Uncoverings 1996

Volume 17 of
the Research Papers of
the American Quilt Study Group

Edited by Virginia Gunn

Stitched in Place, Stitched in Time: Relationships of Quilts, Quiltmaking, and Landscape

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Examination of historic and contemporary quilts and quiltmaking from a landscape perspective yields valuable information for the design and understanding of places. The author pieces together an inter-disciplinary fabric which is an initial inquiry into the scope and nature of contemporary relationships between landscape, quilts, and quiltmaking in the United States. Interviews with contemporary quiltmakers throughout the United States and exercises of imaginative self-exploration highlight possible connections between quiltmaking and landscapes. The author proposes six relationship areas summarized as: common personal perceptions among quiltmakers; landscape as subject; landscape as teacher; quiltmaking as a way of seeing the world; quiltmaking as a process for understanding landscapes; and traditional quilt patterns as inspiration for elements of landscape design.

Landscapes are as much the result of culture and personal experience as they are of biological and physical processes. We are familiar with the physical manifestations of landscape—the patterns of agricultural fields, the cacophony of an animated city street, or the serenity of a mountain sunset.[1] But landscapes are cultural images, as well as physical entities.[2] A mountain may be a product of geology and modified by erosion and vegetation but the understanding of that mountain is shaped by the culture and personal experience of the perceiver.

As cultural products, landscapes are present in the art of a culture. According to geographer Denis Cosgrove, "to understand a built

landscape, . . . it is usually necessary to understand written and verbal representations of it, not as 'illustrations,' images standing outside it, but as constituent images of its meaning or meanings."[3] The physical, spiritual, and intellectual realities of landscapes are transmuted and captured in the conventional arts of literature, photography, and painting. They are also present in the textile arts: tapestry, rug making, embroidery, and quiltmaking.

We recognize an implicit connection between landscape and textiles when we borrow textile terms to describe human manipulation of the land and the resulting patterns. In addition, quilts, like landscapes, result from collective and individual efforts. Both are domestic and domesticating activities. Similarities such as these prompted me to question "are there other, perhaps more tangible relationships between quilts, quiltmaking, and landscapes?"

This project was an initial inquiry into the scope and nature of contemporary relationships among landscapes, quiltmaking, and quilts in the United States.[4] As a landscape architect, I was motivated by a hypothesis that there are numerous points of overlap or contact between these phenomena. In this effort of exploration, speculation, and reasoning, some relationships seemed tenuous and speculative, others are more concrete. I also hypothesized that under certain circumstances the process of quiltmaking might offer insights and alternatives to the practice of landscape architecture.

My investigation drew from a number of disciplines; landscape studies, folk studies, and phenomenology create its basic structure. Stitched onto the basic framework was a broad examination of the literature of relevant disciplines for building bridges between quiltmaking and landscape. I also used interviews with contemporary quiltmakers and an activity of directed role playing , or imaginative self-exploration, where I was both researcher and participant.

Conceptually this project was constructed like a quilt. The various themes lent organization and content to the whole. Layers of information were gathered and evaluated with respect to other information pieces. Some were discarded, others stitched into the accumulating project fabric, and still others were set aside for future projects. The design was dynamic and flexible, receptive to altering course in light of unexpected discoveries.

Woven into the project fabric were several assumptions. The first was that traditional quilt patterns are a valid source of inspiration for designed elements of architecture and landscape architecture, selected along lines of thematic, regional, or personal significance. I also assumed that in quiltmaking, as in any art making, the thinking necessary to translate an idea into an art object is an opportunity to consciously pursue an understanding of a landscape or landscape elements. Furthermore, interpretation of a quiltmaker's design and artistic decisions can lead to conclusions concerning the quiltmaker's perceptions and values associated with her subject matter. My final hypothesis was that, as a design process, quiltmaking can offer insights and assistance to the process of designing landscapes and places.

The paper first places this effort within a cultural context of landscape imagery in textiles of other cultures and follows with a discussion of the various types of quilt landscapes. The paper then describes various points of connection between landscape and quilts in the work of contemporary quilt artists and a portrait of one quiltmaker whose work exemplifies the work of the women interviewed. Finally, I share the process and results of my work exploring quiltmaking as a tool of landscape understanding.

Representations of Landscape in Textiles

Landscapes representations can be molded with all manner of artistic media and they appear in the designed objects and artistic achievements of cultures throughout history. Elements of the natural world serve as models for objects of artistry and adornment in all facets of human life. It appears to be an innate human trait to transfer images or to create patterns based on images of our physical world. Nature inspires motifs that adorn and create visual and tactile texture. It also serves as a model for tools and structures.[5]

As individuals sift through environmental stimuli and perceptions of the physical world, they abstract two kinds of environmental features: "1) universal, invariant relations, such as symmetry or orientation, and 2) distinctive features, such as those peculiar to the aesthetic system of a particular culture."[6] The former features are

environmental aspects which are perceived, processed, and evaluated across cultures and time. The latter characteristics represent features which specific cultures or other human groups value in common and which frame, filter, or evaluate their perceptions. These abstractions assist individuals in the identification and recognition of environmental entities and features and in assessing their relevance to the individual's current needs and intentions.

Landscape images and elements are present in numerous textile traditions throughout the world. Narratives of many cultures are told in textiles such as carpets, embroidery, fabric, and tapestry. For example, in medieval Europe, tapestry weavers recorded landscape elements of flower and field. In Central America, the Cuña Indians of Panama stitch colorful representations of particular places, flora, fauna, and religious events in their molas.

