

Artists emerge from ruins of Mosul to reclaim Iraqi city's cultural life

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The first thing musician Fadhel al-Badri did when Mosul was liberated from Islamic State last year was breathe a sigh of relief.

The militants who seized the city in 2014 had targeted artists like himself so when neighbours said they were hunting for him, he left home, called his wife to say he was likely to die and took to sleeping in a different place each night.

The next thing he did was recover his beloved violin and his oud, similar to a lute, from where he had hidden them in the frame of his bed.

He said he hugged and kissed them "like they were my own children," and played amid the ruins "a song ... for Mosul."

On Saturday, Badri and other musicians and activists attended the first orchestral concert in the northern Iraqi city since the militants were defeated more than a year ago by Iraqi and Kurdish forces and a coalition led by the United States.

Thousands died in that battle or fled the city, large parts of which was reduced to rubble.

The musicians played in a park where the militants once trained child soldiers and the music, a mixture of Western and Iraqi classical, wafted along the banks of the Tigris River.

"Music is my life. It's amazing to hear it in Mosul again," he said. The concert was conceived by Karim Wasfi, former director of the Baghdad Orchestra, whose visiting Peace Through Arts Farabi Orchestra played alongside local musicians.

Mosul was long celebrated as a centre of Iraqi culture but that life was suppressed even before Islamic State declared its caliphate in 2014. Al Qaeda targeted musicians in the wake of a U.S.-led invasion in 2003 and no one could remember when they last heard live music in Mosul.

Islamic State continued that crackdown, blowing up statues and monuments, said Ali al-Baroodi, a Mosul University professor and photographer.

"We continued to consume culture in secret: we would listen to music, trade books, films, music. That never stopped even though it was dangerous," he said.

Baroodi and Badri belong to a community of artists and activists who have defied fears of fresh attacks to hold weekly book markets and photography exhibitions. In a bold move, that community has also painted murals around the city in a bid to reclaim public spaces.

RICH HISTORY

Last year, he helped launch an international book drive to replenish the million books that Islamic State torched at the university library, one of the most important in the region.

"Mosul lost its identity, lost its features, lost thousands of its people with many more still under the rubble," he said. "These efforts aren't going to fix everything overnight but it gives us hope."

One new cultural centre is the vibrant Qantara cultural cafe. It opened in east Mosul in March, welcomes men and women, boasts a well-stocked bookshop and hosts readings and workshops. In addition, musicians including Badri have performed there.

Its walls show paintings and photographs of Mosul's rich history and its recent devastation. One wall depicts the crimes of IS, displaying a yellow jumpsuit worn by

detainees as well as handcuffs.

Not every cultural institution in Mosul is seeing a rebirth.

The central public library, a research centre that housed rare manuscripts including government records dating back to the Ottoman era, was the only one to survive Islamic State intact, even though it was used as a base.

Librarians hid the most precious texts but 20,000 books were dumped in the basement. After East Mosul was liberated, librarians salvaged what they could and stacked books on makeshift shelves.

But with no windows and holes in its ceiling, the library remains closed. Its halls, once filled with student researchers, are now caked in dust.

Library head Jamal Ahmed said funds had been set aside to repair the library, but government repair efforts had stalled.

"This library is an important cultural home," said a library employee. "We can't just rebuild bridges and roads, we have to rebuild minds."