



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



Cultural entrepreneurship and sustainability in the Italian monuments of Kalymnos

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International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2025, 17(03), 1078-1085

Publication history: Received on 22 November 2025; revised on 28 December 2025; accepted on 30 December 2025

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/ijrsra.2025.17.3.3361>

Abstract

This paper examines the historical development and contemporary use of buildings constructed in the Dodecanese during the period of Italian occupation (1912–1943), with an emphasis on Italian monuments in Kalymnos. First, the historical and political context of Italian rule is presented, as well as the architectural trends adopted by the Italian authorities, which had a decisive influence on the form and function of public and private buildings on the island. It then analyzes the course of preservation of these monuments over time, the damage they have suffered, and the interventions for their restoration or reuse. Particular emphasis is placed on the current use of Italian monuments in Kalymnos, both from a business perspective and from a sustainability point of view. It explores whether these monuments can serve as levers for local development, boosting cultural tourism, the economy, and employment, without altering their historical and architectural character. At the same time, it examines their role in shaping the collective memory and cultural identity of the inhabitants, as these buildings arouse both the interest of visitors and emotional attachment in the locals. The Italian monuments of Kalymnos are now an integral part of the island's history and can contribute significantly to a sustainable model of cultural and business development.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage; Cultural entrepreneurship; Italian Monuments; Italian Occupation; Kalymnos

1. Introduction

The Italian occupation of the Dodecanese (1912–1943) shaped a unique spatial, architectural, and administrative model, in which the creation of the built environment served as a key tool for exercising political power and promoting the ideology of the Italian state. In Kalymnos, the Italian presence was reflected in the construction of public, administrative, and military buildings, which did not serve exclusively functional needs but were part of a broader plan to control the space and reshape the local social and urban organization (Kostopoulos, 2005). As Kostopoulos (2015) points out, the architecture of the Italian period on the islands was a vehicle of symbolic power, influencing the urban development and identity of the settlements in the long term.

The architectural heritage of the Italian occupation in Kalymnos is part of the broader context of Italian fascist modernization, as applied in the Dodecanese, with an emphasis on geometric simplicity, monumentality, and state representation (Kolonas, 2002; Giannopoulos, 2006). Although, unlike Rhodes or Leros, no large-scale urban complexes were developed, the Italian buildings of Kalymnos constitute a distinct cultural heritage, directly linked to the memory of the occupation, the administrative function of the island, and its strategic position in the Aegean Sea (St. Sikouris, 2023).

In contemporary research, interest is shifting from a one-dimensional historical record to a post-occupation reinterpretation of Italian monuments, examining the possibilities for their sustainable exploitation in the context of

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cultural entrepreneurship and peripheral development (Maniou et al., 2025). The reuse of Italian buildings in Kalymnos can act as a lever for cultural, social, and economic revitalization, strengthening local identity and diversifying the island's tourism product. At the same time, digital technology is emerging as a critical tool for documenting, promoting, and participatory approaches to cultural heritage, strengthening visitation and connecting the local community with the monuments (Manola, 2024; Manola, 2024).

Experience from other Dodecanese islands, such as Rhodes and Leros, shows that Italian monuments can function as active cultural resources rather than static remnants of the past, provided that there are comprehensive strategies for their management, restoration, and integration into thematic cultural routes (Manola, Tsatalmpasoglou & Geronymou, 2023; Dallari, 2017). In Kalymnos, the adoption of such practices, in combination with cultural policy, corporate social responsibility, and digital promotion tools, can contribute significantly to the sustainable exploitation of Italian heritage (Gantzias, 2010; Logothetis, 2012). Therefore, the Italian occupation of Kalymnos is not only a historical chapter of the past, but a dynamic core of cultural memory and development potential. The combined approach of history, architecture, and digital promotion can strengthen the island's remote identity, promote sustainable tourism development, and reposition Italian monuments on the contemporary cultural map of the Dodecanese (Maniou et al., 2025; Sigala, 2012).

