

The Museum That Never Was

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Prologue

In the mid-1990s, in a small community in the fjords of Western Norway, a long-held dream was taking shape. It was a dream born out of local pride and powered by water.

The plans for a large museum on the edge of the village of Sand in the valley of Suldal had been under way for more than a decade at this point. *Norsk vassdragsmuseum* (the Norwegian Hydropower Museum) would tell the story of the waterways and the role of hydropower in the development of the local community and was to be built near Sandsfossen, a local waterfall and an historic and geographical meeting point for both the region and the village. The project received wide attention and was envisioned as a landmark for Suldal, the history of hydropower and Norwegian architectural history.¹

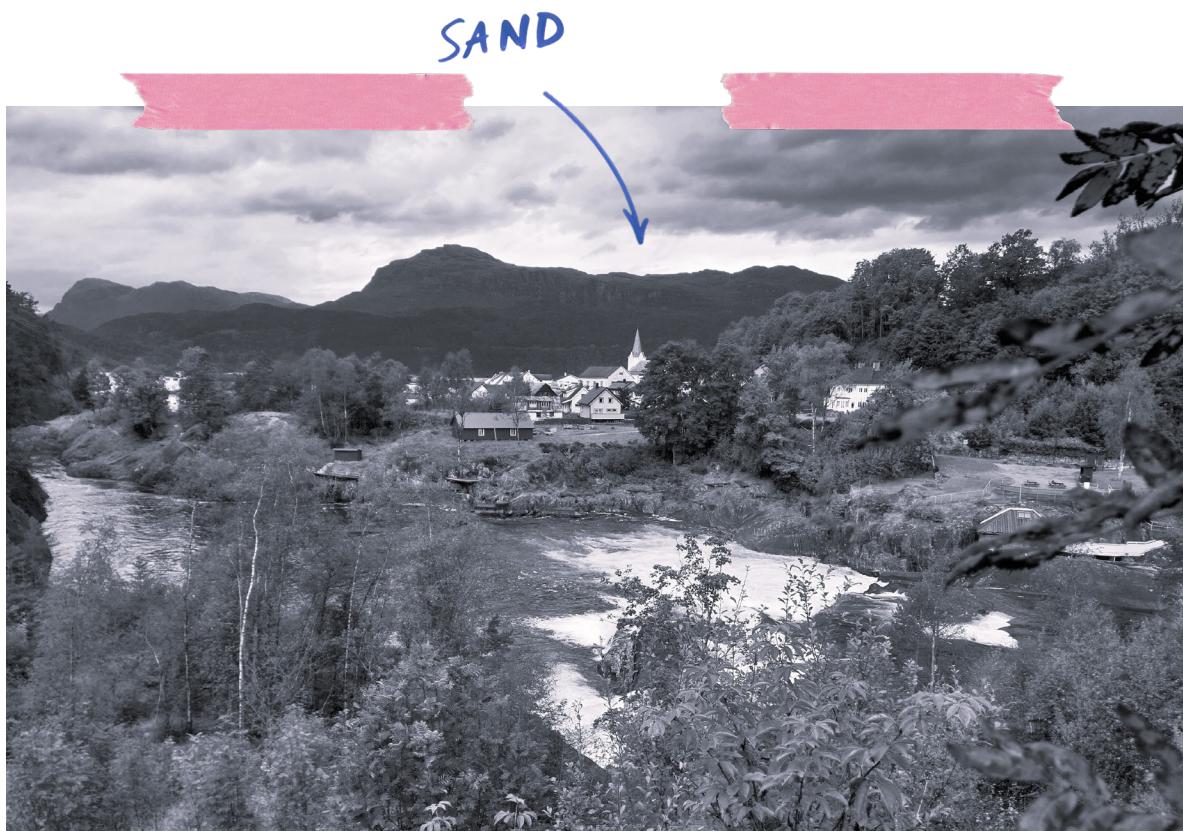


Photo: Marie Bønløkke

In the previous decades, Suldal had gone through its own kind of industrial revolution. The community had developed from a collection of scattered farms along a narrow valley to become an important part of the Norwegian energy network. Now, as construction and development had come to an end, this community wanted to tell its story and preserve its history. The Archivist at the local museum had spent years collecting artefacts and

1 E.g. Turid Furdal, "Enno mogleg å få til eit vassdragsmuseum", *Stavanger Aftenblad*, 25 September 1995, p. 6.

memories. The new museum was to be both monument and mirror: an architectural landmark and a community centre housing a museum, a library and a stage. The chosen site for the museum lay just east of the village centre, at the edge of Sandsfossen. The project would bring this area, known locally as Hedl, closer to the urban landscape across the river.

