Looking ahead with tech icon Bob Metcalfe

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One of the great things about living in Silicon Valley is that the history of technology is alive all around us.

I mean really alive, as in walking around, the way Bob Metcalfe was the other day at the Computer History Museum in Mountain View. Metcalfe - Xerox PARC researcher, inventor, 3Com founder, former InfoWorld columnist and museum fellow - was to take the stage that evening for one of those "Bob Metcalfe in Conversation" deals. It wasn't exactly his thing.

See, when Metcalfe takes the stage, everyone wants to hear the old stories and about how he co-invented Ethernet, a stunning breakthrough in the '70s and a key way computers talk to each other today. But Metcalfe would prefer to talk about what lies ahead.

Metcalfe, who lives in Boston now, was telling me this at the end of an informal lunch at the computer museum with about 30 of the institution's backers. He'd just finished provoking, inspiring and entertaining the lunch crowd with a brief talk about the future of energy production. A talk that he warned would be in parts "controversial and annoying."

But that's the way Metcalfe is. Not so much controversial and annoying, but old-school Silicon Valley. He's not afraid to say what he thinks. But he doesn't say it just to upset people. He says what he says because he thinks ideas have value, that ideas are the way things get invented and problems get solved. If you disagree with him? Good. Let's hear it.

Metcalfe, 62, was happy to have a lunch crowd willing to hear his thoughts about the future, a group that understands he still has a pulse. He wants to be clear about one thing: He's no relic.

"I'm not finished," he told me as he pointed to a museum display case honoring the Ethernet. "I worked on that in 1973 and they're not going to get me into that box."

No they're not. See, Metcalfe is an out-of-the-box guy. Take his lunchtime talk on green energy. Run-of-the-mill topic. Not a run-of-the-mill approach.

First off, he doesn't like the label "green." The green movement, he says, conjures up "anti-capitalism, anti-technology, anti-Americanism." Why not blue tech? Blue for power coming maybe from the sky (sun) or the oceans. Global warming? It could be happening, but it's overblown by the media and others. The United States' skittishness about nuclear power? Silly.

And why are we so focused on energy conservation? Metcalfe isn't against it. He just downsized from a Mercedes to a Smart car. But forget conservation long term. The goal in the next six or seven decades should be to produce "squanderably abundant, cheap and clean energy."

How can we do that? Metcalfe takes the Internet's evolution as his guide. In the beginning no one working on the Internet could have foreseen where it would end up or all it would be used for.

"When we started building the Internet, and I remember this clearly," Metcalfe said, "we did not set out to build a network to support YouTube."

There were innovations no one saw coming that made the Internet

possible and better - the semiconductor, the PC, packet-switching, Ethernet, TPC/IP protocol. There will be surprises in the energy field, too.

Metcalfe, now a venture capitalist, believes that squanderable energy supply will come from people who paid a lot of attention in science class: Maybe we'll create abundant biofuel out of algae, or use the sun to turn water into high-energy fuel. We might rely on nuclear schemes that don't require hulking power plants. No doubt we'll rely on many technologies.

You might find much to disagree with in Metcalfe's specifics. But it's hard to argue with his general optimism. After all, this is a man who made history but isn't finished living it.

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