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

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 moun-
tain. 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, pow-
ered only by the heat of the sun.

It ticks just once per year.

If this sounds like some techno-futur-
ist'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 pas-
enger pigeons back to life.

Some of the projects may seem far-
dated, but it's a refreshing change from
the rest of Silicon Valley, where the domi-
nant 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 deliv-
ered to your car.

Waiting times are continually falling,
and everything promises to get to the cus-
tomer 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.

Lest the immediacy of the experience be
diminished for the absent owner, the ser-
vice 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 per-
spective. Ten thousand years, the span of
the clock, marks roughly the time that has
passed since the beginning of "civilisa-
tion", 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,
evacuation 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 bartop.

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 engi-
neering 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 engi-
neering — 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.