

ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE OF THE RAF BASE ON MASIRAH ISLAND: EXPLORING ITS ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE.

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Abstract

This article examines the architectural heritage of the former RAF base on Masirah Island, highlighting its artistic and cultural significance. Built during the mid-20th century, the base played a crucial role in British military strategy in the region, while also leaving a distinctive architectural imprint on the island. The study analyzes the design and construction of the base facilities, emphasizing their functionalist aesthetics and the integration of local and British architectural influences. The article further explores the symbolic and cultural dimensions of the base, considering how its architecture reflects the broader historical and geopolitical dynamics of the time. It also evaluates the base as a potential subject of artistic interpretation, focusing on its unique spatial composition, materiality and the narratives embedded in its structures. Finally, the paper discusses the challenges of preserving this architectural legacy amidst changing political and environmental conditions. By positioning the RAF base as a blend of military infrastructure and architectural art, the study highlights its importance as a cultural artifact deserving recognition and conservation. This research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between architecture, history and art in military contexts.

Keywords: Context; Photography; Masirah Island

Introduction

The Sultanate of Oman includes not only the vast expanse of the Arabian Peninsula but also Masirah Island, which serves as the focal point of the research presented in this text. Located off the eastern coast of Oman in the Arabian Sea, Masirah Island has long been of strategic importance due to its location. Over the centuries, it has been a crucial part of Oman's defense system and, until 1977, served as a critical British military base. The island landscape is characterized by its extensive beaches, sparsely scattered trees and an overall arid environment. These natural features are interspersed with small, rudimentary spatial structures created by the local inhabitants, often situated at the junctions of roads and pathways. The spatial organization of the island shows a lack of formal planning, resulting in a chaotic layout. This is largely due to the island's primary economic activities, which revolve around fishing and limited tourism, despite its stunning natural beauty. The underdevelopment of tourism on Masirah Island can be partly attributed to its accessibility challenges. The island is accessible only by boat or ferry from the mainland, which limits visitor numbers and economic opportunities. Nevertheless, its

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remote and unspoiled charm offers a unique cultural and natural experience, underscoring its potential for sustainable tourism development. This research explores not only the island's historical and strategic significance but also its evolving spatial and socio-economic dynamics, providing insights into its role within Oman's broader cultural and geographic context (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. RAF Base on Masirah Island, View from the Hill (1968-1969), Photograph by Dave Logan.
Source: RAF Masirah Gallery



Fig. 2. Characteristic fishing boats on the island captured through the lens of Dave White (1959-1960).
Source: RAF Masirah Gallery

The connections between Islamic architecture, Omani architecture and the culture of Islam are explored in various publications, highlighting the interplay between religious principles, artistic expression and social traditions such as *D. Agius* [1], *R. Bhacker* [2], *A. Rippin* [3], *P. Risso* [4] and *R. Al-Tawfiq* [5]. The relationship between photography and the preservation of military heritage is presented in the following ways. The articles provide a

comprehensive history of military architecture and its evolution, including insights into the practical and cultural significance of military structures. *G. King* [6], *J.S. Curl* [7], *I.F.W. Beckett* [8], *R. Mason* [9], *P. Chakrabarti* [10] and *D. Campbell* [11] explore the relationship between the RAF and the local communities near the bases in Oman, including Masirah Island. Stories for Architectural Imagination have been presented in the following publications: *K. Havik and A. Sioli* [12], *C. Zimmerman* [13] and *T. Lichtenstein* [14].

The analysis of the sources from the base reveals that photography is a universal medium that transcends borders, capturing moments and spaces with a unique ability to convey narratives and preserve history. Globally, photography has significantly contributed to the accumulation of positive experiences related to the repurposing of historical structures, including military buildings. This interplay between military architecture and photography offers a fascinating exploration, spanning across art, history and cultural studies.

Amateur photographs of buildings and landscapes (Fig. 3), such as those from Masirah Island, serve multiple purposes. They document the physical state of architectural structures, from their original grandeur to their gradual decay, thereby providing valuable records of their historical trajectory. These images often highlight the juxtaposition between the utilitarian nature of military architecture and the romantic allure of its fading in contemporary landscapes.



