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# The Application of British Neoclassical Design Principles: The Greek Island of Kefalonia

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The Application of British Neoclassical Design  
Principles: The Greek Island of Kefalonia

Nicholas Patricios

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# The Application of British Neoclassical Design Principles: The Greek Island of Kefalonia

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*Abstract: A fascinating example of taking available designs and then engaging in the act of designing new designs is the application of the British Neoclassical architectural style to new buildings in the Ionian Islands off the west coast of Greece. This occurred when Britain occupied these Islands in 1809 which then received independent status in 1815 under the British crown. It is ironical that the country that created classical architecture had neoclassical architecture introduced from the outside. The largest of the Ionian Islands, Kefalonia, provides an insightful case of the application of British neoclassical design principles to new civic buildings and urban spaces. The architectural and urban work of three achievers will be described and illustrated to demonstrate an instance of the transfer of cultural values and design precedent.*

Keywords: Neoclassical, Architecture, British, Kefalonia

**T**HE APPLICATION OF the British Neoclassical architectural style to new buildings in the Ionian Islands is significant as a fascinating example of taking available designs and then engaging in the act of designing new designs. The island of Kefalonia provides an insightful case of the application of British Neoclassical design principles to new public buildings and urban spaces. The results, based on original sources, are relevant in providing additional knowledge on the spread of Neoclassical architecture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

For five decades in the first half of the nineteenth century the seven Ionian Islands off the west coast of Greece constituted Britain's Greek Empire as Michael Pratt (1978) characterized them. Under provisions of the Treaty of Paris of 1815, the great powers created the United States of the Ionian Islands as an independent state under British protection. The British imperial legacy in Kefalonia, the largest of the Islands, included major civic projects and public buildings with Neoclassical design features. These projects and buildings were concentrated in Argostoli, the capital of the island, and the next largest town, Lixouri. British influence on the public realm complemented Venetian impact on the residential architecture of the island (Patricios, 1987).

Before the British occupation, Venice had occupied Kefalonia and the other Ionian Islands from the beginning of the sixteenth century until the end of the eighteenth century. During this time the only major public building the Venetians constructed in Kefalonia was the lazaretto or quarantine building in Argostoli in 1710 (Patricios, 1999). This *Officio di Sanita* had a central courtyard (*cortile*) around which were arranged a number of rooms. Facades had a restrained Venetian Renaissance character re-

lieved by curvilinear and decorative panels of stucco. The single story building had a gable roof. Around 1790 the Municipal Council of Argostoli added a second public building with a meeting space for the Council and for sessions of the courts of law. Later the building also housed a post office, customs, health facilities and archives. Architectural details of this building, later demolished, are not known.

The architectural identity of Kefalonian towns was thus the result of legacies - public buildings in British Neoclassical style, mansions of the nobility and upper middle classes in Venetian Renaissance styles. Kefalonia, of all the Ionian Islands, exhibited most extensively British urban and architectural influences. It is ironical that Greece, the country that created classical architecture, had neoclassical architecture introduced from the outside. Three men were responsible for the architectural and urban work and the remarkable physical transformation of Kefalonia during the British period and the transfer of British cultural values and design precedent. First there was Major Charles-Phillipe de Bosset who was on the island from 1810 until 1814 in the post of Commandant. Second was Charles James Napier who served as the official British Resident of Kefalonia from 1822 until 1830. Then third was Captain John Pitt Kennedy who had entered the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich in 1811 and after other various commissions, the army transferred him to Kefalonia as Director of Public Works and Military Secretary. He held these positions from 1822 until 1831. Napier and Kennedy complemented one another and worked harmoniously together.

In the devastating earthquake that struck Kefalonia and other Ionian Islands in August 1953 the public buildings erected by the British were demolished.



Fortunately photographs taken in earlier years to be found in the archives of the Corgialenios Museum, Argostoli provide visual information of the buildings and Britain's Neoclassical legacy.

### Charles-Phillipe de Bosset

Charles-Phillipe de Bosset's major contribution to the imperial legacy was roads and bridges (Cosmetatos, 1995, 13-42). Before the arrival of the British there were no significant roads for wheeled traffic in Kefalonia. He established the basic road network to which Charles Napier later made significant additions. Soon after de Bosset arrived in Kefalonia in April 1810 he set about building a bridge, to be known as the Drapano bridge, to span the bay of Argostoli. Up to that time inhabitants from a large region to the east had to make a long journey around the bay to reach the capital of Argostoli. As local inhabitants were opposed to the idea of a bridge he decided to construct it speedily in wood. But when the local inhabitants soon accepted the bridge de Bosset proceeded over the next three to four years to reconstruct the bridge in stone. He introduced street lighting into Argostoli and undertook many public works in Lixouri, including the design of the bridge over the storm water canal, called the Seine by the local population.

