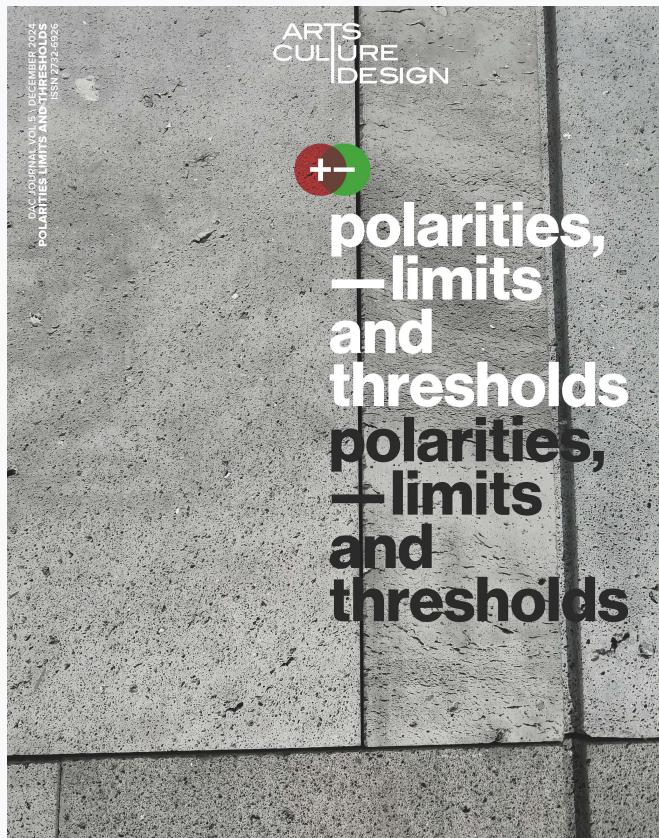


Design/Arts/Culture

Tόμ. 5, Αρ. 1 (2025)

POLARITIES LIMITS AND THRESHOLDS



Leros

Penelope Petsini

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LEROS: A PALIMPSEST OF CONFINEMENT (2017)

ABSTRACT

This photographic series explores Leros through its layered history of confinement and reform, with a particular focus on the Royal Technical School—a key landmark embodying the island's legacy of control. Captured during a 2017 visit with a National Broadcasting Corporation (ERT) crew, these photographs document restricted and decaying spaces tied to Leros' complex past, including the Royal Technical School and its surrounding structures. The series investigates the material and symbolic traces of institutionalization, reflecting the island's transformation from an Italian naval base to a re-education camp, psychiatric hospital, and, more recently, a refugee hotspot. Through the lens of photography, the project engages with the physical remnants of confinement, exposing layers of memory and history embedded in the architecture. By transforming these spaces into sites of remembrance, the project challenges viewers to confront the island's dark legacy while contributing to broader discussions about the intersections of space, memory, and historical consciousness. Leros emerges not only as a physical location but as a palimpsest of trauma and resilience, where confinement and exile continue to inform its identity and collective memory.

INTRODUCTION

This photographic series explores Leros through its layered history of confinement and reform, with a particular focus on the Royal Technical School—a key landmark embodying the island's legacy of control. The name of the island of Leros is often employed as shorthand for the psychiatric institute which has been operating there since 1958. To a considerable extent, this "Leros" subsists in our collective unconscious as a guilty secret (Karydaki 2020). Over and above the psychiatric institution, this is due to an ongoing traumatic history of incarceration and exclusion which begins with the prewar Italian military garrison, includes the creation of the Royal Technical Schools in the post-civil war years, up to the use of the same buildings as places of exile and imprisonment under the Junta.

Leros reflects a complex palimpsest of control and exile, marked by cycles of occupation, institutionalization, and confinement. Historically impoverished, Leros