Fig. 3. Characteristic fishing boats on the Masirah Island. Source: photo by Adam Nadolny

Moreover, such photography fosters a deeper connection to the past, sparking interest in the stories these structures hold. It serves not only as an artistic expression but also as a tool for raising awareness about the cultural and historical significance of repurposing abandoned military spaces. By transforming these images into sources of inspiration and discussion, photography becomes a medium through which the memory of such spaces is preserved, their potential for adaptive reuse is showcased and their importance within the cultural fabric is reinforced. This complex relationship between military architecture and photography highlights the power of visual storytelling in shaping our understanding of heritage, history and the possibilities for reinvention.

Materials and Methods

The Methodology of Selecting Photographs Taken by RAF Soldiers

After a thorough analysis of the available source materials, a decision was made to categorize the photographs taken by RAF soldiers into three primary thematic groups, which

reflect the diverse aspects of life on Masirah Island as captured through the lens of the soldiers stationed there. The first category, Everyday Life at the RAF Base, includes photographs that document the daily routines, activities and experiences of RAF personnel. These images provide valuable insight into the functioning of the base, from moments of work and training to leisure activities, offering a glimpse into the social dynamics and unique lifestyle of the soldiers during their service. The second group, The Residents of Masirah, focuses on the island's local population, capturing the lives and traditions of Masirah residents. These photographs offer a fascinating visual narrative of the cultural interactions between the RAF soldiers and the island's inhabitants, highlighting the coexistence of the two quite distinct communities. They also serve as a record of the traditional ways of life on the island during the mid-20th century. The third category, Landscapes of Masirah, includes images of the island's natural and built environment, showcasing its unique landscapes. From expansive beaches and arid terrains to the utilitarian structures of the RAF base, these photographs document the geographical and architectural features of the island. They also underscore the striking contrast between the island's natural beauty and the functional design of the military infrastructure [15-17].

This thematic organization not only facilitates a clearer understanding of the photographic collection but also enhances its interpretative value. By categorizing the photographs, the study aims to explore the multifaceted role of visual documentation in preserving the historical, cultural and environmental narratives of Masirah Island.

Methodology for the Chronological Selection of Photographs Taken by RAF Soldiers on Masirah Island

The chronological analysis of the available photographic database revealed that the majority of the images taken by RAF soldiers on Masirah Island date from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s. The RAF base on Masirah Island was established in 1936. Initially, it served as a strategic stopover point for aircraft traveling between Britain and British India and later evolved into a significant military base during World War II and the subsequent decades, playing a vital role in British operations in the region.

Some photographs also originate from the 1990s, reflecting a later period of interaction with the island and its evolving environment. This temporal framework provided a basis for categorizing the images according to their historical context. Photographs from the late 1960s and 1970s depict a period when the RAF base was fully operational and crucial to the British military strategy in the region. These images capture the daily life of soldiers, the functioning of the base, as well as the interactions between the military personnel and the island's residents. They offer valuable insight into both the military and socio-cultural dynamics of the time. By arranging the photographs in a chronological order, the study aims to provide a comprehensive narrative of Masirah Island's historical evolution. This methodology allows for a deeper understanding of how the RAF presence influenced the island's development over time and highlights the role of photography as a tool for documenting and interpreting historical and cultural changes.

Results and Discussion

Everyday life at the RAF base on Masirah Island in the 1960s and 1970s, as captured in soldiers' photographs

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Royal Air Force (RAF) maintained a strategic base on Masirah Island, located off the coast of Oman. This remote outpost served as a crucial link in British military operations in the region, particularly during the Cold War and various Middle Eastern conflicts. While the base was primarily established for military purposes, the photographs taken by soldiers stationed there reveal a vivid tapestry of daily life that extended beyond their official duties. These images, often informal and candid, offer a unique insight into the experiences of the personnel who lived and worked on this (Fig. 4) isolated island.

