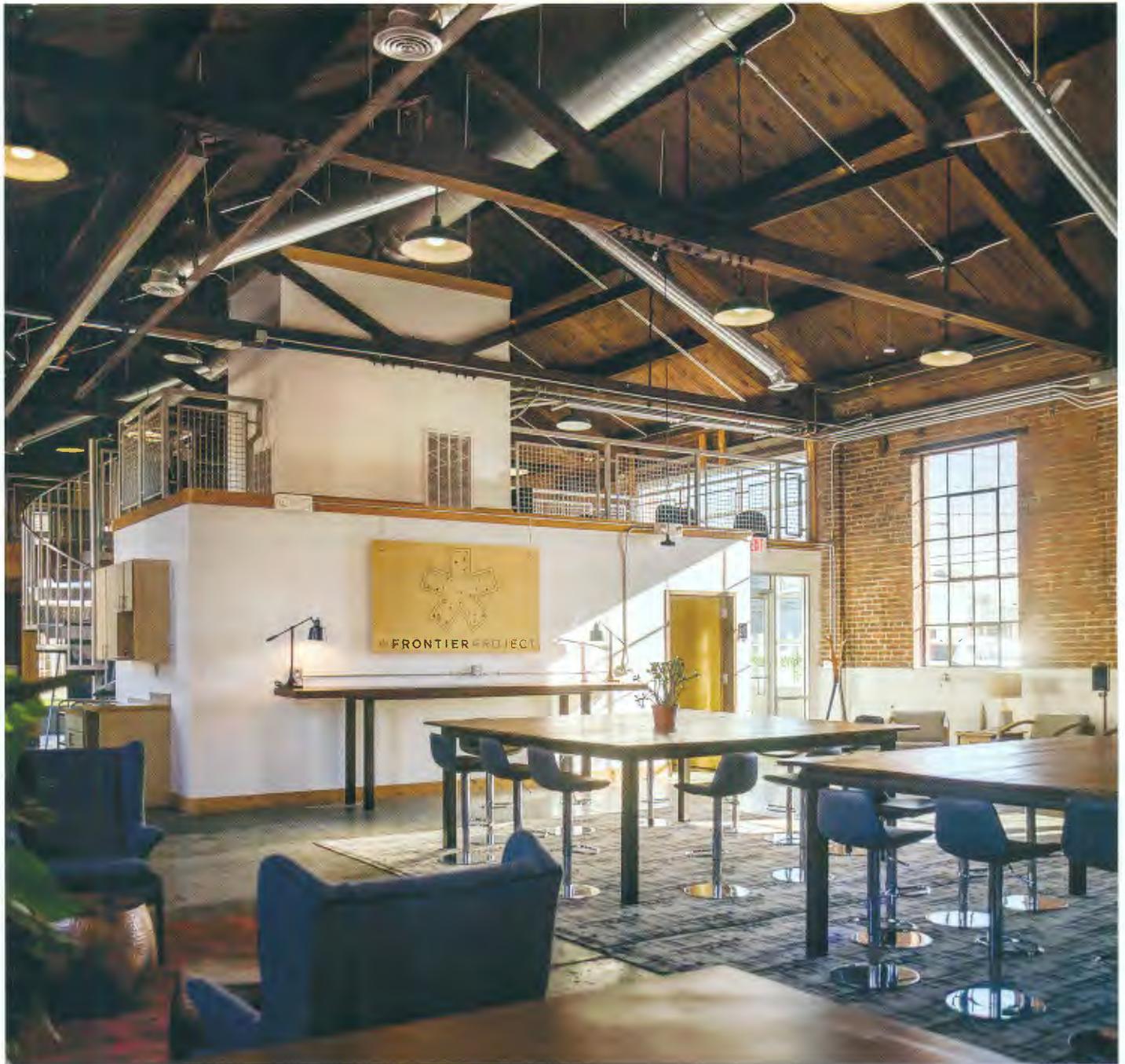


DISPATCHES

FALL 2016

FIELD NOTES FROM THE LEADING EDGE



THE RENOVATION ISSUE

ENGINEERING AN ICON

The ultimate SUV overhaul
Ty Toepke

HI, ROBOT

Twenty years of robotic encounters
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QUIRK OF ART