In the austere, arid land of Persia, where carpet weavers practiced their art of weaving carpets rich with floral motifs, we find clear examples of textiles symbolizing a landscape. The classic garden carpets, from about the seventh century A.D. on, reproduce the structure and vocabulary of Persian gardens and courtyards. Images of avenues and watercourses separate and organize lush planting beds. Some carpets are divided into the classic four-part scheme of garden design, whereas other carpets are more finely divided. Encircled by a border of stylized plants, all are ultimately bordered by an abstract wall.[7]

These garden carpets embody the desert dwellers dream of Paradise. The domestic associations of carpet, garden, and Paradise are subtle statements on humanity's reintegration with Paradise through encounters with nature. Urban resident and nomad alike could, with such a carpet, metaphorically be always in a garden.[8]

The Quiltmaker's Landscape

In recent years, scholars have examined the content of quilts from numerous perspectives: as social histories and texts of personal lives, as abstract visual design, as metaphor, and as political commentaries. Quilts also express ideas of landscape—specific or generalized patterns of buildings and fields, tools and objects of daily life, records of

journeys taken, and places imagined.[9] Landscape quilts express the influence of particular people, places, and events in a quiltmaker's life, conveying a sense of what is valued by the maker.

Architects Dolores Hayden and Peter Marris examined historic North American quilts as landscapes rendered in cloth. They believed that, as a group, American quiltmakers developed a rich design language "based on forms derived from the natural and built world" and used this language of fabric to comment on their experiences, women's experiences.[10] They also asserted that this quiltmaker's design language is an under-exploited source of inspiration for American architects, landscape architects, and other environmental designers.

They proposed that historic quilt designs may be viewed as one of three types of landscapes: actual, typical, and metaphoric.[11] These classifications also hold true for contemporary quilts. Quilts of the first type depict actual places of particular importance to the quiltmaker. Often these are illustrated with recognizable features corresponding to actual landscape features. Some, such as Sarah Warner's quilt of the town square of Greenhill, Connecticut, in 1800, rather clearly and accurately illustrate the style and arrangement of buildings and fields, and are populated with figures of townsfolk and farm animals.[12] In these quilts the entire surface may be given over to the landscape imagery (see figure 1).

The second grouping of quilt landscapes, the "typical" quilts, feature traditional block patterns which allude to landscapes and objects familiar to women of frontier settlements.[13] These quilts illustrate that which may be commonly experienced by all, yet each quilt is a personal interpretation of that commonalty. Through the creative use and arrangement of simple geometric or appliqué shapes, quiltmakers suggest essential forms of objects or landscapes and portray physical and spatial relationships.[14]

Schoolhouse and Log Cabin are the most common of building patterns. The log cabin variation, Barn Raising, commemorates the significance of community assistance in rural communities. The broad bands of light and dark fabric evoke the skeletal structure of a barn while the fabric strips of the individual blocks suggest the infill of boards forming the barn walls. The correspondence between

Figure 1. *Rio Hondo* by Katie Pasquini Masopust, 1994. The artist's interpretation of a particular place along the Rio Grande Gorge near Taos, NM, commemorates the moment of discovery . Photograph courtesy of the artist.

quilt pattern and landscape is vivid when images of both are paired side by side (see figures 2A and 2B).

Patterns now known as Carpenter's Wheel, Monkey Wrench, and Churn Dash evoke tools used daily for survival and indicate a familiarity with the instruments of building construction and agriculture in addition to those of running a household. They suggest connections among activities undertaken by women and men and that a reciprocity of skills occurred among these activities.

Numerous pattern names of typical quilts reflect aspects of nature or familiar landscapes and demonstrate widespread appreciation for both the domesticated and natural landscapes.[15] Patterns and their names evoke images of sights and experiences likely to have been part of women's lives—a walk in the woods, the sight of a hawk silently hovering over prairie grass alert for a mouse, the sound of frogs croaking from their puddles (see figure 3).

Figure 2A. Log Cabin Barn Raising, c. 1880–1900. Reprinted from Roderick Kiracofe, *The American Quilt: A History of Cloth and Comfort 1750–1950* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1993), 169.

Figure 2B. A modern day barn raising. Photo by Kenneth Helphand, courtesy of the photographer.

Figure 3. *Barricade* by Erika Carter, 1991. Trees are an important visual presence in Erika's pieces. Her images suggest trees. By removing the identity of specific individuals, these trees become universal representatives; viewers can more easily make associations with trees in their own lives. Photo courtesy of the artist.

The final category of quilt landscapes is metaphorical landscapes (see figure 4). Whereas quilts of typical landscapes record objects and experiences of daily living, metaphorical quilts strive to convey ideological, intellectual, and emotional associations between actual and imagined landscapes.[16] Quilts with names such as Delectable

Mountains and World Without End draw upon religious traditions of the time to express meaning. The spirit of God's promised land in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is aptly associated with the pattern Delectable Mountains. To the emigrant, the promise of a new start in the New World and its potential for riches and religious freedom was associated with Biblical journeys to a land of peace and plenty. The pattern's jagged clusters of triangles radiating out from a central star, strongly evoking images of ridgelines receding in the distance, is suggestive of the many mountainous vistas of the Eastern United States.[17] Linking the name with imagery suggestive of the New World stitches together the metaphorical and the actual.

