One community near Phoenix is taking a “completely different” approach to development.

By Cara Buckley Photographs by Rebecca Noble
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Last year, when Andre Rouhani and Gabriela Reyes toured Culdesac Tempe, a rental development outside of Phoenix, the place looked pretty sweet. It had winsome walkways, boutique shops and low-slung white stucco buildings clustered around shaded courtyards.

The only surprise came when Mr. Rouhani, 33, a doctoral student at Arizona State University, asked about resident parking and was told there was none.

The couple had two dogs, a toddler and another baby on the way. “Long story short, we decided that all the pros outweigh the cons,” Mr. Rouhani said in a recent phone interview. The family gave its car to Ms. Reyes’ father and moved into Culdesac in December. “We do really, really love it here,” Mr. Rouhani said. “It’s the best place I’ve ever lived.”

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50 States, 50 Fixes is a series about local solutions to environmental problems. More to come this year.

Modeled on towns in Italy and Greece built long before the advent of cars, Culdesac Tempe is what its developers call the country’s first neighborhood purposely built to be car free.

Ryan Johnson, the Culdesac chief executive, said he wanted to offer a blueprint for living in a walkable place, even in a state that’s car-centric and often broiling.

“It’s one of the best things we can do for climate, health, happiness, low cost of living, even low cost of government,” said Mr. Johnson, who lives at Culdesac, too. “It’s also a better lifestyle. We all become the worst versions of ourselves behind the wheel.”

So far, 288 apartments have been built on eight of the site's 17 acres. More units are planned.

Andre Rouhani borrows a car once a week for errands.

While there's a short-term parking lot for deliveries, retailers and guests, Culdesac residents are expected to get around by the nearby light rail system, as well as on buses, scooters, electric bikes and by using ride shares. There are 22 retail shops, several of them live-work spaces, and a small Korean market. So far, 288 apartment units have been built on eight of the site's 17 acres with another 450 units planned.

There are other car-free places in the United States, mostly island getaways where people walk, bike or tool around on golf carts. But zoning requirements in most cities usually require new developments to provide residents with a minimum number of parking spots, including in the Phoenix area, a paragon of urban sprawl. Culdesac Tempe's developers were given a special exemption from parking requirements by the City of Tempe.

“This is completely different than our modern, conventional approach to development,” said Edward Erfurt, chief technical adviser at Strong Towns, a North American nonprofit group that promotes community resilience. “We’ve just had this experiment for the last eight decades where we’ve opted to prioritize an isolated transportation system versus our natural way of working together as humans.”

Culdesac Tempe broke that mold, Mr. Erfurt said, adding, “This is a very big deal.”

Culdesac’s two- and three-story buildings are designed for the desert climate, painted bright white to reflect heat. Not having to factor in residential parking allowed its architects to configure buildings to maximize shade and to design narrow pathways that encouraged breezes and social engagement.

E-bikes are popular in the community.

An outdoor picnic area and beer garden in the neighborhood.

“The pedestrian is really the primary person, the figure that you’re developing for,” said Alexandra Vondeling, the lead architect on the project. Big expanses of glass were eschewed, awnings added over sun-facing windows, and native plants and trees put in for cooling shade. There’s a wide walkway that can accommodate emergency vehicles, but no asphalt, reducing the urban heat island effect and improving conditions for the dogs that live there, too.

The apartments range from studios to three bedroom units, renting from between $1,300 to $2,800 a month, which Mr. Johnson said were market rates. Nearly 90 percent are leased.

Some residents were drawn to Culdesac because of its car-free mission, others in spite of it. There’s a contingent, size unknown, that quietly still owns cars, just parked off-site.

Sheryl Murdock, 50, a postdoctoral researcher who lives in Canada, is renting a unit because she is frequently in Tempe for work and wanted to balance the carbon emissions from all that flying.

Ashley Weiland and her husband moved in with their young child to give up the expense of having a car and ended up getting jobs at Culdesac, she at a restaurant there and he in maintenance.

Electra Hug, 24, who works for the city of Tempe and is blind, wanted to be close to public transit and have a sense of community. It's the first time she's lived without the assistance of family and friends. "In order to have a good time or have fun, I do not have to cross the street," Ms. Hug said. "It's just super unique and really just homey."

Mr. Rouhani and Ms. Reyes borrow her father's car once a week for errands. Otherwise they mostly ride public transit with free passes provided by Culdesac.

"In order to have a good time or have fun, I do not have to cross the street," said Electra Hug, who is blind.

Architects configured the site to maximize shade and encourage social engagement.

Living in a place where people are not zipping about in their cars means the pace is slower, with more opportunity for connection, Mr. Rouhani said. It is the kind of community, he said, where neighbors borrow a cup of sugar from each other. In the days after their daughter was born, three different families either brought a meal, dropped off cookies, or offered to go buy them groceries. "We really feel supported and loved here," he said.

David King, who teaches urban planning at Arizona State University, said Culdesac Tempe could prompt other developers to push for exemptions from parking requirements. And Mr. Erfurt of Strong Towns said Culdesac Tempe could pave the

way, as it were, for similar car-free developments to be built in places like shuttered strip malls, which could address the affordable housing crisis, lessen loneliness and bring people closer to where they work.

"We could do all that simply by decoupling parking from development," Mr. Erfurt said. "In every market, people are looking for that."

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