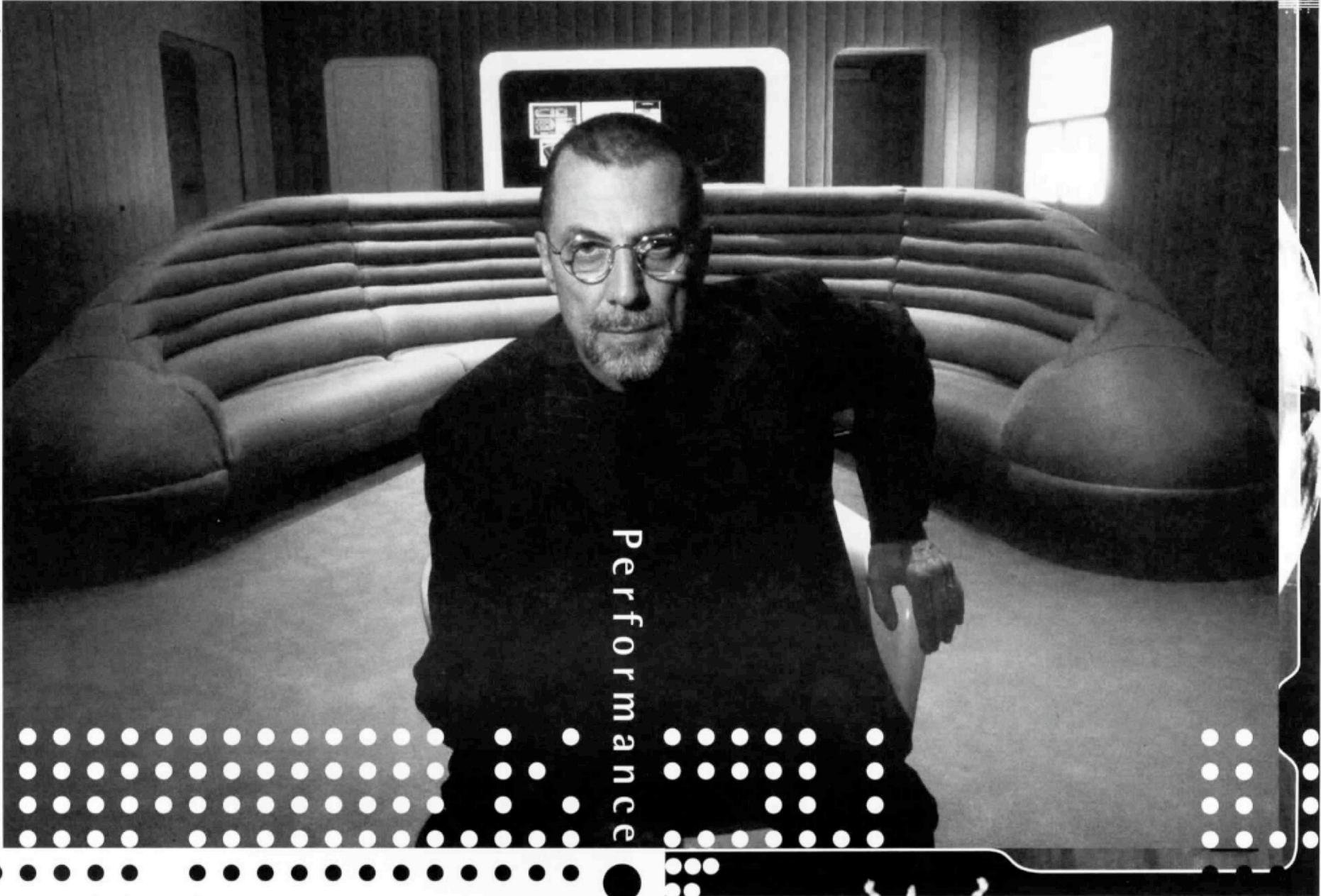


Doug Michels in the Media Lab (formerly the Teleport) at the University of Houston.

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Performance

FOR DOUG MICHELS, BUILDINGS WERE A BYPRODUCT

Architect

BY LISA GRAY

DOUG MICHELS WOULD HAVE LOVED HIS OBITUARIES.

