

# Reconstructing Identity

The Role of German Influence in Shaping Ålesund's Jugendstil  
Architecture and its Cultural Legacy

How did the influence of German Jugendstil on the reconstruction  
of Ålesund in 1904 redefine the city's identity?

History Thesis  
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# Introduction

Architecture and urban planning are rapidly evolving fields that require both deliberate design and adaptability to address global societal challenges. These needs become even more urgent in times of crisis when destruction creates an opportunity for urban development. In such moments, architects and planners play a pivotal role in rebuilding efforts, not only restoring the physical environment but also shaping the future identity of a place.

However, when a disaster is too devastating for a city to recover on its own, external aid becomes essential. In today's interconnected world, architectural ideas and influences are able to cross borders. This exchange fosters innovation and efficiency, but it also raises concerns about cultural homogenization, where distinct local identities may be diluted in favor of universal design trends.<sup>1</sup>

The choices made in the wake of disaster can have long-lasting effects on a city and its inhabitants. Architecture, as a reflection of cultural, historical, and social contexts, plays a key role in shaping and preserving identity.<sup>2</sup> The way a city is rebuilt can reinforce existing cultural narratives or introduce entirely new ones, redefining how a place is perceived both locally and globally.

This thesis explores the reconstruction of Ålesund, Norway, following the catastrophic fire of 1904. The rebuilding process was extraordinary in its stylistic direction, unlike any other urban reconstruction in Norwegian history. Ålesund was rebuilt in the Jugendstil style, heavily influenced by German architects and designers. Backed by international support, the city underwent a transformation that defined its identity in a lasting way. Today, Ålesund is recognized worldwide as *The Art Nouveau City*, standing as Norway's most prominent example of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century urban renewal.

The main goal of this thesis is to identify how a city can deal with its cultural heritage and preservation while at the same time being influenced by foreign involvement. It will also explore how cultural identity can be redefined through the import of architecture. To achieve this, it will be the case study of Ålesund investigated, where the importing of architectural principles and ideologies plays a crucial role in the city's identity until today.

While most sources, such as Harald Grytten's trilogy, provide detailed historical accounts of Ålesund's history, few are critically examining its architectural implications. The German influence is well acknowledged, but less attention has been given to how architects balanced new trends with local identity. This thesis investigates how Ålesund's transformation reflects the

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<sup>1</sup> (Khakurel, 2024)

<sup>2</sup> (Garg, 2020, p. 1445)

impact of globalization on architectural heritage and the export of ideas, offering new insights beyond stylistic and historical significance.

In order to develop a comprehensive and truthful representation of the events, the thesis employs a multi-method research approach. By incorporating sources from predominantly Norwegian and German authors, this study ensures a balanced perspective, reducing potential bias and ensuring a subtle understanding of the architectural exchange that shaped the city's transformation.

Primary historical sources were accessed at the National Library of Oslo, where original literature related to Ålesund's reconstruction was examined. Additionally, an appointment with the map department provided access to original city maps from 1898 and 1907. These maps serve as crucial references for analyzing the spatial evolution of Ålesund before and after the fire.

To gain direct insight into the built environment, a field study was conducted in Ålesund, enabling the observation and documentation of key Art Nouveau architectural elements. To further enhance this research, an interview with an Ålesund resident will gather a firsthand perspective on the history and the extent to which German influence remains part of the local cultural memory and awareness.

Alongside primary research, this thesis uses secondary sources including books, newspaper articles, and academic analyses on architectural history and urban identity. A comparative study will also be conducted, placing Ålesund's rebuilding process next to other Norwegian cities that underwent architectural transformations in the early 20th century.

This thesis begins by examining Jugendstil architecture in late 19th-century in Europe, with a specific focus on Germany, followed by an analysis of Norway's architectural landscape during the same period. This includes the country's political situation, industrialization, and historical ties with Germany and provides the essential context for Ålesund's transformation after the 1904 fire. The study then examines the disaster itself and the extensive German support that contributed to the city's reconstruction, with a particular focus on the role of Emperor Wilhelm II. A key focus will be the adaptation of German Jugendstil to Ålesund's local context, analyzing the reconstruction process, key architects, and stylistic influences. Finally, the thesis will assess the impact of this transformation on Ålesund's identity, both immediately after the reconstruction and in the long term, considering its influence on the city's cultural and architectural legacy.

# 1. Historical Context

Before delving into the story of Ålesund, this chapter provides the necessary historical background on how Jugendstil emerged in Europe and eventually reached Norway. Additionally, it will examine Norway's architectural landscape in the late 19th century, considering the country's political climate, industrialization, and its existing connections to Germany. These factors played a crucial role in shaping Norwegian architecture and set the stage for Ålesund's later reconstruction.

## 1.1 Jugendstil in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century

Jugendstil developed around 1880 and lasted until 1910. Architects rejected the direct imitation of historical styles, which had happened in the previous Historicism style period, and sought to create something new. As an artistic movement, it originated primarily from the applied arts and decorative design rather than from traditional academic architecture. It emerged as part of a broader reaction against industrial mass production, emphasizing craftsmanship, organic forms, and artistic unity. The style gained momentum through various European artistic circles, particularly in graphic design, furniture, and interior decoration, before making its way into architecture.

Manfred Speidel, a German architect and architectural theorist, describes in 1988 at the *European Expert Meeting*, hosted by UNESCO, the general architectural characteristics of Art Jugendstil as the following: "Building art of ornaments, ornamental value of lines, vegetative or geometric; a style which consciously renounced past styles and building forms; craft building with traditional materials, as well as glass and iron, often in unusual combinations; new special forms or plasticity in buildings. The Art Nouveau / Jugendstil is generally considered to be a short-lived transition to modern or back to classical forms of architecture."<sup>3</sup> Manfred Speidel notes that Jugendstil's emphasis on craftsmanship and ornamentation might have made it impractical and short-lived.

There are as many names for this movement as there are countries in which it played a role. The German architect Ulrich Gräf explains that "the term Art Nouveau has always included the international aspect of the movement, and in [his] opinion the term Jugendstil should be confined to the German contribution to the international movement of Art Nouveau."<sup>4</sup> As this style in Norway came from Germany, it is concluded that they called their style the same name. And as this style is the primary focus of this thesis, the same term will be used throughout. Jugendstil architecture in Germany emerged later than in many other European nations. Its adoption was delayed until 1895, and its decline occurred relatively quickly in 1904. Ulrich Gräf has again a critical view on it. According to him, Jugendstil architecture in Germany is a phenomenon that scarcely qualifies as a style, given the limited number of buildings that embody it and the short duration of its prevalence.<sup>5</sup> Regardless, although its presence was brief, its influence pervaded and extended the spheres of artistic awareness and played a significant role in the country's architectural evolution.<sup>6</sup>

The key contribution of Jugendstil architecture was the design of residential buildings as integrated works of art, where every detail, including interior elements, was carefully crafted to

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<sup>3</sup> (Speidel, 1988, p. 8)

<sup>4</sup> (Gräf, 1988, p. 86)

<sup>5</sup> (Gräf, 1988, p. 84)

<sup>6</sup> (Russell, 1979, p. 171)

enhance the aesthetic experience of the inhabitants.<sup>7</sup> In a lecture tour through Germany in 1902, Henry van der Velde talks about the importance of the ornamental value: "This ornamentation is necessary above all, it arises from the object, stays associated with it, indicating its purpose or construction method, it helps it to adapt still more to its use."<sup>8</sup> Jugendstil buildings should be holistic artistic expressions, integrating not only structural design but also interiors, furnishings, and lifestyle elements.

