

Alesund: Norway's art nouveau city

Jugendstil architecture rises from 1904 fire

By SUSAN JAMES

ALESUND, Norway—From tragic circumstances, a confluence of lucky events led to the creation of one of Norway's landmark art cities.

At the turn of the 20th century, Alesund was prosperous and growing. Strategically located on seven islands along the southwest Norwegian coast, Alesund was a town of wooden buildings whose merchants had grown rich in the fishing trade.

On a winter's night in late January 1904, a gale-force storm struck the area. One of Alesund's wooden houses caught fire, and by morning the town was a smoking ruin, its 11,000 citizens left homeless.

In 1904, the country was suffering from heavy unemployment so an army of construction workers appeared in Alesund looking for jobs. Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, infatuated with the country he had visited many times, sent several ships carrying men and materials to help rebuild the beleaguered town.

Fortunately, Alesund's wealthy merchants could pay for the best and decided to forego cheaper, traditional, but flammable wood and rebuild their town in brick and stone.

Fifty Norwegian architects and master builders who had trained in England and Germany and who were fluent in the new architectural style of Art Nouveau, or Jugendstil, arrived to offer their services.

The Norwegian government made the resurrection of Alesund a prime goal and, within three years, from the ashes of the 1904 fire, arose a re-imagined urban landscape on the edge of sea, now called "Europe's most complete Art Nouveau city."

Trained mostly in the earlier German Gothic style, Alesund's turn-of-the-century architects abandoned the emphasis on German themes, simplified the fussy structural rhetoric of a mythologized Middle Ages, and adopted instead a syncretic "Norse" style.

Predicated on functional engineering, pared-down but playful lines, and an abundance of natural light, Alesund's builders used models chosen from the increasingly fashionable architectural vocabulary of Art Nouveau.

Incorporating motifs taken from Norse mythology and Viking history, the buildings drew their inspira-



NORDIC DETAIL: No building is like any other in Alesund, where designs and patterns from Norse myth and legend predominate. SUSAN JAMES

tion from an attention to natural forms, interpreted through idiosyncratic, handcrafted architectural statements. All rooted in Art Nouveau, the buildings appear to have grown organically. No building in Alesund looks like any other.

Everywhere you look, structure and details strike the eye. Brilliant stylized plaster flowers bloom from arches above balconies defined by decorative wrought iron. Window embrasures are outlined in contrasting shapes, and festoons of intricate colored ornamentation run across the facades of houses that, like the proverbial phoenix, rose from the ashes of the old to become a celebration of the new.

Set against a stunning Norwegian backdrop of snow-capped mountains and narrow fjords, today's Alesund is an architectural gem whose citizens are zealously maintaining its structural integrity.

It is a member of the Réseau Art Nouveau Network, a 21-city organization dedicated to the conservation of Europe's signature Art Nouveau towns. Of the 600 structures built in Alesund between 1904-1907, 400 still stand, the largest concentration of such buildings in the world.

For an overview of the town, Alesund's Art Nouveau Center, or Jugendstilsenteret, is a museum incorporating interactive multimedia exhibits. Lo-

cated in the former Swan Pharmacy, built between 1905-1907, the pharmacy has been returned to its pristine 1907 state, complete with embossed, William Morris-style chrysanthemum wall paper from Japan, purpose-built furniture, and a collection of leaded glass windows and art glass on display on several floors.

Slide shows illustrate Alesund before, during, and after the 1904 fire, and the museum invites you to walk through the living and working spaces of the family that created the building. The museum also houses a café and gift shop, and walking tours of the town are offered during the summer.



Al Green giving his love to the crowd at Ottawa's 2009 Jazz Festival PAM McLENNAN/EPOCHTIMES

Good Reverend A'mighty

Al Green on stage at the Ottawa Jazz Festival

By PAM McLENNAN
Epoch Times Staff

Who can sing, dance, posture for the crowd, and chew gum all at the same time? Al Green was doing all that and more on the Concert Under the Stars stage in Confederation Park on the opening weekend of the 2009 Ottawa Jazz Festival.

Looking sharp in a three piece suit and his trademark bouquet of red roses that he tossed to his fans throughout the set, Green sang as well as I have heard him. What made the Reverend so great wasn't just the vocals, the dance moves that take you back to the 60s, or his signature falsetto that had the crowd cheering every time he hit a high note—it was the tight group of musicians he has assembled for the tour.

Each one is a master in his own right and Green paid them their dues. He took most of the night to intro the players to the audience, one or two per song, and gave them a chance to shine. With Dave Stewart on sax, bass guitarist Barry Campbell, Stacey Weyans on keyboard or "piano" as Green called it, and Jimmy

in his gangsta hat playing lead guitar, the group moved from song to song as smooth as butter melting on a pancake stack.

"I'm in Ottawa and I feel at home here," said Green. "We are children; we believe in Jesus Christ." He then had the audience chant, "God is good—all the time" like he might while conducting a service at his home church in Memphis.

Backup vocals, provided by Green's daughters the Green Sisters, were strong, as they helped keep the show moving along and the interest level of the crowd on sizzle. Two backup dancers—and some dancing musicians—added to the overall joy, and everyone on stage seemed to be having a lot of fun.

The first song he sang from his 2008 album was "Lay it Down" and Green, in his doin' it his way style, took it to the limit by lying on the stage and kicking his feet in the air—roses in hand and never missing a note.

The crowd was there to hear the old faves as well as the new stuff and he didn't disappoint. "Stay with Me," "I'm So In love With You," "Every-

thing Is Gonna Be Alright," and of course "Tired of Being Alone," his first gold single. He was down on one knee when he hit that famous high note in "How Can You Mend a Broken Heart."