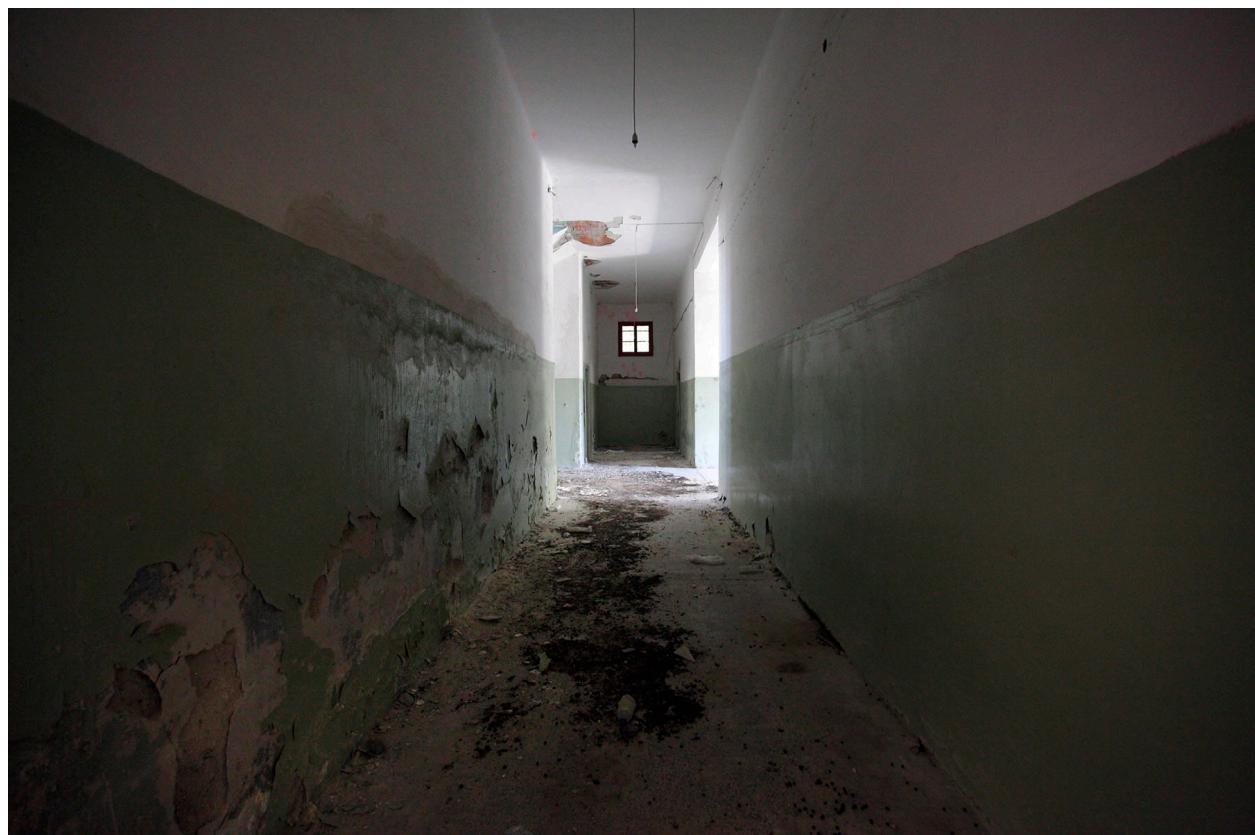
housed an Italian naval base in 1927, generating an economy dependent on military presence. After unification with Greece in 1947, it became the site of the Royal Technical School, a re-education camp for sons of leftist parents. This facility operated until the 1960s, training around 5,000 young men, many of whom were orphans, under strict ideological conditioning. The strain of Greece's Civil War soon led to the establishment of a psychiatric hospital in 1957, transforming Leros into a rural "Psychiatric Colony." Thousands of psychiatric patients and developmentally disabled individuals were sent to live under inhumane conditions, denied even the dignity of names. During the junta from 1967 to 1974, the island further housed political prisoners alongside psychiatric patients, separated by mere wire fences, creating haunting scenes of suffering. The infamous 16th pavilion, known as "the pavilion of the naked," emerged in 1985, embodying the island's harshest conditions of confinement. Gradual deinstitutionalization began in the 1990s, allowing patients some autonomy as they moved to free-standing homes. In 2016, Leros became a Regional Asylum Office and a refugee hot-spot has been established, adding a new layer of containment in its ongoing legacy of human confinement and control. As Neni Panourgia (2020) has put it, "I am speaking of a specific node which I call 'Foucault's node', the node of violent and enforced movements which bear the still oozing stigmata of barracks, reformatories, political prisons, camps of exile, psychiatric institutions, of emigration and of refugees. I speak of Leros".

2. THE ROYAL TECHNICAL SCHOOL OF LEROS

Between 1947 and 1950, the Queen's Fund operated fifty-four *paidopoleis* (children's homes) across Greece, caring for around 18,000 children during the Greek Civil War. These facilities were located in various cities, including Athens, Thessaloniki, and Patras, as well as on islands like Corfu and Rhodes. The *paidopoleis* utilized diverse spaces, such as abandoned army barracks, former hospitals, villas donated by wealthy Greeks, and even a casino. While officially housing orphans and abandoned children aged four to sixteen, some facilities also included older children, possibly partisans, who were under state care. Although many children were deemed "orphans," evidence suggests that some had living parents who were imprisoned or exiled leftists.