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<sup>7</sup> (Gräf, 1988, p. 89)

<sup>8</sup> (van der Velde, 1902, p. 186)

## 1.2 Norway's architecture in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century

The architectural landscape of Norway in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was shaped by a combination of political shifts, economic struggles, and a growing sense of national identity. Around 1800, Norway was among the poorest countries in Europe. Until 1814, it was part of Denmark, however, as a consequence of the Treaty of Kiel in 1814, Norway was given to Sweden. The Norwegians used the change to draft their constitution, which was tolerated by their new King Oscar II. Over the following decades, Norwegians increasingly pushed for greater autonomy, culminating in full independence in 1905.<sup>9</sup>

The country's built environment reflected this tense political situation. Norway's more modest version of the theatrical effects provided by the Historicist styles from Europe may have mirrored the sobriety of the Norwegian public as it prepared for its final push toward independence. Unlike its neighboring nations, Norway did not develop a distinct national Historicist style. This may also have symbolized a broader sense of equality among its people.<sup>10</sup> Due to a lack of wealthy patrons for ambitious architects and limited government funds, there was little room for architectural extravagance. As a result, from a European perspective, few buildings of significant art historical value were constructed during this period.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, Norway's economic situation had significantly improved by the latter half of the century. The transformations in cultural landscapes and urban environments during this period were closely tied to advancements in manufacturing, trade, communication, and the redistribution of land after 1860.<sup>10</sup> Especially, merchant shipping expanded considerably between 1850 and 1880, and by the century's end, Norway had established one of the world's largest merchant fleets. This economic growth provided the foundation for industrialization, particularly in sectors like timber, wood pulp, and engineering.<sup>11</sup> Technological innovations, new energy sources, and improved transportation systems played a key role in reshaping social structures, trade networks, and regional development, leading to localized construction booms.<sup>12</sup>

Parallel to this process, tourism expanded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, with new hotels being built at formerly remote locations, providing new sources of income for the locals and contributing to an increase in residential construction.<sup>13</sup> One famous person in this topic is the German Emperor Wilhelm II, who played a significant role in bringing tourism from Germany to Norway. We will get a closer look at him and his important role in Ålesund in a later chapter.

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<sup>9</sup> (Myklebust, 1988, p. 151)

<sup>10</sup> (Brekke, Nordhagen, & Lexau, 2019, pp. 305-308)

<sup>11</sup> (Sandvik & Enander, 2025)

<sup>12</sup> (Brekke, Nordhagen, & Lexau, 2019, p. 329)

<sup>13</sup> (Brekke, Nordhagen, & Lexau, 2019, p. 331)

Next to that, through long-standing trade and cultural connections, there were even more ties to Germany. The art historian Barbara Miller Lane points out several factors linking their cultural development between Germany and Scandinavia, none more important than the "dream of the North," which drew together nationalists in the countries in a common "nostalgia for the noble and heroic past of the medieval Eddas and Sagas." This was also visible in the architecture. Lane elaborates that architects of Germany and Scandinavia "paid more attention to one another than to their colleagues in the rest of the world." Their interest in each other was mirrored in the public's enthusiasm for "German-Nordic cultural exchange."<sup>14</sup>

As Norway did not have a dedicated architectural school until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, aspiring architects had to seek education abroad. German architecture schools were highly regarded for their education. Therefore, from the 1850s to around 1900, almost all Norwegian architects were educated in Germany. Until 1880, Hannover had been the most popular city for Norwegians to become architects, and in the 1880s, most of them went to Berlin, to the *Königliche Technische Hochschule Charlottenburg*.<sup>15</sup>

After a period of studying abroad, the architects came back to Norway and implemented the German style in their homes, inadvertently bringing Jugendstil to their country. Therefore, we can find some specific buildings, which were built at this time, where you can see traditional Jugendstil blended with motives and ornaments from domestic Norwegian styles.

The most famous Norwegian Jugendstil architect is Henrik Bull, who was educated in Berlin from 1884 to 1887. His most important buildings were the Historical Museum of Oslo University and the National Theatre in Oslo. However, his work was little known outside of Norway and didn't gather much recognition elsewhere in Europe.

Nevertheless, by far the most significant contribution to Jugendstil in Norway is the city of Ålesund. Before delving deeper into this Jugendstil phenomenon, it is important to get to know the existing circumstances of the city.

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<sup>14</sup> (Lane, 2000, pp. 10, 17)

<sup>15</sup> (Myklebust, 1988, p. 151)

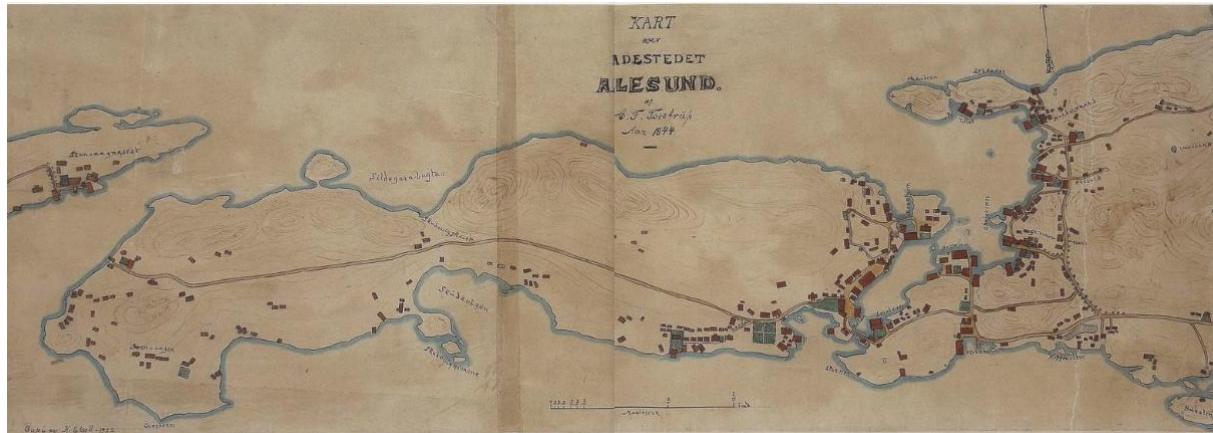


Figure 1: City Map of Ålesund, 1844. (Grytten, Viltre gutt: byen som brente, 2002, pp. 40-41)  
Building colors have no particular meaning.

