

Ålesund—The Art Nouveau City

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Abstract

Cities and their people have their own fate, and sometimes it is tragic. Often tragic events lead to the death and oblivion of a city, and traces of them only remain in the pages of historical chronicles. Ålesund has had both a tragic and a happy fate. A conflagration in 1905 became a turning point in the history of the city. Ålesund was destroyed, and only ashes were left. This tragedy changed its outlook, and made it world famous because Ålesund was completely rebuilt in an Art Nouveau style.

Keywords

Ålesund, City of Art Nouveau, Tourist Destination

1. Introduction

Before the Fire

In the 19th century, Ålesund was a small fishing village (there were many of these along the Norwegian coast) [1]. Ålesund was a town of fishermen, go-getters, businessmen, and workers. They produced many goods for export: fish, cod liver oil, vitamin oil, and guano, a type of fishmeal. Increases in production and export involved a large workforce. Agricultural workers from nearby moved into the town and found jobs on fishing boats, and in the docks, factories, warehouses, and elsewhere. The town grew, and housing in the town center became very dense, with wall-to-wall buildings and narrow streets. However, the streets were adequately wide for walking and small carts. All production and storage facilities were located on the shore of the bay, and items moved mostly by water. Here, fish were harvested for both the local market and for export. The chief export of Ålesund was *clipfish*, which is fish that is cut, salted, and dried on the rocks. Favorable market conditions brought revenue to the treasury of the town. In 1841, Ålesund was granted by authorities the status of a city.

A special pride of Ålesund was its fire brigade with a permanent team of 20 stately men, as many members again as a reserve team, and about 230 volunteers. When a fire occurred, the fire brigade could count on the help of 12,500 men found among the residents of the town [2]. Fires occurred frequently, especially in the winter, be-

cause houses were heated with wood or coal, and it was not always possible to keep domestic fires under control. The fire department was equipped with an observation tower located on a hill in the center of the city. The observation tower was manned around the clock. In 1903, an expensive hydrant system was commissioned into service. The fire department was also equipped with an 18-pound cannon loaded with a blank cartridge to wake up the town inhabitants [2]. In addition to their regular duties, members of the fire brigade had to be able to speak Spanish because there were always many Spanish ships in the harbor. The fire service was arranged perfectly, and the team coped valiantly with the many serious fires. On one occasion though, the elements were stronger than the people.

2. Conflagration of 1904

The night of January 22, 1904 was like many other winter nights, it was windy and chilly. Later that night, the wind increased to storm and hurricane force. At 2 o'clock in the morning, the fire department received a message about a fire that had started at the cannery [3]. Driven by strong winds, the fire spread so quickly that all attempts to stop it failed. The stormy winds blew sparks from house to house and from street to street, falling like a rain of fire.

The fire department chief, Johannes Solem, wrote in his report that the fire advanced across many containment lines, and that fighting against the fire could be compared with Heracles' battle with the Lernaean Hydra, which possessed many heads, and for each one that was cut off, two more grew [2]. The people had no choice but to submit to the elements and to save as much as possible from the destructive fire. The tragedy lasted about 15 hours. By four o'clock in the afternoon, the town was completely burned out. Ten thousand people were left homeless. The people lost their battle with the fire, but thanks to the heroism and courage of the fire fighters and inhabitants, the loss of life was minimal. Only one person died in the fire: a 76-year-old woman. She initially escaped from her burning house, but returned to collect some belongings, and was unable to leave the burning house.

The first reports of the tragedy appeared in the morning edition of the central Norwegian newspaper under the title, "Ålesund is burning!" The news spread throughout Europe. Reports from the burned-down town dominated in central European newspapers for several days. In the many countries, committees were organized to collect funds to help the victims of the fire.

Help came from all over Norway, and from Germany, Sweden, Denmark, France, and the UK. Help committees were formed in Chicago (USA), Leith (Scotland), Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Johannesburg (South Africa), Budapest (Hungary), Yokohama (Japan), and Paris (France). Famous people participated in the raising of charity. French actress Sarah Bernhardt donated her fee for a matinee performance in the theater in Paris. William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, became one of many private donors. The German Emperor and King of Prussia, Wilhelm II (1859-1941) played an important role in raising help after the conflagration and in the subsequent rise of the city.

2.1. German Emperor, Wilhelm II, King of Prussia

The German Emperor was fascinated by Norway and its west coast [4]. For 26 years, from July 4, 1889 to July 25, 1914, he visited the country 22 times. Almost every summer he was seen traveling on his luxurious yacht, "Hohenzollern," anchored at the most beautiful parts of the coast. In the hotels where he stayed, one can see his portraits and objects embossed with the imperial German emblem.

