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The 50 Best Inventions of 2009

From a rocket of the future to a \$10 million lightbulb, here are TIME's picks for the best new gadgets and breakthrough ideas of the year

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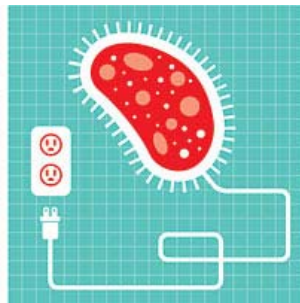
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The Electric Microbe

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HEADCASE DESIGN FOR TIME

Bacteria have always gotten a bad rap. But we should be thankful for one especially talented microbe, *Geobacter*, which has tiny hairlike extensions called pili that it uses to generate electricity from mud and wastewater. Professor Derek Lovley and his team of researchers at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst have engineered a strain of *Geobacter* that's eight times as efficient as other strains at producing power. The next step: creating *Geobacter*-based fuel cells that can generate cheap, clean electricity.

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