

Inside The World's Most Intriguing (And Probably Only) Futurist Bar

Sip a drink and watch a chalkboard-scrawling robot do its thing as you engage with the Long Now Foundation's ode to the future.

The Long Now Foundation supports a 10,000-year clock project, a digital library of human languages, and research to bring back species from extinction. It's not exactly your typical foundation. Since setting up shop at its current location in San Francisco's Fort Mason Center in 2006, Long Now has offered visitors a peek at its work in a small on-site museum. But the office/museum space was kind of boring. It certainly wasn't representative of Long Now's focus on futurism and long-term thinking.

After years of fundraising, the foundation has transformed its formerly nondescript space into a combination bar, coffee shop, museum, presentation space, and office, complete with Brian Eno artwork and a giant chalkboard that will soon be used by a chalkboard-writing robot.

The first floor of the space, dubbed the Interval, is fairly small (there's enough seating for about 60 people), but floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, along with lots of natural light, give it an expansive feel. "It has a highbrow whimsy, inspired by some of the smaller French museums in Paris," says Jeffrey McGrew, founder of Because We Can, the architecture firm behind the Long Now redesign.

The Orrery, a display that features all the planets visible from Earth, was in the back of the old Long Now museum space, but Because We Can moved it front and center. It's now one of the first things you see upon walking into the space. "We really wanted to have Long Now's message



to be really upfront," says McGrew.

Most of Long Now's exhibits, old and new, are in front of the new space. The Chime Generator, a mechanical computer that creates a different bell sequence every day for 10,000 years, has been turned into a table for patrons to use (a larger version of the Chime Generator is planned for The Clock of the Long Now, a clock inside a mountain in Texas that will last for 10,000 years). A "cabinet of curiosities" displays a prototype of the Rosetta Disk, an archive of human languages developed by the foundation.

A prominent shelf in one of the bookcases features two display-mounted Passenger Pigeons, on loan from the Royal Ontario Museum. This is symbolic; Long Now's Revive and Restore project is working to bring the Passenger Pigeon back from extinction. The bird has been gone since 1914.

Near the entrance, there is a giant blackboard on the wall, unused for now. Soon, a "chalkboard robot" will draw images and words on it; the robot can read Illustrator files, so the possibilities for robot art are endless.

"We knew we wanted a chalkboard robot, and it turns out there is a guy that makes them," says Danielle Engelman, director of programs at Long Now.

One of the biggest projects living in the Interval is the Manual for



Civilization, a collection of 3,500 books deemed by the Long Now community to be most essential for sustaining or rebuilding civilization (hence, those floor to ceiling bookshelves). The books are split into four categories: mechanics of civilization (i.e. midwifery, smelting ore, financial systems), a canon for civilization (major works of art, like Shakespeare), long-term thinking and futurism (historical perspectives on the future), and rigorous science fiction (featuring in-depth assessments of societal structures and hard science).

So far, there are about 1,000 books for the Manual on the Interval's shelves. Engelman estimates that just 70% to 80% will make the final cut. Experts will help with the final decisions. Local sci-fi bookseller Borderlands Books, for example, has helped Long Now work through criteria for the books (i.e. no highlighted passages, but writing in the margins is fine).

Once the library is complete, Long Now members will be able to nominate books—but they have to vote one out for every book voted in. The entire Manual will be available on the Internet Archive, and a docent will guide visitors through the in-person library.

Once they're done looking around, most visitors to the Interval will wind up sitting at the bar, which serves coffee and alcohol. Bottles hanging in the rafters contain special "Long Now Gin," reserved for members who donated at least \$1,500 to the Interval's crowdfunding campaign. The gin is sourced from juniper berries found on a plot of land that Long Now owns in Nevada. St. George Spirits turned the berries into gin—and it's really, really tasty. Members can't bring their gin bottles home, though.



They stay at the Interval, inspired by the Japanese bottle keep tradition—where bar patrons can store bottles of alcohol under their name.

For members who abstain from alcohol, \$1,500 also buys 15 to 20 servings of precious Pu-erh tea from 1989, prepared with help from local tea hub Samovar.

The Interval, in a sense, like a museum and guidebook for the future. But it doesn't neglect its roots. The space was originally the blacksmith and machine shop for the Fort Mason complex, and you can see a homage to this history if you look close enough. "We didn't introduce a lot of modern materials or extra color. The concrete floors have scars visible from the machine shop," says McGrew. There is also, Engelman points out, a machine-age aesthetic to the Interval's light fixtures.

Want to check out the Interval? It's open every day, with events mostly happening in the evening.

[Photos: The Long Now Foundation]



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