

Quilting and Architecture: Lessons in Learning, Serving, and Giving

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will examine the process of designing and building a quilting studio for a nationally renowned African American quilter as an example of the architecture of stewardship. The study of quilting, as well as the formal and structural characteristics of the individual quilt, served as a basis for the fabrication of architecture as an attempt to redefine the house as a creative work and teaching environment for quilt making.

The quilting studio was part of a large collaborative effort to build both a residence and a studio for Ms. Mozell Benson, a nationally renowned African American quilter from Waverly, Alabama. The residence portion of the project was designed and built by four graduate students from the Design-Build master's program. The quilting studio, approximately 600 square feet, was designed and built over the course of two semesters by fifty undergraduate architecture and interior architecture students to provide a space for quilting and for conducting workshops. The studio was completed in May and the residence in August of 2007.

Ms. Benson's quilts have been exhibited in the Smithsonian Institution, the American Craft Museum, the American Folk Art Museum, and the Tampa Museum of Art, and at the 1985 Nigerian Council of Women's Studies exhibit in Africa. She is also the recipient of numerous awards, including the 2001 National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. She is a gifted teacher whose wisdom and charisma equal the beauty of her quilts.



The Quilting Studio enables Ms. Benson to fulfill her dream of bringing the community together, through the act of quilting, by offering instruction to children from all backgrounds and social classes and therefore passing on her tradition to future generations.

In their book *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern*, Cheryl B. Torsney and Judy Elsley describe this act of connection as "Pieces stitched together, blocks



Fig. 2. Quilting studio interior

joined, borders attached, and layers quilted and bound. A quilter has the ability to see the whole in the pieces ... and teaching the craft of quilting binds generations, friends and communities.”¹ The beauty of quilt making lies not only in its physical appearance, its patterns, or the fabric used, but also in the simplicity of its utilitarian role and its ability to bring together the histories and culture of a close-knit community. Quilting as a method of production is about the human impulse for creativity, for making something out of nothing. Quilts are utilitarian objects, often made out of necessity, but with a passion for beauty.

GIFT EXCHANGE AS A FOUNDATION OF STEWARDSHIP

The writings of Lewis Hyde provide an engaging way in which to examine the philosophical and spiritual foundations of stewardship. In his book *The Gift*, Hyde writes of the value and power of gift giving. He writes on the economy of the creative spirit, the inner gift, that we accept as the focus of our labor or the creation of an architectural work, and the outer gift that becomes a vehicle of culture when the work leaves its maker’s hands. He says that “art that matters to us—which moves the heart, or revives the soul, or delights the senses, or offers courage for living, however we choose to describe the experience—that work is received by us as a gift is received.”² It is work that speaks commandingly to the soul.

Hyde states that a gift eventually circles back toward its source. Marcel Mauss, author of the



Fig. 3. Quilting studio exterior

classic work on gift exchange “*Essai sur le don*,” published in France in 1924, states this idea from another point of view: “every gift strives to bring to its original clan and homeland some equivalent to take its place.” Mauss noticed that economies based upon gift giving tend to be marked by three related obligations: the obligation to give, the obligation to accept, and the obligation to reciprocate. He also pointed out that we should understand gift exchange to be a “total social phenomenon”—one whose transactions are at once economic, judicial, moral, aesthetic, religious, and mythological, and whose meaning cannot, therefore, be adequately described from the point of view of any single discipline.”³

Ms. Benson, whose spiritual generosity and creative ingenuity provided the foundational source for the quilt studio project, exemplifies Mauss’ description of gift-giving economies. Ms. Benson’s desire to return to her community to teach its children to quilt was the wellspring for this project. She uses her talents in piecing quilts to encourage children to continue the tradition of quilting with donated scraps, thus teaching a philosophy of making much from nothing. Ms. Benson’s life is her work, doing each task wholeheartedly, moment after moment, whether greeting a visitor with a heartfelt hug or selecting strips of cloth to join, or tending her one-acre garden. Each task is about an obligation to give, accept, and reciprocate gifts. Ms. Benson accepts any gift one has to give, whether scraps of cloth or plastic plant containers, furniture, tools, or in our case, a quilt studio. She is equally quick to give and donate her remarkable pieced quilts and the fruits of her garden to others. Ms. Benson’s devotion to gift economies set the standard for all the members of this collaborative quilt studio design and fabrication effort, including faculty, students, administrators, donors, friends, family, and community members.

