Reclaiming the Pace and the Place: Learning from the Quilter

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the lessons learned both from the Quilting Studio project, and from Ms. Mozell Benson, the quilter for whom the studio was built. Although the economy of means had informed every aspect of the design and building process, it has never represented an obstacle. Rather, it has provided an opportunity to create more meaningful and complex architecture. Ms. Benson's resourcefulness in creating her quilts, in combination with her wisdom and generosity, became a guiding principle that was translated into different aspects of architecture 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 at Auburn University. 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 total budget for the studio was less than $11,000; a testament to the commitment to reuse existing or donated materials whenever possible. 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.

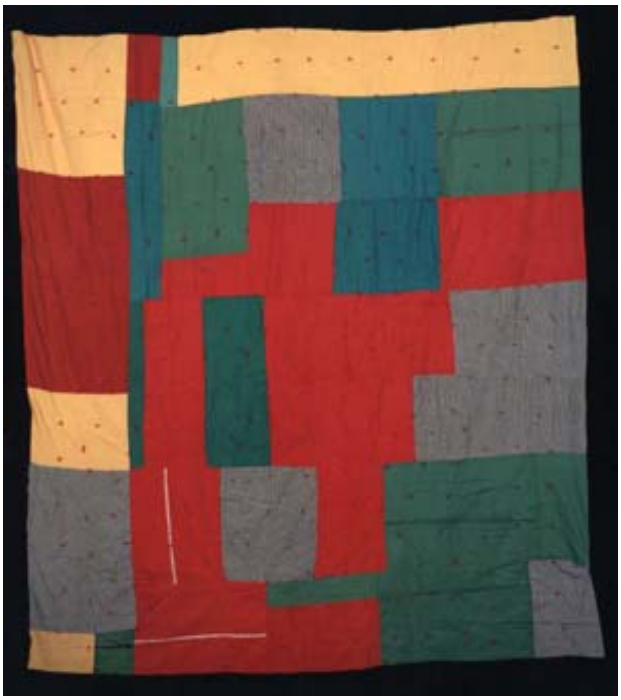

Figure 1. Mozell Benson's quilt, American Folk Museum, New York

Ms. Benson is a gifted teacher whose wisdom and charisma equal the beauty of her quilts. The Quilting Studio enables her to fulfill her dream of bringing together her Waverly community through the act of quilting – by offering instruction to children

and adults and therefore passing on her tradition to future generations.

THE QUILTING AND THE BEAUTY OF ORDINARY

> The plain and un-agitated, the un-calculated, the harmless, the straightforward, the natural, the innocent, the humble, the modest: where does the beauty lie if not in these qualities? (Yanagi 1982,197)

Soetsu Yanagi, a Japanese folklorist who wrote extensively on the relationship of art and craft, said that "those who like the unusual are immune to the ordinary." Too often, architectural education emphasizes this attitude, giving little attention to these seemingly ordinary processes of making, utilitarian and anonymous, that actually have a potential to bring extraordinary quality into our living environments. Because of their focus on the utilitarian, rather than the artistic, the craftspeople have been able to touch our lives in a manner than is closely related to the individual, intimate experience of everyday life.

And, to paraphrase Yanagi's question, what is then the value of these utilitarian objects, and processes: in this case, quilts and quiltmaking by, until recently, anonymous African American quilters working within a tradition and producing the same objects continuously for a lifetime? How does architecture, and architectural education, emulate larger concepts behind these methodologies without becoming sentimental, and (God forbid!) anonymous?

Ms. Benson's work is inspiring because it achieves so successfully, and seemingly effortlessly, a perfect equilibrium between utility and beauty, between being at the same time humble and individualistic. In this, she is very close to the work of quilters from Gee's Bend. During the process of designing and building the Quilting Studio, our understanding of the value of design has been challenged by the work of our client, and by her remarkable ingenuity and creativity. We were reminded, time after time, that resourcefulness may be manifested in the material, physical form, but it is really a way of life, a system built around an appreciation of the natural world and social systems.

As architecture and architectural education make transition into the realm of digital representation and fabrication, it is important to parallel that development with closer examination of the craft and the processes of craft making, because they offer potential for understanding our design actions in a more holistic, rather than fragmentary, way.

As our aesthetic and other sensibilities begin to be defined by the notion of speed – whether it is a laser beam, or a TGV - it is helpful to be reminded that a slower pace enables us to see more clearly the potential and complexity in existing connections or relationships. The ability to react to, and learn from, one's mistake, the time for reflection, the time to loop back into something else, is a necessity not just for a quilter like Ms. Benson, but for all of us. Proximity to the material and knowledge of its boundaries creates a complex sense of tangible permanence. Yet, in many ways, the world today is like a fast-moving series of images and momentary experiences: offering many of them, but with few meaningful enough to reclaim our sense of humanity.

The responsibility of architectural education is to bring back the discussion of pace, place, timing, and reflection into design studios, and that is precisely where the notion of resourcefulness comes into play. It is about framing a series of relationships that define our understanding of land and landscape, of craft and technology, and of ourselves. It is about maintaining a slower pace and achieving fuller control over the things that we make or design, and about allowing the mind and hand to work at the same pace, in the same rhythm.

THE QUILTER, THE LANDSCAPE, AND THE COMMUNITY

> The quilter identifies what a technology can and cannot do. She does not resist technology, but she applies it ways that will serve her values. Patience and thinking, connection and caring, expression and creativity are the values protected by her needle. 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. (Torsney 1994,168).