Quilts of each of these three categories display a tension between the personal and familiar, formal design principles in fabric, and

Figure 4. *Spirit Flight* by Judy B. Dales, 1993. This metaphorical quilt is stitched full of memories of childhood and dreams. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

landscapes. The interjection of the personal animates and activates the surface of quilts with layers of meaning, extending their influence across space and time, touching chords in the lives of others.

Contemporary Quiltmakers and Landscape

Open-ended interviews with eleven contemporary quiltmakers provided a framework of possible relationships between quilts, quiltmaking, and landscape (see table 1). I designed interview questions to elicit descriptions of each quiltmaker's design process and philosophy, her ways of bridging the distance between idea and design, and the ways in which landscape and nature influence her work.[18]

The women all practice their art in a personal manner and likewise landscape and nature influence their work in varying degrees. For some, the relationship of landscape and nature are integral to their work, while for others landscape and landscape elements are occasional subjects within a larger pool of interests. Most can be conscious and explicit about the role of nature in their process and work, although at times, some found it difficult to articulate clearly as many aspects of their transformation of idea into quilt as the author had anticipated. A brief portrait of one of these quiltmakers,

Erika Carter	— Bellevue, Washington
Nancy Crow	— Baltimore, Ohio
Judy Dales	— Boonton Township, New Jersey
Alison Goss	— Cummings, Iowa
Gloria Harries	— Grandview, Washington
Ann Johnston	— Lake Oswego, Oregon
Faye Labanaris	— Dover, New Hampshire
Jean Liittschwager	— Leaburg, Oregon
Katie Pasquini Masopust	— Santa Fe, New Mexico
Shannon Rettig	— Summit, Oregon
Meiny Vermaas-van der Heide	— Tempe, Arizona

Table 1. List of quilt artists interviewed for this project.

Alison Goss of Cummings, Iowa, exemplifies the work and philosophy of these women.[19]

Like many of her contemporaries, Alison is a self-taught quiltmaker who began making quilts in 1980. After several years of working with traditional patterns and building her skills, she moved into creating quilts exclusively of her own designs. She publicly exhibits her work and has won several awards.

Alison's quilts manifest her love and appreciation of nature. In her words her quilts "evolve from internalized visions of landscapes; pictures that (she) carries round in (her) head and in (her) heart, renewed every summer by long hikes."[20] From places traveled come patchwork images of her understanding and experience of meaningful places. Mountains, especially those of Colorado, appear as a strong source of geographical grounding for Alison.

Alison creates quilts about landscapes that are themselves landscapes. Unlike landscape painting which can only engage the vision and imagination of its observers, quilted landscapes have within themselves a dimension for participation on the part of the observer. The intrinsic potential to wrap yourself in the quilt is to surround yourself in its landscape just as you can engage with and be within physical landscapes.

Alison's quilts *Animas Headwaters* and *Escape Routes?* illustrate her work and philosophies. Completed in the fall of 1994, *Animas Headwaters* celebrates a particular spot high in the Colorado Rockies, a favorite place of Alison's, where the river forms in a glacial bowl ringed by austere and rocky mountains (see figure 5).

Animas Headwaters captures a moment in time, a snapshot in fabric of a place and a person. In it we see the beginnings of the river at the base of mountains; each valley contributes a tributary to the birth of the river. Rays of light radiate from behind the mountains. It is dawn, or perhaps dusk with long shadows accentuating the shape of the land. Spring or early summer is the season of this quilt with its flowing waters and profusion of wildflowers.

The Animas headwaters which Alison portrays is a blend of the physical character of the area and her experience of the place (see figure 6). The quilt contains the essential elements of mountain ridges, meandering stream, wildflower meadows, and lofty sky. Her

Figure 5. *Animas Headwaters* by Alison Goss, 1994. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

design presents a scene framed in a manner suggestive of Mexican shrines and implies honoring the sacred in nature. Rows of mountains portray layers of ridges receding in the distance. Rather than imitate nature, Alison suggests depth with stacked rows of mountain peaks diminishing in size towards the sky. This portrayal draws the viewer's attention towards the sky or heavens which embodies several layers of symbolic meaning. The sky is associated with Heaven, with goodness and aspirations. Even the shape of the mountain contributes to this notion of a spiritual presence or aspiration by directing our attention up to the sky.

Many of the same sentiments are expressed metaphorically in the quilt *Escape Routes?*. It records the journey Alison made every summer for six consecutive years. Beginning amidst the traffic congestion and dense urbanity of her East Coast home of the time, it ends in

Figure 6. Artist's photographs of the landscape of the Animas headwaters. Photographs courtesy of the artist.

the mountains of southern Colorado. Set against a background of mist-shrouded hills, snake-like "paths" appear to float. Arising out of a snarl of interstate-like lines, they rise, separate, become fewer, and eventually lead to some of Alison's favorite mountain meadows along the top edge of the quilt.

This is a metaphorical quilt in the sense that it expresses a personal journey not only across physical distances but also spiritual, emotional, and intellectual ones. The flight from the East Coast into the mountains signifies a temporary return to the places which nourish her soul, making city life tolerable. By visualizing this journey of the mind and spirit within the fabric of a quilt, Alison created a visible reminder of the relief she experiences. The act of looking at *Escape Routes?* may initiate a journey of memories to these favored meadows or prompt admirers of the quilt to remember similar journeys and places of their own and this provides a mental escape.

In another sense, the pathways of these journeys are also symbolic of the indivisible linkage of city and nature. Although Alison prefers areas which are wild or not extremely urbanized, she recognizes their complementarity and connectivity. The "?" in the title acknowledges doubts about whether one can ultimately escape the influence or presence of industrial society.