Ålesund, located on the western coast of Norway across several islands that extend into the sea, experienced significant growth and prosperity during Industrialization in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Benefiting from its strong maritime connections and natural harbor along the main shipping lane, it had favored access from the land to the sea and back. Most of the fjord villages in this region along the main shipping lane arose into settlements and became communication hubs and places for the trans-shipment of goods. Many of them were also marketplaces for the surrounding area, with a central harbor, commercial trade, and craftsmen.<sup>16</sup>

In Ålesund, many fish processing factories were established, and the city became a town of fishermen, businessmen, and workers. They produced many goods such as fish, cod liver oil, vitamin oil, and guano, a type of fishmeal. Steamships began docking at Ålesund, and larger factories were built.<sup>17</sup> Increases in production and export involved a large workforce, and agricultural workers from nearby moved into the town to find jobs on fishing boats, in the docks, factories, or warehouses. As the town grew, housing in the center became very dense, with wall-to-wall buildings and narrow streets.<sup>18</sup>

In 1872, Danish author Magdalene Thoresen described the city as follows: "You get the impression that it was built in a hurry, built up by chance, and the mood which comes with a fast, dangerous profession. Here, no even, calm deliberation goes through anything; even the large, dizzying warehouses and individual magnificent buildings speak only of the rapid rise of profit and the boldness of large speculations."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> (Brekke, Nordhagen, & Lexau, 2019, p. 333)

<sup>17</sup> (Vestrheim, n.d.)

<sup>18</sup> (Karaliova, 2015, p. 8)

<sup>19</sup> (Thoresen, 1872, p. 186, translated from Danish)



Figure 2: Photo from the mid-1890s, from a bit up the mountainside, later colorized.  
(Grytten, Viltre gutt: byen som brente, 2002, pp. 12-13)



Figure 3: Photo of Storgata (Main Street), 1878.  
(Grytten, *Viltre gutt: byen som brente*, 2002, p. 95)



Figure 4: Photo of harbor by Sigurd Kufaas, 1903.  
(Grytten, *Viltre gutt: byen som brente*, 2002, p. 72)



Figure 5: Photo by Margrethe Svendsen, 1897.  
(Grytten, *Viltre gutt: byen som brente*, 2002, p. 82)

## 2. The Disaster and Reconstruction of Ålesund

After investigating the historical context, we will continue with the turning point in Ålesund's history: the devastating fire of 1904. This chapter examines the immediate aftermath of the disaster, the extent of the destruction, and the following response efforts. It explores the significant role of German support in the rebuilding process, with particular attention to Emperor Wilhelm II's involvement. Furthermore, it analyzes how German Jugendstil was adapted to Ålesund's local context. By investigating the architects, influences, and key decisions made during this period, this chapter sorts out how Ålesund was transformed into the Jugendstil city it is recognized as today.

## 2.1 The 1904 fire and its aftermath

The 1898 city map of Ålesund shows how fast the city grew in the last half century. It is the last official mapping of Ålesund that before the fire, but it does not show the entire town from west to east. However, the map covers the main city center.



Figure 6: City Map of Ålesund, 1898. (Krum, 1898)  
See attachments for a bigger version.<sup>i</sup>

The city's layout is marked by narrow streets, which follow the natural and smooth topography, and tightly clustered buildings. This demonstrates an organic development pattern with a strong connection to the waterfront. The map also indicates street regulations (dotted lines) and property boundaries (dash-dotted lines), reflecting an attempt at urban organization. Despite these guidelines, the irregular street layout shows that expansion occurred quickly, without a fully structured planning system.

The majority of buildings are constructed from wood, represented in yellow. In contrast, the red masonry buildings are sparse, indicating that fire-resistant materials like brick and stone were not yet widely utilized. Therefore, a special pride of Ålesund was its fire brigade with a permanent team of 20 men and about 230 volunteers. The building *Brandstation* (fire station) is found in the center of the map, in the street *Eihauggaden*. Infrastructure elements, which are visible in the city map, such as water pipes with fire hydrants and shut-off valves (blue lines with circles) and fire alarms (blue dots), suggest that some fire prevention measures were in place.

Fires occurred frequently, especially during winter, as houses were heated with wood or coal. To monitor and respond to these incidents, the fire department operated an observation tower on a central hillside, staffed around the clock. In 1903, an expensive hydrant system was introduced.

Additionally, the fire department was equipped with an 18-pound cannon loaded with blank cartridges to alert the town inhabitants.<sup>20</sup>

On the night of January 23, 1904, the devastating fire that destroyed almost the whole city of Ålesund began. Details on the exact starting point of the fire differ a lot in the existing literature. What is safe to say is that Ålesund was suffering from a strong winter storm with strong winds raging across the city. In the middle of the night, a small fire broke out in the factory of *Ålesund Preserving Co.*, located in the *Nedre Strandgate* in the south-west of the city, possibly because an animal knocked over a lit torch.<sup>21</sup> The storm spread the fire quickly to neighboring houses towards the east and beyond. The fire followed no logical progression. Ålesund's fire chief, Johannes Solem, described the fire line as impossible to hold back or keep in control: "They put out the flames many times in many places. And still, the battle was only in its early stages." Solem was also keen to point out that "the hoses for the different hydrants throughout the city did not fit together. This was a crucial issue, as it made firefighting even more difficult."<sup>22</sup> Within hours, the fire had destroyed the majority of buildings between *Nedre Strandgate* and *Borgundvegen*, which is farther east than the city map shows. In total, the fire destroyed nearly 850 houses. Only about 230 buildings remained within the town.<sup>21</sup> The whole tragedy lasted about 15 hours until four o'clock in the afternoon. One 76-year-old woman died, and ten thousand people were left homeless.

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<sup>20</sup> (Karaliova, 2015, p. 9)

<sup>21</sup> (Nikel, 2023)

<sup>22</sup> (Grytten, Ålesund brenner: byen under ild og aske, 2003, p. 30, translated from Norwegian)



Figure 7: Photo by Eilert Dahl on February 1st, 1904.  
(Grytten, Ålesund brenner: byen under ild og aske, 2003, pp. 158-159)



Figure 8: Photo of Kipervikgata, 1904.  
(Grytten, Ålesund brenner: byen under ild og aske, 2003, pp. 66-67)



Figure 9: Photo by Kirkhorn, 1904.  
(Grytten, Ålesund brenner: byen under ild og aske, 2003, p. 59)

In 1904, fires were not uncommon. As explained earlier, many major fires had occurred, but none had received as much coverage as the Ålesund fire. There were several newspaper articles all over Europe, including major publications in Germany, France, the UK, Italy, and Denmark, which covered the fire extensively. For example, the Trondheim Newspapers reported: "Only the harbor remains." And a Danish journalist finds reason to note: "The mountains stand – they are the only ones that have survived."<sup>23</sup>

Ålesund became the center of attention for the press and telegrams for several weeks across all of Europe. At a time when newspaper images were rare, Ålesund's destruction was depicted a lot in not only photographs, but also in drawings and exaggerated illustrations. The French daily newspaper *Le Petit Parisien*, for example, pictured the aid sent from France dramatically, with the city still burning in the background.