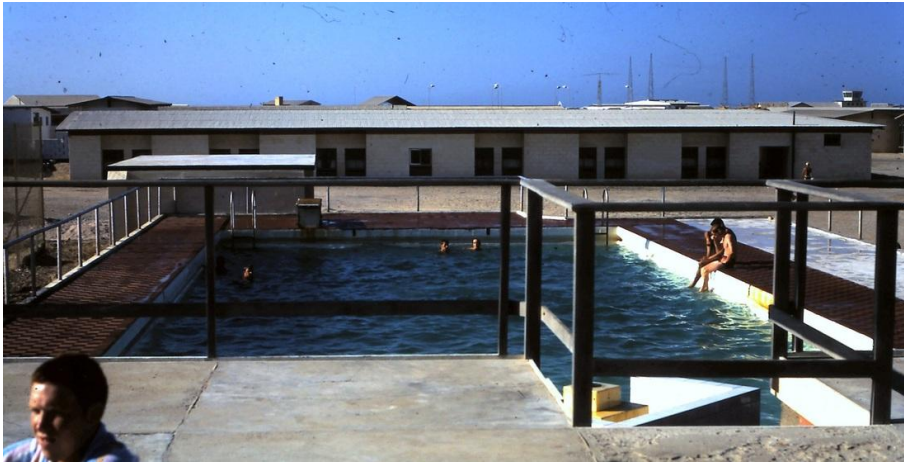


Fig. 4. Characteristic swimming pool on the RAF camp on the Masirah Island captured through the lens of Vic Nugent - 1972-1973 Source: RAF Masirah Gallery

Masirah Island was a challenging posting for the RAF personnel due to its isolation, harsh climate and limited recreational facilities. The primary function of the base was to support air operations, providing refueling and maintenance for aircraft involved in regional missions. Despite these operational demands, soldiers had to navigate the monotony of life on a remote island. Photographs from this time often depict the stark landscapes surrounding the base: barren deserts stretching into the horizon, the turquoise waters of the Arabian Sea and the basic infrastructure of the base itself. The living quarters, typically rudimentary prefabricated buildings, feature prominently in these images. Soldiers captured their makeshift accommodations, which they often personalized with memorabilia from home, highlighting the human effort to create a semblance of normalcy. In group photos, camaraderie among soldiers is evident, showcasing their attempts to foster a sense of community despite the geographic and cultural isolation.

Off-duty moments were essential for maintaining morale and the photographs reflect a variety of recreational activities. Sports, such as football and cricket, were common pastimes and are often seen in snapshots. Makeshift pitches, with minimal equipment and uneven grounds, underscore the resourcefulness of the personnel. These activities provided not only physical exercise but also an opportunity to bond and alleviate the stress of military duties (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. The pilot accommodation on the island consisted of four-man rooms arranged around three sides of a square. The fourth side housed the shared facilities, which included bathrooms, toilets and a communal fridge/freezer. Photo by Keith White, 1974. Source: RAF Masirah Gallery

Beach outings are another recurring theme in the photographs, as soldiers sought relief from the intense heat by swimming in the sea. Images of sunbathers lounging on the sand or groups gathered around barbecue pits highlight a more relaxed side of base life. These moments demonstrate the quality of life on Masirah as visible in the coexistence of duty and leisure in a challenging environment. Social gatherings, including parties and celebrations, are also featured prominently. Photographs from these events often show soldiers in casual attire, enjoying drinks and music, sometimes accompanied by visitors or entertainers flown in to boost morale. Such gatherings were essential in creating a sense of normalcy and breaking the monotony of island life.

Photography served as a critical medium for soldiers to document and share their experiences. With limited communication with families back home, photographs became tangible links to life on the island. They often included captions or notes, providing personal insight into the depicted scenes. These images were shared in letters or kept as keepsakes, preserving memories of a unique and often challenging posting. The candid nature of many photographs also adds an authenticity that official military documentation lacks. Unlike staged publicity shots, these personal photographs capture the mundane, humorous and humane moments of life on Masirah. They reveal the resilience of individuals adapting to an environment far removed from the comforts of their homes.

The photographs taken by the RAF soldiers stationed (Fig. 6) on Masirah Island during the 1960s and 1970s offer invaluable insight into the everyday life at this remote base. Beyond their military duties, these images reveal a community striving to create a sense of home in a challenging environment. They document the camaraderie, resourcefulness and moments of joy that defined their experiences, serving as lasting testaments to the human spirit in the face of isolation. Through these visual records, the lives of those who served on Masirah come to life, providing a unique perspective on this fascinating chapter of RAF history.



Fig. 6. A typical RAF pilot's room was modest and functional, reflecting the practical needs of military life. It was designed to accommodate four individuals, with each pilot having a single bed and a small bedside table.