In 1994, architect Sverre Fehn, one of the most lauded Norwegian architects of the era, was awarded first prize in the architectural competition for *Norsk vassdragsmuseum*. His building would rest against the mountainside, its concrete wings opening out toward the falls. Visitors would approach across a bridge and along a curved path, gradually ascending to the museum itself. The project was approved, and a brochure declared that the new museum would open its doors only a few years later. The local Hotelier was looking forward to a surge in visitor numbers.

However, as the project advanced, cost estimates swelled, and opposing opinions began forming in the municipal council. For every voice that spoke of pride and legacy, another warned of debt and overreach. When the proposal was debated by the council in September 1995, the project was voted down. What was to have been a national museum building, designed by one of Norway's leading architects, was stopped in its tracks as an unrealised opportunity.

One councillor later described it as the lowest point in his career.² Others, who had campaigned for the museum, claimed that the Mayor himself had killed the project by casting his tiebreaking vote against it. In the years that followed, that story took root: what could have been was ultimately brought down by a single decision taken by a single man, in a single moment of uncertainty. Whether or not this story was true became almost irrelevant. The myth emerged of the museum that never was, a story that became stronger than the one supported by documentary evidence stored away in the basement archive of the local village museum.

This is microhistory. It unfolds not through grand causes but through marginal documents, overlooked details and contradictions between memory and record.³ Can both coexist?

The ghost of the museum never entirely faded. It lingered in local conversation, mentioned with a shrug or a sigh, part nostalgia, part embarrassment or resentment, depending on your perspective.

In the decades that followed, the unbuilt museum acquired a peculiar aura. It became a symbol of thwarted ambition and a monument to the fragility of a collective vision. Why had this small community been unable to succeed in realising this project? Why were the main protagonists unable to agree on what had happened?

2 Personal communication.

3 Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore, 1992), 96-125.

