Paved New World

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY IS LEADING THE WAY IN SUSTAINABILITY WITH AN UNLIKELY MASCOT: A PARKING LOT.

J ONI MITCHELL PENNED THE lyric “they paved paradise and put up a parking lot” as an ode to environmental preservation. But if Mitchell saw Arizona State University’s newest parking lot, she might not think it’s all that bad.

That’s because this “New American Parking Lot” in front of ASU’s Art Museum is not just another concrete slab dotting the planet like an unwanted freckle. This lot is engineered to make the smallest environmental impact possible. It deflects heat and helps preserve and purify water that falls on it, and its pervious concrete material even helps neighboring trees grow larger and provide more shade.

This high-tech parking lot comes from an area of research in which ASU is becoming an international leader: sustainability. The Global Institute of Sustainability launched at ASU in 2004 and became the backbone for a new School of Sustainability earlier this year. It’s the only degree-granting program in the nation focused on the study of sustainability. You could call it a degree in planet preservation.

ASU is getting much more attention locally for its efforts in bioscience research, but its most progressive work may be in sustainability. At a time when documentary films on the environment are blockbusters and global warming is a major presidential campaign issue, the university is working to educate students who will be charged with fixing the planetary problems their parents and grandparents created.

There are challenges, however. For starters, industry and education still are figuring out how to work together on complex environmental issues.

“This whole program is a pan-university effort where we’re trying to teach expertise in design, engineering, law, the sciences,” says Jonathan Fink, ASU’s chief sustainability officer, who oversees the Global Institute of Sustainability. “It’s hard to know right now exactly what companies want from graduates in this area, but we know they want people who can draw on many disciplines.”

For now, the school has about 30 graduate students, and next year will expand and accept undergrads. Fink says he expects a high demand: “This is still quite early for us, and we’re trying to figure everything out. I think we’ll keep seeing more interest.”

Other educators are teaching K-12 students about preserving the environment. Jaimie Cloud founded The Cloud Institute for Sustainability Education in New York 12 years ago, but only in the past two years has she seen any real traction in teaching sustainability.

“Universities, corporations and every other sector are giving a lot more attention to the environment and sustainability issues. We’re getting to the point now where there’s a critical mass, and there’s a lot more interest in curriculum,” Cloud says. Her institute works with K-12 educators on developing ways to teach children the importance of the environment and community.

She’s confident that sustainability education will grow on all levels in the coming years, and it can start early on. “In grade school we’re just trying to show the kids that we are all connected. We’re teaching them to love the places where they live, and to help them understand how they have an impact on that place.”

The message isn’t all that different at ASU. And those concepts already are coming to life in a very real way. The pervious parking lot is just one example of where the research is headed, says Jay Golden, a materials expert at ASU. He leads an offshoot of the Sustainability Institute called the National Center of Excellence in Smart Innovations for Urban Climate and Energy.

“Imagine materials that can change color and react to temperature. We will be able to harvest heat in materials and create energy,” he says. “Eventually, we’ll be coating buildings in this type of material.”

As ASU continues to grow at a breakneck speed, he adds, it can act as its own laboratory for many of these innovations – particularly the materials that address heat and energy problems.

— Adam Kress

Holistic Hot Spot

USTIN VICKS, A SELF-PROCLAIMED recovering lawyer, wanted to bring a new concept to Arizona when he created I AM…The Center. The facility recently opened near Mill Avenue and University Drive, inviting Valley residents to take yoga classes, sip organic wine, get beauty advice, receive massages and meet with financial therapists – all under one roof.

Vicks calls it his “education and entertainment complex for aware adults.” He says he chose Tempe as the home of this holistic hot spot because he thinks there’s an abundance of creative energy in the college town. However, the center is not just focused on the college-age crowd. Vicks says he’s hoping to cater to “a little bit of the older crowd.”

Young and old alike can be found taking classes and hanging out at the organic bistro and wine bar, which Vicks says is the first of its kind in Arizona. It serves organic fare such as hummus with apple chips and a selection of organic beer and wine. There is live, acoustic music on Sunday nights.

For more information, visit iamthecenter.com.

— Jourdan Rassas

PHOTO: Nicolle Roegner