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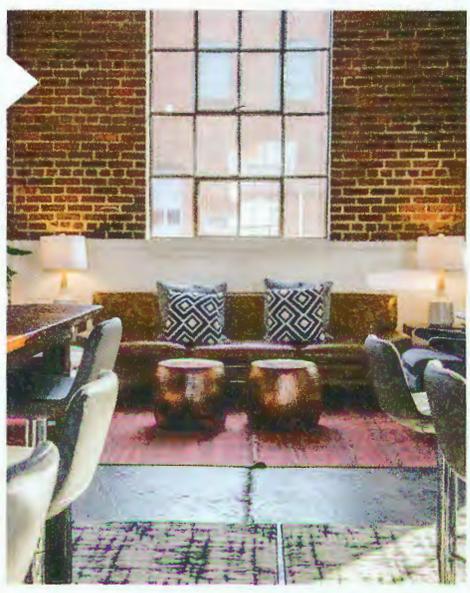
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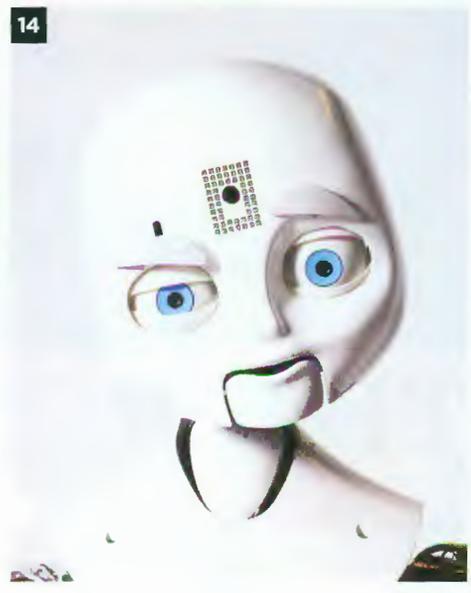
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▲ THE MAP

All previous editions of Dispatches have included a map similar to the above. Typically we spotlight where we’ve been, or where we’re going. This edition, we’re flipping the script, instead spotlighting a few locations our clients have traveled in search of inspiration, reflection, expansion. These are not where our clients live or work, but where they’ve ventured on expeditions in search of the material and motivation to renovate their efforts.



