The Architect as Corporation as Media: Doug Michels, Alexandra Morphett, and Universal Technology, 1978-1980

RANDY NAKAMURA
California College of the Arts

The work of Doug Michels can be understood as a kind of grand strategy of provocation, boundary testing, and playing with the rules of architecture. From the iconic work of Ant Farm that melded performance, installation and architecture, to his life long obsession with the dolphin as a non-human entity of high intelligence that straddled the boundary between art and technology, Michels's practice continually experimented with the possibilities of architectural practice. This paper focuses on Universal Technology a little-known company Michels co-founded with Australian artist Alexandra Morphett in Houston, Texas. As a company Universal Technology had a very brief existence from 1978 to 1980 and produced very few realized projects. Yet the founding of this corporation encapsulates a crucial point of inflection for architecture, between the neo-avant-garde experiments in the expanded field of the 1960s and 70s and more corporate forms of architectural practice

INTRODUCTION

In 1978 Michels, in collaboration with Alexandra Morphett, founded Universal Technology, an entity that combined both the corporate and the speculative. Michels met Morphett, an English artist based in Sydney, while on one of his many visits to Australia during his Ant Farm days. Universal Technology was envisioned as a hybrid of architectural office, ad agency, product development incubator, and media conglomerate.[1] This business did not seem to be a folly or an ironic media intervention akin to the more famous Media Burn or the Eternal Frame helmed by Michels when he was part of Ant Farm. Rather this enterprise was serious in intent. Using a slogan that declared that Universal Technology would be "Image-Makers to Corporate America," Michels and Morphett conceived of a platform that would leverage the mechanism of incorporation to use strategies of the neo-avant garde within the corporate world of the nascent personal computer industry of the 1970s.[2]

At the core of Universal Technology is a contention that image-making or media was a form of architecture. For Michels and Morphett media was an intangible form of value. Less a means of rendering or visualizing concepts, than a way to enact these ideas through film, video, and advertising. The key project for Universal Technologies was their concept for a Corporate Data Station for a San Antonio based company that went by the name Datapoint Corporation.[3] Datapoint, now a long defunct company is notable for two crucial innovations. First is the Datapoint 2200. Released initially in 1971, the 2200 was Datapoint's most commercially successful desktop mini-computer.[4] Envisioned as a programmable terminal the 2200 was designed to access centralized mainframes as a kind of "smart terminal" that had storage and a CPU. The 2200 was one of the first commercially produced personal computers, predating the more well known Altair 8800 by four years. Secondly, in 1977 Datapoint introduced a technology called ARCNET, which was designed as a network protocol to connect multiple computers together in a local area network.[5] ARCNET was an acronym for Attached Resource Computer Network, with the "attached resource computer" referring to a computer that was connected to a network. As a competitor to the more widely known standard ethernet, ARCNET was considered slower, but was envisioned by Datapoint as a protocol enabling a kind of distributed computing where multiple computers could share resources and work on the same computing problem.

DATAPOINT AND THE CORPORATE DATASTATION

In May 1979 as a part of an effort to promote this nascent technology Universal Technology was hired to do "exhibit design, media production, corporate aesthetics and communications strategy" for a press event in New York City.[6] This particular event seems to have been geared towards introducing both the concept of networking technology and the idea of an electronic office based on integrated software and hardware to a broader audience. Michels and Morphett created a report outlining a design for the Corporate Datastation that they characterized as a "traveling information exhibit" as well as type of media projection system they called the Datavision system.[7]

The Corporate Datastation was designed as a temporary structure made out of aluminum and nylon. The shape and weird iconicity of the Datastation evokes nautical, automotive and aircraft motifs (see figure 1). Very strange associations for a technology which essentially was designed to tackle information management and office automation. The Datastation itself had a two part design, with the section in the rear designed as a kind of office or as Michels and Morphett note in the legend the "Attached Resource Computer," or the ARC of ARCNET.[8] The design for the ARC was a prototype for a concept that Datapoint called the "Integrated Electronic Office." The small cockpit like area at the tip of the structure functioned as a part of the Datavision system, a kind of one-person command and control center. On top of this pod-like structure was a video projection screen mounted

