

Films help Lebanese come to terms with war

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BEIRUT: At first glance it is difficult to understand what makes the Hangar, a cultural center in the Beirut suburb of Haret Hreik, different from any space like it in Beirut proper. It's uncomfortably warm under its corrugated tin roof in a space that is only about the size of a two-car garage. But it's not the building that makes the Hangar important – it is the ground it's on.

The Hangar is hosting the film series, "What is to be done: Lebanon's War Loaded Memory," the seventh part of which was shown Friday night. It is a series that tries to come to terms with the conflicts – confessional, economic and political – that have destabilized Lebanon for many years.

Haret Hreik is a neighborhood filled with memories of recent and past conflicts, and you can't step outside and hide from what makes Beirut's southern suburbs so different from the rest of the capital. It's this location that is what's remarkable about the Hangar, compared to similar gallery spaces.

"We are confronting memories," said Berna Habib, project coordinator at Umam Documentation and Research, the

Lebanese NGO that organizes exhibitions at the Hangar.

Umam is currently screening a 10-film series called "Confronting Memories," which analyzes memories surrounding Lebanon's 1975-90 Civil War. The film shown Friday night, "At Day Break" was about a showgirl who left Beirut in the 1970s coming to terms with the city as it is now. The movie had a mixed reception, but the

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location of the Hangar, a more conservative area, confronted viewers with the differences that have set apart Beirut for so many years.

Habib said making people reconcile with their histories is the idea, "so they can see what happens, they can see how they are living today. So they can comprehend their memory."

Haret Hreik is full of memories. It's a largely Shiite neighborhood that is disconnected from Beirut proper. The lack of understanding between the two

areas has led to periods of destabilizing discord. Most recently, in May 2008, on the heels of a government decision to dismantle Hizbullah's private communications network, militants from the party and its allies in the Amal Movement and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party battled in west Beirut with gunmen loyal to the Future Movement and the Progressive Socialist Party.

Harat Hreik was also the site of the heaviest Beirut-area bombing during Israel's summer 2006 assault. Large swaths of the area were flattened during the bombing, because of its centrality to Hizbullah's administrative apparatus.

Lebanon is known for its post-conflict resilience, but the issues that originally created those conflicts are often ignored. Habib said the Hangar is a location that lets people confront with these war scarred memories, particularly the people from Beirut's southern suburbs.

"People need such a place to talk about it for the first time," said Habib. "A lot of things are here for the first time." More details about projects can be found at www.umam-dr.org