He loved seeing his name in print, and in the weeks and months after his June 14 death, articles appeared in the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time*, and *Architectural Record*. They discussed his work with Ant Farm, the art collective that made the Cadillac Ranch; some mentioned the Ant Farm retrospective set to open at the Berkeley Art Museum in January 2004. Most of the obituaries attempted to cover Doug's complicated life after Ant Farm — his obsession with dolphins; his stints in the straight world, working at established firms such as HOK and Johnson/Burgee. The obituaries identified Doug variously as an architect, an artist, a visionary, a provocateur, and even a fashion designer. Those labels all seemed feeble.

I understood the problem: Doug resisted short descriptions. I'd written about him a few years before, for the *Houston Press*, and hadn't done any better. He stayed in touch with me anyway. He sent strange, wild e-mails showing his latest strange, wild projects; we had the occasional lunch. He made me laugh.

Doug set out to convince people that *he* was a genius, or at least someone who grokked the spirit of the times.

I wasn't sure that laughter was the response Doug hoped for, but he didn't seem to mind. When he proposed some wild scheme — to build a 500-foot chrome woman bestriding a Houston freeway, to construct a dolphin embassy in space, to build a humongous National Sofa in front of the White House — he waited for your response. If you took his proposal seriously, then he took it seriously, and enlisted your help to make it real. If you treated it as a joke — a brilliant piece of paper architecture, a commentary on modern existence, but nothing that could actually be executed — then he laughed right along with you. He could go either way: Big-Idea Guy or Joker. Your choice.

The obituaries missed that ambiguity. I saw flashes of it, here and there, in Doug's on-line wake, dozens of e-mail tributes that circulated to the people he'd invited to his 60th birthday party.

The most satisfying summary came from Doug's Houston memorial service. "We're here to celebrate Doug's life and the way Doug lived it," said Chip Lord, Doug's old friend and collaborator. "And the way he lived it, I think, was as LIFE/ART — a life performed."

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On the phone, Peter Papademetriou remembered a scene in that performance. In the mid-'60s, Peter was a class behind Doug at the Yale School of Architecture. Yale was hosting an exhibition on Frederick Kiesler, the surrealist architect and designer of *The Endless House*. Doug asked Peter who the hell Kiesler was. Peter replied that Kiesler had built practically nothing, but because the Museum of Modern Art was convinced he was a genius, he was set for life.

Doug thought that was really cool. Peter thought the moment was a turning point.

Doug set out to convince people that *he* was a genius, or at least someone who grokked the spirit of the times. While

still a student at Yale, he was published twice in *Progressive Architect*, and also in *Archigram*, the hippest of the architecture journals. After seeing another young architect's apartment published in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, he called the reporter and convinced her to visit his groovy pad. She said she'd come in four days — and only then did Doug begin a frantic decorating binge. The result appeared in the magazine: zoomy geometric Supergraphics painted on the walls, sleek borrowed furniture, and a bed headboard made from a VW Beetle ad. The last-minute hodgepodge captured the zeitgeist; a decade later, a photograph of the place showed up in C. Ray Smith's book *Supermannerism*.

But Doug was remembered as much for his antics as for his architecture. Hired to teach architecture at stuffy Catholic University in Washington, D.C. — not the best match for his style — he marched his

students out to a parking lot and arrayed them in orderly rows. Then, to teach the concept of freedom within the grid, he ran zigzags among them, whispering "Mies van der Rohe, Mies van der Rohe."

After the university fired Doug — it didn't take long — he styled himself as a far-out, tuned-in lecturer and traveled the country, seeking his next adventure. At Tulane, he hit it off with Chip Lord, then an architecture student. They met again in San Francisco in '68, the place and time of underground newspapers, underground music, and political undergrounds.

Doug and Chip declared themselves a collective dedicated to underground architecture. "Like an ant farm?" asked a friend.

