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The time of our lives

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With academics' attention span shrinking daily, how can a long-term perspective be restored? With a 10,000-year library and a clock that ticks once a year, bongs once a century and has a cuckoo that comes out once a millennium. Tim Cornwell reports

In the long run, we are all dead. In the short run, complains Stewart Brand, our civilisation has acquired a "pathologically short attention span". Brand acknowledges that universities, libraries and museums are among the few institutions in the late 20th century trying to take a long view - but even in these communities the advent of the internet has telescoped people's sense of time.

Stone tablets survive thousands of years, acid-free paper a few hundred, magnetic tape begins to deteriorate after five. The internet itself is only a few years young. Brand was there at the beginning - in about 1984, when he founded the pioneering electronic chat network, the Whole Earth Electronic Link.

"The trend might be coming from the acceleration of technology, the short-horizon perspective of market-driven economics ... or the distractions of personal multi-tasking," Brand writes. "All are on the increase. Some sort of balancing corrective to the short-sightedness is needed - some mechanism or myth that encourages the long view and the taking of long-term responsibility, where 'the long term' is measured at least in centuries."

To restore our perspective on time, Brand and a group of like-minded thinkers propose to build a 10,000-year clock and a complementary library. The idea was first aired in 1993 by computer wunderkind Daniel Hillis, former academic at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who observed that the future had been shrinking his entire life.

"It is time for us to start a long-term project that gets people thinking past the mental barrier of the millennium," Hillis, now Disney fellow at Disney Imagineering, wrote. "I would like to propose a large (think Stonehenge) mechanical clock, powered by seasonal temperature changes. It ticks once a year, bongs once a century and the cuckoo comes out every millennium."

In the accompanying 10,000-year library, time capsules and future mail - letters set for delivery hundreds or thousands of years hence - will compare present to future, what we predict will happen against what does.

Hillis, famous for once building a computer from a children's building set that could play noughts and crosses, designed the mechanics of the clock. It has a binary-digital mechanism, boasting a precision of one day in 20,000 years. A prototype was unveiled at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland in January. The suggested location for the real thing is in an underground cave in the American high desert, the kind of geologically stable, low-humidity environment favoured for nuclear dumps.

The clock/library's backers, one hopes, are not serious in marking millennia with a Swiss cuckoo. In fact, it might be

hard to take the Clock of the Long Now altogether seriously if it were not for the people behind it. Brand, who runs his Global Business Network from a beached fishing boat in Sausalito, California, has gathered some formidable intellectual backers with access to the sort of funds that could put the project in motion.

The Long Now Foundation list of sponsors includes singer Peter Gabriel, Roxy Music co-founder Brian Eno, Douglas Carlston, long-time chief executive of Broderbund Software, a magna cum laude from the Harvard Aiken Computation Laboratory, Wired magazine editor Kevin Kelly and the outspoken Lotus Development Corp co-founder Mitch Kapor. Esther Dyson, dubbed the "Queen of the internet", and author of the computer software industry's most influential newsletter, is another key player.

For the clock, and the library, of the Long Now are intended to be much more than a clock and a library. They must promise to outlast global warming, a nuclear winter and presumably the human race. As Brand says, they promote long-term responsibility and accountability. "After an encounter with the clock," he writes, "a visitor should be able to declare with feeling, 'Whew. Time! And me in it.'"