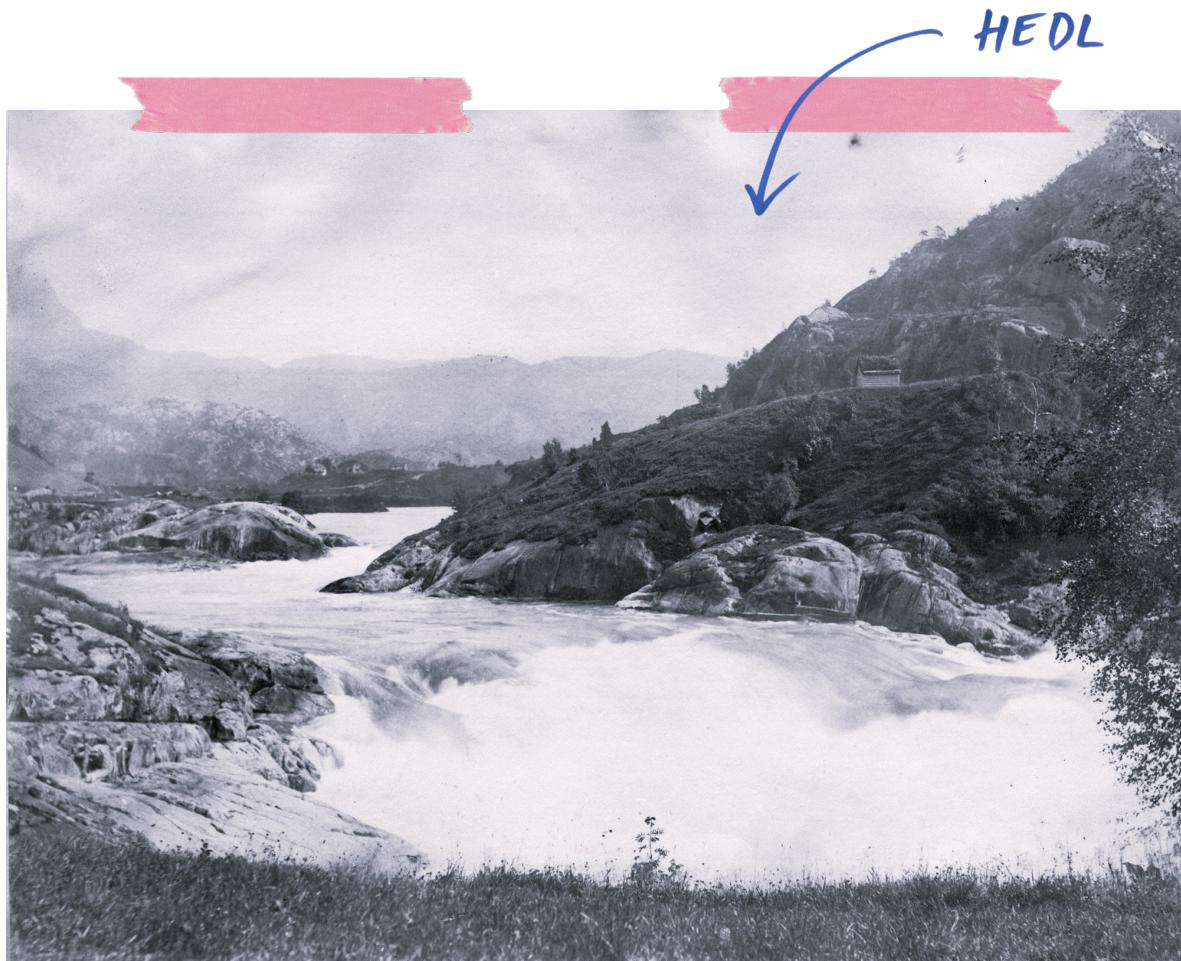


Photo: Alice Archer / Ryfylkemuseet.

Act 1: Opening – Who Killed the Museum?

It began in the spring of 2025 with one of those seemingly innocuous statements: “Someone should do something about this.” But as so often happens, that someone ends up being you, or in this case us: Marie, a historian at the local museum, and Gunhild, curator and hotel owner. So now we are preparing a small pop-up exhibition to mark thirty years since the dream of *Norsk vassdragsmuseum* was extinguished. The idea seems clear enough. If we can retrieve a few drawings, perhaps a letter or some newspaper clippings, we can remind the community of its former ambitions and get on with the work of formulating new plans for disseminating the history and significance of hydropower in Suldal.

The day we set out, the air is unusually bright. It is summer, and the sun is pouring through the large windows of the meeting room at the local museum of cultural history, Ryfylkemuseet, reflecting across the table where four brown boxes stand waiting. Outside, the sound of children playing on the beach below mix with the chatter of tourists passing by or locals standing on the quayside with their fishing rods and the catch of the day. It is the quintessential Norwegian village idyll.

We fold back the flaps on the cardboard boxes, take out the archival folders and begin to read.

At first, it is the ordinary stuff of a project archive: board minutes, design plans, invoices and letters of congratulation or complaint. Several internal memos are sprinkled with poetry and stray quotations. We are struck by a short sentence that appears to be a quote: “My interest is in the future because I am going to spend the rest of my life there.”⁴



Photo: Gunhild Moe

But somewhere between a stapled memo and a folded brochure, the atmosphere changes.

We thought we knew the story of the failed museum project. It has been told in the same way for decades: the Mayor’s casting vote had killed the project. Simple, final and satisfying. However, the council minutes on the table between us tell another tale. The vote, recorded in stark typewriting, had not been tied. No casting vote by the mayor had ever been needed. The project, it appears, had died by other means.

“Then who killed it?” Marie asks. The question is half joke, half realisation.

As Arthur Conan Doyle’s detective Sherlock Holmes exclaimed, “The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes.” Maybe this is one of them. We read on. The more we look, the less the mythologised story makes sense. The evidence is contradictory. A newspaper article hails the project as “a labour of love” and attributes the phrase to the very mayor later accused of destroying it. Another clipping quotes the local museum’s board opposing the plan, arguing that the scale was excessive and the focus wrong.

As we pull out large stacks of paper from one of the boxes, a small envelope slips out. On the front the name “Jon Moe” is written, in fading ink.

“Oh, that’s my grandad,” says Gunhild.



Photo: Marie Bønløkke

Inside are photographs of the Norwegian Glacier Museum in faraway Fjærland, also designed by Sverre Fehn, and of Gunhild's grandmother visiting it. Suldal is a tiny community, and the documents of the table before us are full of names of people who are still around, and still around us.⁵ We find ourselves entangled within the very story we are trying to tell as the private becomes public in the archive.⁶ But what is that story?