Photo by John Driscoll - RAF Police Dog Handler - 1973-74. Source: RAF Masirah Gallery

The Residents of Masirah

Masirah Island became home not only to the RAF personnel stationed there during the 1960s and 1970s but also to a small local population that inhabited the island. The lives of these residents, fishers, traders and their families were occasionally documented in photographs taken by the RAF soldiers. These images offer a rare glimpse into the daily lives of the islanders, creating a compelling narrative that intertwines local culture with the military presence. Beyond their documentary value, these photographs carry emotional weight and serve as a historical record of an era shaped by cultural exchange (Fig. 7) and geopolitical significance. The local residents of Masirah led lives that were deeply rooted in traditional practices. The photographs

taken by soldiers often depict fishers hauling nets, repairing boats, or standing beside their dhows, small traditional wooden vessels used for fishing and trade. Other images show women and children in simple dwellings made of palm fronds or stone, offering a sense of the community's resilience in the face of harsh environmental conditions.



Fig. 7. The photograph depicts a group of women and children from Masirah Island set against the backdrop of a barren, arid landscape with sparse vegetation and distant mountains. The women are dressed in traditional clothing, with their faces partially or fully veiled, reflecting local customs and cultural practices of modesty. Photo by Al Rowland—1970-71. Source: RAF Masirah Gallery

These photographs often convey an air of curiosity and respect. The soldiers' perspectives, as outsiders observing an unfamiliar way of life, are reflected in their choice of subjects. Scenes of marketplaces, camels traversing the desert and children playing outside their homes reveal a quiet admiration for the simplicity and authenticity of local traditions. The emotional undertones of these photographs are layered and multifaceted. For the soldiers, capturing images of the islanders might have been a way to connect with a world far removed from their own. The smiles of children, the industrious nature of the fishers and the serene expressions of local women often radiate warmth and humanity. These photographs transcend their status as mere snapshots, becoming visual narratives that speak to the universal aspects of human life, work, family and community.

At the same time, the photographs reflect the soldiers' role as outsiders. Many of the images suggest a sense of detachment; the residents appear as subjects rather than participants in the life of the RAF base. This dynamic emphasizes the contrast between the transient presence of the military personnel and the enduring connection of the residents to their land and traditions. The juxtaposition of modern military technology with the timelessness of local life adds an evocative layer to these photographs, emphasizing the tension between progress and tradition (Fig. 8).

As historical artifacts, these photographs serve as a record of a time when global forces brought diverse cultures into direct contact. The arrival of the RAF and its accompanying infrastructure probably altered the rhythm of life on Masirah, introducing new goods, ideas and opportunities. Yet, the photographs often depict the residents continuing their traditional ways of life, unaffected by the modernity surrounding them.

This juxtaposition is particularly striking in images where locals interact with military personnel. Scenes of children curiously observing the soldiers or locals assisting with logistical tasks offer a glimpse of the cultural exchange that occurred. Such images are both poignant and complex, documenting fleeting moments of interaction in a broader historical context of

colonization, globalization and military occupation. Viewed decades later, these photographs take on additional layers of meaning. They capture not only a specific time and place but also the inevitable passage of time and the changes that come with it. The residents of Masirah, as seen through the eyes of the RAF soldiers, represent a world in transition—one where traditional ways of life persist amid the encroachment of modernity.



Fig. 8. Eid al-Fitr, a festival marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan, was a moment of great cultural and religious significance for the residents of Masirah Island. The celebration brought the community together in a spirit of unity, joy and gratitude after a month of fasting and spiritual reflection. On this occasion, men would gather in traditional attire to perform communal prayers, engage in social festivities and strengthen bonds within their community. Photo by Dave White, 1959–1960. Source: RAF Masirah Gallery

For those who see these photographs today, they evoke a sense of nostalgia and curiosity. They prompt questions about what has changed on Masirah Island since that era and what remains the same. The islanders' resilience, captured in these images, speaks to the timeless human ability to adapt and endure, even in challenging circumstances.

The photographs of Masirah Island's residents, taken by RAF soldiers in the 1960s and 1970s, are more than just visual records of life on a remote island. They carry emotional depth, offering insight into the lives of the local community and the perspectives of the soldiers who documented them. These images serve as a bridge between cultures and eras, capturing the essence of a time when the rhythm of traditional life intersected with the global forces of change. As historical records, they preserve the stories of Masirah residents and remind us of the enduring connections between people, place and history.

