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A Laboratory for Mixing Art and Science

November 9, 2009

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Photograph by Justin Ide/Harvard News Office

The panel discussion at the Laboratory at Harvard opening. From left to right: Michael John Gorman, Lisa Randall, David Edwards, Mohsen Mostafavi, Ken Arnold, Donald Ingber, and Diane Paulus.

TO DAVID EDWARDS, McKay professor of the practice of biomedical engineering, the intersection of art and science represents a gold mine of creativity.

Keywords
creativity, interdisciplinarity

Edwards has written a book about the potential for transformation and innovation inherent in this nexus, *ArtScience: Creativity in the Post-Google Generation* (2007). He teaches a course that challenges students to address real-world problems by inventing solutions that draw on the arts, the sciences, or both ("[Engineering Sciences 147: Idea Translation—Effecting Change through the Arts and Sciences](#)"). And on November 8, he oversaw the opening of [The](#)

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[Laboratory at Harvard](#), which promises to engage the wider Harvard community.

The basement of 52 Oxford Street (the new Northwest Science Building) had been transformed into a gallery for displays of student work and discussion of the Laboratory's underlying concepts. But when the evening ended, so did this installation; the Laboratory is a conceptual and virtual space for the meeting of minds. When physical space is needed—for future exhibitions, and for the monthly “Idea Nights” Edwards has planned—the Northwest building, with its sleek, modern design, will be the Laboratory's home.

With funding from sources including the [School of Engineering and Applied Sciences](#) (SEAS), the [Harvard Initiative for Global Health](#), the [Graduate School of Design](#) (GSD), and the [Wyss Institute for Biologically Inspired Engineering](#), as well as the [Faculty of Arts and Sciences](#) (FAS), Edwards has laid out an initial three-year plan: the first year focuses on connecting with the Harvard community, the second and third years shift to bringing the public into the conversation.

Above all, Edwards and his collaborators hope to work against academia's tendency to box people into disciplines with neat, nonporous boundaries. A life of ideas is much more exciting when it's messy, said Peirce professor of technology and public policy Venkatesh Narayanamurti (former dean of SEAS, who filled in when his successor, Cherry Murray, was delayed by travel): “We're here tonight to celebrate complexity and ambiguity, and their role in defining the future.”

SINCE 2007, Edwards has maintained [Le Laboratoire](#), a space at 4, rue de Bouloi in Paris's first arrondissement, where artistic and scientific minds can meet. A list of endeavors pursued there gives a sense of what the Harvard community might expect:

- Artist Fabrice Hyber, collaborating with MIT professor Robert Langer, aimed to allow viewers to “know what it meant to be a stem cell becoming a neuron.” The installation included, among other things, a “neuron” made of 4,000 pieces of strawberry bubble gum, heated and stretched from a ceiling beam to the exhibition floor.
- Edwards and designer Mathieu Lehanneur worked together to create “Bel Air,” an air purifier that uses a plant in place of a filter, capitalizing on plants' natural detoxifying attributes. (Their invention was named invention of the year by *Popular Science* in 2008, and is commercially available in Europe and the United States.)
- A collaboration between the double-Michelin-starred chef Thierry Marx and colloid scientist Jérôme Bibette yielded an improved strategy for encapsulating flavors (an area where chefs including [Ferran Adrià](#) had already been probing the overlap of cooking and science). From this came [Le Whif](#), a product consisting of a lip-balm-sized plastic tube containing “inhalable chocolate”—super-fine chocolate powder designed to be breathed into the mouth for a [low-calorie way to satisfy chocolate cravings](#).
- An exhibition by digital composer Ryoji Ikeda, inspired by a conversation with number theorist Benedict Gross, Leverett professor of mathematics. (Sanders Theatre was also commissioned for the Laboratory opening, to present Ikeda's most recent work, [Datamatics 2.0](#), an audiovisual

performance that adds sound to patterns inspired by data, from “sequences of patterns derived from hard-drive errors and studies of software code” to “dramatic, rotating views of the universe in 3D.”

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