

The Million Dollar Clock

The Corpus Clock has a hundred and one little interesting factoids about everything from its design to its unveiling to its message — and it's just hanging out on a street corner in Cambridge.

Alex Cannella, Associate Editor

If somebody's going to throw a million dollars and five years towards constructing a single clock, you'd figure a project of that scale might come with its own building just to house it. But bucking expectations, the Corpus Clock fits comfortably in a display case on a street corner. You could walk right past it on Corpus Christi College's campus and barely even blink, much less guess the clock's cost.

That's hardly the only way the Corpus Clock bucks convention. A grasshopper escapement clock with a literal grasshopper statue from hell carved on top, it tells time without the use of hands. Instead, the clock's gold-plated face has a number of blue LED backlights and dozens of little doors in it. As each second, minute or hour ticks by, the corresponding doors flip open to allow the backlight to shine through. Instead of watching the second hand tick by, you can watch these blue lights orbit around the clock's surface. One quirk, however, is that it doesn't tell time precisely. It's only accurate once every five minutes.



The Corpus Clock's innards, as well as the Chronophage that sits atop it. Photo by Cmglee (CC BY 3.0)

And perhaps wildest of all, this entire contraption works through almost purely mechanical means. It would have been incredibly easy to do things the other way around — to just slap those little LED lights all over the clock's surface like a carnival game and have them light up one at a time. But instead, the Corpus Clock goes the extra mile, creating the same effect with its more complicated system of opening doors and lights. And it would have been almost as easy to just have those doors run on electrical means, but only the light itself is powered by a single motor. Everything else is pure mechanical work.

And all of it is built up around one of the world's largest grasshopper escapements, which is on full display. In yet another of one of the Corpus Clock's many quirks, its guts are openly exposed — everything from the escapement to the escape wheel it interacts with are right on the face of the clock for any curious onlooker to study.

The glamour doesn't stop with the clock's lavish design, however. There was also a consequential amount of pageantry surrounding it. Professor Stephen Hawking was a guest of honor at the clock's unveiling. It's been dubbed "The Strangest Clock in the World." TIME had an even more glowing name for it: the 48th best invention of 2008.

Though perhaps not the most rigorous timekeeper, the Corpus Clock is a work of art, both in mechanical ingenuity and in aesthetic form. And like a lot of art, it has an intended message. Its designer, John Taylor, had a lot of different things to say about his creation, but he often focused on that grasshopper on top.

The Chronophage, it's called. Time Eater. Striding forward against the turning of the escape wheel, each step marking a second, and opening and closing its jaw repeatedly, devouring time itself as the seconds and minutes tick past. And beneath it, a line from the Bible: "the world passeth away, and the lust thereof." Taylor said that he intended the clock to be "terrifying," to fit the image of time as a voracious, unfriendly creature.

And such a thing is just hanging out on a street corner. A work of art, ambitious in both its engineering and its intended artistic meaning, with a hundred interesting little facts about it, just chilling on the street. To the casual observer just looking at it, most of Corpus Clock's groundbreaking facets are almost invisible despite literally being worn on the outside of its frame, but once you do a little research, it makes sense how this could be a million dollar clock. ⚙️