What had perished with the museum that never was was not merely a construction project but a shared vision: the idea that Suldal might, through Sverre Fehn's architectural vision, take its place in history. We thought we knew what had happened, but as we read our way through the archive it becomes clear that the process was much more complicated and contentious. This is the blinding moment of exposure, where meaning and "exhibiting" is only in the process of being constituted.⁷ Have we inadvertently (or inevitably) stumbled into a trove of buried village secrets?

It is all starting to feel like a true-crime mystery. Someone, or something, killed the museum, and if it wasn't the Mayor, then who and what? We know that there was conflict here. We know that there were things that had not been fully dealt with in all the years since the project capsized. That is how we got interested in the project in the first place. Among the official records and memoranda are angry letters, complaints and accusations. On a yellow Post-it note, in green ink, someone has scribbled: "You are the only one in Suldal worth talking to."

Act 2: Investigation – Curating Facts

The unbuilt museum lies at the centre of this entire investigation. What would it have been, had it come into being, and why does it not exist? These questions follow us through every box, every folder. As we sift through the Ryfylkemuseet archive, we are also searching for Sverre Fehn's plans and drawings, but they are nowhere to be found.

The boxes contain newspaper clippings, foundation documents, political correspondence and minutes from board meetings. Plenty of paper, a host of opinions, but no drawings. We know that they do exist, as a few are available online in the National Museum's collection. Others appear in articles and books on Fehn. But they are not here.

When the drawings finally surface, they do so in a different corner of the museum's archive altogether, stored separately from the facts of what happened. Perhaps that separation is itself a clue. We came looking for the story of a museum and architectural masterpiece that never came to be. What we discover is that Fehn's building is not the only character in the tale of *Norsk vassdragsmuseum*; indeed, it might not even be the main one.

5 Cf. W.H. Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on the Detective Story, by an Addict", *Harper's Magazine* (May 1948), 407 (406-412).

6 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago, 1998).

7 Doreen Mende, "Three Short Takes on the Curatorial", in *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, ed. Jean-Paul Martinon (London, 2013), 106.



Sverre Fehn. Ur. Konkurranse om Vassdragsmuseum, Suldal. Foto: Nasjonalmuseet / Frode Larsen.

We meet up to plan the exhibition at Ryfylkemuseet, at the same table where those brown boxes first stood. This time, the table is covered in notebooks, sketches and an improbable number of phones.

An air of chaos is setting in. Gunhild is taking a phone call, Marie is answering emails mid-sentence, as another phone rings somewhere. But between every interruption, the exhibition begins to take form.

“What if we do it all by hand?” Gunhild wonders suddenly.

Marie looks up from her notes. “Handwritten texts?”

“Yes. It will be faster, cheaper, and … more human. It will make it clear this is not a finished story. It is ongoing.”

With serious time constraints and a budget that barely covers the cost of renting the exhibition space at the local cultural centre, our choices are few but freeing. We follow the lead of Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot: “Instinct is a marvellous thing. It can neither be explained nor ignored.”⁸



MUSEET SOM IKKJE BLEI

Pop-up-utstilling på
Kulturhuset i Suldal
1.-11. september



Ryfylkemuseet



KULTURHUSET i Suldal

Prosjektet er støtta av Suldal kommune

Photo: Ryfylkemuseet

We agree on the essentials: prints and handwritten texts, mounted directly on the wall with masking tape in blue and pink. The introduction to the exhibition will be a timeline of the history of *Norsk vassdragsmuseum* with orange strings connecting years and event. The whole setup is not all that different from the evidence boards of TV murder mysteries.

We sketch a loose timeline, display the architectural drawings on the walls and leave clip-pings, brochures and other documents lined up on tables as an open archival display.

Some documents felt too personal to share. We live in a small, relatively closed community. This is a compromise that we are not entirely at ease with. The point was to get the real story of *Norsk vassdragsmuseum* out there, but there is a limit to how many feathers we want to ruffle. What matters is giving form to what is already out there and to create a space that will engage people and archive in discussion. Following Irit Rogoff, we view the archive and exhibition as sites of risk-taking.⁹

Act 3: Revelation – or Curating History

Our timeline is an account based entirely on fact. According to the protagonist in Josephine Tey's classic historical detective story *The Daughter of Time*, history or truth is "not in the accounts but in the account books".¹⁰ Still, the accounts do matter. They are the stories that the people of Suldal have told themselves for a generation and that have created the lingering ghost of *Norsk vassdragsmuseum*. It might be "a capital mistake to theorize before you have all the evidence", as Sherlock Holmes put it,¹¹ but the deeper we dig, the clearer it becomes that the real story lies in the people, the decisions and the silences that shaped what did or did not happen here.