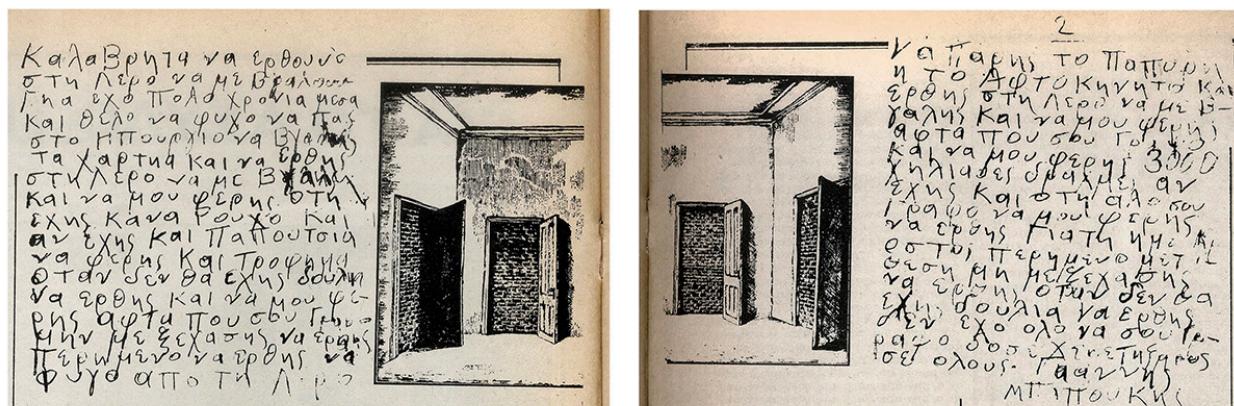
Living conditions within the *paidopoleis* varied significantly. Initially, many children lived in challenging environments with tents and limited food, bedding, and clothing. Conditions improved as the Queen's Fund acquired more resources, allowing for the development of age and gender specific *paidopoleis* to better meet the children's needs, though keeping siblings together was not always feasible. Each institution was managed by a director and assistant, with group leaders overseeing groups of twenty-five children, often organized by teachers or religious figures. Staff included doctors, nurses, cooks, and various support personnel. Modeled as "total institutions" (a concept discussed by Foucault and Goffman), the *paidopoleis* maintained a strict daily regimen similar to military life, featuring scouting activities, uniforms, and the use of corporal punishment.

Life at the *paidopoleis* emphasized Greek nationalism and discipline. Children's daily routines included prayers, raising the Greek flag, exercising, attending school, and participating in work details, such as tending gardens and caring for animals. The *Paidopoli* of Saint Alexandros at Ziro in Epirus exemplified one of the most well-organized *paidopoleis*, supported by the Swiss Red Cross. With dormitories, classrooms,



The Royal Technical School of Leros





dining halls, and healthcare facilities, it housed 250 children, mainly boys, who were divided into groups named after Civil War battle sites, adding a layer of militaristic symbolism. Children at Ziro wore standardized clothing, kept their few personal items in small wooden boxes, and rarely left the premises, only permitted to do so for supervised excursions or parades on national holidays.

In 1947, King Paul founded the Royal National Foundation to improve Greeks' moral, social, and educational standards, establishing royal technical schools in Crete, Kos, and Leros. These institutions were closely affiliated with the *paidopoleis* and supported by the Queen's Fund, reflecting the broader national mission of instilling discipline, patriotism, and technical skills among Greece's youth during this tumultuous period.

The Royal Technical School of Leros, the best-known of three such schools established by the Royal National Foundation, opened on March 2, 1949, shortly after the Dodecanese islands returned to Greece following Italian rule. The institution housed young leftists, many captured partisans, and boys aged fourteen to twenty from *paidopoleis* deemed the most difficult. Later, juvenile delinquents and repatriated refugee children from Eastern Europe were also sent there. Its purpose, dubbed a “bandits’ children’s home,” was to “reeducate” and “rehabilitate” young men with communist affiliations, with the goal, as stated by King Paul, of integrating them back into the “national family” (Hourmouzios 1972: 215). Queen Frederica (1971: 102, 125) framed it as an “experimental reeducational” institution, offering an opportunity for these “young bandits” to transform into “useful members of the community”. As Danforth and Van Boeschoten (2012) note, this “rehabilitation” mirrored the ideological reeducation practiced at the adult internment camp on Makronisos, notorious for extreme violence against those with suspected leftist beliefs (Voglis 2002: 101).