RAF soldier's interactions with the local environment

The photographs also provide glimpses of the soldiers' interactions with the local environment and its inhabitants. Masirah's small local population, primarily fishermen and traders, occasionally intersected with life on the base. Some images show soldiers exploring the island, interacting with locals, or observing traditional Omani life. These interactions were limited but provided soldiers with a cultural connection to the island. Nature photography was another popular subject. The island's unique flora and fauna, such as sea turtles, migratory birds and arid vegetation, were often captured in soldiers' leisure-time photography. These images

highlight the contrast between the desolate environment of the island and the soldiers' attempts to find beauty and interest in their surroundings.

Masirah Island's environment presented the RAF soldiers with a series of challenges; those were particularly its arid desert climate and sparse vegetation. Daytime temperatures often soared above 40°C (104°F) and the dry, dusty conditions well tested both the equipment and personnel. Photographs and written accounts from soldiers illustrate how they adapted to these conditions. Lightweight uniforms and headgear were common, designed to protect against the sun, while work schedules often accommodated the heat, with tasks being performed either early in the morning or late in the afternoon. The infrastructure on the island also reflected adaptation to the environment. Prefabricated buildings provided basic shelter, while water conservation became a critical practice due to the scarcity of natural freshwater sources. The RAF brought in desalination equipment to convert seawater into drinking water, a process essential for sustaining both the personnel and the operations. These practical interactions with the local environment highlight the ingenuity required to maintain a functional military base in such an isolated location.

Despite the challenges, many of the RAF personnel were fascinated by Masirah's unique natural landscape and wildlife (Fig. 9). In their downtime, soldiers often ventured out to explore the island, documenting its features through photography and written accounts. The barren desert plains, rocky hills and pristine beaches became popular photo subjects, offering an opportunity to capture the beauty of this remote environment.



Fig. 9. Masirah Saddle Club in 1975.

Photo by Kevin Schofield—1975—Medical Centre: RAF Masirah Gallery

Masirah was also known for its diverse wildlife, particularly due to its role as a nesting site for sea turtles and a haven for migratory birds. Soldiers frequently observed and photographed these species, appreciating the island's ecological significance. Some accounts describe soldiers assisting in the protection of turtle nests, highlighting an early awareness of environmental conservation. Such interactions provided a sense of connection to the island and its natural rhythm, helping soldiers to cope with the isolation of life on the base.

Another important aspect of RAF soldiers' interactions with the environment of Masirah was their relationship with the island's small local population, primarily consisting of fishers and their families. The presence of the RAF introduced new opportunities for economic and cultural exchange. The residents often worked on the base, providing services such as maintenance, transport and food supply. In return, the RAF brought modern goods and technology that were previously unavailable on the island.

These interactions were sometimes documented in soldiers' photographs, capturing scenes of local life, such as fishers repairing nets or children playing near their homes. While the relationships were often transactional, they occasionally (Fig. 10) extended to moments of mutual curiosity and respect. Soldiers learned about traditional fishing techniques, while locals

observed the operations of a modern military base. Such exchanges provided both groups with a broader understanding of one another's lives and cultures.



Fig. 10. "Bondu Bash" Radio Checks at the Oasis: A Rare Encounter with Palm Trees on Masirah Island in 1970. The term "Bondu Bash," a colloquial phrase used by RAF personnel stationed on Masirah Island, referred to the off-road excursions into the rugged and desolate depth of the island. These outings often had a dual purpose: conducting operational tasks such as radio checks and surveying remote locations, as well as offering a break from the monotony of base life. Photo by Trevor McMaster - Ground Radio Servicing Flight 1969-70: RAF Masirah Gallery

Beyond their duties, RAF personnel often used the local environment for recreation and relaxation. The island's beaches were particularly popular, offering a welcome escape from the rigors of military life. Soldiers swam in the turquoise waters of the Arabian Sea, organized beach barbecues and even attempted amateur fishing, though often with limited success compared to the skilled local fishers. These leisure activities provided moments of respite and camaraderie, helping to foster morale in a challenging post. The desert landscape also offered opportunities for adventure and exploration. Some soldiers organized informal expeditions deep into the island, searching for unique geological formations or vantage points that offered stunning views of the surrounding environment. These experiences often became treasured memories, with many soldiers describing their time on Masirah as a mix of hardship and discovery.