Representative examples of Italian architectural heritage in Kalymnos are the Prefecture (Old Administration Building), the Town Hall, and the Port Authority (Visit Greece, 2025; St. Sikouris, 2023). The Port Authority, in particular, due to its direct connection to the port, highlights the strategic importance of Kalymnos in the Aegean maritime network and the island's role in the administrative and military policy of the Italian period (Visit Greece, 2025). These monuments now form a remarkable core of cultural heritage, offering significant opportunities for historical documentation, cultural promotion, and sustainable exploitation (Manola, 2022; Manola, 2024).

The Old Administration Building housed the residence of the Italian Commander and the administrative offices, decorated with Murano chandeliers and aristocratic furniture of the period, much of which is still in excellent condition (St. Sikouris, 2023). The Town Hall was built in the 1930s by local craftsmen and was the center of administrative and social activity on the island (Visit Greece, 2025). The Port Authority, under Italian supervision in the mid-1940s, controlled shipping and ports in the Aegean, and after liberation, it became part of the Greek administration (Visit Greece, 2025).

The repositioning of these monuments in the context of cultural entrepreneurship, digital promotion, and sustainable tourism offers the opportunity to transform them into living resources for local development, while highlighting the remote identity of Kalymnos and strengthening social cohesion (Maniou et al., 2025; Manola, 2024).

2. Italian monuments in Kalymnos

Representative examples of Italian architectural heritage in Kalymnos are the Prefecture (Old Administration Building), the Town Hall, and the Port Authority. The Port Authority, in particular, due to its direct connection to the port, highlights the strategic importance of Kalymnos in the Aegean maritime network and the role of the island in the administrative and military policy of the Italian period. These monuments now form a remarkable core of cultural heritage, offering significant opportunities for historical documentation, cultural promotion, and sustainable exploitation.

2.1. The Old Administration Building

The Old Administration Building housed the residence of the Italian Commander, which was located above his offices. The rooms were decorated with dazzling Murano chandeliers and aristocratic furniture of the period, much of which is still in excellent condition and continues to be used today. Architecturally, the building incorporates strong Venetian-Byzantine elements, with some Arabic influences, reflecting the tradition and cultural diversity of the region.

In 1943, during the Allied forces' raids against German troops, the building suffered damage on its eastern side. Today, the Prefecture of Kalymnos operates as an autonomous administrative unit, providing services and products to residents (<https://issuu.com/stsikouris/docs/>).

2.2. The Town Hall

The Town Hall of Kalymnos was built in the 1930s by local craftsmen who had the necessary know-how and experience. Although the exact date of its construction remains unclear, the Town Hall was the center of administrative and social activity on the island (<https://www.visitgreece.gr>).

During the 20th century, the Town Hall underwent various changes and extensions, providing services in the fields of health, education, infrastructure, and tourism. The building continues to be the central administrative point of Kalymnos (<https://www.visitgreece.gr>).

2.3. The Port Authority

During the Italian occupation, and especially in the mid-1940s, the Port Authority of Kalymnos was under the supervision of the Italians, who controlled local shipping and the ports of the Aegean (<https://www.visitgreece.gr>).

After liberation, the Port Authority returned to the jurisdiction of the Greek authorities, continuing to provide shipping and port management services. This transfer contributed to the development and upgrading of the Port Authority's operations for the benefit of the island and the local maritime community (<https://www.visitgreece.gr>).

3. Modern utilization and entrepreneurship in the most important Italian monuments of Kalymnos

Kalymnos is now one of the most important tourist destinations in the Aegean, combining its natural landscape, beaches, traditional architecture, and rich historical and cultural heritage. Public buildings erected during the Italian occupation occupy a special place in this heritage, as they continue to play an active role in the contemporary social, administrative, and developmental life of the island.