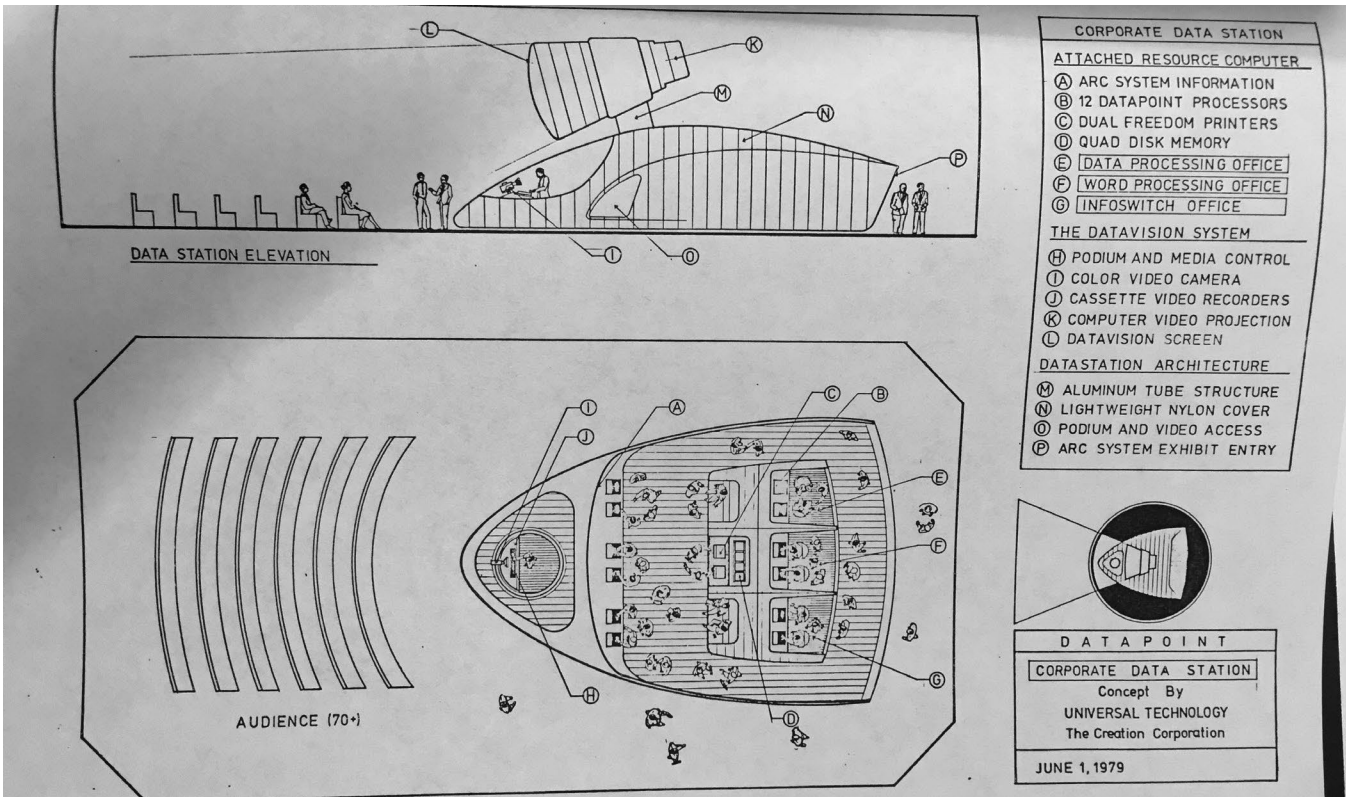

Figure 1: Corporate Datastation plan and elevation (Doug Michels Architectural Papers, Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.)

on an aluminum tube. The best surviving information on the Integrated Electronic Office exists in the promotional videos produced by Datapoint.[9] Utilizing a kind of historical contextualization reminiscent of the IBM films of Ray and Charles Eames, Datapoint used the format of the promotional video to outline an electronic system that is commonplace today. Combining data processing, word processing, and electronic messaging with an integrated stack of hardware, software and networking technology, the Integrated Electronic Office provided a technological substrate for Michels and Morphett to elaborate on a set of ideas that they had working with for several years with funding from the Rockerfeller Foundation and the NEA.