True to his gospel roots Green started singing Amazing Grace—the audience sang as much as he did—and then he let the Green Sisters take over. The Reverend came back in and at the end, with that voice soaring over the band and the crowd, stood with his hands over his head as if clasped in prayer. Quite a sight.

His medley of Motown hits that was all too short included "Here I Am Baby," "My Girl," "I Been Lovin' You Too Long," the Sam Cooke classic "Wonderful World," Otis Reading's "Dock of the Bay," and "You Are Everything."

"Some people wonder if the Reverend still got it," he said. "YES!" yelled the audience.

Undeniably, the Reverend has still got it. What a show. He closed with "Love and Happiness," reflecting just what some of us were feeling for the pop, blues, and gospel icon.

Book review: Poorly Made in China

Chinese companies
masters of
obfuscation

By PHIL RANDELL
Epoch Times Staff

I just returned from an amazing, eye-opening journey to China. However, I never left the United States.

While reading "Poorly Made in China, An Insider's Account of the Tactics Behind China's Production Game," by Paul Midler, it was as if I was there with the author as he detailed the misadventures of Western importers being out-manoeuvred by mainland China manufacturers at almost every turn.

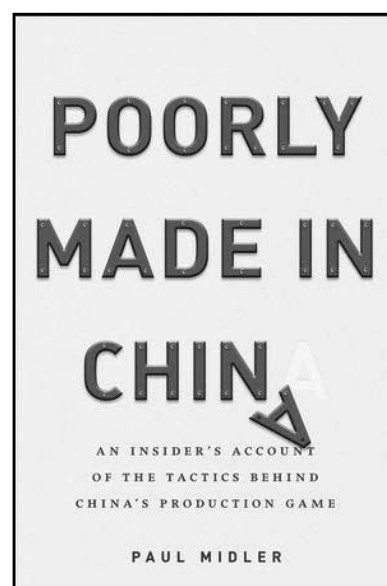
Through a vivid narrative of his own experiences, Midler, a Mandarin-speaking consultant for Westerners trying to do business in Asia, exposes the mind-boggling risks of conducting business in a country in which norms have been turned upside down from traditional culture. Yet, the author's style is humorous at times and often light.

In the West, businesses often court each other with caution at first, and then slowly develop trust as the business relationship evolves. Through the descriptions of about eight business pairings, the reader is shown how Westerners are at first lavishly treated. However, once they make their initial investments, their situations become progressively more difficult.

Midler uses pseudonyms for the people and companies he describes.

One pairing between an importer and manufacturers was the story of Bernie, the savvy owner of Carter Johnson, a body-care products company, and the Chinese company King Chemical. Through his story, we learn of "quality fade," a deliberate, incremental, and surreptitious process in which manufacturers reduce the quality of ingredients to widen profit margins.

One of the products Carter Johnson hired King Chemical to produce was shampoo. When the factory owners were caught using smaller, inappropriate labels, they continued to do so until the supply ran out, despite protests from Midler and the importer.



showed how some importers were trapped by their own greed. Other Western business people were more sympathetic subjects. Without clarity of their situations, they were trying to help their companies in an ever-changing world economy.

In addition, the author shows great sympathy for many of Chinese citizens he meets who are trapped within a system they did not create.

Midler said in an interview, "There are a lot of people who remain in denial about the China opportunity." Commenting about the factory owners, he said they "forever keep foreign partners at a break-even point," shifting all of the profits to themselves.

Through the author's eyes and ears, the reader is transported into a business environment where appearance triumphs over substance and quality, workers rights are almost non-existent, and safety standards are completely arbitrary.

In addition, one is given an inside view into an industrial environment almost devoid of designers, but filled with experts in copying, retrofitting, and counterfeiting.

As I closed the book, I thought of the made-in-China umbrella that I had recently used only twice, which sprang apart into many parts as I opened it. I was grateful it was not a device that I depended on for safety.

Midler did not start out intending to write a book. During the course of his experiences, he took notes, thinking perhaps he would create a brief for his clients. He eventually realized that the understanding he had gained could benefit many.

The 236-page text is a fast, enjoyable read. There are a few times when the pace does slow, but the author is explaining simple situations in great depth to give the reader more understanding of business and interpersonal dynamics.

"Poorly Made in China" is an invaluable book for anyone considering doing business in China or teaching a course in international trade. This is also a book for all consumers in countries that import products from China.

"Poorly Made in China, An Insider's Account of the Tactics Behind China's Production Game," by Paul Midler (2009), is published by Wiley and is available at Amazon.com.

The thickness of the plastic shampoo bottles was slowly reduced until they broke under pressure while being warehoused, causing a mess and a considerable financial loss. The factory owners passed the cost onto the importer.

Bernie had provided King Chemical with the formulation for the shampoo, but when quality problems arose and he asked to see a list of the ingredients, he was told it was proprietary information.

Through all the accounts in this book, it becomes clear how Western countries have become plagued by defective products, such as exploding tires, poisonous toys made with lead paint, and as reported in The Epoch Times, drywall that emits poisonous fumes.

What also becomes obvious is what a weak bargaining position the Westerners are in. They are in a country in which they do not understand the language or business tactics. Businessmen know that in negotiations, information is power.

The Chinese manufacturers written about in the book were masters of obfuscation, obtaining much information, while disclosing little, and creating illusion after illusion. Most importantly, the mindset and negotiation strategies many Westerners used seem to be anchored in the legal protections that they had in their own countries, but that do not exist in China.

Midler, who has an MBA from Wharton, was even-handed; he also