the demise of hyperconsumption for the sake of frugality and the culture of excellence it may generate.
4. I have been working at the demise of the theological structures for the sake of religo.
5. I have been working on a hypothesis that proposes for reality a possible if remote conclusion into grace. The self-revelation of reality to itself. An esthetogenesis.

Soleri’s assertion that soulless materialism, obsessive hyperconsumption, and cultural trivialization have so pervaded the industrialized world that they are bringing about an unstoppable historic “tsunami of unhinged reason” will no doubt call down renewed charges that he is a pessimist and fatalist. But it is only fair to note that he sees astonishing reason for optimism written into the very evolutionary history of the cosmos itself: to wit, the self-creation of life, and within that biospheric trajectory, the self-creation of self-aware life. “We are numb toward our novelty in this solar system,” he writes, “and the way this novelty speaks of both the need for transstewardship and the inevitability of self-demise; thus we have occupied ourselves with inventing alternative realities.”

His philosophy begins in wonder at the mysterium tremendum of cosmic presence and its creative evolution. It aspires to incite wondertment as one of the most precious capacities of the novel human genome, cosmically promising despite all its folly, still only a few million years old. For all that remains to be said of his thinking, Paolo Soleri speaks for himself in this book. Read well and be provoked!

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