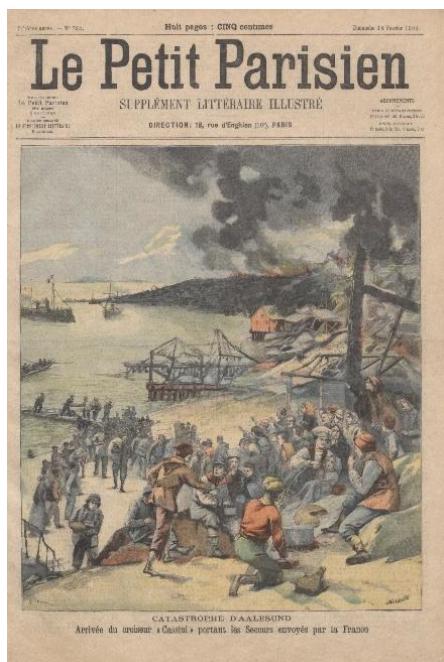


Figure 10: Illustration in the French newspaper *Le Petit Parisien* on February 02, 1904.  
(Grimstad, 2021)

<sup>23</sup>

(Grytten, Ålesund brenner: byen under ild og aske, 2003, p. 30, translated from Norwegian)

## 2.2 German help and the emergence of a hero

After almost 80% of the city was destroyed with a temperature around minus 20 degrees, the homelessness and the need for reconstruction were urgent. Unluckily, the tragedy occurred in the wake of an international economic crisis, known in Norway as the crisis that hit Kristiania (now Oslo) in 1899. This crisis primarily affected the capital, however, the financial challenges were still affecting the necessities in Ålesund. Norway's fire insurance fund lacked sufficient reserves to cover the losses immediately. This created delays in compensation payments, which further complicated the already dire financial situation in Ålesund. In the end, the reconstruction cost approximately 19.12 million NOK<sup>24</sup>, and significant private and public investments were required beyond insurance payouts.<sup>25</sup>

Fortunately, the fire triggered an unprecedented wave of humanitarian aid from across the world. External financial aid, including foreign donations, loans, and building materials, played a crucial role in financing the city's recovery. The initial aid came from the nearest towns. But soon, the fire led to an outpouring of donations from increasingly distant regions, spanning multiple continents. Assistance arrived from various countries like Germany, Sweden, Denmark, England, and France, as well as from America and Africa.<sup>26</sup>

Despite this, the assistance from Germany overshadowed all other contributions. It was both generous and substantial, drawing the most attention of all.<sup>27</sup> One person was crucial for this support and stands out as the name from which the aid came firsthand, and that was Emperor Wilhelm II. He was the richest man in Germany at that time and had, fortunately for Ålesund, a fascination for Norway and its west coast. Even before the fire, he had an enthusiasm for traveling to Norway.

*Figure 11: Emperor Wilhelm II.*  
(Grytten, Ålesund brenner: byen under ild og aske, 2003, p. 187)



<sup>24</sup> 19.12 mil NOK = 1,64 bil NOK today (price increase of ca. 8500%).

(2025, March 30) Calculated with: *Norges Bank*. <https://www.norges-bank.no/en/topics/Statistics/Price-calculator-/>

1,64 bil NOK = 144 mil € (0,0881).

(2015, March 30) Calculated with: *Google Finances*. [https://www.google.com/finance/quote/NOK-EUR?sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjt69\\_wmrKMAxWoCBAIHQoxJrIQmY0JegQIIhAu](https://www.google.com/finance/quote/NOK-EUR?sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjt69_wmrKMAxWoCBAIHQoxJrIQmY0JegQIIhAu)

<sup>25</sup> (Tvinnereim, 1981, pp. 28-29)

<sup>26</sup> (Grytten, Ålesund brenner: byen under ild og aske, 2003, p. 169)

<sup>27</sup> (Grytten, Ålesund brenner: byen under ild og aske, 2003, p. 178)

Almost every summer, he was seen traveling on his yacht, anchored at the most beautiful parts of the coast. There are still portraits and objects embossed with the imperial German emblem in the hotels he visited.<sup>28</sup> He had built a royal summer residence and several monuments dedicated to him, whereby his memory is remembered in many place names. Also, the German people were well informed about his visits to the north. It caused a boom in German tourism to Norway, which also strengthened its industrialization, as explained in the previous chapter. According to Ulli Kulke, "when Wilhelm stayed in the fjords, cruise ships were overbooked, and as soon as he departed, the season was over."<sup>29</sup>

After Emperor Wilhelm II heard about the fire in Ålesund, he reacted immediately and donated 12,000 NOK.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, he contacted all seafarers and dockers in Hamburg and Kiel who were at home on the weekend. On Sunday, the day after the fire began, three packed and loaded ships headed at speed to the north. Before they left, extensive preparation had taken place. It is evident from various accounts that there was great activity in Germany.

*Aftenposten*, Norway's largest newspaper and a key source of news at that time, wrote articles stating: "The town of Ålesund—both rich and poor—stood there in the evening, drawn in by the scent of meat soup from the German ships."<sup>31</sup>

After unloading the ships, they served as emergency shelters for the Ålesunders during the freezing winter nights. The German vessels became a focal point of the city, offering food, warmth, and care to those in need. Additionally, the Germans assisted in transporting the sick out of Ålesund. One of the ships was specially outfitted with a hospital unit, providing patients with proper medical care and optimal conditions for recovery.

After looking at the list of financial contributions to Ålesund by *Aftenposten*, the question of why the German Emperor received so much recognition arises. The records show that various municipalities, organizations, and individuals contributed significantly, and Emperor Wilhelm's contribution of 12,000 NOK didn't make such a crucial difference.

Figure 12: List of contributors from  
*Aftenposten*, January 30, 1904.  
 (Grytten, Ålesund brenner: byen under ild  
 og aske, 2003, p. 170)

Store Bidrag.
Trondhjems Handelsbank 1000.
Kristiania Glasmagazin 1000.
Hauge- jund Kommune 2000.
Den danske Landmandsbank 5000.
Konstil N. Persson, Helsingborg 5000.
Sulitjelma Aktiebolag 5000.
Fir Normand i Stock- holm, Sørensen, Ulvø, Amelie, Die- trichson 20,000.
Kongen og Dronnin- ren 7000.
Det øvrige Kongehus 2400.
Enten Svend Havn 1000.
Bru Træ- sichow 4000.
Bergens Kommune 20,000.
Conrad Langaard 5000.
Keiser Wil- helm 12,000.
Frelsesarmeene ved Gen. Booth forelsbig 3000.
Livs-orsført- selskabet "Thule" 1000.
Generalstøvul Agel Johnsen, Sverige 10,000.
En- kvist Privatmand (ved Statsminister Jøsen) 10,000.
Indbyggerne i Örebro 5000.
Nordenfjeldske Dampflibstelselskab 1000.
Ingeniør Jørg. Lysholm, Trond- hjem 1000.
Enten Knudzon, Kristi- ansjund 3000.
Gerdt Meyer, Bergen 5000.
Mohr & Søn, do. 5000.
Ger- hardi Sundt, do. 3000.
Hæggernes Dampmølle, do. 2000.
Mowinckel & Søn, do, 1000.
F. C. Jøbahl, do. 1000.
Varvets Kommune 1000.
John- sen & Jørgen, Leith 1000.
John- sen & Jørgen, London 1000.
Weitre London 1000.
Kommerceråd William Wolfsen, Hamburg 1000.
C. F. Lilje-

<sup>28</sup> (Skotheim, 2011)

<sup>29</sup> (Kulke, 2017, translated from German)

<sup>30</sup> (Grytten, Ålesund brenner: byen under ild og aske, 2003, p. 169)

<sup>31</sup> (Grytten, Ålesund brenner: byen under ild og aske, 2003, pp. 183-185, translated from Norwegian)

Despite this, the German emperor became the most prominent figure associated with the international aid effort.

