The museums of Sverre Fehn tell a story. A story of building, place and time. One of modern architecture's lesser known figures, Fehn was both a modernist and regionalist, interpreting Modernist ideals within the Norwegian lexicon of heaven and earth, life and death, sense of place, and his notions of moving the horizon.
Many of his works are lesser known due to their remote locations, all but one of his museums being located in the Norwegian countryside that shaped his approach to building.
Fehn’s poetic modernism rests at the intersection of local and global. Fehn blends Modernist ideals with a sensibility towards the landscape and Norwegian building traditions, context, climate and place, creating concepts from the given landscape to imbibe his constructions with a sense of place and belonging. Fehn’s museums showcase this juxtaposition of ideas creating works that both are of, belonging to, and contrasting with the surrounding landscape, context and place; creating a Norwegian regionalist modernism that embodies the spirit of Norway, giving Fehn the language needed to tell the story of his museums.
The Norsk Arkitekturmuseet in Oslo is a story and dialogue between eras and Norwegian architectural masters. Fehn speaks to CH Grosch by adding an exhibition pavilion to Grosch’s 19th century bank building.
“Architecture speaks with the past. Each house on earth has significance, and this is found in the pleasure of coming inside. My mother’s bench is architecture. It is a story told with love and poetry. You can’t say that it is necessary or that it is bad or good. Most important is that the story that is told, that it has an absolute meaning.”

From Sverre Fehn: The Pattern of Thoughts
CH Grosch begins the story with his bank building built in 19th Century Christiania after independence from Denmark, a typical masonry building of the era.
Fehn responds with the Ultviet-Moe Pavilion. Where stone structures Grosch, glass is both structure and ornament in Fehn’s pavilion. Concrete ramparts control views in and out, responding to the 13th century Akershus Fortress a block away.
A half barrel vault wood ceiling transitions the museumgoer from thick, low ceiling 19th century construction to tall, light, airy 21st century pavilion, furthering the story and dialogue between eras and architects.
The story of the dialogue between masters is played out in similarities and differences, Grosch asking the questions that Fehn answered in his design; using similar materials in different and somewhat unexpected ways to create both a stand-alone pavilion and one that makes itself whole with Grosch’s Bank Building. Without Grosch’s construction, the dialogue and story are lost, as every answer must have a question.
Dedicated to the works of internationally known cartoonist, author and inventor Kjell Aukrust, the Aukrustsenteret creates a barrier between Alvdal and the Fedmundsmarka, a mountainous region of largely undisturbed wilderness, creating an interstitial space between town and wilderness that tells the story of Aukrust’s work.
“As you get older, it is what you wear, the clothes closest to your body, that are the most important. The material that touches your skin feels like a mask, a construction that you add to your body, and it becomes part of you. This is the way it is with architecture, too.”

From Sverre Fehn: The Pattern of Thoughts
Fehn’s idea of a linear barrier combined with the tripartite aspect of Aukrust’s life’s work become the formal and conceptual drivers for the Aukrustsenteret and its exhibition, which focuses on the three main aspects of Aukrust and his work: his life and travels, his cartoons and novels, and his inventions within his works. This thin form allows Fehn to create an exhibition in which all aspects of Aukrust’s work are juxtaposed together, creating a complete story.
The linear barrier is created out of two programmatic bars. The first bar, a triangular form clad in slate contains the service and administrative functions and is the first line of the barrier between town and wilderness. A second bar of concrete serves as exhibition space, café seating and circulation. This concrete bar becomes glazing with views towards the mountains and forests of the Fedmundsmarka and serves as the heart of the building. Off of this bar stone clad exhibition rooms jut out into the landscape from which they were formed. A plinth of rubble and built-up earth allows the center to stand slightly above the valley, with a raised earthen walkway out into the wilderness.
The massive façade facing Alvdal becomes a mask that protects the inside of the museum, the story of Aukrust’s work and memory, within a warm heart of wood.
The heart of the building merges the soft wood of the exhibition space with the cold concrete barrier of the exterior, serving to create an interstitial space and story between Alvdal and Fedmundsmarka, between Aukrust’s work and his memory.
The Hedmarksmuseet in Hamar is a story and path through time, as “an architect must move into the past, as he must move into nature”. One moves into the ruins of the Bishops’ Fortress, seat of the Ancient Diocese of Hamar and the layers of history contained within.
“My most important journey was perhaps into the past, in the confrontation with the Middle Age, when I built a museum among the ruins of the Bishops’ Fortress at Hamar. I realized, when working out this project, 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.”

