

Putting flesh and bones on the specter of Dahiyeh

'Collecting Dahiyeh,' the latest exhibition of UmamD&R, would tell the history of a terra incognita

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BEIRUT: Small as it is, the concrete and asphalt of Beirut's urban fabric seems so unremitting at times that it's difficult to imagine that a century ago most of the city was once orchards and woodland. It's all the more surprising to learn that, before the start of Lebanon's last Civil War in 1975, "Dahiyeh" – Beirut's southern suburbs – comprised a few villages surrounded by agricultural land.

Before it was targeted by Israeli bombers and warships last summer, post-Civil War Dahiyeh was a blank spot in the imagination of most foreigners. Perceived as economically marginal, Shiite and the home turf of Hizbullah, it was a non-space for many Lebanese as well.

Umam Documentation and Research (UmamD&R) has undertaken to lend some corporality to that non-space with "Collecting Dahiyeh," an effort to put flesh on the specter by telling its history. A small sample of this work in progress – an exhibition of posters, maps and recorded oral testimonies – is currently on view at Umam's Hangar space in Haret Hreik, one of three municipalities that make up Dahiyeh.

"The project began in April 2005. We wanted to compile the history of Haret Hreik," begins Umam co-director Monika Borgmann. "It was seen to be a long-term project – when there was an occasion to make an interview we made one.

"After the summer war, the program we'd planned for the year until April 2008 simply wouldn't work anymore. We

didn't want to fall into the circus of 'art projects about the war,' yet we wanted to engage with the fact of where we are."

"Haret Hreik was destroyed twice," adds Lokman Slim, Umam's co-director. "First it was destroyed when it was transformed from a village to a suburb. Then it was destroyed again, symbolically, during the summer war. This second destruction stemmed from journalists being unwilling to refer to the destruction of Haret Hreik, calling it 'Dahiyeh' instead."

The conflation of Dahiyeh (which designates the entire urban fabric south of the Beirut Municipality and includes the municipalities of Ghobeiri, Haret Hreik and Bourj al-Barajneh) and Haret Hreik, Borgmann and Slim contend, erases the quarters' individual identities.

"We decided to play the game," Slim continues. "Lebanese too should know the difference between Haret Hreik and Dahiyeh, that beneath this generic term is concealed a complex and multi-layered world."

"Before the war we had an event at the Hangar around the massacre at Srebrenica," recalls Borgmann. "A young woman

from Achrafieh who heard about it somehow wanted to come because she had a friend from Bosnia. She was nervous about coming to Dahiyeh but came in the end, with about 10 of her east Beirut friends. It's amusing that the only thing that could bring a girl from Achrafieh to Haret Hreik is an event about Bosnia."

"Before the 1956 troubles," Slim says, "Shiyah-Ghobeiri were a single municipality. Bourj al-Barajneh was exceptional because it was exclusively Shiite. Haret Hreik's ... [mayor] is still a Christian. In terms of voting registries, there are still as many Christians in the quarter as there are Muslims. Of course Hizbullah's public relations people make good use of this.

"For your average Hizbullahi living in Haret Hreik, [the quarter of] Hay al-Silloum is 'the suburbs,' terra incognita," he smiles, "the suburb squared. Haret Hreik is for them no longer a 'suburb' but a center, a capital in its own right.

"Whether to meet with [senior Shiite cleric Sayyed Mohammad Hussein] Fadlallah or [Hizbullah secretary general Sayyed Hassan] Nasrallah,"

Slim adds, "foreign ministers schedule appointments at Haret Hreik along with the Grand Serail, Baabda and Ain al-Tineh. That capital, Haret Hreik, has its suburbs – poor suburbs like Hay al-Silloum and rich suburbs like Achrafieh.

"I recall the 'diesel riots' of 2004 [when the Lebanese Army killed and wounded several demonstrators in Hay al-Silloum] ... I can assure you, those living in the bourgeois apartment buildings in Haret Hreik were just as scandalized by [the riots] as those in Achrafieh."

Slim acknowledges, though, that perceptions of a monolithic "Dahiyeh" do reflect popular self-representation on the part of some residents there.

"Of course there is a strong local identity," he says. "I encountered it very strongly at the beginning of the opposition sit-

in Downtown. It stems, to a large extent, from the policies of [assassinated former Premier] Rafik Hariri, because he created a Downtown Beirut that was not meeting place for all Lebanese.

"Downtown Beirut's exceptionality, because what goes on there is completely unconnected to what happens in the rest of the city, excludes it too from the imagination of most Lebanese."

The bones of Collecting Dahiyeh are interviews with past and present residents of the area, and Borgmann notes that the fear the place arouses in people has left its mark on the project.

"The Christian former residents we interviewed," she observes, "are much more fearful in sharing their stories than, for instance, Shiites who still live in the Dahiyeh and who can tell stories of its more pluralistic past."

"This fear is part of the men-

tal landscape of the country these days," says Slim. "You can't tell people they're not allowed to be afraid. At the same time, you have an obligation to encourage people to interrogate those fears. It's a first step to understanding them."

Slim's interest in this project isn't academic. Umam is based in Haret Hreik because the Slim family villa, surrounded by the remnants of its gardens, is there. A vocal critic of Hizbullah, which has made Haret Hreik its political, administrative (and, it is assumed, military) headquarters, Slim has an obvious stake in both Haret Hreik and non-sectarian politics. Some would suggest his strong political position makes this project needlessly provocative, and will color the history Umam will tell.

"The Dahiyeh," he says, "is part of my identity. I don't want to fall back on this stupid notion that before the [South Lebanese and Bekaa] migrants came into Haret Hreik everything was much better ... It's our responsibility to try to make it better today. I don't need any cultural or artistic camouflage to express my political views. When I want to do that I just write an article. Obviously I have my nostalgic memories of this place but that's not the point.

"During the Civil War, the Lebanese Forces said that they would defend the security of the Christian Lebanese above all else. They failed. I fear that Hizbullah is the legitimate successor of this model. I fear the other sects will emulate them.

"I don't want to live in a country that is a collection of Dahiyehs, yet I see that's what's happening. Without making an effort, Dahiyeh has become the mirror of what ... Tariq al-Jadideh, Chouf, and others are becoming.

"Collecting Dahiyeh" continues at the UmamD&R Hangar, Haret Hreik, until 16 June. For more information call + 961 1 55 36 02.



"Collecting Dahiyeh" has been gleaned from UmamD&R's wide collection of oral histories and photographs.

