

Long Now Lands In Its New Space Here At Fort Mason Center Landmark Building A

Do you have any responsibility to those who will call you their ancestors? Do you think about "long now" or the "deep future"? Do you know what any of this means? Let's try for a definition.

Don't just think about tomorrow, as the song goes, or live solely in the moment as others might suggest. Toss out your New Years resolutions and your five-year plans. Think about time in other increments -- centuries, millennia. Or in the case of the Long Now Foundation, fix a time period of 10,000 years.

Long Now opened its combination office, store, salon, and exhibition space in early June at Fort Mason Center, where the Museum of Craft & Folk Art used to be before it moved to San Francisco's burgeoning museum district. Visitors used to colorful dolls and elegantly woven baskets could be in for a shock. When you enter the Long Now exhibition area, it's quite likely you'll have no idea what you're looking at or what it means.

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Someone who drops in on the spur of the moment after lunch at Greens will find us puzzling," said the foundation's executive director, Alexander Rose. "They will ask questions and go home and think about it. On their second trip, they start to understand." Rose said they don't have an "elevator speech" that explains the Long Now. There are no short descriptions. It is, not something tangible, but rather a way of thinking about time.

Foundation Co-chairman Danny Hillis is quoted on the Long Now Foundation web site: "When I was a child, people used to talk about what would happen by the year 2000. For the next thirty years they kept talking about what would happen by the year 2000, and now no one mentions a future date at all. The future has been shrinking by one year per year for my entire life."

San Francisco writer Michael Chabon writes in the January issue of Details, "The future was represented so often and for so long, in terms of and characteristic styles of so many historical periods from, say, Jules Verne forward, that at some point the idea of the Future -- along with the cultural appetite for it -- came itself to

feel like something historical, outmoded, no longer viable or attainable."

This is what the foundation wants to change. The way the world works now is that most of us have trouble thinking a few weeks ahead, let alone thinking about what kind of world our children's children's children will live in. But it's not just the future that concerns Rose and his associates. It's the long past as well. Decisions made thousands of years ago have put us where we are today. Decisions made today...

Projects on display at this new public space include prototypes of the Clock of the Long Now that will be constructed on a monumental scale on a mountaintop, and the Rosetta Project, an online and hardcopy documentation of all human languages.

As the first step toward building the Clock of the Long Now, the foundation has purchased desert mountain land adjacent to Great Basin National Park in eastern Nevada. Once built, said Hillis, "The clock ticks once a year. The century hand advances once every hundred years. And the cuckoo comes out on the millennium."

The Rosetta Project was set up to preserve the world's languages. So far, it has documented 2,376 languages. Project members predict that 50 to 90 percent of the world's languages will disappear in the next century, many with little or no significant documentation. With the loss of so many languages, so go great swaths of cultural diversity and history.

The foundation's board of directors is a Who's Who of global thinkers and chroniclers of the future. Stewart Brand, founder of the Whole Earth Catalog is co-chair. Musician Brian Eno and former Wired editor-in-chief Kevin Kelly are also among the many distinguished minds on the board.

Long Now also produces a series of lectures on the various aspects of long-term thinking. Many of them happen at Fort Mason Center venues. Eno, author Bruce Sterling, and Smith & Hawken co-founder Paul Hawken are among the many who have conducted Long Now seminars.

Visit www.longnow.org, for considerably more information about this one-of-a-kind organization. Also, check out the special feature piece on the Long Now entitled "The March of Time" in the San Francisco Chronicle (July 30, 2006).

– Ronald Tierney

Photo: Alexander Rose, Photo: Ronald Tierney; Long Now's propose clock (detail)