

Introducing the Modular Smartphone

Written by Marco Attard
01. November 2013

Making and selling mobile devices should be pretty straightforward, right? Not according to Phonebloks and Motorola's Project Ara, who believe smartphones should actually be modular, built out of interchangeable modules.



First created by company founder Dave Hakkens, the Phonebloks concept is exactly what the name suggests-- a phone made out of detachable blocks. Each block contains different components, such as the processor, display or camera, and all create a phone once connected to a special base.

The Phonebloks concept suggests an open platform, with blocks coming from different vendors.

Hakkens says the idea came about as a means of reducing electronic waste, an issue caused in part by mobile phones. Currently replacing a device (due to damage or its simply becoming outdated) requires the disposal of an entire device, one with any number of perfectly adequate components. With Phonebloks, customers would need to buy only the blocks they actually require for "a phone worth keeping."

It all sounds overtly utopian, but Hakkens has the backing of at least one serious mobile contender-- Motorola. The Google-owned company already toyed with DIY phones by taking "Sticky," a velcro-covered truck packed with hackable smartphones and 3D printing equipment, on the road for a series of make-a-thons, and as the company puts it, "on that trip we saw the first signs of a new, open hardware ecosystem made possible by advances in additive manufacturing and access to the powerful computational capabilities of modern smartphones."

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Following that trip is the announcement of Project Ara, an implementation of the Phonebloks concept. Motorola is already working with Hakkens and the Phonebloks community, and hopes to launch a Module Developer Kit (MDK) and prototype hardware over the coming months.

Will Phonebloks and its ilk transform mobile retail into something more akin to an auto garage than a showroom? We will surely confirm should the concept actually catch on with mainstream consumers.

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