The key to Emperor Wilhelm's fame lies not in the amount of money he donated but in the nature and visibility of his response. Unlike many contributors who primarily provided monetary aid, Wilhelm took immediate and tangible action. He provided essential supplies, like medical provisions, food, and shelter materials. This rapid intervention had a powerful symbolic effect, as it directly alleviated suffering while the disaster was still unfolding.

Media coverage further amplified the German Emperor's role. As one of the most prominent rulers in Europe, his involvement attracted extensive attention in both Norwegian and international newspapers.

Additionally, the Kaiser's involvement carried broader political and diplomatic significance. At the time, Germany and Norway were developing closer ties, and Emperor Wilhelm's support helped reinforce Germany's image as a strong and benevolent presence in Scandinavia.

Beyond the initial relief, Wilhelm remained committed to Ålesund's reconstruction, which further solidified his legacy. He continued to express interest in the city's recovery, invited Norwegian officials to Germany, and maintained a connection with the region for years.

Therefore, even after all his aid had arrived and was finished, Kaiser Wilhelm II was still on everyone's mind. Aftenposten described in an article how people on the streets met and, without any other words, simply said: "God bless him."<sup>32</sup> The German Emperor was perceived as the greatest hero. Until today, you can find in Ålesund a *Keiser Wilhelm* Street, a *keiserstatue*, *keiserbar*, and a *keiserbun*. He also has his own monument right at the bottom of Mount Aksla in the city park.

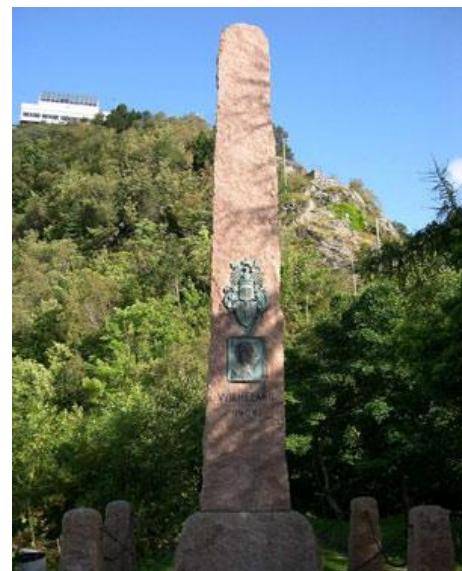


Figure 13: The Emperor Wilhelm II monument in 2005. The inscription reads Wilhelm II 1904. (Schöfert, 2005)



Figure 14: The Keiser Wilhelm Street – Street sign. (Schöfert, 2005)

<sup>32</sup>

(Grytten, Ålesund brenner: byen under ild og aske, 2003, p. 187, translated from Norwegian)

## 2.3 The Adaptation of German Jugendstil to Ålesund's local context



Figure 15: City Map of Ålesund, 1907. (Municipality of Ålesund, 1907)  
See attachments for a bigger version.<sup>ii</sup>

Ålesund was constructed strikingly quickly. The buildings were built within a period of one to three months.<sup>33</sup> The new city map from 1907 reveals a vastly different layout compared to its pre-fire counterpart from 1898. One of the most striking changes is the shift in building materials. While the old Ålesund was dominated by wooden structures, the rebuilt city is characterized by solid brick and stone buildings, shown in red. This change was not merely aesthetic but a crucial measure to prevent such a disaster from occurring again.

Beyond the materials used, the entire urban layout was redesigned with a stronger emphasis on order and functionality. The influence of European city planning trends is evident. The narrow, winding streets of the old town, which had contributed to the rapid spread of the fire, were replaced by wider, more structured roads that improved accessibility and fire safety. This new organization created a more open cityscape, allowing for better airflow and visibility.

After reading about the strong involvement of Emperor Wilhelm II, you could think that he also played a significant role in shaping the style of the city's new buildings. Even most online sources and personal conversations with Norwegians and Ålesunders always gave the impression that it was Emperor Wilhelm II who built up the city.

In truth, neither his thoughts nor German funds influenced the new architectural style.<sup>34</sup> Instead, it was architects from all over Norway who traveled to Ålesund and settled there to help and to

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<sup>33</sup> (Karaliova, 2015, p. 13)

<sup>34</sup> (Grytten, Fugl Føniks: Ålesund opp av asken, 2004, p. 64)

decide how to rebuild the city. Their penchant for German architecture has its origins in their education, which was obtained in Germany, as explained in the first chapter.

These architects recognized that responding to such trauma can offer advantages and open up new possibilities. Carola Hein reflects on this in her lecture *Conflicts and Violence*, emphasizing that trauma can become an opportunity. She states that the resilience of urban forms is reflected in the ability to recover both physically and mentally after trauma, thereby emphasizing the pivotal role of the architect in supporting the resilience narrative through their designs.<sup>35</sup>

The discussion about the reconstruction of Ålesund took place at a time of growing national consciousness. In 1904, the dissolution of the union with Sweden was only one year away. Now, a whole city had to be rebuilt. A new city had to be created. Architects and planners agreed to strive for a Norwegian city with a profound Norwegian appearance.

Questions arose, such as: What did it mean for a city to be Norwegian? If it was to be Norwegian, how should it be built? What should it look like? Should it look to the past? Or should it express something entirely new? The new Norway wanted to demonstrate that it had its own culture—a culture in which architecture played an important role. Ålesund provided an excellent opportunity.<sup>36</sup>

An important architect who contributed to the reconstruction was, for example, Sigurd Lunde. He emphasized in an article published in *Søndmøre Folkeblad* on April 26, 1904: "It is necessary to ensure that our rebuilding reflects national character. The stone, the timber, and other materials we use must be Norwegian, and the same should apply to architectural design. We must not simply copy foreign styles."<sup>36</sup>

Karl Norum, another important architect who worked in Ålesund after the fire, shared this viewpoint. In *Teknisk Ugeblad*, he wrote that new buildings in Ålesund should include elements of Norwegian wooden architecture, such as traditional stave church motifs. He considered this a characteristic feature that could give the houses a distinctively Norwegian appearance. Another person who expressed views on how buildings should be designed was the building inspector, Henrik Nissen, from Kristiania (Oslo). He believed architecture should reflect its time rather than imitate historical styles. Practicality was key, materials should be sourced locally to avoid high transport costs. Economic constraints, he argued, should shape architectural solutions.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> (Hein, 2024, min. 00:52:00)

<sup>36</sup> (Grytten, Fugl Føniks: Ålesund opp av asken, 2004, p. 69, translated from Norwegian)

<sup>37</sup> (Grytten, Fugl Føniks: Ålesund opp av asken, 2004, p. 67)



Figure 16: Photo, printed by Alb. Gjørtz, 1910.  
(Grytten, Fugl Føniks: Ålesund opp av asken, 2004, pp. 246-247)



Figure 17: Photo of Apotekergata, from Kåre Aasebø's collection. n.d.  
(Grytten, Fugl Føniks: Ålesund opp av asken, 2004, p. 203)



Figure 18: Photo of Kirkebakken. N.d.  
(Grytten, Fugl Føniks: Ålesund opp av asken, 2004, pp. 190-191)

Seeing Ålesund today as *the Jugendstil City*, one might assume that its residents at the time were fully aware of living in an Art Nouveau city. Enthusiasm for this idea can even lead to the belief that there was an official plan to make Ålesund a Jugendstil showcase. However, that was not the case. Many Norwegians—perhaps most—never used the terms Jugendstil or Art Nouveau in their daily life.<sup>38</sup> These labels only gained widespread international recognition later, with their adoption in Norway occurring even later, a topic explored in a later chapter.