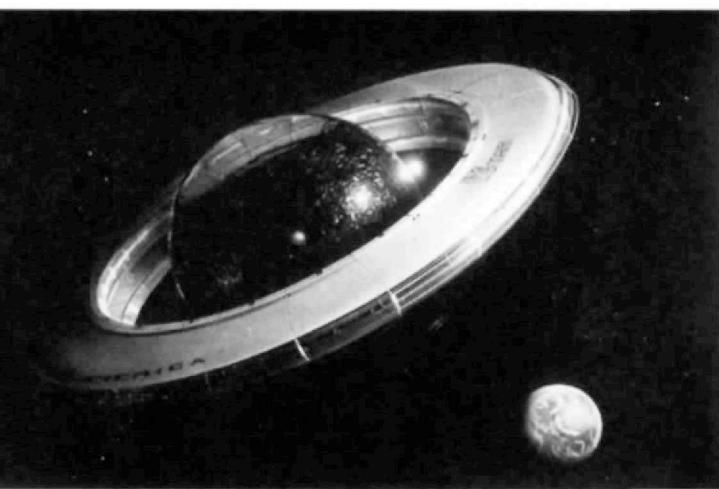
Thus Ant Farm was born: a group with a lot of ideas, only a little money, and absolutely no clients. The idea was to be an architecture firm like a rock band: fluid, hip, with players who come and go. Fluidity and hipness, though, didn't generate income. Doug, with a wife to support, took a job at a garage. Chip moved back in with his parents.

At the University of Houston, Burdette Keeland and Howard Barnstone, under student pressure, offered Doug a paying gig as a lecturer at the school of architecture, and Doug wangled a part-time job for Chip, too. Houston was far less groovy than San Francisco, but it gave Ant Farm a financial base. And UH students — who'd already formed a rowdy, Merry Pranksters-ish bunch called South Coast — gave Doug and Chip a peer group. When South Coast met Doug at the airport with a coffin, Doug happily climbed in.

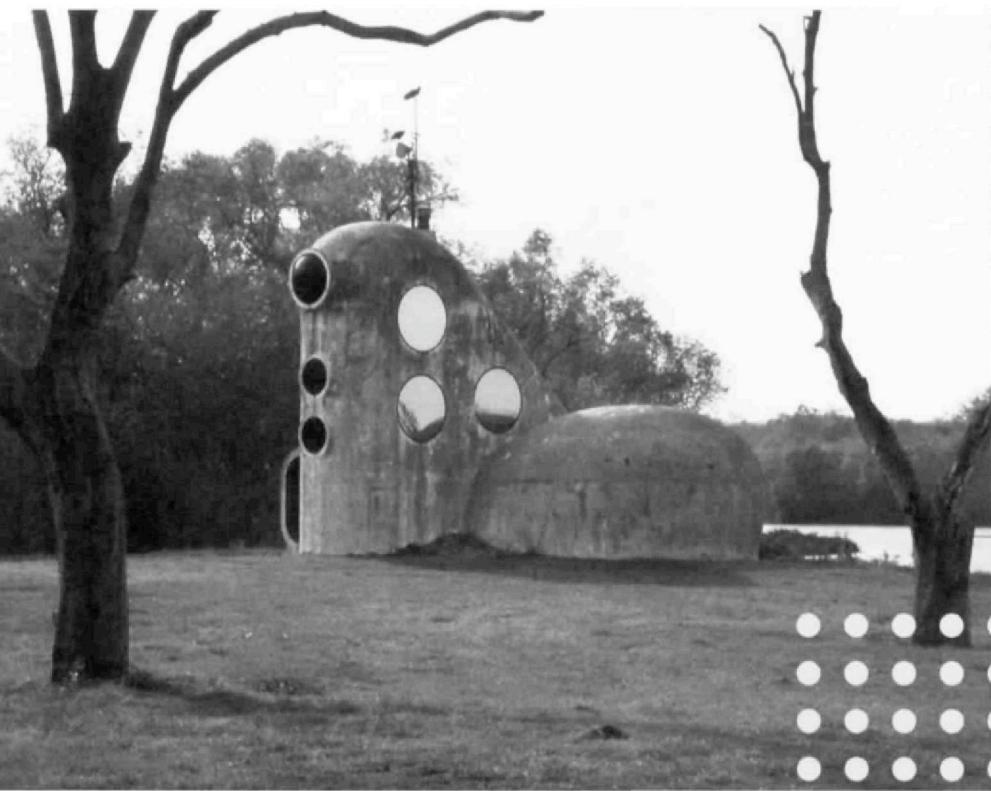
Doug and Chip taught architecture as a total-immersion lifestyle. At a crash pad in Montrose, they and their students plotted happenings such as a sleepover in the Astrodome. It would, of course, be a groovy, psychedelic sleepover, with parachutes suspended from helium balloons and sex in center field.