THE DOLPHIN EMBASSY AND OCEANIA

This work was the infamous Dolphin Embassy, the cetacean-based project that supposedly broke up Ant Farm. In 1978 correspondence with The Rockefeller Foundation Michels understood Universal Technology as the "profit-oriented" venture that could be pursued along with what he characterized as "non-profit dolphin research."[10] This two-pronged approach was less a way to engage in discrete practices than a way to experiment with different applications of the same concepts that had been developed under the umbrella of the Dolphin Embassy project. In a nutshell the Dolphin Embassy was a wide ranging project that sought to explore the communications potential between dolphins and humans using architecture and media as a conduit for communication.[11] The centerpiece of the project was a kind of naval architecture, originally designed by Curtis Schreir of Ant Farm in 1976 as a kind of fantastical craft that Schreir speculated could eventually be built with the ferro-cement technology, it went through several different slightly more practical iterations as Michels and Morphett took more control over the project.[12] Michels and Morphett's iteration as a kind of yacht cum media pod is perhaps less iconic in form, but more subversive in its impact. This media-pod yacht was sometimes called "Oceania" depending on what project the design was attached to. The plans of the Oceania from 1977 show an open plan environment similar to the Corporate Datastation with a cockpit at the tip of the structure and an array facilities towards the rear of the craft for facilitating human-dolphin interaction and communication (see figure 2).

The exterior of the Oceania shows a camera boom, presumably a means for recording dolphin-human interactions around the craft. Of note here is the title of this drawing "Brainwave" which refers to yet another use of the Oceania craft, as a movie set for a movie of the same name. Michels and Morphett's first collaboration that immediately preceded Universal Technology was Brainwave.[13] This 1977 movie concept was conceived as a type of G-rated sci-fi blockbuster that could fund the Dolphin Embassy project as money from the NEA and The Rockefeller Foundation ran out. Brainwave was scripted by Tony Morphett, a Peter Weir collaborator