As explained, the architects who rebuilt the city were largely educated in Germany, where Jugendstil was the prevailing style. However, even in Germany, France, and England, it had already begun to face criticism and had met resistance from those who preferred a return to simpler forms. This tendency is also evident in Ålesund.

One of the most notable German influences came through Hermann Muthesius, an architect who studied and worked in England from 1897 to 1904. His seminal work, *Das englische Haus*, introduced German audiences to the functional and rational principles of British domestic architecture. It advocated for simplicity, practicality, and harmonious integration with the surroundings.<sup>39</sup> This philosophy resonated in Ålesund, where architects were also inclined toward greater simplicity and restraint in building design.

Lunde, in *Sunnmøre Folkeblad* in May 1904, wrote about this tendency and argued that one should be cautious with excessive ornamentation. Instead, he suggested focusing on the larger lines—the overall forms and main characteristics of the buildings. Nissen also discouraged excessive ornamentation and emphasized that buildings should prioritize functionality and durability. In his view, a house was meant to be a shelter, not a showcase of decorative elements. And Norum also advised that his motto was to build rationally and tastefully. "Build with careful thought," he encouraged. "And above all, build simply."<sup>40</sup> This principle also made sense as the reconstruction had to happen fast.

While Germany played the most prominent role, other European countries also contributed to Ålesund's new architecture. Scotland introduced a more geometric and nationalistic take on Art Nouveau, which found echoes in Ålesund's simplified facades and use of bold lines. France and Belgium, traditionally associated with a more ornamental Art Nouveau, had less direct influence but still inspired certain design principles.

All in all, the result of these diverse principles and influences was a unique architectural language that distinguished Ålesund from other Art Nouveau cities in Europe. The city's reconstruction

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<sup>38</sup> (Grytten, Fugl Føniks: Ålesund opp av asken, 2004, pp. 64-65)

<sup>39</sup> (Tvinnereim, 1981, p. 195)

<sup>40</sup> (Grytten, Fugl Føniks: Ålesund opp av asken, 2004, p. 69, translated from Norwegian)

reflected the rationalized Jugendstil of Germany, tempered by British functionality and Scottish geometric clarity.

The outcome of the whole city can be described as a mix of simple and ornate designs, various forms, and different influences. Architects only partially attempted to shape their buildings concerning each other. The varying nature of the exteriors led to relatively little use of the decorative elements commonly associated with Jugendstil. Instead, where Jugendstil was present, it was often isolated to single features rather than being the dominant aesthetic. The more decorative and elaborate aspects of the Jugendstil seen in continental Europe were significantly reduced in Ålesund, where a simplified and adapted version of the style emerged. This meant that, despite Ålesund's association with Jugendstil, it never became a city fully dominated by it.



Figure 19: Photo of colorful Jugendstil buildings at the Aspevågen strait. (Kjolberg, 2019)

The new buildings were built from cement, granite, and marble. Because it mainly looked grey at first, 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. Many homeowners painted their houses in various colors, just as they had done with their timber houses before.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> (Karaliova, 2015, p. 10)



Figure 20: Photo of a colorful Jugendstil building with floral ornaments. (Schmitt, 2016)



Figure 21: Photo of a Jugendstil building with the year of construction on the facade. (Hume, 2024)



Figure 22: Photo of Jugendstil buildings. (Hume, 2024)



Figure 23: Jugendstil building with floral ornaments. (Jugend, 2016)



Figure 24: Jugendstil building with floral ornaments at Kirkegaten 9. (Steigan, 2008)



Figure 25: Photo of floral ornamentation. (Hume, 2024)

Everything was built out of Norwegian material and decorated with Norwegian motifs like Viking ornaments, using troll masks, dragons, Viking faces, and other devices that are associated with the timber carvings of stave church architecture and Viking ships.<sup>42</sup>



*Figure 26: An arch decorated with troll masks. (Karaliova, 2015, p. 12)*



*Figure 27: A decoration associated with Viking ornaments. (Karaliova, 2015, p. 13)*

All these factors created a unique Jugendstil language that can not be found anywhere else than in Ålesund. The adaptation of Jugendstil in Ålesund was not a mere replication of Central European Art Nouveau but rather a nuanced transformation shaped by local materials, building traditions, and socio-economic conditions. Ålesund's architects and builders had to balance aesthetic ideals with practical constraints and the emergence of rapid creation of housing. The adaptation process also reflected the evolving role of urban architecture in the early 20th century, where stylistic ideals were increasingly mediated by functional requirements, safety regulations, and local craftsmanship. Through this synthesis, Jugendstil in Ålesund became more than an imported style. It was a localized architectural language.

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<sup>42</sup>

(Karaliova, 2015, p. 12)

### 3. The Impact on the City's Identity

"Architecture acts as a tool for the representation of culture and society. The buildings should not be mere aesthetics-based buildings or structures; rather, they should have a meaning for the people with a sense of belonging to them."<sup>43</sup>

This idea by Kritika Garg is particularly relevant in the case of Ålesund, where architecture played a pivotal role in shaping the city's identity. The rebuilding process of Ålesund introduced Jugendstil, a foreign style with little connection to the local vernacular. While this new architectural identity eventually became locally adapted and later synonymous with Ålesund, it was initially an imposed vision rather than an organic expression of the community's cultural heritage. This situation is raising questions about identity, belonging, and the role of architecture in shaping collective memory. This chapter examines how Jugendstil became a defining element of Ålesund's identity, shaping both its physical environment and its perception on a national and international scale.

