

Still standing in Haret Hreik, cultural center looks ahead to continuing work when conflict ends

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BEIRUT: Though it seems doomed to continue indefinitely, the war in Lebanon between Hizbullah and the Israeli Army will come to an end eventually. When it does, the Lebanese will count their dead and wounded, tally the number of homes destroyed and families displaced and assess the damage done to the country's economy and infrastructure. Depending on the nature of the political solution that is brokered for truce, the Lebanese – long famous for their resilience – will then calculate the cost of reconstruction and try, once again, to recover.

In four weeks, more than 900 people have been killed in Lebanon, a shocking percentage of them children. Over 3,000 have been wounded and nearly 1 million – as much as a third of the population – have been displaced. Those numbers speak for themselves, as do the numbers of roads smashed and bridges destroyed.

But as horrific as such statistics are there will also be other, more complicated costs of the war – many of them difficult to quantify. Much of the damage being done in Lebanon now cannot be mapped or counted. While it may seem crude to discuss the effect of the war on Lebanon's arts sector, the country's cultural life matters a great deal in that, at its best, it forms the vanguard of imagining a better situation, one to be materialized eventually by the masses.

Though controversial at times, Umam Documentation & Research (better known as Umam D&R) has played an important role in Lebanon's art circles and civil society initiatives. Heavily damaged by Israel's bombardment of the Dahiyeh on Sunday, now it too has become a casualty of war.

Umam D&R is a non-profit cultural center located, very much by intention and design, in an old, intricate white house replete with gardens and courtyards in Haret Hreik. Adjacent to the main building is a large exhibition space called The Hangar, which showcases pho-

tography, video installations, and films by young artists from all over the world.

Umam's foothold in the Dahiyeh, the area termed by some as "Hizbullistan," is crucial to the center's work. Umam endeavors to be a community center in every sense, a place for dialogue and problem-solving, open to everyone in the area. Though Umam's relations with its neighbors have been strained at times, its existence in Haret Hreik is a stance and an outreach at once.

|| Directors of Umam D&R fear for survival of vast Civil War archive

Every summer, Umam D&R holds workshops that bring together children from different sectarian communities to get them to know and better understand one another through taking pictures, writing stories or making art.

Umam D&R also organizes conferences and exhibitions that explore such themes as amnesty versus justice and collective amnesia versus collective memory. At the center of Umam's work is a commitment to probing violent episodes from the past, digging for causes and consequences and fending off the kind of historical erasure that was so politically expedient in the aftermath of Lebanon's 15-year Civil War.

Umam's principle partners, Monika Borgmann and Lokman Slim, made a visceral, highly contentious film called "Massaker," about the massacres at Sabra and Shatila that took place during Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. The film reaped numerous awards. Slim is also involved in a newly formed secular political party called Hayya Bina (Let's Go).

But Borgmann and Slim concentrate most of their efforts with Umam on an archive – a massive cache of written, audio and visual material related to the Civil War. For the past few years, they have been on a mission to assemble a vast collection of material – full print runs

of newspapers, narrative testimonies and more – to be used by future generations as an invaluable resource.

The archive, housed in the main building in Haret Hreik, has been partially destroyed.

On Sunday, Israeli air strikes smashed the building directly next door to Umam.

"The building was 10 stories high and now it is cut in two," says Borgmann. In more peaceful times, she lives in another part of the Umam house. But lately she has been staying in an apartment in Ain al-Rummaneh, close enough to see the Dahiyeh but far enough to avoid putting her life in peril, as Haret Hreik has been largely pulverized.

"The piece that is falling down is basically falling on us," she says, having made a run to Haret Hreik twice this week to try and assess the damage. "Umam's roof is partially collapsed. From the strength of the explosion all the doors and windows are blown out, wood and metals doors alike. I have to tell you it looks a little bit like 'Apocalypse Now.'"

Borgmann can't say for sure how much of the archive is gone. Haret Hreik is so dangerous right now that she can only spend a few minutes at a time there. Borgmann and Slim can access the neighborhood only because they live there. Hizbullah has otherwise closed off the area completely.

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"I don't know to what extent the archive has been damaged but the written part of it looks like it's been put through a shredder," she says. "Now we are worried about the rest. We don't know when this will stop. There are huge holes in the building. The doors and windows are gone. We got stones and wood to secure it as much as we could, but we are very worried."

Borgmann says she considered moving the archive out of Haret Hreik.

But in the first few days of fighting she realized she'd never be able to get a truck in or out of the neighborhood without calling undue attention to its

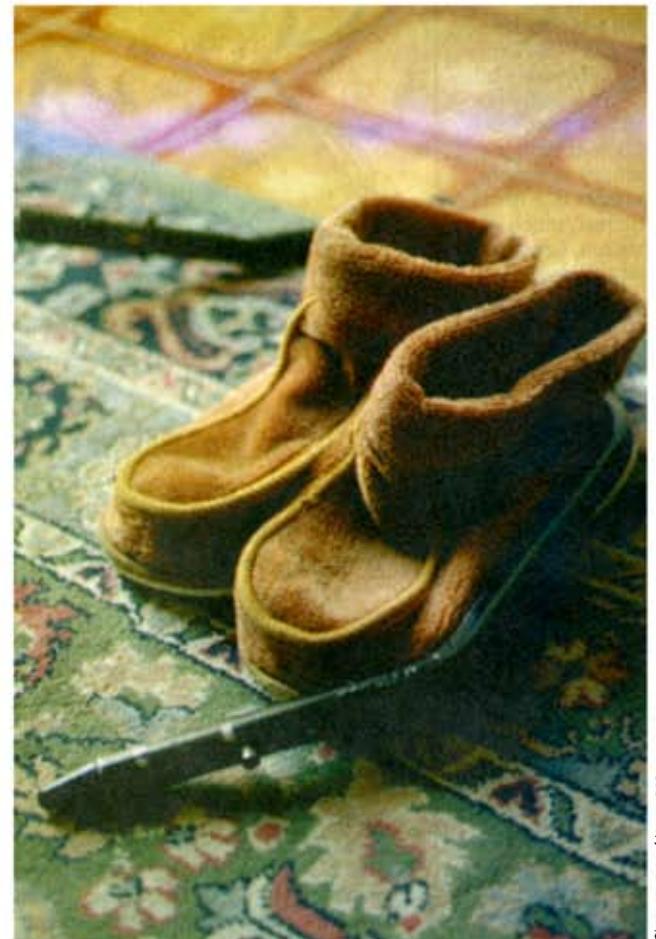
movements.

Moreover, "we want to keep our place," she explains. "We hope somehow to survive. It would be bad for our reputation in the area" – a reputation that has been tough to achieve – "and we want to stay there. If we take everything out, it will be like saying: 'We give up.'"

Despite the bad news, Borgmann still hopes to reopen The Hangar as soon as she can.

"We were planning to reopen in mid-September with an exhibition of photographs about Palestine," she says. "But today, to be honest, we are discussing the situation a lot and as soon as there is a cease-fire we will reopen The Hangar to make a statement, to say we are still here, we are still in the Dahiyeh. We are in discussions with artists who are reacting to all of this and we want to reopen as soon as possible with something dealing with this situation."

For more information on Umam D&R, please check out the Web site www.umam-dr.org



An image from Noel Nasr's installation "Operation 9," above, which was on view at The Hangar this past spring.

Photo courtesy of Umam D&R



Umam D&R has done work on several conflicts, including the Srebrenica massacre, above.

Photo courtesy of Umam D&R