

Opinion **Innovation**

## A crisis can spur invention, but it rarely works miracles

It would be naive to believe that tech evangelists can ever provide the full answer

**JOHN THORNHILL**



Why was it easier to land Neil Armstrong on the moon than to solve the blight of inner city deprivation? © NASA/EPA

**John Thornhill** YESTERDAY

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It would, frankly, be disappointing if at this time of swirling global uncertainty, tech evangelists had not seized the moment to cheer that crisis is the mother of opportunity. As if on cue, they have delivered.

The irrepressible human bullhorn that is Marc Andreessen has been the loudest voice in the chatroom. The entrepreneur and co-founder of Andreessen Horowitz, the venture capital firm, asked how it could be that in the US in 2020 hospital staff had to use rain ponchos for protection while the federal government lacked the means of quickly transferring money to the many millions of newly jobless.

His answer, in an essay entitled “[It’s Time to Build](#)”, was for a new spirit of innovation and aggressive investment in building new products, industries, factories and science to reboot the American dream. “Where are the supersonic aircraft? Where are the millions of delivery drones? Where are the high speed trains, the soaring monorails, the hyperloops, and, yes, the flying cars?” he asked.

Peter Diamandis, executive founder of Singularity University, has also declared his excitement about the possibilities of the present while predicting the collapse of one in every five existing companies. “If you are not disruptively innovating now you are done,” [he said](#).

Technorati optimism has even spread to Europe. Roxanne Varza, director of Station F, the entrepreneurial hub in Paris, pointed out that transformational start-ups had often been born in crisis, just as Airbnb, Spotify, Uber and Adyen had prospered amid the financial rubble of 2008. “[This is an opportunity](#) — it’s time for the tech sector to seize it,” she said.

In these dispiriting days, we should applaud such cheeriness and ambition to build things better. Moreover, the start-up world’s playbook is undoubtedly a critical part of the answer to today’s challenges. But it would be naive to believe it can ever provide the full answer. A particular methodology suited to solving one type of challenge is not a blueprint for all.

That point was made brilliantly by [Richard Nelson](#), then a Yale University professor, in his essay “The Moon and the Ghetto”, published in 1977. Mr Nelson explored the paradox of why it was easier to land Neil Armstrong on the moon than to solve the blight of inner city deprivation. The Apollo space missions, he argued, had the advantage that they had not threatened established interests, while the opposite was true for the ghetto. But Mr Nelson concluded that the biggest obstacle to progress was the partial, and often faulty, conceptualisation of problems and solutions by the different decision-making parties.

Economists, public policy experts and technologists all understood problems within their own terms of reference, challenging the validity of other perspectives. This “imperialistic rhetoric”, which all too often muddled values and facts, led to internecine policy warfare. The language of optimisation in one domain overrode the language of trade-offs, compromise and creative problem solving.

To be fair, Mr Andreessen does acknowledge the broader political dimensions, highlighting the constraints imposed by crony capitalism, regulatory capture and over-financialisation in the private sector and the stubborn defence of old, entrenched and irrelevant interests in the public sector. The imperative to build, he said, had to be separated from ideology and politics.

The trouble is that it is unclear how that can ever happen in real life.

Patrick McCray, a history professor at University of California, Santa Barbara, who has written about the need to maintain, as much as reinvent, functioning institutions, argues that it is ideology and politics that underlie the devastating impact of the pandemic. The “starve the beast” mentality of the Republican party and the “just privatise it bullshit” of the Silicon Valley types degraded the capability of the administrative state. “Disasters are not natural, they are social and political. And Covid-19 is a classic case of a ‘slow disaster’,” he says.

Mr McCray envisages a different type of building. “How about building a sense of trust between citizens and the institutions that are there to support them? How about building a sense of respect for science and facts and expertise?” he suggests. For his part, Mr Nelson resisted simple nostrums that would inevitably disappoint. His modest recommendation was for more open-minded dialogue and a sequential, experimental approach to hard problems.

That is exactly the spirit we need to build, and rebuild. But first, as Mr Andreessen has rightly argued, we must find the imagination and will to do so.

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