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<sup>43</sup> (Garg, 2020, p. 1446)

### 3.1 Redefining Ålesund's Identity

According to the author William Neill, the term *Identity* means image or recognition. It refers to the distinctiveness of a place or object, while an individual's identity can be linked to their unique traits or personality.<sup>44</sup> It can also determine the uniqueness and the property of being exceptional or separate from other places.<sup>45</sup>

Existing studies show that an individual's or a community's identity in a specific environment can be expressed through architecture.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, urban identity is deeply intertwined with architecture, as the built environment shapes not only the physical appearance of a city but also its cultural, social, and economic landscape. As Winston Churchill once said, "We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us."<sup>47</sup>

Art and architecture serve the purpose of conveying meaning through depiction and representation. Kiritika Garg further explains that "architecture acts as a tool for the representation of the culture and society. [...] Architectural forms embody a segment of nature or society that illuminate the inner self of the people and their lost sentiments and feelings towards their history, past, or renowned culture."<sup>48</sup>

In the reconstruction of Ålesund, one main aspect was to create a national character and Norwegian appearance. It should be a Norwegian city that highlights Norwegian identity. Questions arise, such as: Did they succeed? Or was there too much foreign involvement? Before these questions can be answered, the term Norwegian Identity needs to be discussed. What does a Norwegian city look like?

According to Jonathan D. Kyvik, Norwegian architecture is strongly rooted in nature, expressed through local materials, especially wood, and an approach that blends traditional elements with contemporary influences. A key aspect is the use of natural light and a sensitivity to the natural and urban surroundings of a location. Kyvik also talks about a Norwegian architect named Johan Ellefsen, who emphasizes the importance of adapting buildings to local conditions, such as terrain, climate, and the *folkelynne*, which can be translated as the spirit or character of the people. This idea creates a distinct version of architectural principles in Norway, where international styles are blended with local traditions and landscapes, and this paradox –how architecture can be both universal and local–became a key theme in Norwegian architectural history.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> (Neill, 2003)

<sup>45</sup> (Garg, 2020, p. 1447)

<sup>46</sup> (Ashfina, 2014, p. 159)

<sup>47</sup> (Churchill, 1943)

<sup>48</sup> (Garg, 2020, pp. 1445, 1448)

<sup>49</sup> (Kyvik, 2024, p. 4)

This striving for a balance between global influence and local adaptation is evident in Ålesund. While the trends in style and appearance came mostly from Germany, architects in Ålesund tried to adapt these bases to a Norwegian image. This approach was widespread and not uncommon in other Norwegian cities, which begs the question of why Ålesund became, and still remains, the city with the most foreign architectural involvement in Norway.

While other cities in Norway, such as Bergen or Oslo, also suffered from city fires and reconstructions, Ålesund was the only one to undergo such a dramatic transformation. One reason is that in the other fires, the destruction affected only parts of the city but left other districts intact. Ålesund was a relatively small town and was almost completely destroyed overnight, setting it apart from other city fires in Norway. The fire in Ålesund provided national and international newspapers with dramatic and attention-grabbing headlines.

The high international attention was followed by big foreign involvement in Ålesund's rebuilding, making its transformation more radical compared to the more locally influenced processes seen in Norway's larger cities. An effort was necessary to restore economic stability. Additionally, the reconstruction of Ålesund aligned with the ideals of modernization, such as fire safety, order, and open structures. In contrast, Bergen's and Oslo's reconstructions leaned more toward functional rebuilding rather than architectural reinvention.<sup>50</sup>

In Ålesund, modernity, fire safety, and artistic expression were prioritized over continuity with the past. This led not only to an architectural transformation but also to a profound cultural and social shift.

While almost all sources do not talk about the initial alienation and unhappiness of Ålesund's people, it is important to understand that in the initial stages after the reconstruction, many inhabitants found themselves in a city that no longer resembled the one they had lost, leaving them feeling alienated. Even with the incorporation of the local materials and motifs, Jugendstil remained a foreign style with no connection to the local heritage so far.

It almost seems like this issue is nowadays mostly removed from the public memory, as also in an interview with a resident from Ålesund, it was never addressed. Mathilde Tveit, a 29-year-old Ålesunder, confirmed in a personal interview (2025) that only the positive reactions to the reconstruction are taught in school.<sup>51</sup> This process is also called collective forgetting and describes how certain historical events gradually disappear from cultural consciousness due to avoidance, denial, or selective remembrance.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> (Ødegaard, 1928)

<sup>51</sup> (Tveit, 2025)

<sup>52</sup> (Minarova-Banjac, 2018, p. 3)

In fact, while the architects and city planners were happy with their work and outcome after the reconstruction, many other opinions were diverging. For example, writer and county governor Alexander Kielland visited Ålesund in the spring of 1905 and found the reconstruction disappointing. In a letter he wrote: "Ah! You should see Ålesund! If the city had been beautiful before the fire, then you can imagine—no, actually, you cannot imagine—anything so dreadful..."<sup>53</sup> By 1954, author Zinken Hopp was also critical. While she praised the natural surroundings, she found the architecture uninspiring, writing that many houses resembled an Ålesund native's idea of an ugly building. However, she acknowledged the city's unity and style, stating: "The city was unlucky to burn down in 1904 and be rebuilt in step with the ideals of its time—those that directly led to Berlin. The result is that it has become rather soulless and clumsy. Seen as a whole, the city is cold, modern, and ugly."<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the mixed opinions, it still has to be appreciated that the rapidness and effectiveness of the reconstruction of Ålesund were necessary to provide people with a safe place to live. While the single buildings may not be the most innovative design, creating a safe place in such an urgent and demanding situation was successful. From today's view, Dag Myklebust describes the result as "an assembly of Jugendstil buildings, few of which are important in themselves, but in their homogeneity, they make out a unique part of our history of architecture."<sup>54</sup>

The story goes on, and Myklebust elaborates further, "the fact that you find a complete town built generally in the same style is of no advantage to the place as long as the style is despised."<sup>54</sup> After the entire city was fully completed in 1909, the last architects and city planners returned to their original homes and left the people of Ålesund alone with their city. The Jugendstil trend of Europe diminished soon, in 1910, and for the coming time, most people did not see the value of Ålesund's architecture. Dag Myklebust mentions in his paper that the residents in that period were even ashamed to admit they were from Ålesund and found it an "ugly and dull place."<sup>54</sup>

These mixed feelings about foreign localized architecture are not a single case. Globalization has enabled architectural ideas and influences to flow freely across borders, which can create a sense of universality in design.<sup>55</sup> Khakurel explains that "many contemporary architectural designs prioritize global influences, often favoring sleek and modernist structures that may overlook local context. These designs, while visually appealing, may fail to establish a meaningful connection with the community they serve."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> (Grytten, Fugl Føniks: Ålesund opp av asken, 2004, p. 129, translated from Norwegian)

<sup>54</sup> (Myklebust, 1988, p. 154)

<sup>55</sup> (Abu-Orf & Wafi, 2022)

<sup>56</sup> (Khakurel, 2024)

Architect Balkrishna Doshi also aligns with this approach, highlighting the need to incorporate global ideas and technologies while remaining deeply connected to the cultural identity of the communities being served. Architecture should be a reflection of the society it is built for. Overreliance on global influences can lead to the loss of cultural identity and a disconnection from the local context.<sup>57</sup>

This design approach is called *Context Sensitivity Design* and is explained by Ashfina T. as something that incorporates elements that reflect the local culture, history, and environment. It can be achieved through the use of indigenous materials, traditional building techniques, and vernacular architectural styles. By embracing these elements, architects can preserve cultural identity.<sup>58</sup>

Opposing views argue that sharing architectural ideas is a global phenomenon and a natural result of globalization, which can also bring benefits. For instance, Masako Notoji writes, while she addresses concerns about U.S. culture colonizing other societies, that “this line of argument, however, assumes the dominating and unilateral influence of the ‘sending culture’ over the ‘receiving culture,’ and lacks an understanding of the dynamic process in which the meaning and function of the original culture is reconstructed in the new context of the receiver.” She believes that “the values and meanings attached to such exports are often reconstructed and redefined within the contexts of the importing societies.”<sup>59</sup>

This is also the case in Ålesund. Still, especially at a time when Norway was asserting its national identity in politics and culture, the architectural transformation of Ålesund symbolized a dependence on foreign ideas. Although Lunde and Norum promoted a very Norwegian architecture, the city's reconstruction stood as an exception to the nationalistic architectural trends elsewhere in Norway, and didn't align with what was highly regarded in other common Norwegian architecture.