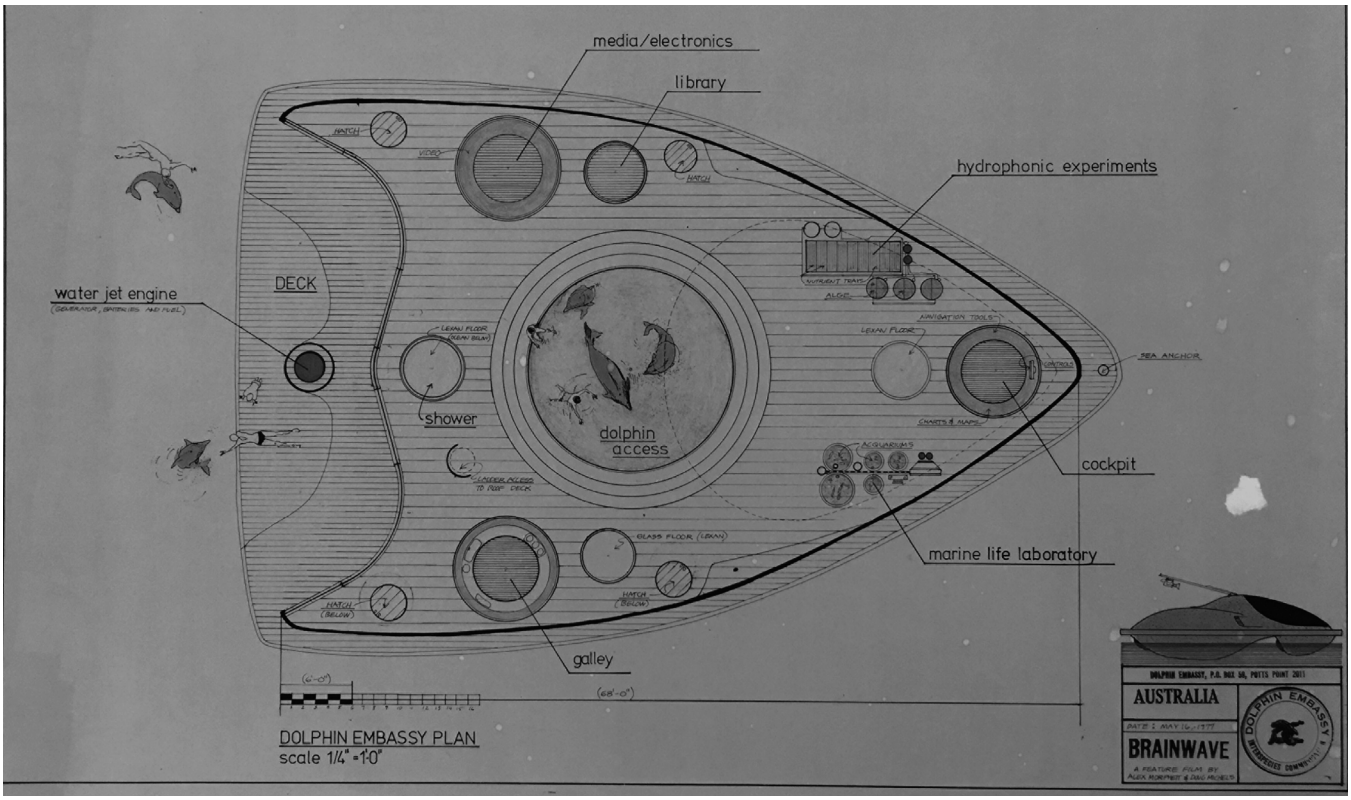

Figure 2: Oceania/Dolphin Embassy plan (Doug Michels Architectural Papers, Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.)