The landscape information which Alison translates into quilt designs is principally composed of visual perceptions. Creation of her designs involves abstracting and adapting the lines, forms, and colors which she perceives into shapes and patterns suitable for fabric. It means selecting not only the essential forms but also the characteristics of those forms or entities which provide a sufficient description, allowing the rest to be suggested.

All of her pieces are personal reflections stitched into particular landscapes or among elements of nature. Rather than adhere to what appears to be photographic accuracy, although photographers interpret their subjects through composition, framing, and lighting, Alison creates an image of a particular landscape which resembles the physical reality but more importantly integrates a personal interpretation of how she experienced it. Although her design is tied to a specific place it is also a landscape which only truly exists in the mind and memory of the artist.

Common Threads

We can note or speculate on connections between landscape, quiltmaking, and quilts but the precise nature of those relationships remains open to interpretation and discussion. Some relationships are more obvious and satisfying while others are tenuous and more speculative. I propose six areas of relationships: common personal perceptions, landscape as subject or inspiration, landscape as teacher, quiltmaking as way of seeing, quiltmaking as process, and quilt patterns as elements of landscape design.

Common Personal Perceptions

From the interviews and discussions with these quiltmakers, three generalizations about environmental perceptions emerged: kinship with subject, interest in the details, and nature as a wealth of patterns.

This first common thread of perception is personal involvement with subject matter. Through the stories told by these women, each expressed a realization that her life is connected in some way with her subject. This echoes the observations of Mary Field Belenky and her colleagues that women tend to function within a worldview based on interpersonal relationships.[21] In the case of these quiltmakers the relatedness is between themselves and nature, themselves and other species.

This feeling of connection was manifested differently by each of the women. Some observed a correspondence between the condition or mood of their environment and aspects of their design decisions. Shannon Rettig noted that her color choices are sometimes subtly influenced by the seasonal or daily ambiance of her surroundings. As an example she cited the appearance of relatively brightly colored fabric pieces she had sewn into a quilt with an intentionally muted color palette. Her only explanation was that after weeks of cloudy, cheerless weather towards the end of winter her spirit must have been longing for the bright colors.[22] The erratic fabric choice was a subconscious decision in response to the winter weather. In a related manner, Alison Goss remarked that it was difficult for her to practice her quiltmaking during the seven years she lived in urban

Delaware.[23]

For other quiltmakers the sense of relationship was more intimately tied with their motivations for quiltmaking. Erika Carter was explicit about this relationship. She described her quiltmaking as a process which bridges her interior and exterior landscapes. She observed that over the years the imagery and emotional content of her quilts parallels and reflects major emotional events of her life. For instance, her early works are all characterized by strong trees silhouetted against a highly structured background of colorful fabric strips. In contrast, while her current pieces often display the same organization of trees against a background, the background appearance is softer and the distinctions between fabric pieces are blurred. More striking is the change in her trees; they are more relaxed and each of the branches terminates in a hand pattern. The trees with hands represent the artist. Erika said the early quilts reflect a need in her life at that time to be in control of some aspect of her life. Recently this attitude has changed from one of control towards one of balance with regard to personal growth, interpersonal relationships, and environment. She wants to exhibit in her quilts the characteristics of the kind of person she is and will be.[24]

The second general trait among these women is an interest in the visual details of their physical world. During the interviews many of the women expressed a fascination with the breadth and aesthetic richness of the details of nature and landscapes which is echoed by an attention to detail in their quilts. In her quilt *Going, Going . . . Coming Back*, Jean Liittschwager conveyed an understanding of both the general structure of a Douglas Fir forest and the sensual texture of its surfaces. Skillfully using her media—layering fabric, rich iridescent colors, and quilting stitches—she evoked the lush visual and textural diversity of the mats of moss without attempting mimicry.

Finally, these quilt artists perceived of nature and their personal landscapes as rich sources of inspiring patterns used to develop quilt designs. Alison Goss was intrigued by the patterns exhibited in nature that result as a consequence of evolutionary selection, physical weathering, and survival.

In the quilts examined, all of these women emphasized nature and non-urban places.[25] Elements of industrial society are absent

from their quilt designs. These women were more inclined to channel their creative energies through subjects of nature. The beauty and complexities of nature and natural processes were deemed more appropriate or satisfying topics for quilt designs than contemporary human-wrought objects and processes; unless they contrasted one against the other. Perhaps the objects of an industrial society are simply considered less interesting. Subconsciously they may be too ordinary and familiar. It is also interesting to consider that this focus on subjects from nature is a contemporary variation of the domesticating tradition of frontier quiltmakers. Unlike our foremothers who needed to domesticate a forbidding and wild landscape, many quiltmakers of our predominantly domesticated world are motivated to interject a little wildness into that domesticity. Under these circumstances quiltmaking becomes a means of constructing landscapes to satisfy personal needs.

Landscape as Subject or Inspiration

The most evident relationship between quilts and landscape is that of landscape as a subject for quilt designs and as such it appears in numerous forms. In some instances, landscape or landscape elements are treated as scenery, collection of objects, or aesthetic qualities and portrayed with near photographic realism.

In others, the landscape is interpreted through the lens of the quiltmaker's experience, values, and personality, bearing a resemblance to physical reality but existing fully only when coupled with the internal landscape narrative of the quiltmaker or observer. Paraphrasing Erika Carter, symbolic representations of the particular allows the artist to comment on the universal.[26]

Finally, a landscape may inspire surface designs derived from its aesthetic qualities. An artist may analyze or describe the landscape in terms of its aesthetic properties (pattern, color, texture) and these descriptions become springboards for explorations of color, form, or patterns based on observation. An artist, by disregarding an object's identity and focusing instead on its physical characteristics, alone and in relation to others, reveals those shape- or pattern-identifying features which are relevant to comprehension of her surroundings.

