Imagine a modular smartphone, with upgrades as easy as switching out a module with another. This is the Google plan for the phone of the future, as shown off at the first Project Ara developer conference.



Project Ara was first revealed by Motorola back in November 2013 . It hails from the Google ATAP (Advanced Technology And Projects) group, and is one of the few things Google kept when it sold off Motorola to Lenovo. Thus the conference is part of an effort to stir developer interest in the device.

As described above the concept is fairly straightforward-- it consists of a Google-designed metal frame, into which users can slot 3rd party modules. The platform promises to free users from the obsolesce cycle, as one should be able to freely upgrade devices according to their requirements with a potentially infinite array of components.

Modules covered at the conference include regular smartphone components (processor, RAM, wifi, power jack, display, storage) as well as exotic concepts such as credit card readers, blood analyzers and custom antennas.

In the frame carries electro-permanent magnets to not only hold modules in place but also easily switch elements on or off.

Google plans to play the long game with Ara-- 2015 might see the release of the first "Grey Phone", a stripped-down low-cost number packaged with screen, wifi and processor modules.

By then the first set of additional modules should be available, should the idea attract the attention of enough developers. But only time will tell if customers (and, crucially, the industry) will catch on the idea of a Lego-style DIY phone.

Go Project Ara