“Fire in the Grove: The Cocoanut Grove Tragedy and its Aftermath”

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# **Introduction**

The book titled “Fire in the Grove: The Cocoanut Grove Tragedy and its Aftermath” by John Esposito covers the events that transpired on 28th Nov 1942 in Boston, Massachusetts, where one of the biggest fire disasters in the region took place, claiming around 490 lives. This book has provided a detailed analysis of different events that took place during that night. It also goes on to highlight some other events that happened after the tragedy. In this dreadful night, the Cocoanut Grove nightclub caught fire, and due to different reasons, people were unable to escape. As a result, a significant number died in the building trying to fight for their lives. This paper provides a brief description of the incident, impacts of the fire, lessons learned from the tragedy, different factors that led to the incident, and a general review of the book.

# **Description**

It was around 10:15 pm when the fire started. After a few moments, the first fire alarm was struck. A huge cloud of smoke was visible near Broadway. Firemen realized that the Cocoanut Grove was burning. They arrived at around 10:23 pm, only to find that the fire had already spread. According to the author, the fire started at the Melody Lounge where a palm tree was seen burning. A bulb in the Lounge blew, and that is when the palm tree started burning. During the trial, the owner of the Lounge said that a worker lit a match stick to check why the bulb stopped working, and in the process, he started the fire. However, this was not established as a fact because different people believed that the fire was a result of faulty electrical wiring in the building. The workers tried to put the fire off to prevent it from reaching the ceiling and the wall by pouring water at the palm tree. The fire went on and spread along the ceiling, and it was on the entire Melody lounge. It was too late from the workers to do anything to prevent the fire from spreading. People in the lounge panicked, and they started moving in different directions where they stumbled over chairs, tables. They were all moving to one exit, which most of the people knew existed. However, some exit doors were locked. As a result, many people were trapped in the building, something that significantly contributed to the high number of deaths in the incident.

The fire reached the stairway and caught some of the people who were ascending the stairway. Now the fire was burning wood, and things were collapsing and falling on the ground. Stairs were blocked by bodies—a pile of human bodies. The smoke and the flames were making people choke. This was the main cause of the death of those who died. The fire reached the main floor. The revolving door was the primary way out, yet it was also at the main entrance. The other exits were in the New Broadway lounge, but these were dangerous because they could not let a lot of people out. In total, there were nine exits. Nonetheless, most of them were only known by employees. The fire reached the street floor, and after a few minutes, it reached the basement room. One of the exit doors was equipped with a panic lock, and thus, it did not help much in evacuating people from the lounge. The fire reached the foyer via the connecting corridor, where it intensified due to the presence of oxygen and fuel in the room. It then covered the entire foyer, finally reaching the Caricature bar. After a while, it reached the New Broadway Lounge. Here, while the patrons tried to help people to get out, the fire burnt a significant number of people in that area. The efforts made by the firemen were fruitless because they watched people burn alive to death. The injured people were taken to different hospitals in the area, with some succumbing to the injuries. The owner of the Club was charged with involuntary manslaughter.

## **The Structure of the Club**

The book does not state when the nightclub was built, but it has given a detailed analysis of the structure and ownership of the club. Barney Welansky was the owner of the club when the tragedy occurred, and he had “inherited’ it from Charles Solomon in 1933. This occurred after Solomon was killed in a shooting incident that took place in Cotton Club. Solomon’s wife decided to transfer the ownership of the club to Barney after her husband’s demise. Solomon had bought the club in 1930, so he only managed the club for three years. When Barney took over the management of the club business was hard because of the depression, but he managed to make the club a success. Barney managed to build the modern Grove, and the club was two times larger than the old Grove. The modern Grove contained a dining room, which was a 3,600-square foot (Esposito, 2005). It also had three rooms, which were 10,000- square-foot, and these rooms contained four bars that were connected by staircases and corridors. The building also had a Caricature Bar, which was 48-foot-long, and was located in the basement, and it also had a blue fabric ceiling. The also had a recent expansion known as the New Broadway Lounge, which was different from the older structures because it was designed in a way that reflected jungle kitsch. It also had some imitations of a palm tree. The New Lounge was also decorated in a tidy modern style. It was covered with glossy leatherette and neon-lined walls.

