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Where time slows down

A giant 10,000-year clock in a mountain is just the start for a group that wants to change our idea of 'now'. By *Leslie Hook*

The mountain site for the 10,000-year clock in Texas — Long Now Foundation

Imagine yourself standing at the base of a tall limestone cliff in a Texas desert. You hike in through a hidden entrance, open a door made of jade, and emerge into a dark tunnel that takes you towards the heart of the mountain. Inside hangs a giant mechanical clock, with five-ton counterweights and gears as big as a car. This is a clock that can keep perfect time for 10,000 years, powered only by the heat of the sun.

It ticks just once per year.

If this sounds like some techno-futurist's fantasy, that's because it is. The 10,000-year clock is being built by the Long Now Foundation, an eclectic group of dreamers whose mottos include "serve the long view" and "take no sides". The man funding the clock is Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon, and the project is the brainchild of computer engineer Danny Hillis and biologist Stewart Brand (best known as founder of the Whole Earth Catalog).

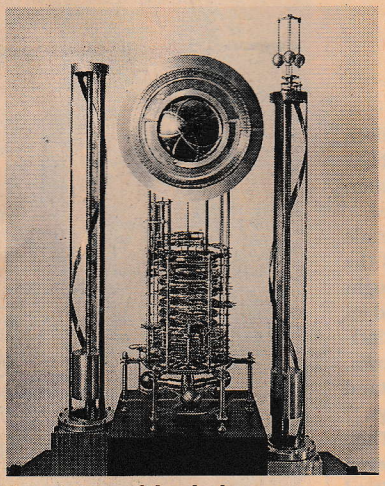
Their mission is "to stretch out what people consider as now" — and the clock is only the beginning. I first came across the group at the Interval, a trendy bar and café in San Francisco run by the Long Now Foundation.

The walls of the bar are decorated with the foundation's various projects, which include preserving all human languages, and bringing extinct species such as passenger pigeons back to life.

Some of the projects may seem farfetched, but it's a refreshing change from the rest of Silicon Valley, where the dominant value feels like a short "now" that is becoming ever shorter. Signs of that culture come creeping in, even at the Interval, where I heard a patron in an animated discussion about a $7 meal delivery service.

Instant gratification is the currency of many of the Valley's most successful start-ups, whether it is Uber offering rides at the tap of a button, or Facebook offering instant information about your friends. You can use your smartphone to summon a peripatetic valet or have gasoline delivered to your car.

Waiting times are continually falling, and everything promises to get to the customer faster and give more updates along the way. Around San Francisco there are even billboards that show a dog looking at a smartphone with the caption, "Finally, an app for me to pee!" It's an ad for an on-demand dog-walking service.



A prototype of the clock — Long Now Foundation

Lest the immediacy of the experience be diminished for the absent owner, the service also provides a real-time GPS location while your dog is being walked, and photos on the way.

While a lot of start-ups like to talk about changing the world, few are thinking about how the world will change — or change them. In ancient Greek, there was a distinction between long and short notions of time, with *chronos* referring to ongoing time and the personified deity of time, and *kairos* referring to the moment.

The goal of the clock project is to help people to think beyond *kairos*, and to examine their world from a broader perspective. Ten thousand years, the span of the clock, marks roughly the time that has passed since the beginning of "civilisation", when nomadic tribes settled down to tend crops.

The Long Now Foundation was launched in 1996 (or "01996" to those who work there — the extra zero helps avoid ambiguity when the year 10,000 AD comes around), and work on the clock design started shortly thereafter. Today, excavation of the site in Texas is nearly complete, while the clock itself is being built in San Francisco and is about two-thirds finished. Prototypes of its pieces are scattered around the room at the Interval, and stone from the site forms the bar top.

An early version of the chime machine — a mechanical algorithm designed by Brian Eno that can generate different note patterns each day for the next 10,000 years — forms the basis of a table.

Alexander Rose, executive director of the foundation, explains that the objects in the bar are designed to pique visitors' curiosity and get them to ask questions. "You can't tell someone to think long-term, they have to arrive at it," he explains. The foundation sets out to pose questions, but not to answer them, he adds.

The clock parts are all beautiful to behold, but there is a subtle, unwritten message in them: that science and engineering can be a saviour of sorts, inspiring people to be better and wiser. In some places that is a role reserved for faith — belief in a God being one thing that has always helped humans think beyond their own short lives.

In others it's a role played by art, which can humble a viewer and change their perspective. In this sense, then — approaching the problem of short-term thinking as something to be solved with fancy engineering — the Long Now Foundation perhaps has a bit more in common with the rest of the Valley than at first appears.

The writer is the FT's San Francisco correspondent. Susie Boyt is away