For 60 more years after the reconstruction, the city got no recognition for its Jugendstil architecture. Fortunately, over time, there have been shifting attitudes and perceptions. Things have moved forward for the benefit of the reconstruction efforts.<sup>60</sup>

The breakthrough came in the 1970s when people working with architecture preservation took an interest in Ålesund. It was in 1975 when one of the owners was forced for the first time to rebuild his house as a copy of the old one because of preservation, and the term Jugendstil became well known among the inhabitants.<sup>61</sup> It is also the beginning of Ålesund's second identity change.

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<sup>57</sup> (Balsavar, 2023)

<sup>58</sup> (Ashfina, 2014, p. 160)

<sup>59</sup> (Notoji, 2000, p. 222)

<sup>60</sup> (Grytten, Fugl Føniks: Ålesund opp av asken, 2004, p. 130)

<sup>61</sup> (Myklebust, 1988, p. 154)

## 3.2 Long-term impacts

"The identity of a region is not fixed or constant. Rather, it is a variable that keeps on changing according to the user's experience or association with it over a period of time. This represents identity and culture at a generational level. The identity of a place may be different for every person, is always exclusively formed, and is always in a continuous process."<sup>62</sup>

This quote from William Neill applies to Ålesund. In the 1970s, Ålesund's architectural identity underwent a second transformation. This time, not through physical rebuilding, but through a shift in perception. As architectural movements evolved and historical preservation gained importance, the distinct character of Ålesund's built environment started to be recognized as a cultural and artistic asset rather than just a functional urban renewal. By the late 20th century, recurring interest in Art Nouveau and Jugendstil across Europe, along with a broader appreciation for heritage tourism, led to a rebranding of Ålesund. In 1984, the Swan Pharmacy became the first listed Jugendstil monument, and more followed.<sup>63</sup> As tourism flourished, Ålesund leveraged its unique architectural heritage to attract cruise ships, cultural events, and international recognition, transforming what was once a foreign and imposed style into a celebrated emblem of the city's identity. The former Swan Pharmacy was transformed into the *Jugendstilsenteret* (Jugendstil Centre) in 2003, and until today, it is an interpretive center exhibiting modern multimedia exhibitions and international art.



Figure 28: Photo of the Jugendstil Centre.  
(Hume, 2024)

<sup>62</sup> (Neill, 2003)

<sup>63</sup> (Juvrud, 2024)

Nevertheless, one part of Ålesund's identity will always be its history and past. As Neill said, historical structures that are still present or maintained form a significant memory of that painful past and history. Although history may be traumatic or harsh, it is what shapes us today as beings.<sup>64</sup>

As noted by Mathilde Tveit, the story of the fire and the subsequent German aid is still taught today from an early age through family, school, and cultural institutions. Her account reflects a deeply rooted awareness and pride in Ålesund's reconstruction and Jugendstil architecture, which she described as an integral part of local identity, with many locals cherishing the buildings and their historical significance. According to her, the history is remembered in an overwhelmingly positive light, with little to no critical discussion or controversy surrounding the German involvement.<sup>65</sup>

Author Harald Grytten compares the history of the city with the characteristics of a family lineage, which is passed down from generation to generation: "The city's development is shaped by its history and has left clear marks, which time either reinforces or diminishes. Yet, some aspects will always remain."<sup>66</sup>

The gratefulness for Germany, particularly Emperor Wilhelm II, has never diminished since the reconstruction. The positive connection remained strong, even in the face of the city's occupation by Germany during World War II. Despite the period of occupation, Ålesund never distanced itself from its German ties. While other Norwegian cities altered or removed German street names to sever associations with the occupying force, Ålesund maintained its streets named after German figures, including Emperor Wilhelm II. This continuity reflects the city's longstanding respect for the German influence on its identity and architecture, even in the most challenging times.

Tveit goes as far as to say that "everyone in Ålesund loves the German people"<sup>64</sup>, although younger people may not discuss it as much as the older ones.

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<sup>64</sup> (Neill, 2003)

<sup>65</sup> (Tveit, 2025)

<sup>66</sup> (Grytten, *Viltre gutt: byen som brente*, 2002, p. 45, translated from Norwegian)

## 4. Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the impact of German influence on Ålesund's reconstruction following the 1904 fire and how this process redefined the city's identity. By exploring the historical context, the rebuilding process, and their lasting effects, this research has highlighted the significant role of external architectural influences on a city's character.

The European rise of Jugendstil in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, specifically in Germany, set the stage for its adoption in Ålesund. Norway's already existing political and economic ties with Germany laid the groundwork for the architectural exchange that followed. Although the fire of 1904 was a disaster, it provided an opportunity for rapid reconstruction, largely aided by international help. Germany, and in particular Emperor Wilhelm II, played a significant role in supporting the city's recovery. The integration of German Jugendstil into Ålesund's reconstruction led to a distinctive adaptation of the style, blending foreign influences with local traditions. This transformation not only altered the city's physical appearance but also redefined its cultural identity, which established Ålesund as *the Art Nouveau City* we know today.

More broadly, this case study contributes to discussions about the relationship between globalization and architectural identity. It shows how foreign involvement can leave a lasting imprint on a city while also creating questions about its cultural preservation.

Did the architects and city planners pay enough attention to reflect the society when they were integrating global ideas, or did they fail to connect with the community and lose touch with the city's former cultural identity? Aside from that, were they truly successful in creating a distinctly Norwegian city, or did they become too influenced by international trends?

There are no definitive answers to these questions. While the reconstruction undeniably brought global influences to Ålesund, it also created a unique local version of Jugendstil that merged international elements with Norwegian roots. The success of this transformation can be seen as a balance, though not without tensions, between embracing modern, global trends and maintaining local identity.

While this research has investigated the city of Ålesund, further study could examine similar cases of post-disaster reconstruction and how cities manage the balance between international architectural trends and local heritage. Comparative analyses with other urban transformations could provide deeper insights into how identity can be reconstructed through architecture.

Today, Ålesund stands as a striking example of how a city's identity can be shaped by historical events and external influences. What began as an urgent need to rebuild developed into a unique architectural legacy that continues to define the city more than a century later. This lasting

transformation reflects the ability of architecture to not only restore but also reinvent the spaces in which people live and interact.

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