As stated by the author, the lighting in the lounge was dark: It comprised of indirect light at the center of the bars and some neon glowing from underneath the bar. The lounge had 7.5watt bulbs that had the same lighting as Christmas tree lights. During Barney’s tenure, the club had several improvements where it underwent numerous renovations. One of these renovations included an extension of a bar that was now an octagon of 35-18 feet, which covered around one-third of the entire floor space (Esposito, 2005). The ceiling of the club was low because it was 10 feet long. It also had some dark blue fabric that suspended below the cement. There was a staircase that had 15 steps that made a 50foot U-turn on the club’s main floor. This staircase led to a revolving door that was at the club’s main entrance, which led to the foyer area and to the checkroom. The main dining room was around 60 by 60 square feet, with the wooden dance floor being 600 square feet. The club served its purpose because it attracted huge numbers of customers, but it was not structured in a manner that could save lives if a fire accident occurred. Its seating capacity was around 460 people, but it was overcrowded during the weekends. This was a disaster in waiting. True to this speculation, it came to be during this dreadful Saturday night.

# **Impacts of the Fire**

Even if the fire burned for around eight minutes, the damage it caused was massive, and the number of people who died in that building was high. The fire claimed around 490 people and many others sustained minor and major injuries. During this particular Saturday night, the club was overcrowded: it was supposed to hold a capacity of 460 people, yet the number of people who died was around 492. This means that some extra tables and chairs were added during this night, a movement that prevented the free movement of customers during this fire incident. The fire spread through different floors. Many workers died during this period because they tried to save the lives of the visitors. Other workers, such as the cashier, refused to leave the money the club had made during this night but she ended up dead. While the destruction of property was significant, the death of all these people was the most painful consequence of the incident. The impact could have been reduced if people did not panic because they could have moved out in an orderly manner. Even though exit doors that were available at that particular time were not sufficient to allow all people to get out, more people would have been saved.

The whole building was burned to the ground. Consequently, it was closed and secured for investigations. Some of the customers who survived had to stay in the hospital for more than one year before they fully recovered. The author has given detailed information regarding how different people died. There is no doubt that the events that happened during that night were worrying and horrifying, and it was one of the worst tragedies that have ever happened in this region. The local hospitals were overwhelmed by a large number of injured people. The doctors had a hard time separating the dead and those who were yet to die. This confusion was catastrophic as some of those who were injured but alive ended up dying hours after arriving at the hospital. Overall, even though the fire did not spread to other buildings, it left massive damage, and it also claimed a huge number of people who were trapped in the building. Prominent figures such as the mayor were not in the building during the night. Also, the owner was at the hospital when the accident happened.

# **Factors that Led to the Fire and Loss of Lives**

Multiple factors are said by different people to have led to the fire in the Cocoanut Grove. As stated, lights went off, and that is when the fire started. According to the owner of Club, the fire was caused by a minor who was employed in the club when he was checking what had made the bulb to go off. When questioned, the boy said that he was not certain whether he caused the fire. Other parties suspected that the fire was caused by faulty electrical wiring. The fire spread because the club was not equipped with firefighting equipment. Also, the club was built with materials that could catch fire easily, especially the ceiling. These materials caught fire easily, and this also led to the spread of the fire at a rapid rate to other rooms in the club.

Overcrowding caused major inconveniences because the extra chairs and table restricted people from moving to the available exits. It also led to the piling up of bodies in different locations because people could not move freely. The fact that a significant number of exits in different locations were locked also contributed to the death of all these people. The author said that Barney refused to allow the responsible authorities to inspect the electrical installation of the New Lounge because he had connections with the mayor. In fact, he said that he had done a lot of favors to the people who were supposed to license the Lounge. This also may have led to fire and loss of lives. Corruption was a major contributor to this accident because the owner failed to follow the existing laws and regulations and still conducted business as usual.