In Argostoli de Bosset improved the main street. He ordered the removal of the animal stalls, slaughter houses, and butcher shops from this street in the center of Argostoli to a more distant place. He also directed the widening of the street and paving it with stones which may have come from the ancient Greek agora at Sami. The street came to be called Lithostrato (Stone Street). He also ordered the elimination of building extensions that projected over the street, in some cases almost reaching the heads of persons passing by. In addition de Bosset installed a channel system to drain rainwater away from the street and into the nearby sea.

In recording his own achievements over a three year period, 1810-1812, de Bosset wrote: "A public square has been formed in Lixuri, notwithstanding the numerous difficulties which were in the way of such an undertaking, a square which combines with the embellishments of that city the advantage of a secure and commodious landing place for boats" (de Bosset, 1821, 141). He also undertook the construction of the bell tower for the church of the Pantokratora. Above the window of this tower residents placed a plaque that acknowledged de Bosset's contribution.

The arched design of the Drapano bridge did not include any embellishments but the precedent was "effected in a style that recalls [*sic*] to memory the Greek mode of construction, without cement." (de Bosset, 1821, 142-143). Although de Bosset was Swiss he was a long-time member of the British army

and his legacy was in the transfer of cultural values of convenience and functionality as evident in his projects.

### Charles James Napier

Napier carried out an extensive array of projects (Cosmetatos, 1995, 45-51). He extended the island's road network begun by de Bosset and opened all the ports in Kefalonia. Today this network still forms the bulk of the modern system. In Argostoli he improved the street pattern, created new urban squares, built a new court house building, erected many other public buildings, and constructed a waterfront road and quay. He also built a large court house building in Lixouri. In these projects Napier's British values for efficiency, public health, humanity, convenience and urban aesthetics are evident in his projects for the quay, prison and tribunals, market building, waterfront esplanade and public squares.

When Napier took office in 1822 he discovered on his arrival, as he wrote afterwards, that

"the town of Argostoli, which stretches along the shore, had a ragged, filthy edge, and generally shallow water. In strong winds, the waves dashed into the town, so as to render the street next the sea impassable; I, therefore, resolved to build a quay ... and filled up the sea to a certain depth, forming a quay of a mile and a half in length, ... This quay ought to have been constructed with cut stone, much broader, and in nearly a straight line, with some enclosed places for small boats. All this I hoped to have done, gradually, had I remained; and I only considered the quay, in its present form, as a portion of a greater work. Nevertheless it has improved the health, the cleanliness, and the comfort of the town; for having been made expressly without any projections to harbour filth, the water has a clean sweep, keeping always clean; and, as the foundations were made with large rocks cast into the water, and afterwards filled up; so, in wet weather, the rain sinks through the crust of gravel which forms the surface, and in ten minutes, after the heaviest shower, there is a perfectly dry walk of a mile and a half, adding greatly to the beauty and cheerful appearance of the town, and forming the favourite promenade of the inhabitants; ..." (Napier, C.J., 1833, 332).

John Kennedy referred to the quay as the "Mole," known locally as "*O Molos*" (from the Italian). Napier began construction of the quay in 1822. A British visitor, Richard Burgess, reportedly criticized Napier for using stones from the ancient agora at Krani in the construction of the quay (Burgess,

1835, 142-143). Yet another visitor, David Ansted, wrote about the “excellent quay constructed by Napier.” He went on to describe Argostoli as a

“long town, consisting of several pretty good streets, parallel to the quay, and a multitude of others of all kinds crossing them at right angles. The chief street is the *Strada Marina* which extends from the commencement of the town at the bridge and is nearly a mile long, facing the harbour for the whole distance, and terminating with the parade ground.” (Ansted, 1863, 329).

Napier’s vision for the undeveloped northern district of Argostoli was for an esplanade on the waterfront and an adjoining urban square to form the core of the new area. He envisioned “a fine Esplanade the greater portion of which is levelled out of the solid rock, and in the centre a pyramidal base pedestal surmounted by a statue of Sir Thomas Maitland by Prosalendi of Corfu.” (Napier, H., 1829, 135). Letters written by Charles Napier in 1822 and 1823 provide details on the preparations for building the Esplanade and Maitland Square as it was named.