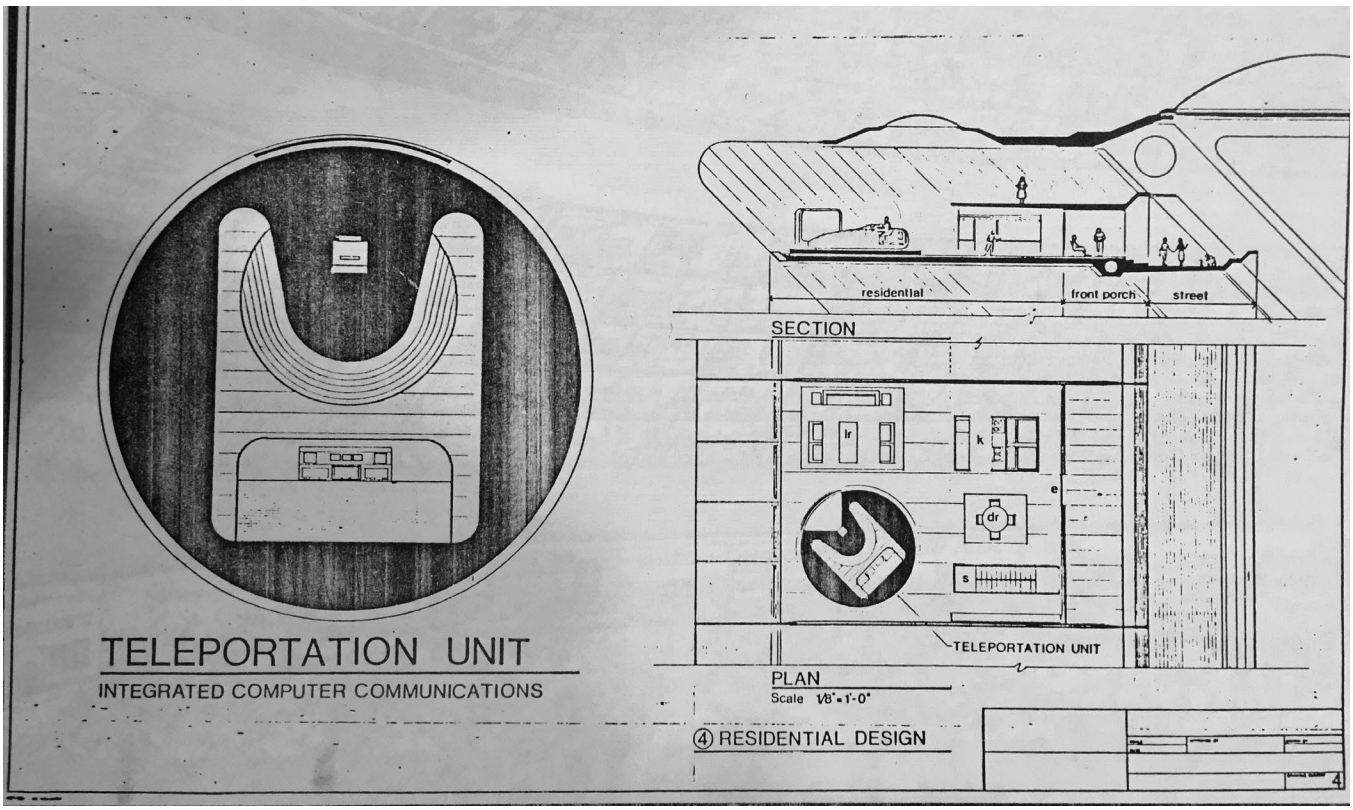

Figure 3: Teleportation Unit (Doug Michels Architectural Papers, Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.)

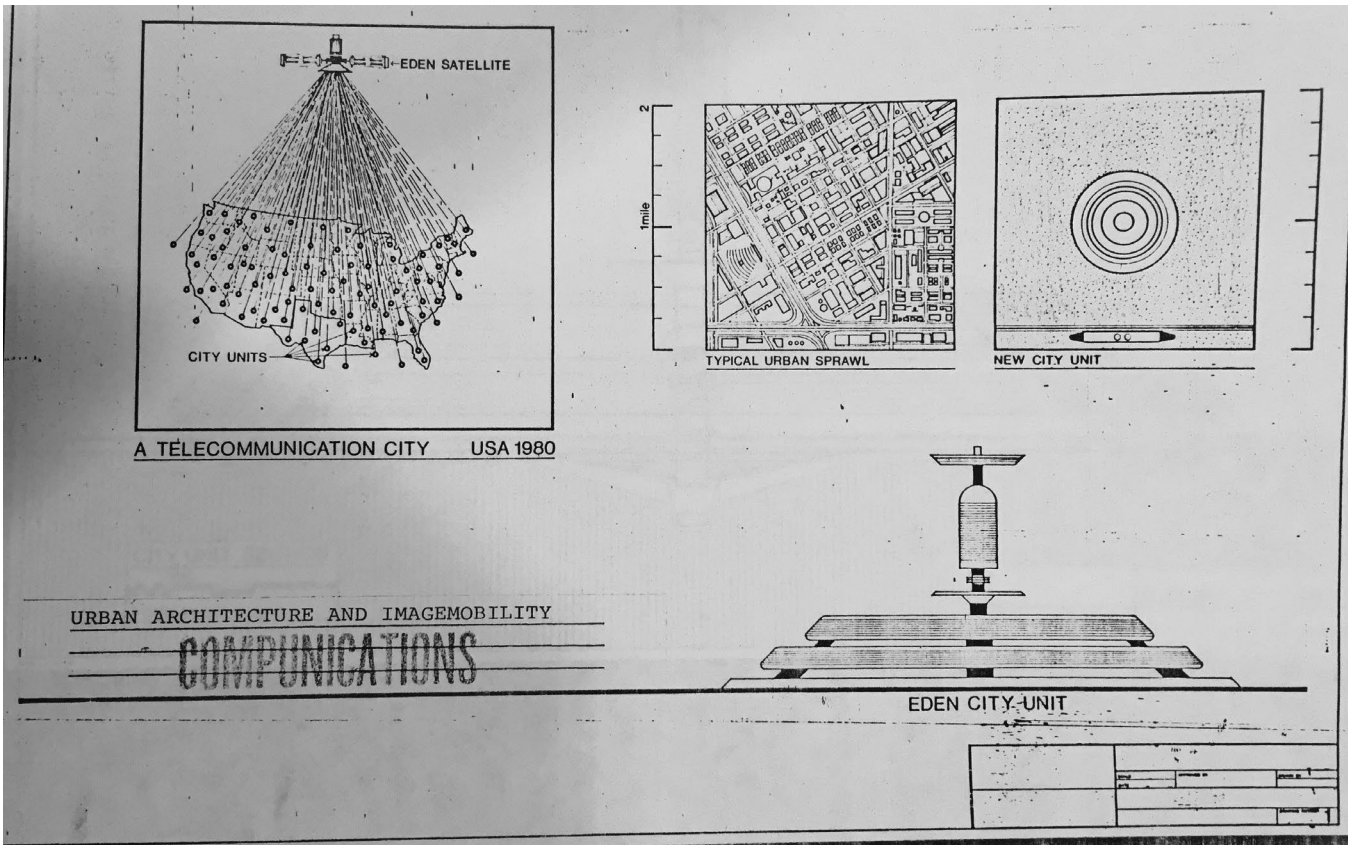

Figure 4: Eden System (Doug Michels Architectural Papers, Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.)

