

Documenting memories of war: UMAM and The Hangar

Liliane Kfoury



Visitors watch an outdoor film screening at The Hangar, Beirut // © Zeina Assaf/The Hangar

The 'state-sponsored amnesia' regarding Lebanon's violent past is apparent in the absence of either a national archive or public library containing evidence and documentation about its recent history. In the years following the end of the 1975–90 civil war, individuals and NGOs came up with the idea of reflecting on the questions of memory, truth, society, self-reconstruction and conflict resolution through organising roundtables and debates. The work of this association, Memory for the Future, led to a roundtable and a publication in 2001. In the same period, other committees and associations formed by families and relatives of missing persons also emerged.

In an attempt to explore and understand the intricacies of the civil war years, Monika Borgmann and Lokman Slim embarked on a process of collecting testimonies, including those of combatants, politicians, civilians, displaced persons, relatives of missing people. In order to be comprehensive in their work, they cross-referenced divergent versions and testimonials, and in doing so they felt acutely the absence of a research centre that could accommodate their requirements – especially as state authorities continued to procrastinate over the restoration of the National Library and Archives.

In response to this lack of oral archive or empirical data, they established the Association for Documentation and Research (UMAM D & R) in 2004. It was initially stocked with the archives of the Slim family, which consisted of,

among other things, 'grey literature' including pamphlets, brochures, propaganda posters, and Monika's Audio Fund. The centre produced a daily press review including political articles, columns and news items. It collected archives from booksellers and libraries, while also building up its oral archives by collecting testimonies from veterans, victims and perpetrators. The Hangar was then created as a space to host various cultural and artistic events organised by UMAM D & R.

The centre is intended as a resource for all Lebanese. It is situated in the Shia suburbs, far from the usual centres of cultural and intellectual life in downtown Beirut. This is a way to open memory issues to wider audiences and to invite more privileged classes to visit less prosperous areas.

After some of its material was damaged by aerial bombardment during the 2006 war, the centre began digitising its remaining archives. It also began receiving and safeguarding private family and commercial archives. The creation of such an archive will undoubtedly help identify and preserve part of a personal and collective memory that would have been otherwise lost.

UMAM seeks to work on three levels: documentation, archiving and public dissemination. Activities include film screenings, exhibitions, roundtables and workshops on archiving, memory and the fight against violence. For example, in the summer of 2011 the Hangar hosted a seminar on the concept of transitional justice, and in October an exhibition was organised based on the archives of the Carlton Hotel – the site of several significant meetings during the war.

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