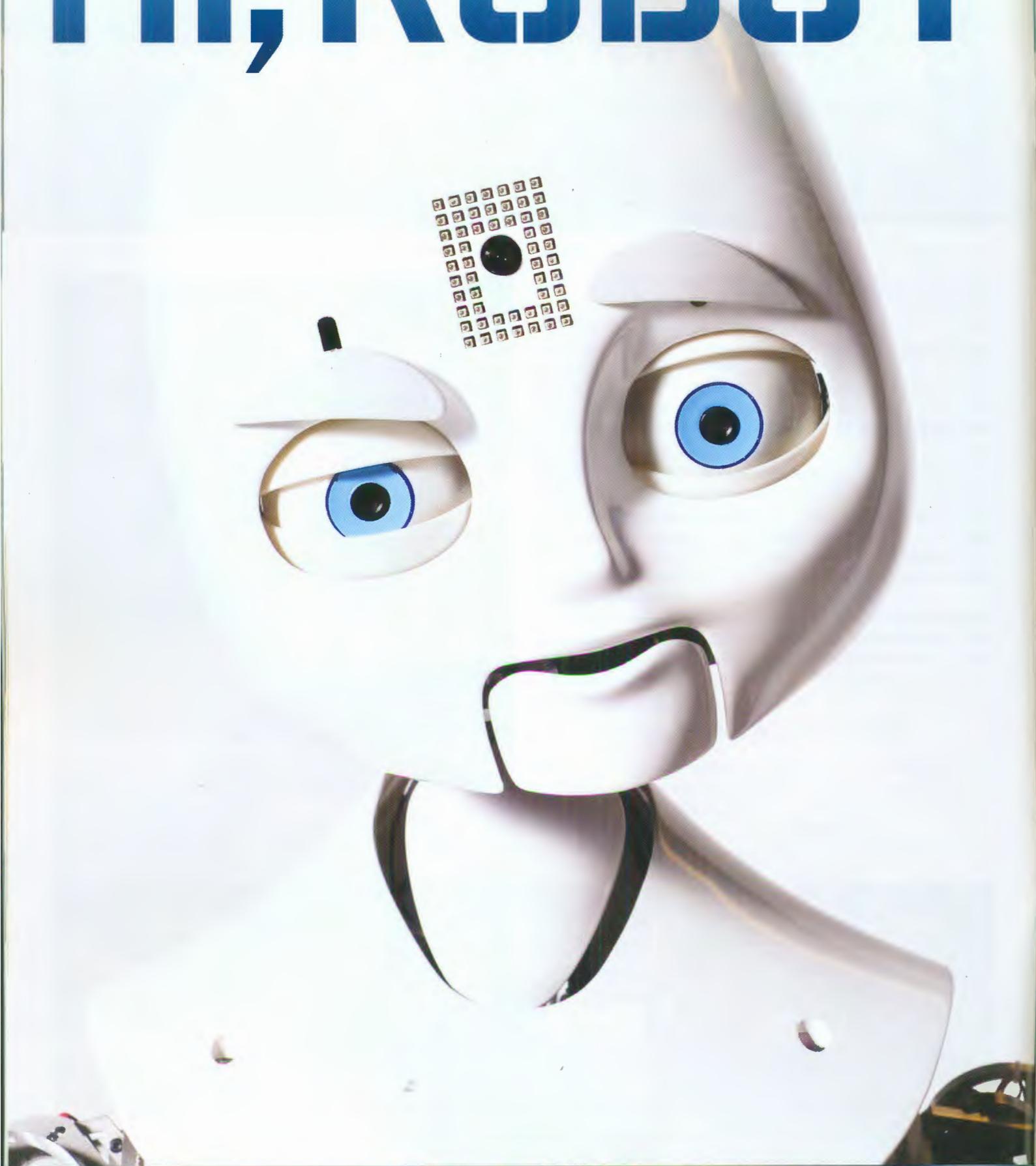
DESIGNING SIX
FUNCTIONAL SPACES
 FOR THE MODERN WORKPLACE



Twenty years of robotic encounters—and what they reveal about the human condition

Hi, Robot | SOPHIA STUART

HI, ROBOT



WHAT'S IT LIKE TO MEET A ROBOT?

A reflection on 20 years of robotic encounters—and what they reveal about the human condition.

SOPHIA STUART

ROBOT #1

The first robot I met was at MIT in 2009 at Dr. Cynthia Breazeal's Personal Robots Lab. Her name was Nexi. She was an MDS robot: mobile, dexterous, social. She could move, had arms to pick up and touch objects, and was programmed to be curious. Her voice was light and well-modulated. She was four feet tall with big blue eyes.

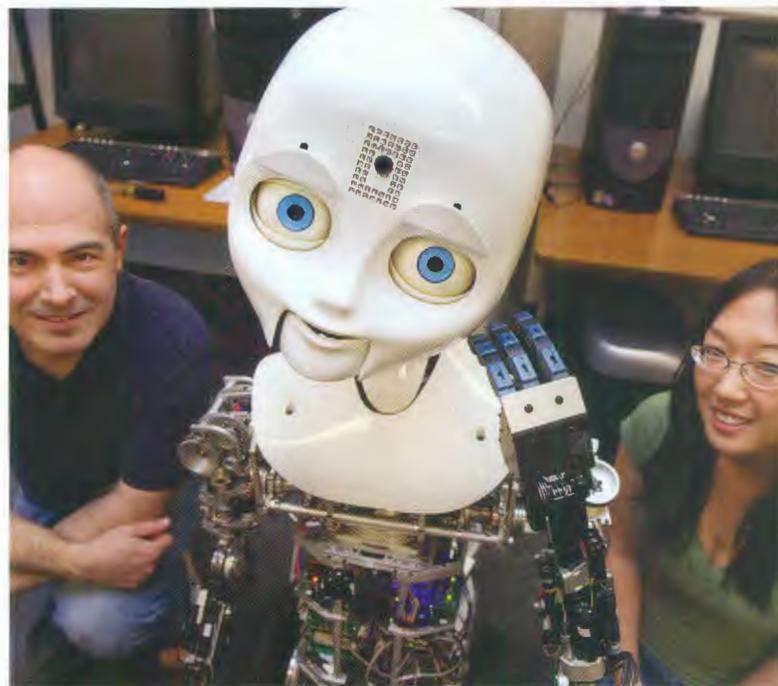
As I walked into the lab, looking for Dr. Breazeal, I felt those eyes on me. I turned around. Nexi half raised her arms and turned her torso towards me as her eyelids lowered in greeting. I felt a sensation rush through my body. It was a mixture of curiosity and, I'll admit, fear. Within 60 seconds of interacting with Nexi, the fear was gone: the robot was delightful.

“I FELT A SENSATION RUSH THROUGH MY BODY. IT WAS A MIXTURE OF CURIOSITY AND, I’LL ADMIT, FEAR.”

A LONG EXPLANATION requires a myriad of conflicting socio-economic and philosophical debates about consciousness (about which we still know very little) bound up with worries concerning unemployment and an underlying terror about a super-race of silicon overlords who decide humans are over.