The amazing thing was that Doug somehow pulled it off. On that project, as on every project, he served as Ant Farm's interface with the straight world, the guy who talked to authorities. While other Ant Farmers wore long hair and Day-Glo tribal markings, Doug kept his hair clipped short, wore suits, and carried a briefcase. Says Chip, "It looked like we had an FBI agent with us."

After Doug and Chip's contracts at UH were up, Doug wandered Europe,



Doug Michels Studio



House of the Century by Ant Farm. Photo by Chip Lord.



Cadillac Ranch by Ant Farm (Lord, Michels, Marquez). Photo by Chip Lord.

From the top: *Bluestar*, Doug Michels' space station for dolphins; the House of the Century; and Cadillac Ranch.

searching for the wife who'd left him, then drifted to Israel and India. Chip headed back to San Francisco, accompanied by a handful of new Ant Farmers. The colony waxed and waned, depending on the project at hand. The Ants toyed with way-out ideas that now seem ahead of their time: inflatables, solar power, telecommunications, nomadism. They lived on food stamps.

To build real buildings required real money, and Doug, Ant Farm's front man, set about finding it. Without the other Ant Farmers realizing what he was up to, he courted Marilyn Lubetkin, an art collector who once mentioned to Doug that she and her husband wanted to build a vacation house on the shore of Lake Mojo, in Angleton, near Houston. For a year, Doug barraged her with mail, sending wildly decorated envelopes that contained drawings of strange dwellings rising from the swamp. Lubetkin yielded in the fall of '71.

Lord and several other Ants traveled to Houston, and soon, surprisingly, the house moved from design to production. When it became clear that the Ants and their Houston friends would build the house themselves, its design became more modular, easier to execute, a wee bit practical — which is to say that it looked less like a giant lizard and more like a spaceship. The aesthetic was a cross between the Jetsons and Kiesler's Endless House, a Yellow Submarine painted refrigerator-white. It was hard on the outside, with a long Plexiglas passageway leading to a stucco shell. And it was soft on the womb-like inside, with upholstered walls and curvaceous wood never betraying a right angle. Lubetkin's husband called the place, skeptically, the House of the Century. The Ants loved the name.

The House of the Century was one of Doug's favorite projects, and one of his most obviously architectural works — not to mention a scheme that was actually executed. Its techniques were innovative; students at UH still study it. But when you talk to the Ants and their friends, they only lightly describe the house itself — its construction techniques, its form, its materials and site. Mainly they tell the stories of its building: what car Doug was driving when he visited the site; how the Ant-generated construction arm, tiny Nationwide Builders, acquired its grand

name; how the construction site felt like a party. The House of the Century was, like most of Ant Farm's work, less an object than a process. The idea of the house and the story of the house mattered more than the house itself.

When completed, the house was frequently photographed and much discussed. It won a *Progressive Architecture* award, but Doug was just as proud of its appearance in *Playboy*.

While working on the House of the Century, the Ants met Stanley Marsh 3, a hippie millionaire from Amarillo. Marsh says that sometimes the Ants visited his ranch, where they stayed up all night discussing art and revolution. Marsh believed that it was immoral to display an art object because then the art accrued value. Art, he believed, should be hidden, so that it didn't become a filthy investment vehicle. He commissioned the Ants to create a hidden piece of art.