QUILTING AS A MODEL FOR AN ARCHITECTURE OF STEWARDSHIP

This responsible use of talent, resources, and time exemplified in the art of piecing quilts served as a significant model for the quilt studio fabrication project and exemplifies the architecture of stewardship.

talent

Hyde speaks about talent in relation to gift exchange. He makes the assumption “that a work of art is a gift, not a commodity. That works of art (or architecture) exist simultaneously in two “economies,” a market economy and a gift economy. Only one of these is essential, however: a work of art can survive without the market, but where there is no gift there is no art.” He continues with the notion that a gift is a thing we do not get by our own efforts. “We cannot buy it; we cannot acquire it through an act of will. It is bestowed upon us. Thus we rightly speak of “talent” as a “gift,” for although a talent can be perfected through an effort of the will, no effort in the world can cause its initial appearance.”⁴ Architects and designers innately possess the talent to improve life through the natural and built environment for those living now and for those who will follow us. It is this talent that can be perfected through an architectural practice and education that focuses on being stewards of the world in which we live and developing a respect for human life that will endure.

resources

Quilter’s use of fabric that is donated or found and their design pattern that produce little or no waste served as an inspiration to our thinking about architectural materials for this project. We focused on the use of reclaimed material resources and very economical standard lumber or metal that can be manipulated in such a way that there is little or no waste. For example, we configured a collection of more than thirty donated single-pane windows into an efficient system of transparent or translucent modules.

In choosing the material resources for the fabrication of the Quilt Studio, we attempted to distinguish between local and imported materials, natural and artificial, native and alien, old and new, local and national, handmade and industrial. The



Fig. 4. Quilting studio storage detail

material investigations were also inspired by the culture of quilting with a focus on the experiential, social and economic resource possibilities.⁵ Experiential materials include haptic, interactive, and soft materials that evoke the acts of touching and folding the layers of a quilt into a thick or thin skin that holds, covers, and protects. Torsney and Elsley state, “No matter who we are, we all want to wrap ourselves in a quilt, metaphorically speaking.”⁶ Social material possibilities emphasize the collective assembly process of pieces, just as the quilting bees provided an opportunity for social contact and creativity. Jane Barker, in *Quilt Culture Tracing the Pattern*, suggests that women enjoy the patchwork of quilting because it mirrors their ability to unify diverse perspectives.⁷

time

Time is a concern for every quilter, thus many quilters use a sewing machine or other form of technology to piece their quilts. Ursula Franklin examines the use of technology in relation to quilting and distinguishes between holistic and prescriptive technologies: “Holistic technologies, exemplified by crafts, are individualistic in nature.



Fig. 5. Quilting studio storage, bathroom entry and perforated pivot wall

The crafter is in control of the planning and creation of the product and can change the original design as needed. In contrast, prescriptive technologies are based on a division of labor, designs for compliance, and a mandate for precision and conformity.” Franklin suggests that, “the determinative factor to evaluate a quilt should not be the absence of technology, but rather the presence of a connection between the crafter and her work.”⁸The model of simultaneously participating in both prescriptive and holistic technologies, emphasizing personal workmanship and connection between the architectural fabricator/assembler and the work of architecture, was used to measure and evaluate the success of the Quilting Studio.

TECHNOLOGY AND FABRICATION THAT FOSTERS STEWARDSHIP

Our study of quilting methods and processes offers some important insights into the nature of machine and handmade works, and into prefabrication processes. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, these issues are more pertinent than ever. We should embrace technological advances in architectural fabrication, but with the understanding that they are rooted in, or in some way connected to, the local and personal histories of place. It is the process of uncovering and re-establishing these values that brings a sense of validity to architecture. Although digitally fabricated architecture has of the potential for global appeal (it can be made anywhere), once produced, it is



Fig. 6. Detail of door and cedar rain screen

part of place—and place is never global, but always local.

Quilts are almost entirely sewn by machine, and yet they still carry a great sense of individuality. It is in the making, the assembly of the things, and their ordering that the individual act of creation really occurs. The question that had informed our investigation at every step of this project was how to use new techniques and new materials without losing the sense of place, scale, and individuality.

During the process of building the Quilting Studio, fabrication was viewed as a part of a design stage, rather than being separate from it. Testing of the materials and design through prototyping allowed for all the necessary transformations that change project from conceptual to real. Issues of materiality, joinery, and structure, as studied in this stage, through the use of technology have fostered our ability to act resourcefully, economically, and meaningfully.