(who was also the uncle of Alexandra Morphett). Billed as a story that "combines mystery, adventure, and a strangely moving story of love between a young girl and a wild dolphin," it was meant to appeal to a mass audience on the scale of 2001 a Space Odyssey or Close Encounters of the Third Kind. The Brainwave investment prospectus details a scheme where the dividends from this putative blockbuster would be funneled into realizing the Dolphin Embassy.[14] The Oceania craft had a dual purpose in this scheme. It could be built as a functional set to act as the fictional Dolphin Embassy for Brainwave, while at the same time it could eventually function as the actual Dolphin Embassy for research. What is fascinating here is Morphett and Michel's idea that Brainwave served as a kind of "pre-enactment" of the Dolphin Embassy. Not speculation, but a state directly anterior to execution. The Oceania craft which seems to be the prototype for the Corporate Datastation existed partially in fiction and fact, but was never realized in either state. In this sense the Corporate Datastation was a pre-enactment of an information processing environment, a medium that may have been as alien in the mid-1970s as it is familiar in 2018.

INTEGRATED ELECTRONIC OFFICE AND TELEPORTATION UNIT

What is notable here is how Michels and Morphett called out the main functions of the Integrated Electronic Office. These three modules or cubicles are labelled information processing office, word processing, and infoswitch office. The naming scheme is deeply anachronistic, the idea of a "Word Processing Office" is absurd. At the same time these so-called offices look like little more than glorified cubicles. These offices are not discrete units, they appear to be integrated with each other in a structure that looks suspiciously like a modular sofa. This particular piece of office furniture, sofa in the front, business workstation in the back is a recognizable motif that was reused in other Universal Technology projects. In a project that was contemporaneous with the Corporate Datastation, this piece of workstation furniture was called a teleportation unit (see figure 3). It aspired to combine a computer, telecommunications, media projection and a seating area in one piece of furniture. The neologism used to describe this system was "compunications" a portmanteau of "computer" and "communications."[15]

This teleportation unit was the centerpiece of a 1979 Universal Technology project called the Eden System. This was a vision of a network of thousands of cities connected by a satellite system (see figure 4). Billed as a telecommunications city, it was a blend of urban architecture and what Universal Technology called "imagemobility." In this project Universal Technology appears to be adapting Datapoint's ARCNET at the scale of urban design. In a proposal as part

of a fellowship application in 1980, Michels describes it as a city based on "dispersed data processing," he explicitly mentions the potential use of Datapoint's "attached resources computer."[16]

The story of Universal Technology is one that creates a transect through the neo-avant garde architecture and video art collectives of the early 1970s to the nascent personal computer industry of the mid-70s. With Datapoint it is important to note that their scheme for an Integrated Electronic Office was rationalized purely in terms of productivity and return on investment. These terms of eliminating inefficiencies and producing more work with fewer, better educated employees are recognizable as a kind of neoliberal logic that has only become more pervasive particularly when it comes to technology. Michels and Morphett with their teleportation unit also take a place in the genealogy of architects fascinated with the technology of networks, a kind of obsession with the form and technics of connectivity that Mark Wigley describes as a "network fever."[17] Perhaps the best way to bring this paper back to the theme of monopoly and game play is to think of Elizabeth Magie's The Landlord's Game (the basis for Monopoly.) Originally designed to engender a critique of capitalism and private landownership through a game that could be played with two different sets of rules, the game could be considered a kind of pre-enactment of a more equitable way to distribute property wealth and prosperity. A way of achieving a kind of reality before realization. Universal Technology utilized the field of play in a similar manner. Even if the Dolphin Embassy or the teleportation unit in all of their manifestations could be considered failed gambits, they edged towards an uncanny valley, neither purely speculative or realized, but a strategy where the speculative could be tested in reality.

