

## Invention



*David Edwards  
Photography by Philippe Servent*

Politically, environmentally, socially--the world is changing at a rapid clip. To David Edwards, a biomedical engineering professor at [Harvard University](#) and founder of Paris-based experimental art and design center Le Laboratoire, the key to adapting quickly is [invention](#). "The development of new ideas that respond to new conditions has never mattered so much," he declares.

The ability to translate an idea into commercial success is a special skill indeed, but it's far more consequential to come up with an idea that redraws the very boundaries of what is possible. Consider the printing press, antibiotics and the internet: inventions that altered the course of history in ways "innovative" software and mobile startups can't even approach. Revenue models certainly weren't a big part of the development process for these inventions, yet countless opportunities arose (and are still arising) from their creation.

According to Edwards, support for wild ideas "so naive no one would encourage them" is lagging in the private sector. Rather, environments such as Silicon Valley promote the reworking of existing concepts--a process that is more easily taught and has more immediate gratification.

"To be in a position to see things in a fresh new way that others don't see requires a perspective anchored in innocence and luck," he says. "If you look at really successful inventors, they tend to be in positions that allow for that innocence, which is why many breakthroughs come from young minds."

If the goal is to crack the world's toughest problems, institutions of all types should foster creativity for creativity's sake, and do what they can to nurture ideas that hold long-term promise. All that business stuff, meanwhile, will sort itself out.

For instance, Le Laboratoire produces exhibitions with the goal of presenting concepts that are so fantastical and thought-provoking that the public will pay to see them. And some of those projects do, in fact, become businesses. In 2010 and 2012 Edwards launched commercial ventures that grew out of such "open-ended" ideas: AeroDesigns, maker of AeroShot, a lipstick-size aerosol dispenser with which one can inhale medication, food or drink; and WikiCell Designs, maker of edible (and apparently tasty) packaging for food products like yogurt and ice cream.

More than just wild contrivances, these efforts could have important medical, nutritional and environmental applications.

In other words, Edwards believes far more great companies will arise from a culture that focuses on radical ideas than one more intent on building and funding, say, Pinterest 3.0. The future will shine brighter if we take a creative, multidisciplinary approach to entrepreneurship that encourages possibly reckless, avant-garde thinking that has the power to change the world.

As Thomas Edison once remarked, "Hell, there are no rules here--we're trying to accomplish something."