

## Lakki, a monument to 1930s Italian rationalism



By Giorgos Lialios

The Aegean boasts a spot that would be hard to come by anywhere else in the world: a small seaside town that could be from a Giorgio de Chirico painting or a Federico Fellini film set.

Unknown but at the same time familiar, old yet contemporary. Nothing really prepares you for a visit to Lakki on the eastern Aegean island of Leros, a village that was built by the Italians in the 1930s and remains today just as it was then, an architectural treasure that has been salvaged thanks more to chance than design.

The history of Lakki dates back to 1912, when control of the Dodecanese island cluster to which Leros belongs was ceded to the Italians. The Italians chose Leros to locate their aeronautical base, and the Bay of Lakki, the second-largest natural harbor in the Mediterranean after that of Valletta on Malta, was ideal for this purpose. In 1923, the G. Rossetti air base was completed, housing hydroplanes, military installations and a few residences for staffers at a spot called Lepida, which is across the bay from Lakki.

"The ever-increasing demand for residences for officers and their families prompted the Italian administration to build a new town, Porto Lago, on the facing coast," explained architecture professor Vassilis Kolonas in his book "Italian Architecture in the Dodecanese Islands (1912-1943)" (Olkos, Athens, 2002).

The new town of Porto Lago was built at Lakki in place of a small fishing village between 1930 and 1936. The town had everything from public buildings to private residences for the military base's officers and soldiers and the result was an architecturally homogenous urban center built along the principles of rationalism.

"The church, the theater, the school, the hospital, the artillery barracks, the hotel and above all the circular market with the clock tower compose an architectural whole with unique continuity, which could, rightfully, be included in an architectural exhibition for the 1930s," wrote Kolonas.



Following the end of World War II and after the Dodecanese islands became a part of Greece, the Italians began leaving Lakki. Part of Lakki and Lepida were used as an asylum for the mentally ill, who were kept in notoriously horrid conditions. During the 1967-74 military dictatorship, Lakki and nearby Partheni were used as camps for political prisoners. The residences of the Italian officers were passed into the hands of island residents, while some of the town's more emblematic buildings, such as the hotel (which operated into the 1970s) and the cinema, now belong to the Municipality of Leros.

Today, Lakki has now been abandoned to its fate.

"The lack of attention to the preservation of Lakki is certainly due to the chronic lack of funds. However, it also reflects the absence of a culture for evaluating, assessing and protecting architectural heritage," wrote architect Donatella Manzella in her study "Saluti da Leros. Portolago: una città razionalista nell' Egeo" ("Greetings from Leros - Lakki: A Rationalist City in the Aegean").

"But even in buildings that have been renovated, the interventions are often inappropriate," Manzella argued. "We have seen cases of structural alterations and changes to the original materials and colors."



Little has been done to salvage Lakki on an institutional level. Kelly Kourepini, the chief of zoning on the island, told Kathimerini that the area was listed for protection as a traditional settlement (along with dozens more) by a decree in 1978 that set some rudimentary regulations regarding new construction. However, she added, the boundaries of Lakki have not been formally designated and it does not have a modern zoning plan. As far as the buildings themselves are concerned, just three have been listed for preservation: the cinema, the hotel and the market.

"Lakki is a monument from the past," Kolonas told Kathimerini. "On Rhodes and Kos there are only a few individual buildings that date back to that era; but on Leros

we have a whole town, with the entire breadth of public and private buildings. Lakki cannot be compared to anything else, especially after the recent destruction of similar Italian settlements in Libya. In my opinion, it should become a meeting place for modernist architecture. It could, perhaps, be adopted by some school or architectural schools could come together to organize an annual meeting there. But it also needs the participation of the local community, which seems unaware of the fact that it has a true gem in its hands. And the state, of course, must complete the process of having it institutionally protected."

According to Nina Avramidou, a Greek professor of architecture at the University of Florence, there is a great deal of interest in the Dodecanese in Italy given its history.

"It concerns me that there appears to be no such interest from the Greek side," she told Kathimerini. "On Rhodes, for example, important buildings such as the aquarium have been destroyed by poor decisions. Lakki is mentioned in almost every Italian book on architecture as a unique example of that era. I wonder why it hasn't received the attention it deserves."

[The photographs of the market and the cinema are by Agelis Tsotras, [www.agelistsotras.com](http://www.agelistsotras.com)]