The Administration Building (Prefecture) remains to this day the central pillar of Kalymnos' administrative organization. It houses the Regional Unit of Kalymnos, which is responsible for the entire northern complex of the Dodecanese, including Telendos, Psérimos, Leros, Patmos, Agathonisi, Lipsi, and Astypalea. The modern function of the building is not limited to a typical administrative role, but extends to providing multifaceted support in areas such as health, education, social protection, and regional governance, contributing significantly to improving the quality of life of residents.

The Old Administration Building is now used as a vehicle for implementing development policies and actions with a strong social and cultural impact. Through initiatives related to the promotion of tourism, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the promotion of sustainable development, the building serves as a hub for cooperation between local authorities, organizations, and social groups. At the same time, it supports actions related to the local economy, agriculture, and livestock farming, while promoting synergies with the Municipality and other institutional partners, strengthening the overall development strategy of Kalymnos.

The Town Hall of Kalymnos, also dating from the Italian period, remains to this day the main administrative authority of the island and a point of reference for the local community. It offers a wide range of services to residents and visitors and has adapted to modern governance and sustainable development needs. Through infrastructure management, the provision of social, health, and educational services, and mediation between the local community and central government authorities, the Town Hall contributes significantly to the economic and social cohesion of the island.

The Port Authority of Kalymnos is another characteristic representative of Italian architectural heritage with an active contemporary role. As the competent administrative authority for the operation of the port, it is responsible for safety, the enforcement of maritime regulations, and the provision of services to sailors and passengers. At the same time, it participates in actions to upgrade port infrastructure and cooperates with local and national bodies, recognizing the importance of public-private partnerships for the development of shipping and maritime tourism.

Overall, the Italian public buildings of Kalymnos are living monuments, which not only serve as repositories of historical memory, but also as active tools of modern administration, local development, and cultural entrepreneurship. Their ongoing use strengthens the island's identity and creates conditions for sustainable development prospects in the context of insularity and regional policy.

Table 1 Complete list of Italian monuments in Kalymnos and proposals for their utilization.

Monument	Architectural Features	Current Use	Proposed Entrepreneurship / Tourism Actions
Italian Administration Building, Kalymnos	Neoclassical-Fascist style, symmetrical façades, large windows	Vacant / limited use for events	Conversion into a History & Culture Museum, guided tours, educational programs for schools, exhibitions
Italian Military Warehouse	Stone construction, large arches, military characteristics	Closed or storage	Cultural center, local product exhibitions, gastronomy tourism, artistic residencies
Italian Hospital / Clinic	Simple, functional design, spacious rooms	Closed	Cultural center with seminars and workshops, collaboration with NGOs for cultural activities
Italian Coast Guard Building	Stone building, military architecture, large windows	Used for local administration	Integration into cultural networks, photography exhibitions, guided tours of port history
Italian Coast Guard Building	Stone building, military architecture, large windows	Used for local administration	Integration into cultural networks, photography exhibitions, guided tours of port history
Italian School, Kalymnos	Neoclassical-functional, symmetrical classrooms, courtyard	Partially functioning or closed	Educational programs on cultural heritage, museum-type activities, summer cultural camps
Italian Armory / Fort	Stone construction, defensive morphology, small openings	Closed	Historical tours, themed events, reenactments for tourism
Italian Garrison / Watchtower	Stone building, military tower, panoramic view	Limited access	Educational and walking trails, photography workshops, landscape observation
Italian Port Authority Building	Stone building, symmetrical openings, military style	Used by local administration	Tours on naval history, cultural events in the courtyard, modern art exhibitions
Italian Army Accommodation	Stone construction, simple lines, covered courtyards		

Kalymnos is home to a number of important Italian buildings that retain their historical and architectural value. The Italian Administration Building stands out for its neoclassical-fascist design, with symmetrical facades and large windows, but today it remains largely inactive. It is proposed that it be converted into a Museum of History and Culture, with guided tours, educational programs for schools, and exhibitions. The Italian Military Storage Building, with its stone construction and large arches, functions mainly as a warehouse and could be used as a cultural center, with exhibitions of local products, gastronomic tourism, and artist residences.