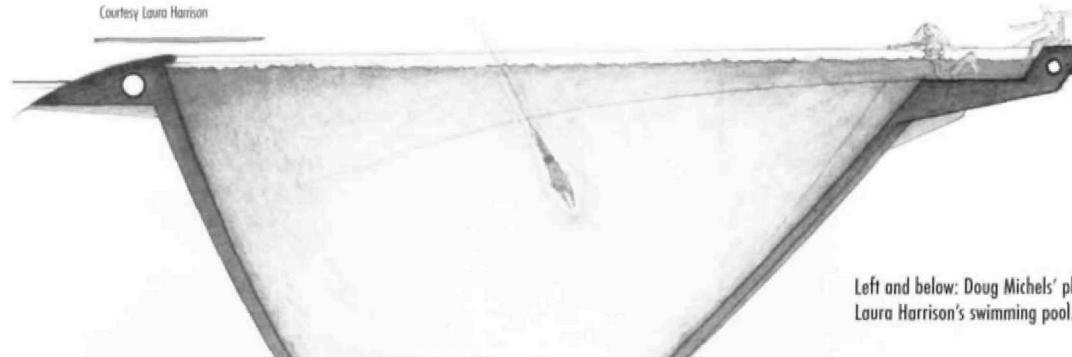
The Ants called Marsh an elitist. They liked the idea of making something that didn't appreciate in value, but they said they wanted to create art for the people, visible for free. They suggested placing a sculpture by the freeway on Marsh's ranch. Marsh agreed, and they began *Cadillac Ranch*.

Doug and Ant Farmer Hudson Marquez had been playing with darts whose tails looked like Cadillac fins. Everyone liked the idea of planting ten real Cadillacs nose-down in the ground. Marsh saw Cadillacs as the ultimate symbol of capitalism, their ever-evolving tail fins and this-year-only colors the emblems of conspicuous consumption and planned obsolescence. He liked his Cadillacs out of commission.

When the Ants proposed to scatter the cars randomly in a field, Marsh's wife objected. They would look messy, she said, and would be hard to plow around. The Ants then proposed to line them up, all in a row, all at the same angle. Marsh promised his wife that if she hated the sculpture, he'd tear it down after six months.

Instead, of course, *Cadillac Ranch* became famous. The tail fins starred on postcards and T-shirts. Warren Zevon wrote a song called "Cadillac Ranch," and Bruce Springsteen made it a hit. The Ranch became a mandatory stop

Courtesy Laura Harrison



Left and below: Doug Michels' plans for Laura Harrison's swimming pool.

on Route 66 pilgrimages. Amarillo touted itself as a tourist destination.

Years later, Doug felt odd about *Cadillac Ranch*, about the way that it became an icon with a life of its own, a story outside Ant Farm's control. He didn't think it was Ant Farm's best work — that would have been the *House of the Century*, maybe, or *The Eternal Frame* (in which the Ants relentlessly re-enacted the Kennedy assassination), or *Media Burn* (in which Doug drove a Cadillac-cum-spaceship into a pyramid of burning televisions). Yet somehow *Cadillac Ranch* hit a pop-culture nerve. "Our hit single," Doug called it.

Still, he defended it fiercely. Whenever a commercial concern ripped off the *Cadillac Ranch* concept, Doug was once again the guy in the suit, the Ant who dealt with the lawyers. Stanley Marsh 3 owned the physical sculpture,

slowly over the next two decades, but it never seemed to apply to dolphins. He found the rare people who also believed. When he couldn't attract a financial backer to build a boat designed for dolphin-human contact, he pitched a movie script that included such a boat; if the movie were made, he reasoned, the boat would have to be built. When the movie wasn't made, the script evolved into a graphic novel. The boat evolved into a spaceship shaped like Saturn, a giant glass orb where dolphins in helmets could somehow communicate with humans in the ring.

Pepper Mouser, an old friend, joked about making a documentary: *The Doug Michels Story: How Dolphins Ruined My Life*. By then Doug's enthusiasm had been tempered; he could laugh. Still, his friends wondered: What was it about dolphins?

"Somehow, for him, dolphins embodied a contemporary version of the state

Wearing an Armani suit, he went to Philip Johnson's New York office and applied for a job. Johnson knew Ant Farm, and suspected that Doug was up to something. Doug assured him that he wasn't. Johnson hired him, and Doug spent a year designing parking garages and bathrooms. Finally, Johnson promoted him to senior designer on Transco Tower.

Doug left the job after his old Ant Farm friends invaded Johnson's office but had a hard time getting past Doug's secretary. They were shocked. They said, "Doug, come home."

Doug left. But he remained proud of Transco. And later, he worked at HOK — another giant firm, another place where his artist friends wondered if his costume was wearing him. Doug played it both ways.

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There, in the dark, they were attacked by vultures — real, live, bald-headed carrion eaters. A flock had nested inside the House of the Century. The vultures defended their territory the way that vultures do: by projectile vomiting.