In March 1950, Lady Norton, the British ambassador’s wife, noted that the Leros school aimed to “civilize” and “eradicate” the rebellious traits developed during the Civil War. She viewed welfare programs like this as politically motivated, designed to prevent communism’s spread by offering hope of a decent life. The importance of persuading refugee children that they would fare better in Greece than in Eastern Europe was also emphasized, as discontent could fuel communist sentiments. Lady Norton remarked that this approach made Greece the only country where welfare was actively combatting “the cancer of bolshevism” (Danforth and Van Boeschoten 2012: 102).

The Royal Technical School of Leros operated in former Italian military barracks, training about 1,300 young men as carpenters, bricklayers, painters, tailors, and electricians. Unlike the *paidopoleis*, Leros was run by specially chosen Greek Army officers, with stricter discipline, poorer food, and a more restrictive and explicit ideological environment. Graduates received diplomas signed by King Paul, but their experiences with these credentials varied. Some found the diploma helpful in securing jobs through police connections, while others were stigmatized as leftists and faced discrimination.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, several *paidopoleis*—Saint Dimitrios in Thessaloniki, Saint Sofia in Volos, and Saint Andreas in Athens—offered better conditions. These urban *paidopoleis* were well-resourced, with good food and proximity to high schools, allowing children with strong academic performance to continue their education. The Queen’s Fund took pride in the successes of graduates from these institutions. These successful stories highlighted the accomplishments of the *paidopoleis* system, contrasting sharply with the experience at the Royal Technical School of Leros, which was marked by ideological indoctrination and militarized discipline. In addition to fostering a sense of Greek nationalism, the staff at the *paidopoleis* aimed to assimilate children into middle-class Greek society, to “civilize” them from “backward” peasants into model citizens. Queen Frederica, after visiting the Royal Technical School of Leros, remarked that the children initially seemed “subhuman,” likening them to “animals.” She wrote, “The impression they made on me was that they were subhuman. They looked like animals” (1971, 102 quoted in Danforth and Van Boeschoten). This perspective reflected the broader goals of the Queen’s Fund, which prioritized minimal education, sufficient only to reintegrate children into village life rather than prepare them for advanced opportunities. A Macedonian child who attended the Leros school recognized this



The Royal Technical School of Leros





intention, observing that the education aimed to teach only basic skills, ensuring they could simply “settle” back in their villages.

Following the end of the Greek Civil War in 1949, the Queen’s Fund began repatriating children from *paidopoleis* (state orphanages) back to their villages. While the initial plan was immediate repatriation, it was delayed until summer 1950 to allow the children to complete the school year. The repatriation policy reflected political concerns: only children from “nationally healthy” families could return, while those whose parents were leftists, in exile, or imprisoned were kept in the *paidopoleis* as “orphans” to shield them from communist influences (Vervenioti 2010). On June 3, 1950, the first group of children returned to their villages, and a celebratory ceremony in Athens honored the Greek armed forces

for “saving” these children from communism. Over the next decade, some refugee children who returned from Eastern Europe struggled to adapt to rural poverty and were sent back to *paidopoleis* or to the Royal Technical School of Leros, often encouraged by local authorities as part of a broader government effort to “reeducate” them. This initiative aimed to integrate the children into a “family atmosphere” and “restore” them as model Greek citizens free from “anti-national propaganda.” While some repatriated children saw this as a chance for a better life, others resisted, fearing they would lose their cultural identity.

Many repatriated refugee children sent to the Royal Technical School of Leros found the experience harsh and alienating. Macedonian children, in particular, described it as a “reformatory” focused on instilling Greek identity, where they were called “Bulgarians” and forced to publicly denounce their lives in Eastern Europe. Some children viewed their time on Leros as a “waste,” receiving an education inferior to that provided abroad. The government aimed to ease their resentment from the Civil War, with one child likening the experience to being put “in quarantine” to settle them emotionally.

