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# Ten Thousand-Year Stare: Old Silicon Valley Invented "High Speed" and Now Wants to Slow Down

By Rachel Swan Wednesday, Dec 11 2013

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Some of **Stewart Brand's** ideas seem like a tough sell, but the 75-year-old writer has no trouble pitching them. Linger on the sidelines during a kickoff event for his "long-term" cultural institution, *The Long Now*, he expounded on the possibility of resuscitating woolly mammoths and passenger pigeons from scraps of DNA, of creating a "Manual of Civilization" with all the world's most important books, of archiving 1,500 different languages on a disc small enough to hold in your hand. Some of these projects have already come to fruition, Brand says, and others are well within the realm of possibility — there's plenty of habitat up north for the mammoths; there's ample space for the library. The big challenge now is to inculcate a slower, more patient line of thinking in fast-paced San Francisco.

Brand says he isn't concerned about tomorrow; he measures time in 10,000-year increments. He's part of an elder generation of **Silicon Valley** whose members helped facilitate the high-tech economy, but who are now using their wealth and resources as a salve against it. All over San Francisco, enlightened techies are building communes, eating locally sourced food, and trading in digital currency. Many have fixated on the idea of creating a better landscape for their grandchildren. And great-grandchildren. And generations beyond.

In creating *The Long Now*, Brand spun that hackneyed notion into a lifestyle and a credo. He's confident that other San Franciscans will get on board. He and other foundation members are building a small salon in Fort Mason, with a carefully curated library and a bar to serve archaic cocktails (including Prohibition-era syrups and centuries-old beers). They'll feature a sound installation from **Brian Eno**, ambient rock artist and *Long Now* board member, whose ruminations about fly-by-night life in Manhattan inspired the foundation's name. In an essay called "The Big Here and Long Now," Eno marvels at the contrast between New York, where he immigrated in 1978, and his native **England**. New York was cutthroat and immediate, he writes. "Enormous buildings came and went, careers rose and crashed in weeks."

Contemporary San Francisco is even more extreme, perhaps best characterized by the anecdote about the man who pulled a gun on a crowded Muni train but went unnoticed — because all the other passengers were looking down at their smartphones. To people like Brand, that story encapsulates everything that's currently wrong with urban society. Their idea is to create a safe harbor of sorts, where the city's intelligentsia can recoil from the city's ascendant culture.

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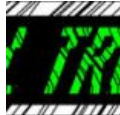


The Long Now Foundation

Curious onlookers gather around a planetary display.

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and break things.

Brand has long hewed to this philosophy, even when it wasn't quite as radical — or rather, when it was radical in a hipper sense of the word. After graduating from **Stanford University** in 1960, he joined the **Merry Pranksters**, produced a psychedelic rock show called **The Trips Festival**, immersed himself in Native American Indian reservations, persuaded **NASA** to release its first satellite images of the Earth, and created *The Whole Earth Catalog*, which featured tools, seeds, clothing, and other products for a sustainable lifestyle. The idea of slow, holistic, back-to-the-land-style living was au courant in San Francisco, where people sewed their own clothes, planted herb gardens in flower pots, and grazed on brown rice or yogurt before the rest of the country caught on.

"Civilization is roughly 10,000 years old — so we're right in the middle of a 20,000-year cycle," Brand says, squinting as an orange beam of sunlight slats through a window on the salon's far wall. "And we have to think about the next 10,000 years the way we think about next week."

Long Now members take that adage literally. In the 1990s, they began designing what they hope will be the world's first 10,000-year clock, a giant, mechanical timepiece built into the side of a mountain in west Texas. Hundreds of feet tall, it's the foundation's version of a perpetual-motion machine — a transfixing maze of stainless steel gears and **Geneva** wheels, with chimes engineered to ring daily. They hope to ultimately build many such millennial clocks, including one in a mountainous region of eastern **Nevada**, nestled beneath a grove of 5,000-year-old bristlecone pines. If each clock lasts twice as long as the oldest pine, the Long Now will have fulfilled its purpose.