ENDNOTES

1. The ambitions for Universal Technology are clearly delineated by Michels and Morphett in the document "Universal Technology, Outline for Corporate Organization," 1978, Box 13, Folder 15, Doug Michels Architectural Papers, Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.
2. Ibid., 2. See also Felicity D. Scott, *Architecture or Techno-Utopia: Politics after Modernism*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007) which is the definitive account so far of the encounter between architecture and new digital technologies of the late 1960s and early 1970s. She notes in regard to Ant Farm, their invention of "a mode of experimentation that destabilized the very "medium" of architecture, while retaining an engagement with the differential specificity of the medium." (240).
3. See "Datapoint Corporate Data Station," June 1, 1979, Box 13, Folder 19, Doug Michels Architectural Papers, Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.
4. See Lamont Wood, *Datapoint: The Lost Story of the Texans Who Invented the Personal Computer Revolution*. (Austin, TX: Hugo House, 2012.) for a history of the Datapoint Corporation and their role in the development of the personal computer. An ornamental design patent for the 2200 was issued to the founders of Datapoint, Jon P. Ray and Austin O. Roche, and industrial designer John R. Frassanito. See U.S. Design Patent 224,415 filed November 27, 1970, and issued July 25, 1972.
5. For a concise history of Datapoint's development of ARCNET, see Martha Stott, "Two Decades of Networking," *ARCNETworks*, Fall 1998, 1-6. *ARCNETworks* is a publication of the ARCNET Trade Association.
6. See Alex Morphett and Doug Michels to Thomas J. Moldenhauer, May 15, 1979, Box 13, Folder 20, Doug Michels Architectural Papers, Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.
7. See Datapoint Corporate Data Station," 3-4.
8. Ibid., 9.
9. A number of Datapoint promotional videos have been uploaded to YouTube. Of particular interest here is "Datapoint-IntegratedElectronicOffice" YouTube video, 30:33, posted by "Gordon Peterson," May 18, 2012, https://youtu.be/3GFsVOhTL9g.
10. See Doug Michels to Howard Klein, November 27, 1978, Box 13, Folder 20, Doug Michels Architectural Papers, Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.
11. Extensive documentation on the Dolphin Embassy exists in the Doug Michels Architectural Papers. Of particular note is "Oceania Revised Exhibition Proposal" (Box 13, Folder 1) a 1978 proposal for an exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston, Texas. This proposal makes the case for the Dolphin Embassy as kind of "probe" that united art, science, and technology, comparing the project to the work of Experiments in Art and Technology and Robert Rauschenberg. See also Tyler Survant, "Biological Borderlands: Ant Farm's Zoopolitics," *Horizonte* 8 (2013): 49–64 which positions the Dolphin Embassy as an architecture of "co-evolution" where species become biologically entangled via laboratory and domestic spaces.
12. The Schreir design was reproduced extensively in material related to the Dolphin Embassy. In particular Schreir's renderings from a March 1975 issue of Esquire were used in the appendix of the 1976 Ant Farm Dolphin Embassy proposal as a kind of speculative illustration. See Box 27, Folder 11, Doug Michels Architectural Papers. Schreir's version of the Dolphin Embassy is perhaps best known for its recreation in the 2015 Chicago Architectural Biennial by Workac. See "WORKac + Ant Farm – Chicago Architecture Biennial," 2015 Chicago Architecture Biennial online, http://2015.chicagoarchitecturebiennial.org/exhibition/participants/workac-ant-farm/.
13. The Doug Michels Architectural Papers at the University of Houston contains the Brainwave screenplay as well as the Brainwave investment prospectus as well as associated correspondence and preliminary design sketches. See Box 52, Folder 4 and Box 52, Folder 5.
14. See "Brainwave Prospectus," Box 52, Folder 5, Doug Michels Architectural Papers, Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.
15. Michels used "compunications" to describe the teleportation unit in a 1980 NYSCA Architectural Fellowship Program application. See Box 13, Folder 56, Doug Michels Architectural Papers.
16. See "Architectural drawing page #5 [Eden System]," 1979, Box 13, Folder 21, Doug Michels Architectural Papers, Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.
17. See Mark Wigley, "Network Fever," *Grey Room*, no. 4 (2001): 83–122.