On the landward side of Maitland Square Napier proposed three major buildings: a prison complex, the tribunals, and the barracks. His report and plan for the new prison was drawn up in 1822 and the building was initiated by the end of 1828. The prison was built of stone quarried from leveling the area for the Square. Napier’s own words best describe the efforts it took to build the prison. “I finally succeeded in getting leave to build a new prison, upon the principle of classification, and the separation of persons at night, so that every prisoner should have a separate cell, while those of every class worked together, each in the yard appropriated to his class of crime. The prison is so constructed that it may also serve as a fortress, in case of any danger to the garrison.” (Napier, C.J., 1833, 327). He added further that

“[t]he two circular towers are for the guards. They do not communicate with the internal part of the prison and the guards mount to the top of the prison wall by a staircase within the towers, which latter are loop-holed. There are arched door-ways prepared inside of the towers in the prison wall, which may, on an emergency, be opened, and the whole turned into a castle strong enough for the garrison to resist attack if not made with artillery. The cells are not placed back to back as in English prisons: It would not do well in so hot a climate, which requires a clear passage of air through. The guards may be formed on the top of the walls, as the sentry’s walk goes all round, and commands every part of the interior of the prison” (Napier, C.J., 1833, 605).

The prison complex also included a Chapel, a Hospital, and Work Houses. Henry, Charles’ brother, depicted “[t]he new Prison, now half finished, [as] already a fine specimen of strength and massiveness combined with space, security and convenience and well adapted to the supervision of prisoners. [There are] 120 cells with grated windows and the doors so fixed to allow of a free circulation of air without endangering the prisoners’ security” (Napier, H., 1829, 139-40). It is conjectured that the radial corridors of the prison (Figure 1) allow for surveillance from a central office as conceived by Jeremy Bentham in the design of his Panopticon (Bentham, 1791). Charles Napier further envisaged how

“Close in front and almost touching the prison are to be placed the Tribunals, where also the whole of the public offices will be concentrate [*sic*] so as to make it the real centre of public administration in every department a great convenience and economy of time.” (Napier, H., 1829, 139-40).

In a letter he sent to Sir Thomas Maitland, Lord High Commissioner of the Ionian Islands and residing in Kerkyra (Corfu), on 12 March 1823, he added that

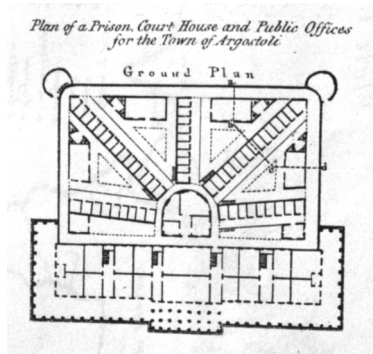


Figure 1: Plan of a Prison, Court House, and Public Office Building, Argostoli

"[t]he Tribunals you know will be quite separate so the consideration of them will be quite unconnected with the Prison, except that we have the ground for them. The Private Houses may be built after the plan of those on the Esplanade at Corfu. The stone here is on the spot, so that the expense of the Arcades will be pilfering." (Corgialenios Museum Card D44a15).

The tribunals were never built. Charles Napier envisioned

"the third side of the Esplanade a Barrack [that] has long been in contemplation, which it is calculated will redeem its own cost in a few years by saving the expense of officer's quarters which in Argostoli are extravagantly dear; If ever this fine square is completed it will be one of the most splendid places in Europe of its size, and art, nature, and good taste will all be employed and aid each other in its accomplishment." (Napier, H., 1829, 142).

Barracks for the soldiers were eventually built but were architecturally undistinguished. For central Argostoli, Charles Napier's idea was for an avenue to link Maitland Square with a new central square. He described his idea as

"a new and spacious street, just opened out and planted with a row of trees on each side, but not yet built. It will be a half mile long and fifty feet across, but cut through the centre by another of equal breadth: the point of intersection will form a fine square in the centre of which it is intended to erect an Exchange, Theatre and Casino, all comprised under one roof the drawing and plan of which are already executed and will add greatly to the magnificence of Argostoli." (Napier, H., 1829, 140).

