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## O'Brien: A gadget to help us consider the long view

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The last time I talked to Alexander Rose, executive director of The Long Now Foundation, was in late 1999. We were on the cusp of a new century, and I wanted to chat about the meaning of time and how technology had quickened the pulse of our age.

The Long Now Foundation, created by a group of high-tech superstars, had announced plans to build a clock designed to last 10,000 years in a limestone cliff in eastern Nevada. The foundation's mission is to find ways to inspire people to shift toward thinking about the longer term.

"The idea is we're building a clock to keep track of time on a much slower scale," Rose told me at the time. "It's really being supported by the high-tech community. They realize the dangers of living too fast."

The clock would need to be constructed to survive thousands of years. It would need to be designed to display time over that almost unimaginable span. And it would need to be engineered to keep running all that time, with an energy source that would not run out. And just as important, it needed to excite the imagination of people and generate conversations about what the world might look like at such a distant horizon.

It was audacious. And I loved the romanticism of it.

But that was a decade ago. And when a friend passed along an e-mail Rose had sent about an upcoming event at the Long Now Foundation, it got me wondering about where those plans stood. So I called him up, and he invited me to stop by the foundation's office in Fort Mason, near the San Francisco waterfront.

The foundation's modest office also contains a small museum that's open to the public and hosts a dazzling display of miniature versions or prototypes of some of the projects. In one corner is an early version of the Rosetta Disk, part of the foundation's Rosetta Project, which aims to archive all human languages in the foundation's 10,000 Year Library. The languages are being micro-etched onto nickel disks, with clues for translating them, so all someone will need to read them in the future is a really, really powerful microscope. No software, no platform, no booting up.

Rose, a lanky, bald fellow, greets me in the museum. Before joining the foundation, he was an industrial designer who had kicked around several high-tech companies. But for someone immersed in an industry bent on racing toward the future, he had grown disenchanted about the direction that technology was taking humanity. As time seemed to be accelerating, thinking, particularly about the future, seemed to be growing shallower. Objects and products were being built for the here and now, for quick consumption, rather than to endure.

"I had kind of written off the future before this," Rose said.

A decade later, Rose says his optimism has been renewed. By embracing a job devoted to long-term thinking, he has met legions of people eager to hear that message.

That might sound counterintuitive in this day and

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age.

At times, the signs of short-term thinking are all around us. There was the recent budget disaster in Sacramento, where legislators chose the short-term approach of slashing education spending over finding a way to invest in the next generation. There's the financial calamity, where a whole spectrum of bad actors chose to revel in the short-term benefits of a housing bubble rather than consider the long-term implications when it would inevitably burst. And throughout Silicon Valley, it remains nearly impossible to find companies that will look beyond their next quarterly earnings.

But I'd be a hypocrite to blame only bureaucrats, governments or other organizations. The lure of the now over the later is a central human dilemma. Individually, we struggle every day between the tension of what we want in the moment versus what we know will benefit us in the long run.

At a time like this, it would be easy to label as frivolous a project like The 10,000 Year Clock. But in fact, I'd argue that we need something like this more than ever to fire our imaginations and rethink our priorities.

Alexander says he sees signs that the dynamic is changing, over issues such as climate change, where people are beginning to think about the kind of world they want to leave their heirs. Even the financial crisis has prompted wide-ranging discussions about the legacy the budget deficit will leave.

And then, of course, there was the election of President Barack Obama, and signs of hope for supporters like Rose, that government would pivot toward investing in programs and projects that would provide benefits for generations, in the way the creation of the national highway system did in

the 1950s.

"You always see fits and starts in a movement," Rose said. "I would like to think the election was more about the future than the past."

What then, of the clock? Things have continued to progress in the past decade. After initially focusing on a site in Nevada, the foundation purchased a second piece of land near Van Horn, Texas, owned by [Amazon.com](#) founder [Jeff Bezos](#), who has also pledged \$10 million to build the clock. For a variety of logistical reasons, the foundation is now focused on installing the clock at the Texas site.

Testing is under way of the ground for stability, and construction could begin in a few years.

The 60-foot clock will be built underground, in a place reachable only by foot. Rose said most of the engineering challenges have been solved. The clock will have giant pendulums made of dense tungsten metal, star-shaped Geneva Wheels will ring the clocks' bells, enormous weights falling slowly will power the clock. And it will be built in a clock tower with winding stairs so people can explore all aspects of the monument.

It has been called part sculpture, and part machine, and that strikes me as about right.

"It not only has to work," Rose said, "it has to intrigue people."

For me, it already has. As I exit the foundation and pass by the displays, I find myself imagining what it might be like to make the trek to visit the clock with my grandchildren. It's enough to leave me feeling just the tiniest bit more optimistic than when I walked in.

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