Monument to the Future

Stewart Brand celebrates the Millennium with a Clock/Library to last 10,000 years

by Virginia Lee
Stewart Brand has always been a maverick. As the creator of the Whole Earth Catalog in the 1960s (of which there now more than a million copies worldwide), Brand went on to further distinguish himself as a writer and editor of the Co-evolution Quarterly (which has since evolved into Whole Earth Review). A graduate of Stanford University and always on the cutting edge of avant-garde thinking, Brand’s latest project is to create a Clock/Library in the Nevada desert that will last 10,000 years. But Stewart Brand is not alone in this. Joined by an eclectic group of artists and entrepreneurs, the Long Now Foundation is still in the planning stages of how to build what Brian Eno has dubbed “The Clock of the Long Now.”

Stewart Brand has recently published a book of the same name, a collection of conversations, ideas and essays about various aspects of the project, as a way of inviting the rest of the world to participate in the creative process. Anyone who wishes to be part of this monument to the future can contact the Long Now Foundation via their website: www.longnow.org

SB: The poetic description of the original idea is that this 10,000-year clock will tick once a year, bong once a century, and the cuckoo will come out every 1,000 years. The Millennial Clock will be located inside a remote but well-protected mountain in the high desert, and will be about 80 feet or more high. Although it will be a bit of a pilgrimage to get there, it will be awesome in its size and charisma.

One of the design principles of the Clock is: Reward patience. If you hang around the Clock for five minutes or more, you start to see something interesting. And at noon every day, the Solar Adjuster will fine-tune the Clock with a pulse of sunlight on sunny days. A visit would require at least an hour, or perhaps a whole afternoon to really become acquainted with the whole structure, which will probably have different rooms on different levels, all recording different aspects of time.

It will show the Sun and the Moon and where they are in the sky, and it will predict eclipses 10,000 years into the future. It will show the horizon shifting with the seasons within the grander procession of the equinoxes, as well as a star field showing where the Clock is situated and what is visible in the sky at that moment. It will even compensate for the microscopic slowing of the Earth’s rotation, which over 10,000 years would be quite significant.

There will be many stages in its construction. The clock which is being built right now is a prototype about eight feet tall. It’s a matter of going through the process of examining all the mechanical and engineering concepts that Danny Hillis has come up with to make it actually work. One of the things about clockmaking, “horology” as it is called, is that it is a tremendously nuanced technology. Very delicate variances make a huge difference as to how well things actually work. So this original clock is going through many stages of redesign and refabrication. It will definitely be Y10K compliant.

The 10,000-year Clock will be mechanical and also digital. In that sense it is different from Charles Babbage’s design over a century ago, which did not work since it was made out of brass and used decimal notation. In contrast, the Millennial Clock will work on binary calculations. Also, it will not calculate by gear ratios the way mechanical clocks at present work. There are a number of advantages — and it will be more fun to watch. Entering the 10,000-year Clock will be a world unto itself. Possibly, it will affect our perspective of time the way the first pictures of Earth taken from space altered our perception of space.

CG: Would you compare this structure to Stonehenge?

SB: In concept, yes, but we have to be careful that it doesn’t go the way of Stonehenge, which has become a mysterious but ill-maintained ruin. No one really has any idea what it was used for. A better comparison for us is the Ise shrine of Japan, which is rebuilt every 20 years down to the last splinter. Then they recycle the timber to other shrines and temples.

CG: Who will maintain the Millennial Clock?

SB: We see three really interesting design problems: One is how to design a clock that will last 10,000 years. The next is how to design a 10,000-year library, which is a very large part of the project. The third and perhaps most difficult aspect is creating an enduring institution to take care of all this. Ideally it will be maintained by those alive at (continued on page 126)
Clock, which is very specific. Whereas the Clock project will take decades, the Library will take centuries. The Library will be a living, growing, evolving entity.

CG: You were first known for creating the Whole Earth Catalog in the 1960s. Is this new project connected with what you've done in the past? Will the idea behind the Whole Earth Catalog continue in the 21st century?

SB: Someone asked me the other day if I'd want to start the Whole Earth Catalog now and I said, "No, the Internet really is the new Whole Earth Catalog."

Meanwhile, Whole Earth Review [formerly Co-Evolution Quarterly] carries on better than ever with Peter Wasson as editor. So that's alive and well.

The main connection I see is the actual photograph of the Earth, which really transformed things and became an icon of the ecology movement. Earth Day started a year after the first photograph was published.

CG: Please describe the idea behind the Global Business Network.

SB: The Global Business Network is a research and consulting operation based in Emeryville, California which helps large organizations think very seriously about the future — corporations, governments, non-profits. The major tool is called "scenario planning," although there are many other devices which have emerged. Scenario planning is the opposite of making predictions. An organization, facilitated by the GBN, thinks quite seriously about three or four different worlds it may be facing over the next 10 to 20 years, and developing a rather robust, adaptive and alert strategy that would work in any of those possible worlds. It's not betting the company on one idea of what might happen. That turns out to be beneficial in many respects, but the one that most intrigues me is that once the organization has a rigorous way of envisioning the future, they can't help but step up to greater acts of responsibility.

For example, when we think of what the work force is going to be like for this company in 20 years, they have to think seriously about education. What they do now in regard to education will pay off in the future. Similarly, this includes a company's relationship to their industry and the region where they are located. It is a way of stepping out in front of current events and taking them seriously, but not too seriously. It's also a way of paying attention to current events in a different way, without getting blinded by the obvious. The Internet is a good example of this, for example, the effect of amazon.com on the publishing industry.

CG: What do you think the Earth will be like 100 years from now? 1,000 years from now? 10,000 years from now?

SB: The Earth is a very dynamic planet. It's going to be very different in a hundred years. In a thousand years, it will be completely different. In ten thousand years, it will be completely different again. This is the thing that keeps me interested in what we're doing.