Often it is only the title of the piece which indicates the artist's

intent. In the absence of clearly recognizable shapes within quilt designs, observers of the quilt are at liberty to use their imaginations and intellects to understand why or how this visible image describes or represents the subject stated in the title of the piece. This process can help personalize the artwork and prompt them to ponder their lives with fresh perspective.[27] It is not important that observers of the quilt understand and appreciate the quilt in the same manner as the artist. It is more interesting if the quilt artist is able to engage and challenge observers to interpret the design in personally meaningful ways, stitching connections between the personal and the universal.

Quilt designs may variously exhibit combinations of realism, interpretation, and symbolism.[28] These approaches are not necessarily incompatible nor are quiltmakers tied exclusively to one conceptual framework. An individual may repeatedly approach landscapes themes from the same direction, or each quilt may call for a different approach, or over time the thematic emphasis may change.

Sometimes a particular physical aspect or element of a quilt design results from overcoming a technical problem rather than furthering a conceptual intention. In her early quilts, Erika Carter pieced colorful fabric strips into six-inch wide panels which were assembled into a background upon which she would then appliqué tree images. To her amusement, she has heard critics attribute various meanings to the structure of her pieced backgrounds. The reason her background pieces are composed of six-inch wide panels is because that is the width of her ruler.[29]

Within the context of landscape as subject for quilt designs there are other related themes or issues. Why are landscape and landscape elements such a popular topic? Choosing these elements demonstrates, in part, the degree to which they are valued by the artists and, by extension, the public at large. For some artists, the value lies in the technical challenge of portraying convincingly, complex organic shapes in fabric. For many others, their quilts intentionally express a concern for the land and dismay at the many potentially harmful consequences of human activities (i.e. *Going, Going . . . Coming Back*).[30] In these artists' hands, a quilt becomes a vehicle of political and social activism. Using the quilted medium to give voice to their concerns is particularly poignant. Quilts in American society typically

symbolize home, security, comfort. Creating quilted landscape images stitches the land and its associative elements onto the home, underscoring the function of landscapes as extensions of home. The juxtaposition of images of degradation or appreciation of nature with objects of home and security in these quilts can provoke powerful images and associations in the minds of viewers.

Frequently, the practice of making quilts affects the way quiltmakers perceive their world. In addition to their "accustomed" way of understanding the world, many quiltmakers consciously or subconsciously perceive or organize their surroundings in terms of patterns and potential quilt designs. Paraphrasing Ann Johnston, quiltmaking is infectious and often becomes an obsession.[31] Once this happens, the quiltmaker is constantly receptive to design ideas from any source; viewing the world is never quite the same. The quiltmaker is sensitive to repetitions of lines, to forms and colors, to contrasts and edges; in short, to anything that catches her attention and seems worthy of the effort of developing a quilt design.

We are a mobile society. The ease with which people travel great distances may foster a greater appreciation for the exotic at the expense of the familiar. In this sampling of quilts and quiltmakers, the images of meaningful landscapes, commemorated in fabric, usually recorded experiences and memories of places visited rather than those that were part of daily lives. We generally place higher value on knowing wide-ranging areas rather than claiming and knowing a home place.[32] These quilt artists are not unappreciative or unreceptive of their daily landscapes. On the contrary, each described herself as generally a keen observer of her surroundings. Their decisions reflect the values of American society which tends to emphasize the exotic and the unique over the mundane and daily with its perennial presence.

Landscape as Teacher

The artists filter daily interactions with observations of local landscapes into their work. The daily landscape functions as a teacher and contributes to their growth as an artist. Many of the interviewed quiltmakers commented on the importance of landscape as teacher and model. Considered observations of the physical aspects of

nature and personal responses to these experiences is yet another opportunity for training in formal elements of design: color, pattern, figure-ground, and spatial relationships.

Nancy Crow acknowledged that nature is one of her fundamental teachers, contributing to her personal and artistic development. Its influence is stitched into all of her quilts to varying degrees.[33] The dynamic tension between positive and negative shapes surfaces in her work. Layers of shapes, demarcated by subtle distinctions of color and value, create an intricate network of lines and forms similar to a network of branches silhouetted against a sky or shadows on a wall. It is also revealed in the harmonious diversity of pieces and colors.

A number of quiltmakers mentioned that they were enthusiastic observers. According to Judy Dales, our minds internalize our observations which then may unconsciously appear pieced into a quilt at the appropriate time. In her work, she tries to see carefully and let the understanding of her observations emerge naturally.[34] For Shannon Rettig, observations of the robust color schemes of the Douglas fir forest, visible from her house windows, influence her color choices. The wealth of greens and other colors occurring in patterns that were fortuitously arranged without regard for formalized rules of composition is license to use colors without adherence to any established color theory.[35]

Another aspect of landscape as teacher is its ability to encourage patient and thoughtful observations of the world around us. As Judi Warren eloquently described in the conclusion of her book *Fabric Postcards*, careful observations are essential not only to quiltmaking but to any activity, including landscape architecture and architecture, which ultimately is grounded upon understanding physical, temporal, cultural, ecological, and aesthetic relationships:

> Looking is basic to the making of Art—whether that Art is a beautifully composed descriptive paragraph, a literal or abstract painting, or a pictorial or geometric quilt. If in looking and observing we truly perceive the relationships that exist within a source of inspiration, we are then able to re-create them or choose to grant them added emphasis by transforming or enhancing

them. If we perceive the relationships that exist in a work-in-progress, we are able to refine them.[36]

Quiltmaking as Way of Seeing and Thinking of Landscape

One of the more potent relationships is the act of translating inspiration into the physical form of a quilt. The technical limitations of working with fabric are also opportunities to creatively communicate a place, object, or experience in a medium that does not lend itself easily to lifelike representation. For the designer this means that the process of describing place or landscape in fabric may yield an understanding of its structure and function vastly different from that which is learned when using the traditional design media of drawing, painting, or photography.