Our aim now is to figure out not just *what* happened, but *why* it happened. It is a lofty ambition to try and set history right, but it might be the only way to put the past to rest and clear a path towards the future. We take our cue from Sverre Fehn himself, as we decide "that only by manifestation of the present, you can make the past speak. If you try to run after it, you will never reach it."¹²

To make the past speak, we plan the exhibition as a space for dialogue and schedule a number of events throughout the first week of September to activate it. The archives cannot give us a complete account, but perhaps the community can.

9 Irit Rogoff, "The Expanding Field", *Tishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 13, no. 2 (2014), 13.

10 Josephine Tey, *The Daughter of Time* (London, 2022), 103.

11 Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet: A Novel* (London, 1898), 33-34.

12 Sverre Fehn, Pritzker Price acceptance speech, 31 May 1997, Bilbao.



Photo: Gunhild Moe

We organise our exhibition space as a place of inquiry and participation. By opening the space for collective investigation, memory and discussion, we shift the exhibition from representation to participation.¹³ The facts of the timeline stand, but by opening it to expansion we try not to display the past as settled.

If this exhibition is an investigation, we must use it to gather testimony and test our hypotheses. We document everything and begin writing this essay as the exhibition and investigation unfolds. In this sense, the exhibition becomes a method for approaching uncertainty, and a way to collectively work through a contested narrative, not necessarily by resolving it but by exposing its complexity.

Act 4: Confrontation – Real Men Do Cry

The exhibition opens on a Monday at noon. There is a good crowd despite the lunchtime opening. Most of them are pensioners, and there is a lot of “Oh, I remember this” going around.

13 Harma Staal, Miriam Rasch and Joanneke Gijsen, ed., *Hands on Research for Artists, Designers & Educators* (Eindhoven, 2025), 40-48.



Photo: Gunhild Moe

The main event of the opening is a round-table discussion with three men who all figure heavily in the documents we have retrieved from the archive, and which are now out on display in the exhibition room. The Archivist, the Hotelier, and the Mayor are all more than seventy years old now, but in 1995, when they were involved in the planning of *Norsk vassdragsmuseum*, they were around our age, or a little older. We have invited a local woman to moderate the conversation. She is too young to really remember or know anything about the project. Her curiousness mirrors our own.

All three men, when asked, willingly agree to participate in the conversation. The Mayor says he probably has a different version than the Archivist.

“Good,” we reply. “We want to hear the different versions.”



Photo: Judith Littlehamar / Omega365 Design

The Mayor also asks if we have talked to the young woman who worked as Project Manager for the museum. "She really was very involved; you should talk to her." We have searched but found no contact details. She seems to have completely vanished.

The Archivist's account reaches further back than the others. He tells us that for him, the plans for a museum dedicated to the history of local hydropower began as early as 1981. At this time, he had initiated the collection of objects and interviews from the workers who had been part of the construction of the massive dams and power installations in the previous decades.

The conversation quickly takes on the air of a therapy session or grief counselling. As we move through the five stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, we add a few new puzzle pieces to the story of what had happened and why.

There are no dramatic revelations, but confronted with his role in ending the project, the Mayor sets the record straight. He did not cast the deciding vote. This, the Hotelier quietly reveals to us after the event, is news to him. He publicly laments the loss of opportunities that a project the size of *Norsk vassdragsmuseum* would have entailed.



Photo: Marie Bønløkke / Ryfylkemuseet

“Real men don’t cry,” he added, “but tears came to my eyes when I heard that there would be no museum.” He had always thought that the Mayor had indeed killed the museum, and he seems relieved that he had got it wrong.

The Archivist seems to view the failure to realise the dream of *Norsk vassdragsmuseum* as both a defeat and a relief. When asked directly what he thinks went wrong at the end, he suggests that the project had taken a form that was a far cry from what he had originally envisioned and had hoped for.

The main difficulty in piecing together the narrative is that each of the protagonists remembers what suits him. But getting these competing narratives out in the open means that they might converge and not merely be made to coexist.



