

# Innovation Economy

Inside tech, life sciences, start-ups & venture capital in New England

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

## The significance of 'that flying car company'

Posted by Scott Kirsner December 15, 2009 07:20 AM

Yes, I was a bit skeptical in October 2008 when I wrote about Woburn-based Terrafugia, that company that is trying to build a flying car (or, if you prefer, a roadable aircraft):

"Want a big entrepreneurial challenge? Try to design an aircraft and bring it to market... Want an enormous entrepreneurial challenge? Design an aircraft that can also fold up its wings, drive off the runway, and travel safely at highway speeds. Success is so absurdly improbable it is like asking the clerk at the local pet store to sell you a parakeet that can also bench-press 400 pounds and play the trombone."



Five months later, Terrafugia's "Transition" hybrid car/aircraft made its first flight. The company spent the rest of 2009 working on a second, more advanced aircraft that will be used for more testing, and taking its first "proof of concept" vehicle to air shows, the Smithsonian, the Museum of Science in Boston, and the fall MassTLC Innovation UnConference. Terrafugia expects to make its first deliveries to customers in 2011.

After the 2008 column, Terrafugia CEO Carl Dietrich let me know he thought I was being unduly skeptical about his company's chances for success (maybe it was the parakeet remark?) The Globe's copy editors had also headlined the column "Fighting to take off," which further accentuated the degree of difficulty.

You know what? I still think you couldn't pick a tougher start-up challenge than what they're trying to do at Terrafugia. But then I saw the plane on display at the Innovation UnConference this fall. You just couldn't ignore how jazzed all the tech entrepreneurs were who were circling it and peppering Dietrich with questions. The atmosphere was a combination of "I can't believe they're building this" and "Rock on."

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It struck me that one of the things that is great about the innovation economy in New England is that it supports this kind of ambitious, high-risk, engineering-intensive, let's-do-it-because-it's-never-been-done project. (At left are the keys to the TerraFugia proof-of-concept vehicle, seen through the passenger side window. The little red tag there says, "REMOVE BEFORE FLIGHT.")

You can view TerraFugia as a poster child for the purest kind of entrepreneurship possible: whatever you envision, however outlandish, can become real with the right combination of people, smarts, energy, and, yes, at least a sprinkling of capital.

TerraFugia challenges other entrepreneurs to ask:

- Who needs venture capital? (So far, they've been funded by individuals and scrappy boot-strapping.)
- Who needs an industry cluster to support you? (Massachusetts is not a hotbed of aviation innovation.)
- Why bother worrying about people (whether investors, rivals, or newspaper columnists) who don't think your idea is going to fly?
- Who cares if other companies have tried and failed to do what you aim to do? (Often, innovators succeed after having another crack at a problem that seems impossibly stubborn.)
- How do you take small, concrete steps that carry you forward? (Almost everything TerraFugia has done has involved blazing new trails, whether it's working with the federal Department of Transportation on safety requirements or the Massachusetts Registry of Motor Vehicles to apply for a license plate.)

Will TerraFugia succeed? Still very much an open question. But I'm glad they're out there, plugging away.