



LAKKI, ARCHITECTURAL GEM ON ISLAND OF LEROS, FINALLY GETS DUE ATTENTION

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By Giorgos Lialios

It's 2009. Italian architect and photographer Daniele Ratti is traveling in Eritrea, Eastern Africa. After reaching the country's capital, Asmara, Ratti is in for a surprise, as he finds himself surrounded by modern buildings constructed during the early 20th century. His unexpected encounter with Italy's colonial legacy pushes him to find out more. He studies the Rationalist movement in architecture and gradually, with the help of photographer Bruna Biamino, begins to discover the small towns and villages founded by Italians around the world. Ratti's first stop is Greece's Dodecanese island of Leros.

Fast forward to 2013. I am traveling on a boat from Patmos to Leros to see Anastasia Papaioannou, an architect from Rhodes who insisted that I visit. The boat stops at Lakki. For a moment I wonder whether I have got off at the wrong island. And then, as I walk from the end of the port to the center of the town, I start to encounter a unique spectacle. One Italian building after the next along the promenade: the naval administration headquarters, the school, the market, the half-built hotel next to the imposing theater. Modern structures with clean lines and generous spaces straight out of a Giorgio de Chirico painting.

This is Lakki. An unusual town, like a set from a movie. Most people don't even know it exists. Even residents of Leros treat it with some skepticism. Travel brochures are usually filled with pictures of Aghia Marina, your typical island village, along with the castle, the churches, the windmills and the island's – rather ordinary – beaches. There are just a handful of references to Lakki, and these are generally understated. How can that be?

Back in February, architect Fabio Colella visited Leros along with a group of Italian architects, photographers and experts, including Daniele Ratti and Bruna Biamino, to launch the Eritalia project (Eri Italia = You Were Italy), a photographic journey around former Italian colonies which share the same Rationalist architecture. The group stayed at a friend's house and the news of their arrival quickly spread around the small Italian community on the island. An Italian community calling itself the Friends of Leros promised to help them in any way they could.

Earlier this month, with the help of the community, the Eritalia project was presented by Colella at the Lakki primary school. "Eritalia is a photographic recognition, somewhat arty, of Rationalist architecture made by Italian architects in one-time Italian colonies – Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Libya and Leros – from the time of the first exhibition of the Italian Movement for Rationalist Architecture (MIAR) in the 1920s until 1943, when Italy gave up its colonies," he said. "Our goal is to document, to tell the story of these buildings, the events that led to the present day," he said.

The project will be presented at Expo 2015 in Milan and Turin. More data will be included about other locations before a volume is published. "Until recently, there were some reservations about all that in Italy because these buildings were constructed during Fascist rule," said Enzo Bonanno from the Friends of Leros. "However these buildings were never symbols of the party, while Rationalism, although originating in Italy, became an international style. Lakki is precious to Leros. It is a jewel which could, under proper management, attract quality tourism to the island," Bonanno said.

Good ideas and love for Lakki are not exclusive to the Italian community. All of Leros's residents who attended the recent presentation of the Eritalia project expressed a similar desire regarding the future of their town. Leros is struggling to turn a page. All it needs is the right vision.