Photo: Gunhild Moe

What becomes clear during the opening is that the exhibition as an investigation is also a method for dialogue and an invocation of the un-archivable.¹⁴ By placing documents and drawings side by side with real human memories, new conversations are creating new stories that might help put to rest the ghost of the museum that never was.

Act 5: Consequences – Crossing the Bridge

As part of any good crime investigation, we need to survey the crime scene. Wednesday just after lunch we set out for Hedl, the plateau above Sandsfossen that was to be the site of the museum. It is overcast, one of those grey but not quite rainy days when the clouds descend all the way to the bottom of the valley. We are joined by the Headmaster and the Designer, two witnesses to the death of the museum and its aftermath.

We cross the river at Øvre Høse, just a few steps away from where Sverre Fehn envisioned a bridge leading to his new museum.

“We never used to come here as kids,” says the Headmaster. “Before the bridge, this area was relatively inaccessible to most of the local population.”¹⁵

The bridge in question is Høsebrua, a pedestrian bridge, designed by Rintala Eggertsson Architects and opened to the public in 2013.

As we walk, we reflect on how other architectural projects came to occupy the empty space left behind by the museum that never was. The cultural centre, which now takes up a central space in the village, would never have happened if the museum had been built. The swimming pool, finished only in 2019, became a prestige project for Suldal. Would that have been the case if the village already had an architectural landmark in Sverre Fehn’s museum?

These projects did not replace the museum, but they filled some of the functions it was meant to hold: a library and stage, and a meeting place for the community. It is a reminder that even the things that do not happen have consequences.

We follow the steep gravel path up the hill. Here we find a sign commemorating the museum that never was. It says something about the status of this project, that nearly 20 years later someone thought it appropriate to erect a commemorative sign to mark the spot telling the history of something that never was. It acts like a museum label with no corresponding artefact.

¹⁴ Nora Stenfeldt, “Museums as Spectral Infrastructures”, in *Symbolic Machines: Institutional Transformation through Exhibitions*, ed. Pernille Lyslund Matzen and Jacob Lund (Aarhus, 2025), 28.

¹⁵ Personal communication.



Photo: Gunhild Moe

We make our way along an overgrown path and through a small thicket. We are now standing in what could have been the stage and auditorium of Sverre Fehn's museum.

“Imagine if the museum had stood here,” the Designer says. “None of this would look the same. The whole area would have looked different.”

We stand for a moment, taking in the thought of what could have been.

He nods toward the opposite bank. “But you must remember,” he says, “Not everyone wanted the museum to happen, or this area to be developed.”

The river has a long history of private interests, all the way back to the medieval period, in fact.¹⁶

“Who?” we ask.

“Landowners, conservationists and the county governor. Many objections to the project were raised along the way, but none of them strong enough to slow things down.”

16 Ernst Berge Drange, *Sand: Gardar og folk III. Sand og strandstaden Sandslandet* (Suldal, 2000), 620-663.



Photo: Gunhild Moe

This introduction of additional and hitherto unknown suspects is both confusing and satisfying. Ever since we knew that the story of the Mayor's casting vote was just a myth, we have been looking for the combination of forces that brought down the dream of *Norsk vassdragsmuseum*. Why was no one willing to stand up for the plans when it really mattered? The question of rising costs was always a little too neat. It is never just one thing.

We stand in silence for a moment. We take in the surroundings of the museum that never was behind and around us, and the river far below. The clouds remain low, pressing against the edges of the clearing, partly obscuring the view.

“So, who killed the museum?” the Headmaster finally asks.

“I am starting to think,” says Gunhild, as we turn to walk back, “that this might not be the right question at all.”

The walk through the crime scene has put things in perspective. While searching through the archives, designing and setting up the exhibition, centring the prints of Sverre Fehn's plans and looking for a “killer”, we have lost sight of one important fact. At Hedl, this truth was right before us: the museum that never was *was indeed never there*. It never happened.

Act 6: Closure – Into the Future

One morning, midway through the exhibition period, we arrive to find that nearly all the prints of Sverre Fehn's museum plans have fallen from the walls. For a brief, absurd moment we entertain the idea of sabotage. This started out as a crime story, after all.



Photo: Marie Bønløkke / Ryfylkemuseet

When it happens again a few days later, the mystery deepens but is quickly resolved. In this case the culprit is almost certainly the wind, swirling in through a door left ajar. And yet, the collapse becomes curiously symbolic. The failure of the proposed museum was the condition that allowed our little pop-up to happen, but this exhibition also had come to an end.