From *Every Man is an Architect*
1997 Pritzker Prize Acceptance Speech
There are four layers of history in the Hedmarksmuseet: the 13th Century Bishops’ fortress ruins, the concrete exhibition ramp of the present, the barnlike enclosure recalling the 18th century, and the exhibition of rural life.
The first of four temporal layers is the ruins of the Bishops’ fortress that become the base of the story. The second temporal layer, the ramp of the present, both runs through and lightly attaches itself to the old fortress, creating a bridging exhibition path.
This path weaves through the body of the museum and fortress yard, taking you on a narrative though the history of the site without dictating the pace or sequence. The present temporal layer lies gently atop the ruins. Openings in the ruins are covered with plate glass, gently touching the ruins with pins on each corner providing an ephemeral contrast to the massiveness of the ruins. The third temporal layer is the barnlike enclosure, recalling the barn and manor of the Eighteenth Century. The timber structure of the enclosure contrasts with the massiveness of the stone ruins. These layers intersect with carefully designed steel angle joinery, creating a story and dialogue between layers.
The materials used here are associated with time. The stone ruins come alive through dialogue between past and present. Concrete creates an exhibition path. Wood completes the museum’s enclosure, providing warmth against the cold concrete and ruins. Glass and steel become exhibition showcases for artifacts in the museum creating a dialogue of old and new between display and object.
A variety of techniques are used to display the exhibition as it varies widely in scale from personal effects to the Madonna statue from Hamar Cathedral, to carriages, to large stills used in the production of aquavit. The glass prism displays artifacts of rural life. For larger artifacts, steel angles and marble slabs are used to create displays with deference to the individual artifact, marble is used for object from the cathedral, steel for farm implements.
The largest items become nodes along the exhibition path. Fehn studied each object in order to understand the way it needed to be displayed. He creates an appropriate display piece out of modern materials, always well crafted, but never overshadowing the artifact, a story between past and present.
The interaction with the ruins shows Fehn’s intentions of creating a harmonious whole, yet to have clear distinction between old and new. This story between old and new brings awe to the space. All layers of the museum: the ruins, the barn, the exhibits, the ramp; work together to create a harmonious whole. Fehn creates a story through history with the ruins of the Bishops’ fortress, in where New and Old touch lightly, making the past speak through manifestation of the present.
Situated in a lea along the Fjaerlandsfjord at the foot of the glaciers of Jostedalsbreen, the Norsk Bremuseum tells the story of the glaciers that created the fjords, becoming a rock left behind in the meadow thousands of years ago.
“A traditional museum works to visualize lost objects. Today we feel it necessary for museums to make visible the invisible. Our future is dependent on conditions in our old-fashioned sky. The atmosphere we have breathed through the centuries hides its data in the ice masses of the glacier, ...which at a few degrees shift in temperature would flood the fertile plains of the earth.”

From “Above and Below the Horizon”
Architecture and Urbanism, January 1999
A site-cast rough concrete body is a rock that contrasts with a soft landscape, mountains and valleys that have been smoothed over by thousands of years of glacial activity. A story is told taking the stairs to the rooftop public space, one of climbing a rock to get a better view of ones surroundings.
The entry sequence becomes a story of hiking on a glacier. One may climb the stairs to the roof, hiking on top of the glacier or enter the cave-like entrance located between the stairs, a cave-like entry portal into the underside of the glacier and the exhibition via a run-off tube.
The ceiling, edges and skylights are very topological, taking cues from the shaping of the underside of the glacier against rock. The central skylight dips into the space and then recedes towards the glacial tongue. The cafe opens up to the landscape, glass curtain walls contrasting against concrete, a glacier against rock that collects rain and snowmelt into a runoff pool.
The museum’s concept of being conceived by the glaciers that surround it adds to the story of the museum. Sense of place, and of belonging is present as if you are entering the glacier through a low, dark entryway. The sameness in tonality of the wood and concrete envelops you much like the glacial ice. The concrete exterior exudes massiveness, asking the question “How large would the glacier that left this massive rock behind have to be?” Like a cathedral from afar, your attention is drawn to the rock in the meadow, leading you on a story of discovery about the Jostedalsbreen.
The Ivar Aasen-tunet is a cultural center and museum for the Nynorsk language, telling the story of Ivar Aasen and his journey to create a new national language based on the dialects of Norway and Old Norse to replace the heavily Danish influenced Bokmal.
“...the starting point for the design of every building should be based on a poetic construction. In other words: if the story we choose to call architecture has no structure, it is useless discussing it with an engineer, for the structure is not something to be added afterward. It cannot be calculated in figures. It is included in the story an architect tells about people and life, the basis of the story.”

From “An Architectural Autobiography”
The Poetry of the Straight Line: Five Masters of the North, 1992
The museum is a long linear line that is the story and timeline of Aasen’s life and journey to create Nynorsk. East of the entrance stands Aasen’s boyhood home and farmstead. To the left of the entrance sits the auditorium, signifying his education.
The exhibition documents his journey across Norway to document the dialects, with the door at the end leading onto a small patio and the view of the fjords of Sunnmøre, showcasing the lands he traveled. Concrete tells a story in the Ivar Aasen-tunet. It is both a bearing wall structural system and a tribute to the strength of a man who sacrificed home, family, and happiness to create Nynorsk for his country.
This is not a museum for tourists like the Bremuseum (I was the first American to visit this year, and last year the only foreigners were two Italians and two Americans). It is both museum and cultural center, as Nynorsk is actively passed down to future generations. Toward the valley, the focus is on Aasen’s life and journey, towards the hill Nynorsk is the focus (with exhibits on its instruction and the library)...monitors shine light onto these areas. Here the most peculiar exhibit arises where a desk is mounted vertically as if the sun washed concrete half-barrel vault is a chalkboard on which the pupil learns Nynorsk.
The Aasen farm creates a starting point in the story of Aasen and the museum. Starting at the beginning, entering the cave like museum that opens to the valley below, the museum tells the story of Aasen’s strength along his journey to create Nynorsk showcasing both life and landscape that came together to create a language.
“No matter how good an architect you are, if you have no chance of expressing your poetic idea in structures, you lack the very foundation of architecture. The structure is a language, a way of expressing yourself, and there should be a balance between thought and language. Every story has a construction.”

Thank you to the following:

Kentaro Tsubaki for all your help and advice while I was putting this proposal and lecture together.

The Tulane School of Architecture for selecting my proposal and allowing me the chance to explore Norway.

Gavin Newman for our many discussions on Fehn’s work.

The staff at each museum for being extremely accommodating, especially at the Ivar Aasen-tunet and Aukrustenteret, whose exhibitions were completely in Nynorsk or Norwegian.