It's perhaps no surprise that a vast swath of the city's elite — and several newly minted tech-sphere billionaires — have signed on. **Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos**, who has earned a reputation of late for throwing money into quaint, anachronistic ventures like newspapers, donated \$42 million for the 10,000-year clock. Social media entrepreneur **Matt Mullenweg** is one of the foundation's principal donors. Tech pundit and forecaster **Paul Saffer** sits on the board. **Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom**, digital media mogul **Tim O'Reilly**, foodie intellectual **Michael Pollan**, and "open source sex" columnist **Violet Blue** have all delivered Long Now seminars. So many have been seduced by the concept of slower, protracted time that they've rendered it a social cause. In many senses, it's older Silicon Valley's rejection of younger Silicon Valley jingoism, a dogma that favors conservation over disruption, and urges people to tread carefully, rather than move fast



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Hippie counterculture allowed young people to slough off the conservatism of their parents' generations, but it also paved the way for modern social media: In the 1980s, Brand converted his catalog into a primitive online community called The WELL ("Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link"). In a sense, he helped steer the very technology that accelerated our lives, and now he's reacting to it.

"There's this smooth connection from Whole Earth to The WELL," Long Now spokesman **Michael McElligott** says, acknowledging that the transition to decamillennial thinking is a little more elusive. Brand launched The Long Now in 1996 with computer engineer **Daniel Hillis**, another aspiring thought leader with a solid tech pedigree. (Hillis owns some of the key patents on "parallel processing," the use of multiple computer engines to make programs run faster.) At that time, many of their cohorts from The WELL had gone on to be editors at *Wired* magazine; the Internet had already supplanted brick-and-mortar libraries as an information portal; and e-mail had obviated the need for old-school telephone switchboards. The last copies of the *Whole Earth Catalog* were sitting, unmolested, in the San Francisco Public Library. Already, paper catalogs had become a relic of the past; **Amazon.com** had launched two years before.

By all appearances, the Long Now provided an escape from the "short now" created by the Internet. But McElligott insists the two phenomena aren't at cross-purposes. "I think we have a lot of folks who were involved in technology from very early on, who also appreciate having a balance by looking at the other side," he says. He adds that Bezos, the foundation's foremost benefactor and Fortune 500 CEO, "actually runs his business based on long-term thinking."

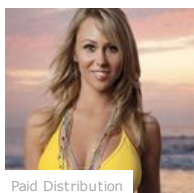
Brand, who lives in **Sausalito**, never really cast off the free-wheeling, earthy spirit he had as a young man sponging the cultural practices of Native Americans. He stood by serenely on a Thursday evening in September, when dozens of Long Now members gathered to create a floor plan for the new salon using cardboard. A table in the corner bore sandwich wedges, speared olives, and paper cups of wine; above it was a paper sign that applied long-term thinking to people slicing cardboard with box-cutters: "36 minutes until the Next Accident."

A prototype of the 10,000-year clock stood idly in another corner, encased in bubble wrap. According to Brand, it contains limestone excavated from the quarry on Mount Washington, where the real clock is under construction. He plans to furnish the Salon with other artifacts as well, such as the 8-foot Orrery — a planetary display made of nickel-copper alloy and stainless steel. Upstairs, the Long Now staff will install shelves for a 3,500-book library, meant to serve as their Manual of Civilization writ small. "We're evoking the whole apparatus," Brand explains, gazing at the last sliver of sun as it smears a westward window. Outside, ships bob in the ink-blue twilight, and the bay spreads ever-outward like a long, rumpled tarmac.

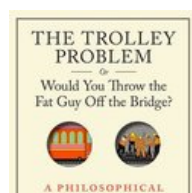
At present, the Long Now organizers don't have an opening date for their salon, or a definitive timeline for their 10,000-year clock, or a full index for their Manual of Civilization. Yet they seem unconcerned about deadlines.

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