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MIT Media Lab Complex ready to illuminate

by [Candace Lombardi](#)

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MIT Media Lab complex designed by Fumihiko Maki and his firm, Maki and Associates.
(Credit: Andy Ryan/MIT)

CAMBRIDGE, Mass.--The Massachusetts Institute of Technology on Friday officially opened the doors to its MIT Media Lab Complex, the school's most famous interdisciplinary program.

The new building, designed by architect Fumihiko Maki and his Maki and Associates firm, broke ground in 2007. But the [Media Lab's quest for expansion](#) has actually been 12 years in the making, according to Adele Naude Santos, dean of the MIT School of Architecture and Planning.

[Fumihiko Maki](#), a winner of the [Pritzker Prize](#) for architecture, was present at the opening event but did not speak publicly. Instead, he left Dean Santos, [MIT Media Lab Director Frank Moss](#), and his architectural associates to explain the vision he, MIT, and his team had in [designing the building](#).

"They picked Mr. Maki because their thinking was that, being from Tokyo, he could design a very interesting building on a very tight site," said Santos.

"The model is literally open collaboration between industry and academia. Research here at

the Media Lab is highly creative but finds its way into the world via industry. The idea of designing serendipity, this building was designed to promote this type of thinking and capturing in an uncanny way this magic," said Moss.

Moss went on to point out that many innovations, including the Kindle and Guitar Hero, grew from technology that was developed at the MIT Media Lab.

Influences on the building's design included the artists Piet Mondrian and George Seurat, as well as the art of Japanese paper lanterns. The white, glass, and aluminum building includes touches of the primary colors red, blue, and yellow, which are often found in Mondrian's paintings.

The MIT Media Lab Complex design, which MIT had originally requested consist entirely of glass walls, had to be tempered to fit Cambridge energy requirements that restrict the use of glass construction in buildings. To accommodate the codes, Maki and his team integrated translucent aluminum screens over the building's many glass and solid walls.



The screens over glass create a slightly pixelated view of the Charles River and Boston skyline when looking outside from within the building. It's a nod to both the Media Lab's digital world, as well as a pointillist adaption of landscape as seen in the paintings of Impressionist George Seurat.

Seven cube-shaped labs with glass walls surround a common atrium filled with natural light.

(Credit: Candace Lombardi/CNET)

Looking in at the Media Lab Complex at night, those same screens are lit from behind by the building's interior lights and create semi-translucent views into some labs. The effect hints that a giant Japanese paper lantern has been plopped down on the corner of Ames and Amherst Streets in Cambridge.

It's a distinct contrast to the dim and cozy den atmosphere of "the Cube," the MIT Media Lab's old space in [the I.M. Pei-designed Wiesner Building](#). That space consisted of a series of rooms overlooking a multistory common area with minimal outside light. Keeping "the Cube" as inspiration, the new six-story building is connected to the Wiesner Building and consists of seven cubes awash in white walls, glass, and natural light. The staggered double-height units with glass walls allow various groups to look across, down, or up at one another. The cubes then form another cube around a common atrium.

Maki and his team have created a series of literal think tanks filled with professors, students, computers, and robots all working in tandem on future technology.

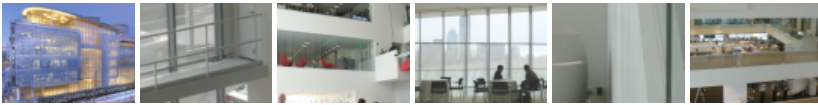
The cubes themselves, now referred to as labs, have retained the same creative and colorful preschool feel of the original Wiesner cube, with many of the usual players and odd projects-in-progress that the Media Lab has come to be known for.

For example, [the City Car, a two-seater stackable electric vehicle made to integrate with kiosks around a city for public transport](#), has progressed from [concept](#) to half-scale working model. MIT Professor Bill Mitchell's Smart Cities group, which is responsible for the City Car, now shares a cube with [MIT Professor Tod Machover's](#)

[Hyperinstruments/Opera of the Future group](#). While the technology involves a groundbreaking three-dimensional sound system and robotic instruments, the libretto is by former poet laureate Robert Pinsky and is scheduled to run in Monaco in late 2010 and throughout the U.S. in 2011.

In addition to housing new labs and offices for the MIT Media Lab organization, the building will also be home to several programs belonging to MIT's School of Architecture and Planning, the [Jerome Lemelson Center for Inventive Thinking](#) and the [Okawa Center for Future Children](#). It also has a digital fabrication and machine shop, a lecture hall, a winter garden, a cafe, and conference rooms.

[MIT's latest think tank \(photos\)](#)



In a software-driven world, it's easy to forget about the nuts and bolts. Whether it's cars, robots, personal gadgetry or industrial machines, Candace Lombardi examines the moving parts that keep our world rotating. A journalist who divides her time between the United States and the United Kingdom, Lombardi has written about technology for the sites of The New York Times, CNET, USA Today, MSN, ZDNet, Silicon.com, and GameSpot. E-mail her at candacelombardi@gmail.com. She is a member of the CNET Blog Network and is not a current employee of CNET.