# **Lessons Learned from the Incident**

There is sufficient evidence showing that the fire spread due to faulty electrical installation and other factors that are related to the lack of proper equipment of building to contain such accident threats such as a fire. From this incident, it is clear that it is important to have sufficient exits with illuminated exit signs that clearly indicate at the floor level to enable people to escape when there is a fire incident. It is also critical for such a building to have an ample number of portable fire extinguishers and also have trained staff who know how to use them. Also, have transparent local fire inspectors who will enforce all the regulations and requirements in a way that will minimize fire accidents and also ensure that buildings are structured in a way that negative impacts of fire can be mitigated and minimized. In such a building, the owners should train the staff on how to respond to such an incident properly. After all, the staff did not have clear instructions related to responding to such emergencies.

In a club such as Cocoanut Grove, it should have an automatic fire sprinkler regardless of the size so that the fire can be put off immediately as it starts. It is also critical for such buildings to prohibit materials such as polyurethane because they are not fire retardant. Also, other buildings, such as Cocoanut Grove, should be equipped properly to ensure that accidents can be contained easily without causing massive damage and other negative impacts. It is also important for customers of such buildings to take caution when entering such buildings. In the current incident, people continued to enter even though it was fully packed, and this led to more deaths. Therefore, when someone is entering such a building, it is important to ensure that one can see all available exits and also check whether there are clear exit paths. Also, during emergencies, it is critical to react immediately and get out. All these lessons related to the operations of the current buildings.

# **How the Built Environment Influenced Survival**

Almost every aspect of Grove’s environment influenced the survival of people in a negative manner. The way the club was structured violated almost every chance of survival in case of an incident. In the plan of the New Broadway Lounge, there was an exit door that was supposed to be built for emergency purposes, but the owner decided to build a checkroom, and it blocked the exit door completely. Also, as stated, the material that was used to build and complete the building was not fire retardant, and this increased the chances of the fire spreading faster in the entire club. The fact the basement also had a bar, and it had no window also reduced chances of survival (Stewart, 2015). Also, in the dining room, there was a wood that had blocked several plate-glass windows, which could have provided an ideal escape route. This reduced the survival rate by a significant margin because people in this area could have escaped the fire easily.

The building was managed in a manner that no customer would move out without the patrons noticing, and that is why a significant number of exits were locked. As stated, the locking of exit doors was manslaughter because it trapped customers during the fire incident, and this minimized the chances of survival of all these customers significantly. Despite these exit doors being locked, the customers could not trace them easily. During the incident, these customers did not know where the exits were. This caused a lot of commotion and confusion, and it led to the death of so many people. Of course, the building functioned as it was intended, but sometimes it performed beyond its capacity. However, it was a threat to human lives, and its structure was not suitable for such as social place.

# **A Review of the Book**

In addition to containing an analysis of the activities that transpired during the dreadful night, the book is very insightful and entertaining. The way the author has structured it has made the flow of thoughts to be efficient, and after reading one chapter, one can anticipate what the other chapter entails. The book has chronologically covered all events, with sufficient examples and points of view from the author. In fact, it has provided details that one cannot find from other sources, and this is incredible (Schorow, 2005). The author has also provided recommendations that entail different ways that other buildings can be structured and designed to avoid such accidents and high fatality. It is amazing how the author has been able to cover an event that happened several decades ago and still provided so many details.

I would recommend other people to read the book because it contains useful insights related to managing buildings and the prevention of accidents. It also has an interesting storyline that is entertaining with important lessons. The author has also included his opinions about different things that transpired in the book. This makes the book to be more than a documentary about what happened during the fire incident. The language used is clear and understandable by all sorts of readers, and thus, this book is great for all readers.

# **Conclusions**

The events that happened in Cocoanut Grove are devastating, and people must learn from them. This accident happened due to gross misconduct and failure to follow the stipulated laws and regulations. There are a lot of lessons that this story has taught different people. Therefore, other building owners can learn from the conviction of Barney and ensure that they equip their buildings with proper equipment to handle accidents efficiently. Also, buildings should be structured in a manner that reduces negative impacts in case of a fire incident. Lastly, people should also be careful when entering buildings to maximize their chances of survival in case of an accident.

# References

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