

Thinkers on a Planetary Scale —

Or what you always wanted to know about your future

By BRIAN PEARL

The Vanier College sponsored conference on Friday was dubbed Thinkers on a Planetary Scale and featured Buckminster Fuller. It should have been subtitled What You Always Wanted to Know About the Future.

The three speakers, international legal expert Richard Falk, experimental builder and city designer Paolo Soleri and the old engineer-philosopher himself, Buckminster Fuller all arrived wearing their new multifocal glasses designed for the global viewpoint. They simply tried to tell students what it is like to literally see the world with new eyes.

All three men, despite their widely divergent backgrounds, were in basic agreement that the future will be an artificial arrangement by men for men in which both nature and man will live in a more fulfilled state as technology takes care of all our physical needs efficiently and cheaply.

Falk envisions a new social contract between men which will eliminate the state and replace it with an intense, compact "tribalized" society on a global scale. Falk a professor of international law at Princeton, was the only speaker that day to refer to the possibility of an ecological catastrophe occurring if technology itself is not curtailed.

Both Soleri and Fuller firmly believe that increased use of the proper technologies will produce enough food, clothing and shelter (as well as the material for a creative life-style) if pollution can be brought into the system and controlled. Soleri criticized Falk's views as "simplifying a situation where the only valid solution was to increase the complexity of the technological environment to improve its capacities as a human environment.

Basic premise: do more with less

Soleri is a student of Frank Lloyd Wright's who stayed on in Mesa, Arizona to create a unique school of architecture and design on a huge scale. Like Fuller, Soleri's basic

premise is the doing of more with less, "frugality is more than a virtue, it is a necessity". The first part of his talk was about Mesa City a projected town of 3,000 to be built by Soleri and his students.

Both the building techniques and the design of Mesa City are revolutionary. Transportation, for instance will never involve an automobile because the town is too compact to make the car efficient. The area of the town will be only one percent of the available acreage, leaving almost all the land free for farming or just plain free of suburban sprawl.

The concrete basic to the town's construction will be quarried from a central area which will be landscaped into a park when the town is finished. (Buchart Gardens near Victoria, B.C. is a restored limestone quarry and a beautiful park.)

Mold a building anyone?

Finally, Soleri has developed a number of revolutionary building techniques, as well as taking the idea of modular construction to a level of incredible sophistication. One of the new methods he has invented is earth-molding concrete by casting the structure's roof on a mound of earth shaped as desired, then excavating under the hardened shape to create the interior or raising the concrete form by crane to use someplace else and then reusing the earth mold. Soleri showed some slides of his work which proved to the audience that even the simplest of standardised modular building techniques can produce unique structures if the creative urge is given full play.

But the really interesting aspect of Soleri's work is his planetary vision of Archology, the complete living

systems he has designed for people on the oceans, on dams, on bridges and around airports, to name just a few. These communities are not only planned from top to bottom to take total advantage of existing technologies and to avoid waste of anything, including light and land. They still retain greater flexibility and room for human creativity than our present botched-up megalopoli. Soleri's vision leaves no room for cars or the type of industrial work that takes men into the underground factories for anything besides maintenance work. Cybernation, automation of living services and the freedom of man to pursue his true purpose is the substance of Soleri's plans.

World made up of three levels

The form of his plans is a cosmology based on how Soleri views the ascendant faculty of human awareness of cosmic design and the faculties of creativity and production combined into the act of human design. Soleri himself is the true expert of this in the world today. The world is made up of phenomena on three levels, Soleri believes. The first is that of physical matter, reacting consistently and predictably in cosmogenesis. The next level is the world of biological organization, procreation and the innocence of biogenesis. At the highest level is the "mental, evolutionary, compassionate, manipulatable, formal and social" world of good and evil creation, homogenesis. The purpose of mankind, says Soleri, is to increase the world of homogenesis, the phenomena that man can affect and to be the true designers of their environment. For this humanistic cosmological philosophy, Soleri was called naive by one of York's more experienced students.



Richard Falk

Soleri and Falk spoke in the afternoon in the Osgoode Moot Court to a full house but that evening Buckminster Fuller spoke to a crowded Burton Auditorium. His talk was carried outside to the lobby by loudspeakers to the people who couldn't be fitted into the full hall. Fuller said he had not notes to speak from and that his speaking style was "thinking out loud" and proceeded to do just that for over two and a half hours. Near the end of his talk when he asked if we minded if he go on a bit more, the crowd applauded their assent. No one was bored.

Fuller began with his biography, starting with an anecdote about his early lack of vision (he is cross-eyed) which was finally corrected when he turned four. So, Fuller said, whenever he wants to see the world the same way he did when he was four, all he has to do is remove his glasses.

Thoughts of suicide Fuller's beginning

From there, he talked about his confrontation with failure in 1927 when his business collapsed. The shock made him think about suicide and suicide made him think about life. He traces his personal development from that day. From the single decision he made "to do my own thinking" as Fuller puts it, came the economic, historical, engineering and environmental insights the global viewpoint, that Fuller spoke of that night.

The basis of his talk was the maps he had made to show the world as "one world-island" on "one world-ocean" and the only major problem Fuller sees that threatens the survival of mankind is the "conditioned reflexes" of biological man that blind him to the potential of the world seen as a planet instead of a collection of irrelevant nation-states. These conditioned reflexes include the war syndrome, which has cost nearly a thousand billion dollars since World War II and is based on the fear of scarcity of natural resources of food and energy. Fuller points out that these fears are based on old standards of energy production and agricultural limitations. Nuclear energy (which actually produces all its own fuel and energy at the same time) and artificial food products (today all

the world's population could be adequately fed on just 3 percent of the soya bean crop, according to Arthur C. Clarke, if we tried to create the technology) make the historic fears of famine and the exhaustion of energy resources obsolete. That these fears still are behind the working of most of the world's nations is the most dangerous situation man faces.

We will leave the planet

But before he could finish his talk on the necessity for a global or planetary consciousness for the survival of the human race, Fuller talked about the cosmos and Man's emerging place in it. Comparing our past on this planet to an embryo living off the nutriment inside the shell and around the rapidly growing child, Fuller compared the modern experience of an emerging global consciousness to the breaking of the egg and a human emergence into the universe. Fuller sees the eventual departure of mankind from this planet into space. Fuller believes man's destiny is in outer space and his evolution leads him there. Like Soleri, he views the human capacity to understand and analyse experience into principles and to control his environment on the basis of those principles as an integral part of the design of the universe.

The conference was an educational experience of the best type. All three men are dedicated philosophers who believe in doing their own thinking. And by sharing these thoughts with us, they teach us how to appreciate the planetary viewpoint as a relevant and rational one and as necessary to our survival on this planet. There were some unfortunate aspects to the conference, but they were easily ignored in the midst of the basic success of the meetings. The students who questioned Soleri did a poor job of understanding his meaning. But the afternoon experience with Soleri might have led the organizers of the conference to pass over a question period for Buckminster Fuller because the idea of another student calling Fuller naive to a chorus of groans great gnashing of teeth was too much for them. As a gift to the York community, this conference was ideal.



Paolo Soleri

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