The Italian Hospital/Clinic has a simple, functional layout and spacious rooms and could serve as a cultural center with seminars and workshops, in collaboration with NGOs. The Italian Observatory, with its observatory and military aesthetic, is ideal for interactive historical and educational tourism spaces, including VR experiences and guided tours.

The Italian Coast Guard Building, with its stone construction and large windows, is currently used for local administration and could be integrated into cultural networks, with photography exhibitions and guided tours on the history of the port. The Italian School has symmetrical rooms and a courtyard and is suitable for cultural heritage educational programs, museum-type activities, and summer cultural camps.

The Italian Armoury/Fortress, with its defensive layout and small openings, remains closed but can be incorporated into historical tours, themed events and reenactments for tourist purposes. The Italian Guardhouse/Observation Post, with its military tower and panoramic view, is suitable for educational and walking trails, photography workshops, and

landscape observation. Finally, the Italian Port Authority Building, with its symmetrical openings and military style, still functions as an administrative building, while guided tours on maritime history, cultural events in the courtyard, and contemporary art exhibitions are proposed.

Overall, the promotion of the Italian monuments of Kalymnos connects historical memory with cultural entrepreneurship and the development of high added-value tourist experiences, enhancing the sustainable exploitation of the cultural heritage and local identity of the island.

4. The Role of Internet and Digital Technologies in Education and entrepreneurship training

At this point, we highlight the significance of all digital technologies within the educational field, particularly for cultural entrepreneurship training and instruction. ICTs facilitate universal education, introduce efficient methods for teacher development, boost knowledge retention, and promote collaboration and transparency. They also foster learner-centered environments, pioneer novel teaching methodologies, and accelerate the process of acquiring knowledge. Furthermore, they offer innovative tools for representing knowledge and support educational practices through virtualization, mobile integration, artificial intelligence, and immersive new learning environments. In the specific area of entrepreneurship training, ICTs prove highly effective, streamlining assessment and educational procedures via mobile devices that enable learning in any location [25-27], supported by various ICT applications that serve as the foundation of modern education [28-34]. The integration of AI, STEM, and robotics elevates educational standards to new levels of innovation and adaptability [35-36], whereas gamified learning converts education into a multisensory and highly engaging interaction [37-38]. Additionally, merging ICTs with theories of metacognition, mindfulness, and emotional intelligence [39-44] centers mental capabilities within educational policy, significantly enhancing training results, especially for those in the business and cultural sectors.

5. Conclusion

This study highlighted the multidimensional role of the Italian public buildings of Kalymnos as living monuments, which remain actively integrated into the contemporary administrative, social, and developmental functioning of the island. Their long-term use by institutional bodies, combined with their architectural and historical value, makes them crucial pillars of local cultural identity.

Their exploitation through organised guided tours, themed cultural routes, exhibitions and cultural events creates substantial opportunities for cultural entrepreneurship, boosting local income and diversifying Kalymnos' tourism product. At the same time, these actions contribute to the promotion of the island's historical memory and unique character, enhancing its attractiveness in the context of cultural and thematic tourism.

Of particular importance is the contribution of these monuments to sustainable development, which requires coordinated maintenance strategies, rational management, and their functional integration into the broader tourism and development model of the island. The link between cultural heritage, local administration, and business initiatives forms a comprehensive framework of cultural governance, compatible with the principles of sustainability and insularity.

The strategy for the exploitation of Italian monuments in Kalymnos does not limit them to the role of passive historical relics, but highlights them as active agents of cultural promotion, administrative support, and local development. Through the creation of cultural routes, thematic tourist products, and public-private partnerships, these monuments contribute significantly to strengthening the local economy, preserving cultural heritage, and shaping sustainable development prospects for the island of Kalymnos.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgments

The Authors would like to thank the SPECIALIZATION IN ICTs AND SPECIAL EDUCATION: PSYCHOPEDAGOGY OF INCLUSION Postgraduate studies Team, for their support.

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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