In Lixouri Napier added a large building to the new public square to house varied activities. As he explained it was also needed to house troops in case of insurrections, which had recently occurred in the Ionian Island towns of Zante and Santa Mavra. He added that

"The reason for building a market place on a larger scale at Lixuri than Argostoli was that the Court of Justice was hitherto held in a small hired room quite insufficient for the purpose of administering justice ... I therefore built over the Market Place an ample room capable of containing at least 600 people opening onto a balcony which passed all round it ... Under the same roof were concentrated the Public Offices and a Lancastrian school ... Under the colonnade of the Market Place, the people find shelter from the noonday sun and if late they may sleep there sheltered from the heavy dews. The labouring class find the full use and profit of great public edifices in these hot climates which is the reason I preferred the colonnade" (Cosmetatos, 1990, 74).

Overall the public buildings such as the prison complex and barracks and civic works such as the quay, waterfront esplanade, square and wide treed avenue in the northern district of Argostoli, and the square and market building in Lixouri, built by Napier were an expression of British cultural values of efficiency, public health, humanity, convenience and urban aesthetics.

Under Napier's administration other public buildings were erected and were Neoclassical in style. These buildings were a small garrison hospital, a church, a theater, and a bank. After the departure of the British in 1864 the hospital was converted into a British Consul's residence and the church (Figure 2) into an archeological museum. The theater, named the *Kefalos* (Figure 3), opened in November 1858. It had a majestic auditorium that consisted of orchestra seating encircled by three levels of boxes to seat altogether about 500 people. David Ansted wrote that "among public buildings is a respectable theatre, where operatic performances take place in the season to crowded audiences." (Ansted, 1863, 319). After the British authorities approved the establishment of the Ionian Bank, a branch building was erected on the waterfront in Argostoli (Figure 4). The bank began business in Kefalonia in August 1840. Besides individual buildings, Napier planned the whole northern area of Argostoli with broad streets, up to sixty five feet wide, and paved outlying suburban streets.

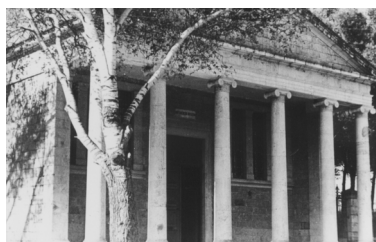


Figure 2: English Church, Argostoli with Ionic Columned Portico



Figure 3: *Kefalos* Theater Front Facade, Argostoli

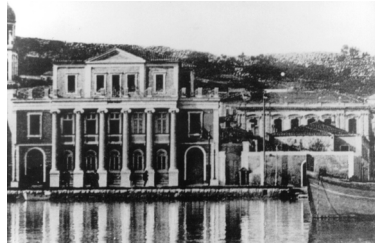


Figure 4: Ionian Bank, Argostoli with Giant Ionic Order

### John Pitt Kennedy

Kennedy's role was essentially to make concrete Napier's visions (Cosmetatos, 1995, 52-55). This began with the design of two lighthouses. The first lighthouse was on Guardian (Vardianoi) Island, at the entrance to the bay of Argostoli. In form the lighthouse resembled an ancient Greek column (Figure 5). The second lighthouse was on Point Theodore and resembled an ancient temple (Figure 6).

About the first lighthouse on Guardian Island, Napier wrote that Kennedy "designed, and executed, the magnificent Doric column, which at present exists. My wish was to have formed this column, of a single stone; or at most of three, which might have been done; but the means I possessed were not adequate to the transport of such masses across the water; a distance of seven miles." (Napier, C.J., 1833, 216). The column was left unfluted but Napier's hope was to obtain approval later for fluting the column.