Wilhelm II was captivated by the loveliness of Norwegian nature: its waterfalls, glaciers, and inlets. The Norwegian sagas and people fascinated him. He had friends among the locals: pilot Johan Parelius from Nordhus, umbrella maker Erichsen from Bergen, architect Christie from Trondheim, and many others. Wilhelm II was welcome everywhere: he came as a guest and behaved like a guest. He became popular in Norway long before the conflagration in Ålesund. The memory of the German guest is remembered in place names: for example, *Keisernese* in Geirangerfjord, and *Keisergrotten* and *Keiserstien* in Bergen.

The visits of Wilhelm II were covered in detail by the press. The German people were well informed about what was happening in Balmholm, Molde, and Kristiania (the capital of Norway from 1877 to 1924). It was fashionable for reporters to cover the Emperor's journeys. The year after the Emperor's first journey to Norway, German shipping companies flocked to the north. Passengers expected not only to discover a new country, but also to meet the Emperor himself. Karl Mjelva says that Wilhelm II discovered Norway as a tourism destination.

Other crowned heads rushed to visit Norway after Wilhelm II: King Rama V of Siam, King Leopold of Belgium, King Edward VII of the United Kingdom, Prince Albert I of Monaco, and members of the Dutch royal house. The American railway millionaire, Jay Gould, and the founder of Wall Street, Anthony Drexel, both met the Emperor of Germany in Norway.

We must remember that Emperor Wilhelm II was the richest man in Germany at that time: he owned 60 palaces and huge land holdings. Generous yearly contributions from the state budget and agricultural income gave him the opportunity to buy and own what he wanted. Germany was experiencing tremendous economic growth, and if the Emperor asked for money for a special purpose, then neither the Chancellor nor Parliament ever denied it.

2.2. Help from Germany

Let us return to our subject. After Wilhelm II heard about the fire in Ålesund, he reacted immediately. He contacted all seafarers and dockers in Hamburg and Kiel that were at home on the weekend. On Sunday, the day after the fire began, three ships headed at speed to the north. The armored cruiser, “Prinz Heinrich”, was dispatched from Hamburg with emergency help. This 9.800-ton ship was accompanied by two other ships, “Phönicia” and “Weimar”, which arrived in Ålesund harbor three days later. Aid distribution was organized with precision. A large quantity of food and medicines were made available to the people affected by the fire, and 2.500 people were accommodated on board the “Phönicia”.

Without detracting from the merits of many people who contributed help after the conflagration and rebuilding of the town, we must recognize the vigor and public relations (PR) talent of the Emperor of Germany. His PR talent further raised funds to rebuild the town. It is not surprising that you can find in Ålesund a “*Keiser Wilhelm Street*”, a “*keiserstatue*”, a “*keiserbar*”, and a “*keiserbun*”. When the Emperor came to Ålesund in July 1904, he was met as a hero.

3. Rising from the Ashes

Directly after the conflagration, the residents of Ålesund wandered off to the surrounding villages looking for shelter or to stay with kinsfolk, because the majority of them came from the Sunnmøre district. They themselves, or their parents or grandparents had settled in this seaport and had either found a job or started their own business.

On January 26, 1904 the construction of temporary barracks began [5]. When the ship “Prinz Heinrich” arrived in port, its team of 500 sailors began construction works. Other ships arrived with building materials, and other building materials were brought by sea and by land from almost all parts of Norway. At the first meeting of the leadership of the Ålesund municipality, it was decided to attract experts on rehabilitation work. The engineer Fridrik Næser, who arrived from Kristiania, provided management of the project. He proposed to make the streets wider and straighter than they were before. The terrain was difficult, being mountainous, and high demands and standards were imposed in the creation of the city. **Figure 1** shows the inner harbor of Ålesund. Only stone houses were allowed to be constructed in the center of the city **Figure 2**. Wood was used only for interior decoration, window frames, and for doors. Streets that were 20 m wide formed the boundary around the stone zone to create firebreaks in case of a new conflagration. The new streets were 12.5 m wide **Figure 3**. The residential quarter had a limited size up to 4.000 square meters and the height of the roofs of the houses could not exceed 15 m.

When the decision to rebuild the city was made, work began immediately. Builders arrived from all over Norway. Many houses needed to be built in a short time and there was a job for everyone: laborers, masons, bricklayers, architects, developers, contractors, carpenters, and adventurers, who all flocked to this little place in search of work or in pursuit of adventure. The rebuilding of the city looked like the mythological Phoenix bird arising to new life from the ashes.

A few months after the conflagration, the first houses had already been built. The new city looked grey because the houses were built from cement; granite and marble were used for paneling. The residents of Ålesund decided to decorate their town for the visit of the new King of Norway, Haakon VII, and the German Emperor Wilhelm II, and some homeowners painted their houses in different colors. The Committee of Preparation for meeting their Majesties found this attractive, and decided to paint the front of all the buildings.