Photo: Marie Bønløkke / Ryfylkemuseet

Taking place in the evening, the exhibition's final event featured presentations of future projects related to the history and importance of hydropower in Suldal. Two central characters in the contemporary work, the Destination Manager and the Developer, had come to talk about the new plans to fill the void left by *Norsk vassdragsmuseum*.

It is an informal affair and a relatively small crowd. The Destination Manager opens the meeting by inviting us to share our relationship to hydropower in Suldal. Perhaps surprisingly, everyone has an interesting story to share. From their parents' first date to their own first summer job, everyone has a personal relationship to the history of hydropower and its continued presence in the landscape. One local who has grown up next to the river that was regulated as part of the system of dams and sluices states "I am the River". It feels like a powerful statement.

The rest of the presentations include future plans for disseminating the history and significance of hydropower in Suldal. The final presentation ends with the quote: "My interest is in the future because I am going to spend the rest of my life there."¹⁷

In the exhibition space on that final evening something happens. We might not all be in agreement about the merit of the museums that never was, or what the road ahead might hold. Yet we were all there. In a mutual space, sharing our individual experiences, linking them together and connecting them to a bigger story that we all have a stake in.

With our exhibition we have invited the audience in to explore these stories with us, and in doing so we have shared a space and learned from each other's stories. Maybe in the end it does not really matter why or how the *Norsk vassdragsmuseum* never came to be. What matters is that attempts were made to create something for the future. That future is still there, even if the building is not.

¹⁷ Herbert V. Prochnow, *The New Speaker's Treasury of Wit and Wisdom* (New York, 1958), under "Future". Quote by Charles F. Kettering.



JEG ER INTERESSETT
I FRAMTIDEN, FORDI
JEG KOMMER TIL
Å TILBRINGE RESTEN
AV MITT LIV DER.

Kettening

“My interest is in the future because I am going to spend the rest of my life there”. Photo: Ryfylkemuseet

Epilogue

A few weeks before Christmas, we meet in what had once been the first museum building in Sand, now converted into a café. There we speak with the wife of the Archivist. By now, we know that the myth surrounding *Norsk vassdragsmuseum* was just a myth, that the men we have spoken to through the exhibition period each had settled into their version of the truth, shaped as much by resignation as by memory. Perhaps the actual course of events had been too painful, or too complicated, to hold onto. The wife of the Archivist is able to provide us with an outside view and a historic depth to the whole affair. It appears that fights over museums and their location have a long history in Suldal.

On the way home from the café we decide to make a last attempt at finding some of the still missing pieces from the story of the Museum That Never Was. We call a now-retired woman who had previously worked as the rural development manager in Suldal, and when Gunhild asks her about the Mayor's role as villain, she offers a markedly different perspective from those we have heard before.

The museum affair, she explains, was a high-stakes political drama. The Mayor had wanted the museum to be built, despite the rapidly rising costs, but his own political party had not. They forced him into a position where, if the project were to move forward at all, he would have had to use his casting vote against the members of his own party.

This account reconciles the long-standing myth of the casting vote with the documentary record preserved in the archives.

Seen from this vantage point, the conclusion becomes difficult to ignore. No “crime” was committed – no museum was killed. What the investigation reveals is not a villainous act, but a collective decision, taken through an ordinary democratic process at a moment when ambition, risk and local responsibility could no longer be reconciled. The vote was not tied, so no casting vote was required. The mayor did not destroy the museum. In this sense, his vindication is not incidental, but central: a correction that allows responsibility to return to where it belonged – in the community.

The archival record makes clear that the question had never simply been whether to build a museum, but what kind of future Suldal was willing to underwrite, and at what cost. In retrospect, the decision not to proceed with the plans for *Norsk vassdragsmuseum* did not only close a door; it also opened others.

Other projects followed: a new cultural centre and library, a bridge, and a swimming pool, each assuming some of the functions the museum had been meant to hold. These were not substitutes for Sverre Fehn's building, but consequences of its absence.

If the myth of the death of the Museum That Never Was endured for so long, it was because it performed an important task. It offered a clear antagonist and a way of personifying an outcome that was, in reality, structural and collective. What our exhibition made possible, by treating the archive not as a repository of settled facts but as a field of inquiry, was the gradual laying to rest of that fiction through dialogue.

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