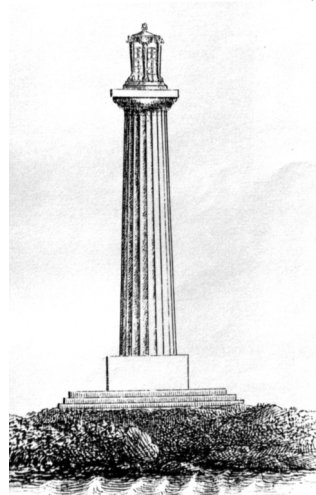


Figure 5: Guardian Lighthouse



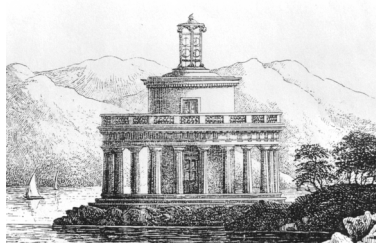


Figure 6: Point Theodore Lighthouse with Doric Columns and Entablature

He also lauded the second lighthouse at Point Theodore which “Captain Kennedy, again, excited the public admiration of his taste in architecture, by erecting a beautiful Grecian temple, on the top of which stands the lantern, and completes the illumination at the entrance to the harbour of Argostoli.” (Napier, C.J., 1833, 216). The building was circular with “columns (that) are 24 in number, about 8 feet high, and the height to top of lantern is 30 feet.” (Napier, C.J., 1833, Plate 12). Henry Napier recorded that “(t)here is a lighthouse just erected on Point Theodore at the entrance of Argostoli Harbour ... the foundation stone of this little ‘Bijou’ in architecture was laid by Captain Kennedy on the 12th or 13th of March 1829. In the beginning of May it is nearly completed.” (Napier, H., 1829, 140).

Kennedy translated Napier’s idea for the focal point of central Argostoli, the intersection of two broad avenue, into a design that consisted of two buildings not one as Napier envisaged. The first building was located on a site that was originally a pond or swamp where women washed clothes. Kennedy filled the marshy area before beginning construction of the building in 1825. Just as Burgess

was critical of de Bosset for using stones from the ancient Greek site at Sami as building material so he was equally disparaging of Kennedy for using stones from the ancient citadel of Krani. Kennedy’s design for Napier’s “Exchange, Theatre and Casino” (Figure 7) in fact became the law court building when the second building, which was designed as the law courts, did not receive any funding and consequently was not built (Figure 8).

Kennedy also designed the court of justice, or Markato building (Figure 9) as it came to be called, in Lixouri. In a letter to Napier on 15 May 1824, he wrote that he hoped “to have the Lixuri market habitable in two months.” (Cosmetatos, 1990, 69). Napier mentioned in his book that each of the twelve columns was cut in one piece at the quarry. The beautifully white stone, also used in fine houses in Argostoli, was from the quarry at Fallaris although Napier mistakenly referred to its location as the Black Mountain. About 1930, the authorities replaced many of the columns in the Markato building with reinforced concrete after an earthquake had damaged them.

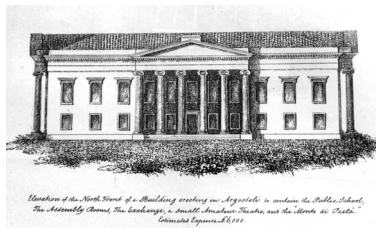


Figure 7: North Elevation of a Building to Contain a Public School, Assembly Rooms, an Exchange, a Small Theater and the *Monte di Pieta*, Argostoli

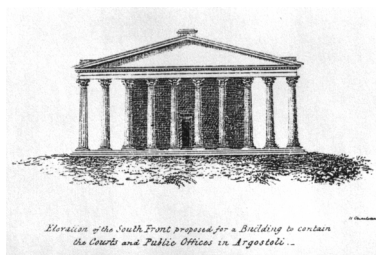


Figure 8: South Elevation of the Courts and Public Offices Building, Argostoli

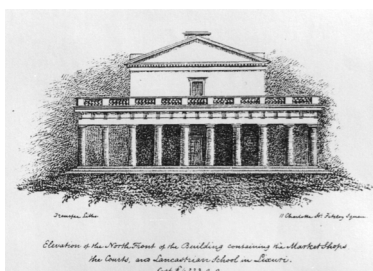


Figure 9: North Elevation of a Building to Contain Market Shops, the Courts, and Lancastrian School, Lixouri

David Ansted described Lixouri as a “picturesque town, with a mole and quay, and several respectable public buildings. One principal stack of buildings includes the courts of justice, the town hall, and the exchange, and is handsomely built. Sort of a square bungalow, with a very long balcony all around, and a large, central staircase leading to the various offices. The stairs and balcony are crowded with people of all classes. The back of this building forms one side of a market place.” (Ansted, 1863, 360).

Clearly the architecture of the public buildings designed by Kennedy was Neoclassical in style. Napier’s references to the Doric order and “Grecian” temple are evidence of this as are the drawings of these structures illustrated in this paper. The circular lighthouse structure at Point St. Theodore brings to mind a Classical temple with its Doric columns and entablature and an Italian Renaissance balustrade (Figure 6) although it cannot begin to compare with a similar circular Greek-type building, Bramante’s Tempietto in Rome. Kennedy used the same theme for the long façade of the court house building in Lixouri to which he added a pediment with dentils (Figure 9). In the buildings for central Argostoli he used the Corinthian order for the short façade of the one building (Figure 8) and the Ionic order for the central *risalto* in the longer façade along with a pediment and a Classical roof cornice that extended the entire length of the façade (Figure 7).