Figure 1. The inner harbor of Ålesund.



Figure 2. Stone houses in the center of the city. Photo: author.



Figure 3. The streets are 12.5 m wide. Photo: author.

Art Nouveau and National Romantic

The reconstruction of Ålesund came about when the Art Nouveau architectural style dominated both the Old and New Worlds, at the time of turn of the century (1895-1910). Art Nouveau is an ornamental style that grew from a symbolization of organic structures. The ideal world of the Art Nouveau artist is one that prefers the reproduction of perfect forms from the diversity of nature. The architectural style at the end of the XIX century showed similarities throughout Europe and in other parts of the world. Each artist created his or her own variation of the style. Each country and each architect had their own points of difference, from the romantic magnificence of Maison Tassel (Victor Horta, Brussels) and the quaint fantasy of Casa Batlló (Antoni Gaudí, Barcelona) to the geometric elegance of Secession Haus (Joseph Maria Olbrich, Vienna). It was a characteristic of Art Nouveau objects to contain decorative ornamentation symbolizing vegetable and animal forms inspired by myths and legends. Artists combined traditional and new materials, and it was a time of broad experimentation with styles, techniques, and materials.

Many of the Norwegian architects were educated, had practiced abroad, and had spent some years in Germany, France, and other European countries, where Art Nouveau was at the height of its popularity. The reconstruction of Ålesund took place in the period of a great arousal of Norwegian nationalist sentiment. The beginning of the 1900s was a period in Norwegian history where there existed a need to demonstrate national independence. In 1905, Norway dissolved its union with Sweden and became an independent state.

Architects who came to Ålesund had to construct a new city, an entire city, and a Norwegian city at the same time. Sigurd Lunde and Henrik Nissen decided to abandon the old examples and avoided imitating the Old Norwegian style. Influenced by European trends, they determined to construct on a reasonable scale to include the needs of the citizens and to comply with modern trends. Henrik Nissen supported the view that architects must take into consideration the mentality and lifestyle of the people who will be living in the city. He was convinced that the architects must avoid any excess and extravagance, and the new Ålesund must be built only from local materials. The architects managed this task successfully. The city has features of a medieval culture, stone construction, and Viking ornaments. Buildings are ornately decorated in the Old Norwegian style, with the use of troll masks [Figure 4](#), sinuous dragons, Viking faces, and other devices that are associated with the timber carvings of stave church architecture and Viking ships [Figure 5](#).



Figure 4. An arch decorated with troll masks. Photo: author.



Figure 5. A decoration associated with Viking ornaments. Photo: author.

Several houses are decorated with flower motives **Figure 6** and **Figure 7**, an arctic rank of leaves, open blooming sunflowers, poppies, thistles, and beautiful female faces with flowing silken hair around their foreheads and cheeks in the pure Art Nouveau tradition.

Ålesund was constructed amazingly quickly. The buildings were built within a period of 1 - 3 months. Construction was funded by individuals, municipalities, and aid funds collected immediately after the fire. The reconstruction was financed by Norwegian banks, large and small, with the money gifted from both inside and outside Norway, and in addition, Emperor Wilhelm II also made a contribution.

Around the end of 1905, most of the city had been built, including houses and infrastructure for businesses, with 700 buildings in all. The construction of the entire city was complete in 1909, when the most expensive building in the city, the Ålesund Church, was finished. Some buildings were constructed after 1910, but the architects remained faithful to the style from the beginning of the XX century. In this respect, the year of construction was indicated on the façade of the buildings **Figure 8**.

Ålesund rose from the ashes renewed and transfigured like the mythological Phoenix. The town has an appearance of being one style, but nevertheless, each building is unique with its own identity and character.

4. Instead of Conclusion

Ålesund Today

Ålesund is the largest city in the Møre og Romsdal country district. The municipality has a population of 45,932 (as of the second quarter of 2014 [6]). There are many offices and production facilities of companies in Ålesund that provide services to the offshore oil and gas industry providing technology, concept development, and innovation services. More than 16.000 vessels visit the port of Ålesund annually. Many tourists come to Ålesund to see the picturesque northernmost part of the city that was built in a uniform Art Nouveau style (**Figure 9**). Cruise



Figure 6. A house decorated with flower motives. Photo: author.



Figure 7. Another house decorated with flower motives. Photo: author.



Figure 8. The year of construction is shown on the façade of the buildings. Photo: author.



Figure 9. Today, Ålesund is a modern city, but with an Art Nouveau style. Photo: author.

ships of all sizes and from many countries are welcomed in the very center of the city. Norwegian Coast Express cruise ships arrive in Ålesund twice a day.

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