None of the interviewed artists consciously approached their art as a tool for landscape understanding. This was, however, the focus of my exercises of imaginative self-exploration. I consciously tried to employ a quiltmaking process to understand particular landscapes. That work forms the basis of the following remarks.

Drawing and painting are traditionally employed by design professionals to explore landscapes and design ideas. The making of quilts with the intent to understand landscape structure and function may serve the same purpose as drawing but provide distinct insights, reflecting the personality of fabric materials and techniques. Originating from the same spirit of inquiry as drawing, it approaches the subject from a fresh perspective. It creates a different kind of landscape understanding. Using fabric, thread, and maybe found object embellishment rather than pencil and paper forces one to critically think how to describe without actually mimicking what is seen or experienced. As such, quiltmaking becomes another means of gathering information pertinent to subsequent landscape designs. This increases the number and variety of perspectives in examining the problem, enhancing the potential for richer, more diverse design solutions. The result is a potential for richer, complex experiences of designed places by users.

Not only is the process of art making a means of understanding for the artist, it is also a vehicle for sharing these understandings and discoveries with a public audience. This thought is expressed by the

founder of San Francisco's Exploratorium, Frank Oppenheimer: "At the simplest level, artists, and scientists alike make it possible for people to appreciate patterns which they were either unable to distinguish or which they had learned to ignore in order to cope with the complexity of their daily lives."[37] The making of art, any art, at some level is about both understanding and communication. Recognition of quiltmaking as art, an artistic endeavor, expands this role to other segments of the population and thus their views and ideas.

Quiltmaking as Process of Designs of Landscape

Another way in which quiltmaking offers useful insights for the process of landscape design, under some circumstances, is as an alternative approach to problem solving. The process of both landscape design and quiltmaking involve some degree of problem solving. Problems arising in aesthetic, conceptual, structural, or technical issues are common to the practice of both disciplines. When confronted with a landscape design problem with an elusive answer, speculating how a comparable problem might be resolved if it were rephrased as an analogous quiltmaking problem could offer a means of tackling the problem with a fresh approach. Phrasing the problem in terms of a different media inserts some intellectual and emotional distance between problem and designer. The act of rephrasing the question forces the designer to critically examine and define the problem, breaking it into essential pieces. It is beneficial to examine a problem from as many possible and unexpected perspectives as possible. Switching media may remove any preconceived notions of possible solutions and offer a new means of understanding and insight.

Using quiltmaking as a problem-solving process for architecture has been tried in several architectural studios that designed quilt museums or galleries. For example, professor Carolyn Senft encouraged her students who were struggling with architectural problems to consider transposing the problem into fabrics and working toward a solution from the perspective of a quilt. If, for example, the architectural question involved designing a facade, the students would address the pertinent issues of composition, hierarchy, symmetry, and context in fabric and quilt blocks rather than working directly

with building materials.[38]

Quilts and Quilt Patterns as Elements of Landscape Design

Finally, just as landscapes inform and inspire some quilts, quilt patterns also lend themselves to the organization, structure, and aesthetics of landscape design. It is appropriate to consider traditional quilt patterns as inspirational sources in the surface design of site elements or layout design of places, integrated with the ecological, sociological, and physical issues of the project. Landscape architect Peter Walker encouraged his students at Harvard to "seek sources of landscape form in contemporary art and culture, history, ecology, and themselves," but to do so without neglecting human or environmental concerns.[39] I propose that quilt patterns offer physical information for the design of landscapes and places at two levels: those of aesthetic ornamentation and organizational structure.

At the simplest level, quilt patterns provide an extensive inspirational source for surface and structural design of site elements or suggest possible planting designs. Patterns used in designs can be selected by designers in keeping with the overall design intent of the project and can be selected along innumerable thematic lines such as patterns of regional significance, patterns significant to a particular ethnic group, or flower patterns. Quilt patterns could offer possibilities for elements of site design such as paving patterns, arbor design, fountain design, or the siting of lighting elements, benches, or planting beds.

Quilt patterns may also form the basis for the organization of human spaces and for circulation systems in landscape designs for small-scale projects. The organization and arrangement of lines and the geometric shapes of quilt patterns may initially suggest an organizational framework to structure the design of places. Initial conceptual designs can be subsequently modified to accommodate and complement other environmental design concerns. The lines of an individual block pattern may suggest the locations of edges in the landscape, the placement of circulation routes, or spatial arrangement of structures or plant masses. Translated into landscape design, quilt patterns become three-dimensional; they acquire volume and mass. Some portions of the patterns may remain lines and shapes on

the ground surface (paving patterns or edges delimiting areas) while others become positive forms projecting into the atmosphere and objects to move around and among rather than over.