Given existing financial and time constraints, we were forced to make a shift from a proposed modular type of wall production to conventional framing. This allowed the possibility of exploring conceptually and pragmatically the notions of layers and skin, and of achieving real parallels between quilt- and architecture-making. The studio was fabricated as a three-layered wall structure: a cedar rain screen as an exterior layer-skin; denim insulation as a batting, or enclosed interior layer; and a storage skin as an interior layer.

INTERCONNECTED SYSTEMS AND SOCIAL FABRIC

The architecture of the quilting studio aimed to cultivate and preserve the subtleties of craft- and art-making while utilizing innovative concepts of prefabrication and customized pre-assembly practices. Quilting practices such as stitching, patchwork, tacking, and improvisation served as the production model for architecture, placing value on making connections between past and present, handcrafted and machine-made, and local materials—a kind of stitched fabrication that utilized advanced technologies just as quilters have integrated elements of technology into their work. According to Torsney and Elsley, “Quilts stand as examples of how to use technology without sacrificing social values. In their setting of technological limits, quilts act to preserve the social fabric.”⁹

Hyde argues that a gift that cannot be given away ceases to be a gift and that the spirit of a gift is kept alive by its constant donation. This seemed to be the mantra of the quilt studio project. Limited funding from outreach and university grants made donations a necessity. The students and faculty took on the dual role of both designing and securing resources and donations from anyone at every opportunity, whether it was for materials or services. The more resources that were secured, the more opportunities for resources became available.

This example supports Hyde’s proposition about “the convergence of gift exchange as both a kind of property and commerce. Unlike the sale of a commodity, the giving of a gift tends to establish a relationship between the parties involved. When gifts circulate within a group, their commerce leaves a series of interconnected relationships in its wake, and a kind of decentralized cohesiveness emerges.”¹⁰

The Quilting Studio is intended to serve as a model workshop for other Alabama communities to follow. The publication of the design and building process will be distributed to communities, with the hope that it can provide a possible blueprint for craft-related, community building types of projects. The sustenance of a social web through the workshop activities of the Quilting Studio will

be, hopefully, the most important non-material outcome of the project. Both physical and non-physical disappearance (decay) of so many of small Alabama communities can be slowed, or possibly even reversed, through the renewal of interest in the traditional crafts and activities that supported these communities for centuries. Students of architecture—us included—have an obligation to serve as stewards of these traditions in addition to our interest in the preservation of material culture artifacts.

THE PRACTICE AND TEACHING OF THE ARCHITECTURE OF STEWARDSHIP

The Quilting Studio project was interdisciplinary in nature: it brought together undergraduate students from disciplines of interior architecture and architecture in a design-build type of project, with a strong research component integrated into its process. As the project progressed, these students worked closely with graduate students from the Outreach Center for Design and Construction, under the direction of Professor D. K. Ruth. Thus this project builds on the tradition of the Rural

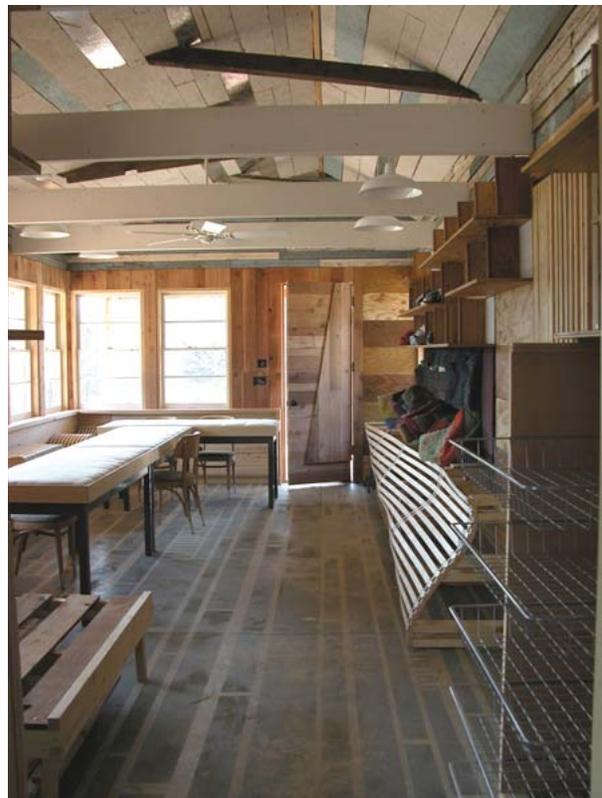


Fig. 7. Quilting studio interior



Fig. 8. Students positioning the framework

Studio, while adding some new components of hands-on learning.