Quoted in Danforth and Van Boeschoten (2012), the testimony of a young Macedonian reflects a complex, bittersweet experience at the Royal Technical School of Leros, highlighting both disappointment and adaptation. Initially, the speaker’s father sought to enroll him in a royal school in Athens to “make you a human being” while also instilling royalist values, though due to their time in Eastern Europe, they were sent to Leros instead. The school, he remembers, was filled with children from diverse backgrounds—orphans, street kids, and even juvenile delinquents—but it provided little in the way of meaningful education, leading the speaker to describe it as “a complete waste of time” (ibid: 144). Life on Leros was strict and restrictive, yet familiar, having been through similar experiences before (“We adapted quickly because we knew all about that kind of life” [ibid]). Although the school offered meals and activities like sports, the speaker found Greek customs foreign, especially the mandated religion classes and church visits, recalling how they puzzled over prayers and questioned the priest, eventually learning to blend in with Greek traditions. He felt that, despite their varied knowledge, they were held back (“People in Greece didn’t want us to get ahead” [ibid: 145]), noting that life in Eastern Europe had been comparatively “freer.” Although life on Leros was manageable, the overall sense was one of resignation, with limited opportunities and the dismal realization that leaving would only bring new challenges.

In another testimony (ibid: 10-171), the speaker recalls the harsh realities of life in the reeducation camp, beginning with the ever-present uncertainty about his family’s fate. Communication was tightly controlled and letters were being censored, so they avoided personal sentiments like “I miss you very much,” learning through the “rumor mill” that even minor complaints could lead to disciplinary scrutiny. The camp, with its fenced-in buildings and date trees which they had never seen before, was organized with “units” and “group leaders,” following a strict military-like regimen. Days began early with whistles, “exercises,” and standing at attention, yet they lacked basic amenities: There wasn’t enough water, and they often had to wash in the sea due to poor sewage facilities. Meals were meager, with breakfast just “a chunk of bread and a cup of tea,” and there was no money to buy anything else. Amid these conditions, he found solace in small accomplishments like time spent in the library or attending public school, noting that, despite the challenges, they were sometimes able to “exchange ideas” and “do different things.” At night, they had military-type bunks, with mattresses filled with



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“straw or wood shavings” and uniforms mostly old recycled military stuff. In moments of reflection, he admits, “I missed home,” but values the resilience and perspective gained from “being exposed to other people.” By 1950, after the war, 16,000 of the 18,000 children in *paidopoleis* returned to their villages, while the remaining 2,000—orphans or those with imprisoned parents—stayed in the remaining institutions.

3. THE PROJECT

The photographic series, captured in 2017 during a visit with a National Broadcasting Corporation (ERT) crew, aim to explore the layered history of Leros through its spaces of confinement and reform, particularly the Royal Technical School. The visit was part of a documentary project aimed at exploring Leros’ dark legacy, granting access to restricted and often forgotten areas, including the now-collapsing buildings of the Royal Technical School. Through these images, the project seeks to document the tangible remnants of the island’s past, revealing the layers of institutional control and the memories embedded within the decaying structures. The photographs do not merely depict abandoned spaces but evoke the lives and experiences of those who once occupied them, offering a poignant commentary on the intersections of space, memory, and history.

This project also holds a deeply personal resonance. My father was among those confined in one of the *paidopoleis* during the Greek Civil War. His so-called “reeducation” included a brutal incident where a guard shattered his pelvis with a kick, leaving lasting physical and emotional scars. This connection to Leros and its institutions is not just an abstract historical interest but an intergenerational reckoning with the traumas inflicted by these systems of confinement. The personal history intertwined with the broader narrative of Leros sharpens the focus of this work, transforming it into both a documentary of a collective past and an intimate exploration of familial memory.

Photography serves as a vital medium for engaging with the past, particularly in places like Leros, where history often remains hidden or suppressed. The Royal Technical School, once a site of ideological reeducation for children of leftist parents, now stands as a haunting relic of a time marked by political indoctrination and exclusion. The peeling walls, crumbling ceilings, and scattered debris bear silent witness to the lives that passed through these spaces, echoing their struggles and resilience. Each photograph captures not only the physical traces of the past but also the intangible weight of memory, urging viewers to confront the enduring legacy of systemic confinement and control.

The act of photographing such spaces transforms them into sites of remembrance, preserving their stories against the erasure of time. In Leros, the Royal Technical School is more than a ruin; it is a palimpsest of confinement, layered with the narratives of young men who lived under strict discipline and ideological conditioning. By visually documenting these spaces, the project underscores the importance of bearing witness to histories of marginalization and exile. The resulting images aim to be not simply records of decayed buildings but also portals into the complex and often painful histories they contain, challenging viewers to reflect on the social, political, and ethical dimensions of confinement and its impact on collective memory. In this sense, the project contributes to an ongoing dialogue about the role of space and photography in confronting difficult pasts and shaping historical consciousness.

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