Imaginative Self-Exploration

I concluded this investigation by creating a series of quilts inspired by landscapes and landscape elements. Drawing from the disciplines of phenomenology and material culture, I modified a technique called imaginative self-exploration to structure a critical self-examination of the process of translating landscape into quilt.[40] As a landscape architect, I used this process to test the applicability of a new tool, constantly questioning and evaluating the process of creating landscape-inspired quilts in terms of how this creative activity might further the work of a landscape architect.

I worked on three different series of quilt themes. One series stemmed from a week-long January sailing adventure among the British Virgin Islands. Another focused on the duality of city and nature. The third series emerged from my experiences in south central Alaska the summer of 1994. A description of the design development of the *Alaska* series illustrates the process and products of my imaginative self-exploration.

I arrived in Alaska with the intention to piece a quilt the following winter and spring of 1995. Consequently as I explored, observed, and marveled at the Alaskan landscape, I examined it with an eye to its patterns of color, movement, process, structure, and texture, thinking how these perceptions could be expressed through a quilt and not merely as an superficial portrait. What were the elements capturing my attention? Did it linger over the complexity of the details or was it impressed by the accelerated pace of the seasons, the smell of an energetic stream, or the seemingly endless progression of receding ridge lines?

The first piece, *Alaska I*, began with furious stream-of-conscious word associations. The intent was not to focus on any specific site, but rather to describe my understanding of the larger whole of south-central Alaska. The associations were not limited to descriptors of the physical but ranged into relationships, dynamics, and

meanings.

When I thought about Alaska, my memory recalled a sensation of vastness, of space extending not just to the horizon but endlessly upwards—a rough, raw landscape, recently released from the weight of glaciers. It remembered a mix of bold patterns and complex, subtle distinctions. Vegetation occurred in distinct bands of plant communities spanning valley bottom to rocky summit. Alaska was not just a single landscape but layers of landscapes. Colors were saturated, especially after rain; they demanded attention. In a palette dominated by greens, browns, and blues, a little red or purple got noticed. The cycles of seasons were accelerated and measured by snow. Changes I associate with the passage of months were compressed into the span of a few weeks. Water was everywhere: glacier, bay, fog, and rain.

Meanings were slightly more difficult to articulate. Alaska had an unmistakable aura of a lack of refinement or civilization. It seemed to be a land full of promise and opportunity, of awe and humility; a landscape empowered by its indifference to human endeavors, yet fragile and easily scarred.

The word associations yielded a set of ideas upon which to build my design (see figure 7). The initial studies were executed in watercolor. Like the Alaskan landscape, this quilt design arose from simple elements that in combinations formed larger structural patterns. Using the simple triangle of the traditional pattern Thousand Pyramids as a point of departure for underlying structure, I could suggest larger, complex patterns. A single occurrence of the pattern Storm at Sea introduced irregularity and symbolized the value a landscape element may possess out of proportion to its apparent size or duration.

The final design synthesizes four interrelated themes. The first is the image and presence of mountains. Just as mountains are one of the fundamental landscape elements of South Central Alaska, so are triangle mountains the basic unit of this design. Patterns of larger triangles formed from aggregations of similarly colored triangles suggest layers of ridgelines receding to horizon. Seasonality, the second theme, is expressed in indistinct horizontal bands of color corresponding to seasonal color changes of the plants. The bands are

Figure 7. Diagrammatic structural layers forming the conceptual framework for the quilt series.

blurred out of respect for the imperceptible blending of seasons one into the other. The third theme addresses the multiplicity of landscape scales. The fractal geometry of Thousand Pyramids evokes my perception that the broad Alaskan landscape is a complex accumulation of a melange of details. The final theme is the immensity of the landscape. This piece is without a border suggesting that this landscape is boundless. Immensity is also embodied in the size of the Storm at Sea block relative to the remainder of the design.

Upon completing *Alaska I*, I realized I had more to say and saw many different ways of saying it. Feeling that overall the design of *Alaska I* is too regular, *Alaska II* introduces irregularity alluding to the dynamics of structure, process, and change that I witnessed. Accordingly the triangles were distorted creating possibilities of flowing ribbons across the quilt surface. On one level the twisted bands of dark color symbolize interconnectedness, diversity, and dependence. On another, the dark bands against a background of pale, cool pastels are a reminder of the brilliant colored ripples of the Northern Lights. The bands also symbolize the brief, precious space of summer squeezed between the brilliancy of winters.

Alaska III, the final quilt in the series, consciously focuses on relationships between and among human settlements and the natural patterns and processes of Alaska (see figure 8). My observations of the "seam" between settlements and the larger landscape leads to a conclusion that, for the most part, the human settlements were carved out, recovered, or separated from their surroundings. Continuity between settlement and its contextual landscape is more a matter of chance than intention. *Alaska III* essentially redesigns the previous piece with the addition of a grid of squares. If the pattern of the variable, triangular grid represents the Alaskan environment, the square grid represents human settlements set in the landscape.

Under close scrutiny, the regularity of the square grid, like the regularity typical of city organization, contrasts with the irregularity of its surroundings. The seams are symbolic of process, interconnected and complex, that joins objects together. At the interface between human settlement and surrounding landscape sometimes those process lines match up, often they do not. Stepping back, shading and color placement blurs the boundaries between triangles and squares, between town and countryside. One is not inherently better than the other, they are just different patterns.

