Panning the camera lens over what had been a nonspace before the summer war

‘Collecting Dahiyeh’ begins to screen films of the suburbs at Umam D&R

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BEIRUT: One of the ramifications of Israel’s 34-day bombing campaign against Lebanon last summer is a sudden awareness of Beirut’s southern suburbs, Dahiyeh. Since Lebanon’s southern neighbor and sometime occupier has unleashed its full fury to flatten Dahiyeh, particularly the quarter of Harat Hikm, and as television news phases in to turn its camera-toward it for the better part of a month, artists and audience have grown interested in what the area was before it was attacked.

At once part of Beirut and apart from it, Dahiyeh is not unlike the unregulated ‘bidonvilles’ that have grown up adjacent cities for as long as history has bared to notice them and stamp them with various labels. A focus on informal, and so cheaper, settlement of migrants during the 1975-1990 Civil War, Dahiyeh has been denied in the public imagination as poor (therefore unpleasant), slum (slum alien) and a stronghold of the militant Islamic party Hizbullah (thus dangerous).

Through the ruin of the old city center in the 1970s and 1980s has kept Beirut relatively decentralized in its shopping and public life, elite culture tends to be concentrated in the northern end of the city. Poplar quarters further south like Colla and Farouk al-Shalhoub maintain a strong local flavor, the outskirts of Dahiyeh--officially beyond the pale of Beirut’s municipality—and virtually none is a space, at least as an object of (and platform for) the sort of high culture patronized by resident foreigners.

The recognition that governs this is the Harat Hikm-based Umam (Documentation and Research) (Umam-D&R), co-directed by Lina Kamal and Monika Borgmann. Nared in the Slim family villa and pursuing a weirdly secular agenda, Umam embarks on a drive to open up Dahiyeh. In this regard, Nader’s view of the commencement of a three-night screening program devoted to films on Dahiyeh.

The films are being presented as part of “Collecting Dahiyeh,” an exhibition of posters, maps and recorded oral testimonies sampled from Umam’s ongoing project to assemble the history of Dahiyeh. All history is narrated from a chosen standpoint, commonly called “bias,” and this one is abashedly focuses on the history of the region before the immigrants arrived in the 1970s.

The Umam project will be of interest to some, then, because it subverts the prevailing narrative that Dahiyeh is synonymous with Hizbullah. The value of the project extends well beyond this point of contention, though. Not only does “Collecting Dahiyeh” take a step in the direction of filling the vacuum in Lebanon’s written history, it also serves to undermine biases of certain accounts, which tend to be told from a north-Beirut and Mount Lebanon perspective.

The screenings began with a pair of films from Pamela Chaminem: The first of these, “A Matter of Distance (The Bicycles)” (26 minutes, 2003) is a fiction film telling the story of a mother, Nada, and her young son Omar. She’s returned to her family house in Harat Hikm for one last visit before handing the papers over to a friend who still lives in the quarter. Omar has his own mission, to retrieve and re-establish the yellow bicycle he was forced to leave behind when his family left.

Ridiculated with Nada’s memories of past happiness and the loss of relations, and accompanied by the music of Fadi al Attar, the film is a portrait of the nostalgia found in so much post-Civil War Lebanon cinema. The sectarian aspect of the film’s move is kept low key: the mother’s secular attitude, Omar’s name, the Christian calendar hanging on the wall -- but the codes are there for the Lebanese audience to read.

Four years later, in the wake of Israel’s attacks on Harat Hikm, Chaminem picked up these themes again in her documentary “Lemon Flowers” (35 minutes). As her text explains, at the beginning of the film, before the start of the Civil War in 1975, Harat Hikm was still a village. Now, apparently living somewhere north of Beirut, her family recall what a rural idyll Harat Hikm once was. Ghanem’s mother and aunts are captured while watching an old film at Al Attar movie. Her philosophically minded uncle Joseph is filmed fishing and working in his garden, which he says was planted in soil from Harat Hikm.

Gradually the subject turns to the Palestinian revolution, as the left turned the early stage of the Civil War. Though Joseph was at first sympathetic to the movement, the family was later intimidated into leaving the quarter by young gun-wielding thugs whose bad behavior cannot be stopped with an apology. Joseph remarks on the surprising phenomenon of Hizbullah, its ability to command its supporters like no political party before it, but when his niece tells these supporters “stupid” he disapprove. “No,” he says. “It’s com- mitment. Religious commitment is stronger than this.”

Umam subverts the belief that Dahiyeh is synonymous with Hizbullah.

The Umam screenings will conclude on June 15 with “Dahiyehscope,” a selection of short films shot during the 2006 summer war. On June 8, Umam will project the fiction film “A Shahrazade Tale” (22 minutes, 2006) by Ramz Kodiko. This student film is a first-person narrative of a climactic day in the life of Ziad, a university student from the southern suburb of Hay al-Selloom.

Unconnected to the summer war, the piece is doubly interesting. It’s a remarkably accomplished first film that makes intelligent use of commercial film convention to tell a tale at once comic and tragic. It’s also a story embodied in a quarter--almost one that, as the narrator tells us, could take place anywhere in the world—a quarter that is sometimes spoken for but rarely speaks for itself.

Collecting Dahiyeh continues at the Umam-D&R theater, in Harat Hikm.