Doug and the students fled. Doug was elated.

In the years that followed, he polished the tale of the vomiting vultures to a high sheen. The vultures proved that even in ruins, the House of the Century still possessed the power of all his best work: the power to generate a good story. ■

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but Ant Farm — Doug, Chip and Hudson — owned the concept, and their permission was needed to use it in ads. Over the years, as companies "borrowed" that concept, the Ants won settlements from Volvo, General Electric, Absolut Vodka, and Hard Rock Cafe. "It was like getting a grant you didn't have to apply for," says Chip.

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In 1978, Ant Farm's warehouse in San Francisco burned. It seemed a signal: Ant Farm was officially over.

Doug went to Australia, where dolphins changed his life. Architect and critic Michael Sorkin, an old friend of Doug's, writes that his obsession was "made magic by an early encounter with one during an acid trip." Back in the States, Doug alarmed his old friends with fervent plans to cultivate dolphin-human relations. "It was like seeing a friend converted to a cult," says Chip. "He'd say things like, 'We'll open the Dolphin Embassy on Embassy Row in Washington, D.C.'" Doug for once remained serious, even when hardly anyone played along.

His old irony was gone. It came back

of nature, a paradise lost but perhaps recoverable," writes Michael Sorkin in *Architectural Record*. "His appreciation for these creatures was further deepened by the fact that they had another, darker side. Flipper could be murderous, filled with rage. And dolphins could be deeply sexual, orgiastic."

Laura Harrison knew Doug in many different ways: as a beer-drinking friend; as an architect (he designed her pool, one of his few projects still extant in Houston); and as a subject for the documentary films she makes. Laura thought a lot about Doug's relationship to dolphins, and why he maintained it even when it made him a laughingstock. Dolphins, she notes, are intelligent loners, but they also function well in groups, where they show a warm camaraderie.

Doug, says Laura, was an intelligent loner. And after Ant Farm broke up, he longed for a group.

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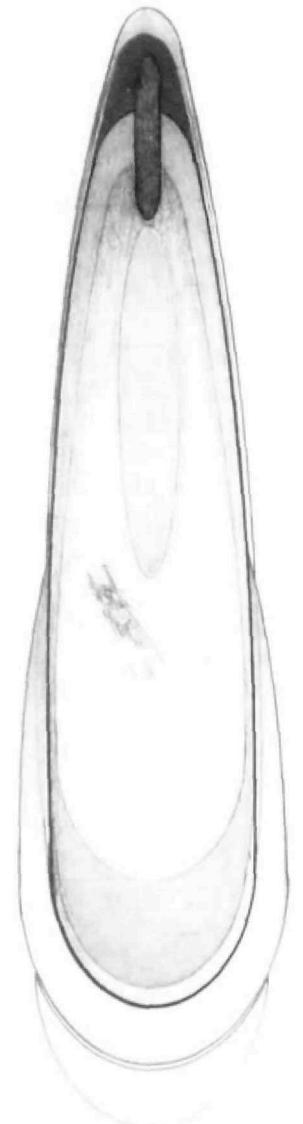
While still in the first flush of his dolphin mania — when his friends thought he was craziest — Doug simultaneously presented the straightest side of himself to the world.

Besides his dolphin obsession, Doug fashioned himself as a futurist — and sometimes he even envisioned a future without dolphins in evidence. In 1978, he and Richard Jost designed Teleport, a futuristic media room for Houstonians Rudge and Nancy Allen. *Newsweek* called it a center for "communications." Years later, after Rudge Allen died in the Teleport's chair, Doug updated the retro-future room for the University of Houston.

In '99, he moved back to Houston to teach at UH. Once again, his teaching gig was only temporary. But he was at UH long enough, that second time around, to escort a group of students to the House of the Century, the site of Ant Farm's glory.

Doug wasn't sure what they'd find. He knew that a flood had wrecked the place in the late '80s. He knew that the long Plexiglas entryway had collapsed, and that water water had destroyed the upholstery. He expected a ruin. He wondered how a futuristic ruin would look.

As Doug's group approached, the house looked beautiful: pristine white capsules were covered in vines. The Plexiglas entryway was gone, but the exploratory party made its way into the stucco main building.



Courtesy Laura Harrison