### British Neoclassical Architecture

From 1800 until the 1850s nearly all new architecture in Britain reflected the Neoclassical spirit that was also dominant in Europe. There was a national fervor for Classical antiquity which followed the discovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum and the publication of James Stuart and Nicholas Revett’s first volume on the Antiquity of Athens (Stillman, 1988). The British Neoclassical style was introduced into Kerkyra and

Greece by George Whitmore in 1821 in his design for the Palace of St. Michael and St. George in Kerkyra (Dimacopoulos, 1979). It is likely he was influenced by the work of Robert Adam who in turn was inspired by Andrea Palladio.

In Kefalonia the British Neoclassical style was evident in the designs of John Kennedy for the lighthouses and the court house buildings in Argostoli and in Lixouri and in the additional public buildings by other architects. It should be noted that this style is austere in character compared to Neoclassical designs in Italy, France and elsewhere. Although Whitmore and Kennedy were each designing Neoclassical buildings at about the same time on different Ionian Islands, Whitmore in 1821 and Kennedy in 1824, it is not known if they communicated with one another. What is interesting is that both were civil engineers in the British Royal Engineers. They had the same education as all army engineers at the time were educated at the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich. Kennedy graduated in 1815 and Whitmore much earlier as he was twenty-one years older than Kennedy. Although neither of them had an architectural training when designing buildings they were no doubt influenced by the prevailing Neoclassical style in architecture.

Kennedy, then, is a prime example of taking available design precedents and then engaging in the act of designing new designs in another culture. Of the public buildings and structures built by the British during their occupation only the St. Theodore lighthouse survived destruction in the 1953 earthquake (now restored, Figure 10). Kennedy’s court house building in Argostoli (Figure 11) was demolished in 1906 and replaced by a new court building (Figure 12) designed by Anastasis Metaxas in the Athenian Neoclassical style. After the departure of the British from the Ionian Islands in 1864 the influence of Athenian Neoclassical style had spread to Kefalonia and the other Ionian Islands.



Figure 10: Restored Point Theodore Lighthouse



Figure 11: Old Court House, Argostoli Prior to its Demolition in 1906



Figure 12: New Court House (Dikastirion Megaron), Argostoli

In assessing his brother's efforts Henry Napier wrote that there was "order diligence and frugality in public offices and public expenditure, good roads, improved agriculture, handsome public buildings, schools, commodious quays for the landing of merchandise, a prison, two lighthouses, increased shipping and a more widely extended commerce." (Napier, H., 1829, 66-67). Another British visitor described "[t]he improvements of Colonel Napier have given to this town the air of an English Watering-place. The bridge across the marshes is imposing as the traveller descends upon it from the Samos road. The quay on which the Cephalonians take their exercise in the cool of the day extends for a mile in length." (Burgess, 1835, I). Another way in which the results of the efforts of Charles de Bosset, Charles Napier, and John Kennedy can be envisioned is through an imaginary tour of Argostoli sometime in the early 1860s prior to the departure of the British (Patricios, 2002,

143-151). A new visitor would be struck by the distinguished public buildings and structures in a style of architecture introduced by the British that recalled the architecture of Greece nearly two millennia ago.

## Conclusion

Three men were responsible for the architectural and urban work and the remarkable physical transformation of Kefalonia during the British period. They introduced British cultural values but what is significant is that they established a neoclassical design precedent in the Ionian Islands that paved the way for Athenian Neoclassicism later in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The depiction of neoclassical style of architecture in the Greek island of Kefalonia is relevant as it adds to our knowledge of the spread of this style throughout the territories of the extensive British Empire.

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## About the Author

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Nicholas Patricios holds a PhD degree and has degrees in architecture and town and regional planning. He is the author of three books including *Kefallinia and Ithaki: A Historical and Architectural Odyssey* and the author of over forty articles in international and national journals. He is a Professor of Architecture and has held the position of Interim Dean of the School of Architecture at the University of Miami. He is the recipient of many professional and academic awards and has been a Fulbright Fellow and the co-leader of an Earthwatch expedition. He also practices as an urban design and planning consultant.





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