Conclusion

The results from imaginative self-exploration demonstrated to me that the process of making quilts describing landscapes or places is a useful and appropriate complement to more conventional

Figure 8. *Alaska III* by Rebecca A. Ries, 1995. Photograph by author.

descriptive methods of drawing and painting. The inquiring mental attitude necessary to communicate structure, function, and experience of places in fabric fosters a high degree of critical thought and reflection with regards to the interactions and implications of specific configurations of structure, function, and experience related to landscape. Rich, meaningful relationships exist among quilts, quiltmaking, and landscape; relationships extending beyond the metaphoric. These relationships are multi-directional and interconnected. Landscapes influence quilts and quiltmaking. Quiltmaking can also indirectly influence landscape through the landscape design process. Quiltmaking will certainly not supplant drawing and painting as analytical tools, but quiltmaking will prove a useful complement for this landscape architect as she strives towards a personal philosophy of landscape and an understanding of specific project sites.

Acknowledgements

Publication of this paper has been supported by a gift from the Columbia-Willamett Quilt Study Group and Mary Cross, Director.

Notes and References

1. For this project, landscape is defined as the physical substance of land wrought by human and natural processes within one's field of view out-of-doors and experienced by all senses. This includes the personal perception. A more detailed discussion of the various definitions of landscape will be found in Eugene J. Palka, "Coming to Grips with the Concept of Landscape," *Landscape Journal* 14 (Spring 1995): 71.
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4. This article summarizes the work and findings of the author's Master's project in Landscape Architecture completed in June 1995 at the University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.
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10. Dolores Hayden and Peter Marris, "The Quiltmaker's Landscape," *Landscape* 25 (Winter 1981): 40.
11. Ibid.
12. Amelia Peck, *American Quilts & Coverlets in The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Dutton Studio Books, 1990), 18.
13. Hayden, 44–46.
14. Ibid., 45.
15. Ruth E. Finley, *Old Patchwork Quilts and the Women Who Made Them* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1929; reprint, McLean, VA: EPM Publications, Inc., 1992).
16. Hayden, 46–47.
17. Finley, 109–10; Hayden, 46.
18. I interviewed eleven quiltmakers between January 23 and March 10, 1995. I interviewed in person if the quiltmaker lived within a reasonable driving distance, or over the phone for those farther away. I had follow-up interviews with Erika Carter, Alison Goss, Ann Johnston, and Jean Liittschwager. Participants were selected in consultation with Marty Bowne, editor of *American Quilter*, and in response to an inquiry published in the Green Quilt Newsletter.
19. Alison Goss, interview by author, 23 January 1995.
20. Alison Goss, Artist's statement, 1994 , provided by artist.
21. Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (USA: Basic Books Inc., 1986), 45, 101. Until the 1970s, women played a minor role as research subjects

and theorists in human development. Major theories on how people learn were formulated by men based on predominately male responses. This team of psychologists explored the ways of women as learners and knowers and the evolution of their concepts of the self and relationships with others in comparison to the classical developmental theories for men. Their results, presented in this book, are fascinating reading.

22. Shannon Rettig, interview by author, 30 January 1995, at the artist's home in Summit, Oregon.
23. Goss interview.
24. Erika Carter, interview by author, 18 February 1995, at the Bellevue, Washington Art Museum.
25. An informal review of the titles of pieces and patterns in magazines such as *American Quilter*; *Quilter's Newsletter* and in exhibit cataloges such as Peck, *American Quilts and Coverlets*; Deborah Bird Timby, ed., *Visions: The Art of the Quilt* (Lafayette, CA: C & T Publishing, 1990); Deborah Bird Timby, ed., *Visions: The Art of the Quilt* (Lafayette, CA: C & T Publishing, 1992); and Bernice Steinbaum, curator, *The Definitive Contemporary American Quilt.* (New York: Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, c.1990) reveals a preponderance of nature-based themes.
26. Carter interview.
27. Other examples of this are often found in contemporary art shows. See *Southwest II: A Green Quilt* by Meiny Vermaas-van der Heide, 1992; *Polychrome Pass* by Linda Kimura Rees, 1992; and *In the Bleak Midwinter* by Chime Saltz, 1992, in Timby (1992), 51, 65, 68.
28. Nancy Crasco, "In the Landscape Tradition," *American Quilter* (Winter 1993): 39–44.
29. Erika Carter, public lecture, 17 February 1995, at the Bellevue, Washington, Art Museum.
30. The Green Quilt Movement inspired by Susan Shie focuses on such concerns.
31. Ann Johnston, interview by author, 3 February 1995, at the artist's home in Lake Oswego, Oregon.
32. Barry H. Lopez, "Mapping the Real Geography," *Harper's Magazine* (November 1990): 19–24.
33. Nancy Crow, interview by author, 10 March 1995, Bellevue, Washington.

34. Judy Dales, telephone interview by author, 28 January 1995.
35. Rettig interview.
36. Judi Warren, *Fabric Postcards: Landmarks & Landscapes, Monuments & Meadows* (Paducah, KY: American Quilter's Society, 1994), 117.
37. Frank Oppenheimer, quoted in Pat Murphy, *By Nature's Design* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993), 13.
38. Carolyn Senft, telephone interview by author, 15 November 1994. See also Carolyn Senft, "Cultural Artifact and Architectural Form: A Museum of Quilts and Quilt Making," *Journal of Architectural Education* 48 (February, 1995).
39. Linda L. Jewell, *Peter Walker: Experiments in Gesture, Seriality, and Flatness* (New York: Rizzoli Press, 1990), 6.
40. Elizabeth Hoffman, "The Murder Quilt" (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1991), 77–78.