However, the soldiers' interactions with the environment also contributed to a deeper understanding of the island's ecological and cultural value. Through their explorations and exchanges with the local population, they documented a way of life that, in many ways, has since changed due to modernization and global influences. These records, preserved in the form of photographs, letters and memories, provide a long-lasting legacy of the RAF relationship with Masirah Island.

From adapting to the harsh climate to exploring its unique natural features and engaging with the local population, RAF soldiers stationed on Masirah Island between 1955 and 1975 developed a multifaceted relationship with their environment. Their experiences highlight both the challenges and rewards of life in a remote and unforgiving setting. Today, their accounts serve as valuable historical records, offering insight into how military operations and the local environment intersected during this pivotal period. Through their interactions, the soldiers left

behind not only a legacy of adaptation and exploration but also a deeper appreciation for the resilience of both the people and the natural landscape of the island.

Conclusions

The architectural heritage of the RAF base on Masirah Island is a remarkable intersection of military utility, artistic expression and cultural exchange. Built to serve strategic and operational purposes during a period of global tension and regional conflict, the base represents a unique chapter in both military and architectural history. Its structures, while primarily designed for functionality, hold a deeper significance as reflections of the cultural, environmental and historical context in which they were created. This summary explores the artistic and cultural aspects of the RAF base architecture, emphasizing its lasting legacy on Masirah Island.

The RAF base architecture was primarily dictated by the harsh desert environment of Masirah Island and the operational demands of it being a remote military outpost. Buildings were constructed using prefabricated materials and simple geometric forms, designed for durability and ease of assembly. Features such as raised structures, corrugated metal roofs and shaded walkways were employed to mitigate the extreme heat and sand-laden winds.

Despite their utilitarian focus, these designs demonstrate a keen understanding of the island's environmental challenges. The architecture there reflects a pragmatic approach to sustainability, with innovations like water desalination plants and natural ventilation systems becoming essential for the functionality of the base. These practical solutions highlight the adaptability of military architecture and its ability to respond to challenging conditions.

While the primary aim of the RAF base architecture was functionality, artistic elements subtly emerged, often influenced by the soldiers and personnel who lived and worked there. Informal embellishments, such as hand-painted murals, squadron insignias and commemorative plaques, added a human touch to the otherwise stark and utilitarian structures. These artistic contributions often reflected the personalities and experiences of the individuals stationed on the base, creating a sense of identity and camaraderie among the personnel. The juxtaposition of the modernist, industrial architecture of the base with the natural landscape of Masirah Island also created an unintended artistic quality. The contrast between angular, man-made forms and the organic curves of the surrounding desert and coastline gave the base a distinctive visual presence. This interplay of architecture and environment evokes a dialogue between modernity and tradition, progress and preservation. The base's presence on Masirah Island inevitably led to cultural exchanges between the RAF personnel and the local Omani population. This interaction is subtly evident in the architectural details of the base. For instance, some structures incorporated elements inspired by traditional Omani architecture, such as shaded courtyards and wind towers, which were adapted to suit the needs of the military. Furthermore, the layout of the base mirrored aspects of local settlement patterns, with clusters of buildings organized around shared spaces. These design choices, while practical, also reflect a subconscious blending of Western and Omani architectural traditions. The resulting structures stand as physical manifestations of cross-cultural interaction, illustrating how even utilitarian architecture can become a site of cultural convergence.

Today, the remnants of the RAF base on Masirah Island stand as a testament to the historical and cultural impact of its existence. The architectural heritage of the base transcends its original purpose, offering valuable insights into the broader narratives of military history, colonial influence and cultural adaptation. These structures serve as reminders of the individuals who lived and worked there, as well as the local community that shared the island with them. The artistic and cultural significance of the base lies in its ability to tell stories, stories of resilience, creativity and the interplay between function and expression. As Masirah Island continues to evolve, the preservation and study of these architectural remnants provide an opportunity to honor this shared history and explore the ways in which architecture can reflect and shape human experiences.

The architectural heritage of the RAF base on Masirah Island embodies more than just military functionality; it is a symbol of adaptability, artistic expression and cultural dialogue. Through its pragmatic design, subtle artistic flourishes and integration of local influences, the base reflects the complex dynamics between time and place. Its legacy serves as a valuable insight through which we can examine the interplay of architecture, environment and culture, ensuring that its significance endures for future generations.

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