But what's it like to actually *meet* a robot? The shorter answer is odd, unsettling, yet strangely exciting.

I've been writing about emerging technology for more than 20 years and I've met, conservatively, about 25 robots. I've been insatiably curious about robots since meeting the first one.



ROBOT #24

Last time I was in Silicon Valley, a robot delivered my room-service order. I was staying at the Crowne Plaza in Milpitas, which has a robot called Dash, made by Savioke. Dash self-docks in the lobby, looks like a slimmer version of R2-D2 from Star Wars, can call the elevator using WiFi, and refers to a constantly readjusting 3-D map of the hotel to avoid obstacles and reach the correct destination.

When he arrived at my room, the purple glow from the LED lights around his base shimmered under my door. The phone rang. It was Dash—yes, he can make calls using a mobile network. When I'd taken my order from his top loading tray, he asked me to grade him.

Dash didn't want a tip—he has no use for cash—but rather a response. His screen lit up with stars, and when I touched lightly on five of them, he gave an excited squeal and did a little shimmy of his torso before slipping off down the corridor, avoiding a room-service tray on the way. Dash and I had a communicative experience, and it was joyful.



“DASH AND I HAD A COMMUNICATIVE EXPERIENCE, AND IT WAS JOYFUL.”

ROBOT #21

In contrast, last summer, I sat in the stands at Pomona fairground in California and watched a bunch of very butch military robots go through disaster rescue scenarios. DARPA, the U.S. government's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, was cooperating with foreign nations to fund a robot that can support a first-responder emergency team.

Team Kaist from Korea won with its HUBO robot. HUBO can drive an SUV, open doors, unlock power valves, and drill through walls. I live in Los Angeles. If the big earthquake hits, and I'm on a freeway that snaps in half, I'll be thrilled to see HUBO and his friends coming to rescue me.



ROBOT #19

But the strangest experience I ever had with a robot was at the University of California, Los Angeles in the Biomechanics Lab. Dr. Veronica Santos, who runs the lab, took me to see the Barrett arms for which students are designing “BairClaw” end effectors (what roboticists call hands). The BairClaw can perceive its environment through a Bio-Tac fingertip sensor.

I cupped my hand to let the BairClaw touch my fingertips. I shivered; I hadn't realized it had fingerprints too. These enable better haptic perception of vibration, Dr. Santos explained. The robot moved its second digit slowly back and forth in tiny minute movements across my fingertips.

“What is it doing?” I thought. It felt as if it was methodically working out what material I'm made of. Finally, it stopped. Perhaps it had ascertained through touch, analysis of body temperature, and many other complicated calculations in its artificially intelligent brain, that I was human.

Dr. Santos confirmed that the BairClaw can process and interpret tactile data—the more grown-up and scientific definition.



AND THE REST

I've met robots that are designed to ameliorate the sadness of terminal illness through companionship. NASA-JPL has a robot that goes down into once-molten lava to ascertain the causes of volcanic eruptions, another that goes into space to allow astronauts to do repairs while remaining safely tethered. There are robots, like Pepper, from Aldebaran, that can read emotions. UCSF has a fleet of tug robots that travel tirelessly to deliver hospital supplies all night long. Dr. Bernadine Dias at Carnegie Mellon created a robot device that enables children without sight to learn how to write braille.

But in the end, the most interesting thing about robots isn't them; it's us.

We are the ones programmed to connect and bond. So that's what we do when we meet a robot. We feel seen, heard, and touched—just as we do with one another. Every time I've met a robot, I've been struck by the same thought: “Hello, new lifeform.” ★

SOPHIA STUART is a digital strategist and technology columnist based in Los Angeles. Find out more at www.teamgloria.com

5 ROBOT COMPANIES TO WATCH

1. JIBO

Cynthia Breazeal (see story) took a sabbatical from MIT to start her first commercial social robot company called Jibo, an engaging tabletop family assistant.

WWW.JIBO.COM

2. SIMBE

A retail robot that scans inventory while zooming up and down vast warehouses.

WWW.SIMBEROBOTICS.COM

3. SAVIOKE

The cutest thing in next generation hotel room-service deliveries (See story).

WWW.SAVIOKE.COM

4. JOSH

Not embodied, but it could be in the future. A connected software to run the Internet of Things inside your home.

WWW.JOSH.AI

5. QUALCOMM

Their snapdragon chip is now powering a fleet of drones for both personal and industrial uses.

WWW.QUALCOMM.COM

HELLO, NEW LIFEFORM.