The students were exposed to material research methods, and research methods in general, in a more comprehensive manner than in the other design studios. They have benefited from a hands-on experiential type of teaching by working on a design-build project that, among other things, emphasizes ¹¹the importance of being rooted in communal, social, and environmental concerns. Every stage of the project was founded on exhaustive research that addressed the areas of vernacular culture, social and cultural studies, sustainable materials, digital fabrication, prefabrication, and research of residential and work environments. Faculty and students compiled this research (through a series of individual research projects), which was carefully documented and then edited for a series of paper conferences and journal submissions. Students were actively involved in the preparation of these submissions—an under-explored practice in the undergraduate teaching of architecture. This educational approach is rare for architectural schools, where typically the research part of the project is very brief and not clearly structured, and the design phase dominates the process. The impact of this approach informed the future work of the students involved in this project (approximately thirty third-year students and fifteen fourth-year students), and especially in their preparation for the thesis-year project.

Can aspects of this project inform future studio situations? Although some of the issues are indeed specific to a quilting studio— certainly those

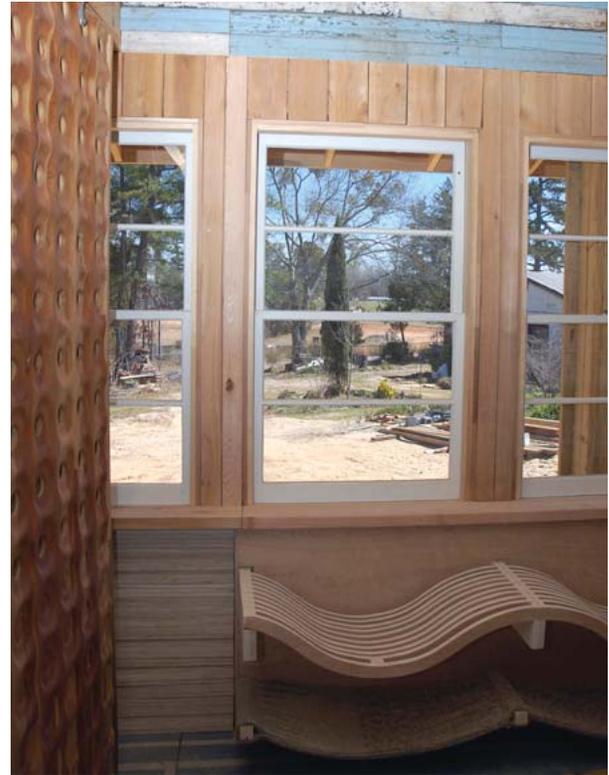


Fig. 9. Detail of pivot wall and bench

related to the design-build aspects—one can clearly see the possibility of framing future projects, both real and hypothetical, in a “layered and decentralized” frame. Our study of the quilting process, and Ms. Benson’s quilting in particular, has helped us understand the larger framework of architecture-making, and our position in it. One piece of fabric is dependant on another piece of fabric, material form is dependant on spiritual and cultural aspects, and the economy of means is an opportunity to bring out the qualities of each piece, and then the qualities of the whole. The emphasis is as much on the quilt as a whole as it is on the relationships between the different pieces and participants. The “objectness” of the finished piece is less important than its intended use. “A good quilt is warm and beautiful,” says Ms. Benson, who advises everyone to keep his or her quilts on the bed rather than on the wall.

For quilters like Ms. Benson, the understanding of authorship is different from individualistic and more a collective, or even reciprocal, action. It is interesting to envision the twentieth-century notion of the architect as super-hero being trans-

formed into something that is based on a complex and layered set of relationships. For the students involved in this project, architecture has offered more questions, more ambiguities, and more challenges than they might have anticipated. It has also given them, in return, a stronger sense of their own architectural self, through the continuous exploration of interdependence of the social, cultural, and economic layers of the project. It has affirmed the role of an architect as someone who is creating within the continuity and plurality of an architectural process, rather than within the singularity of architectural dogma.

ENDNOTES

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