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Da Vinci comes to life 500 years on

Shorter, later and 1,500 miles further north than intended, the 'Mona Lisa of bridges' goes up - and it doesn't wobble

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Doug Mellgren in Oslo
Thursday November 1, 2001

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Norwegians offer solid proof that Leonardo Da Vinci's designs work. His 1502 draft (left) dreamed of a bridge over Istanbul's golden horn. This one is a pedestrian crossing over the E18 near Oslo (right).

Almost 500 years ago, Leonardo da Vinci sketched out what fans call the "Mona Lisa of bridges" and what critics said could not be built.

Five centuries after a Turkish sultan rejected the project the bridge opened yesterday, albeit 1,500 miles north of the sunny spot he intended.

With a helicopter buzzing overhead, cranes lifted the huge white cloth to unveil the bridge to the 500 people gathered in the rain,

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wind and cold of Norway.

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"This is the first time any of Leonardo's architectural and civil engineering designs has been built. There have been models, but this is the first in full size," said Vebjoern Sand, a Norwegian artist who fell in love with the structure in 1995.

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As with most of Da Vinci's works, the design pleases aesthetes as much as engineers.

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"It just had to be built. This has taken years of effort," said Sand. "The bridge is such a beautiful mixture between the functional and the aesthetic."

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Da Vinci designed the bridge in 1502 to cross the Golden Horn inlet at Istanbul. With a length of 346 meters (1,135ft), it would have been the world's longest bridge at the time, if only Sultan Bajazet II believed it feasible.

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Sand convinced the Norwegian highway department that the bridge could be built in any scale which led to the commissioning of a modest 100-metre-long, eight-metre-high wooden version in Aas Township, about 20 miles south of the capital, Oslo.

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Although Da Vinci envisioned the bridge in stone, the Norwegians thought it too expensive and settled for a graceful wooden version, weighing in at £930,000.

The bridge, actually a pedestrian crossing, is supported by three light-coloured wooden arches, like a series of archer's bows pulled back in parallel. Over them, a pathway in wood spans the E18 highway.

The arches are built in glued pine, a process used in many of the venues at the 1994 Winter Olympics further north in Lillehammer. The railings are of stainless steel and teak.

Sand and other fans held an all-night party around the bridge, leading to the official opening by Queen Sonja.

In a letter discovered in 1952, Leonardo offered to build the bridge for the sultan because no one else would. That left the question of whether the sultan's refusal had spared him a humiliating failure.

"Our project has proved that it can be built in wood or stone, in any scale, because the principles work," Sand said, adding that he now dreams of one such bridge on every continent, possibly starting in the United States.

Jonathan Glancey on [top 10 buildings that remain just a dream... or a nightmare](#)

- AP, Oslo

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