Quilting has been a source of social sustenance for many rural African American communities; it has brought families and friends together in the process of making utilitarian objects stamped with an artistic fervor that celebrates their African ancestry and their natural surroundings. The Gees Bend

community comes to mind: a strong sense of place defines both these remarkable women and their work.

Ms. Benson's quilting process is fluid, intuitive, and not guided by strict adherence to the exactness of pattern, or rigor of method. She uses a sewing machine freely, and does tacking by hand.

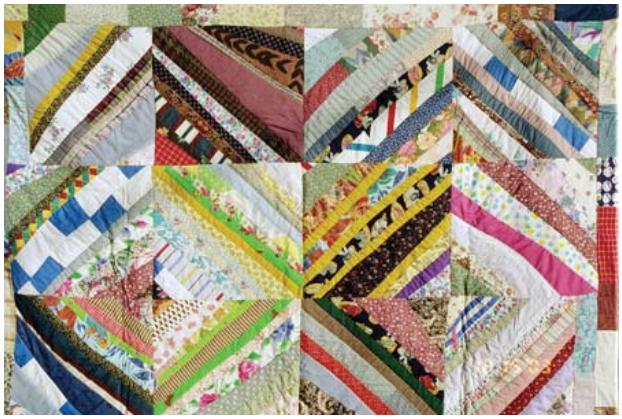

Figure 2. The "Diagonals" quilt.

She quilts using fabric that she has or that has been given to her; she never buys anything except for the thread. The design for the quilts comes to her naturally: she finds similarities or possibilities in the fabric she has, and arranges it by color, patterns, or sometimes even textures. She often works with larger pieces, gently altering them, because she does not like to waste anything. One will often find an entire segment of a pillow, or jeans, thoughtfully incorporated into the whole. She uses old blankets and spreads as batting, and old sheets, or larger pieces of fabric, as backing.

Ms. Benson works intuitively, and rarely uses any standard patterns. Rather, she relies on the fabric that she has at hand. She selects, cuts, and sews her scraps to make something new and original. She bends, folds, and pleats pieces until she achieves a desirable pattern or composition. Ms. Benson's house is filled with plastic bags containing fabric scraps sorted by color or pattern. She often starts by creating a square piece that consists of diagonal strips of fabric all sewn together. Her collection of these pre-made squares serves as a base for a number of different quilts. Ms. Benson's design reflects decisions that happened in the process of joining pieces together, and demonstrates her ease in the art of resourceful improvisation. Her process adds to, rather than takes away from, the aesthetics of the whole.

The two issues that are particularly interesting in this conversation are issues of gender and craft, and the way in which they are interconnected and reflect on the larger issue of, or quest for, beauty. Historically, the notion of singularity of authorship has been elusive in both craftsmen and women production modes. The anonymity of the maker(s) and the importance of the work for the community informed social, cultural, and aesthetical understanding of the piece in question.

The ultimate goal of any maker is to create an object, or space, that is of such a quality, and/or beauty, that it transcends his or her own sense of individuality. It is this translation of one's ego into the larger sense of goodness (public good) that is particular to the craft. Soetsu Yanagi points out that it is the thing that shines , not the maker ; one senses the beauty of a Persian rug before any question arises as to who made it.

An understanding of the parallels between skilled, craft production, and digital technology, as well as their possible overlaps, or complementary relationships, provides a meaningful blueprint for the architectural practices and pedagogical models of tomorrow. Women's involvement with crafts, and their ease in adopting the technology (such as in quilt-making), has been born out of necessity, and out of a sense for communal good, and communal purpose. Hence, the notion of beauty is inextricably connected with service to one's community. Authorship is seen as a series of actions, and a series of participants, reflected by the finished work.

The notion of resourcefulness (and indeed of sustainability) begins with one's relationship with landscape. It is impossible to create a meaningful design without a careful consideration of the site, its natural characteristics, and all the possibilities inherent either in the bounty, or in the scarcity, of its elements. One should not try to reinvent that what is already there, but rather try to augment - or diffuse – existing relationships through the act (process) of design (building).

Ms. Benson lives in tune with nature. Her daily

activities are organized around tending her garden, caring for her grandchildren, and quilting. The garden is at center of her personal universe (or, it is her universe): the strong connection with the land and the landscape extends itself into the everything she does. The majority of her food comes from the garden, and it is also the source of inspiration and beauty.

The same principle that applies to her quilting is at work here: Everything is used, nothing is wasted. There is a comforting quality of seasonal change that organizes Ms. Benson's life: the rhythm of a shovel turning the soil, almost like a rhythm of stitching; the sweet smell of wild and cultivated flowers mixed with vegetables in season; the sturdiness and simplicity of tools used, most of them adapted and refitted. Every opportunity is exhausted for yet another re-use, and even an old, non-functioning plow is used as a mailbox.

Ms. Benson's understanding of one's connection to the natural landscape, dependence on and strength of being part of the community, and use of materials and technology redefined our understanding of the notion of resourcefulness, beauty, and giving back to the community. The strength of the community lies in its identification with the place: physical and spiritual.

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

THE PROJECT

The decision to create building is the decision to destroy some part of the material universe. Things are wrecked – trees are toppled, stone is broken, old houses are razed – to make life better. The desire is for improvement. The process of the desire is technological.

> Technology is a corollary of human existence. It is the means of our extension into space, as natural to people as swimming is to fish. As life unfolds, every technological act brings changes in two great relations: the one that always connects the human and nonhuman spheres, the other that is built to connect people with one another.(Glassie 1999, 22)

The larger hypothetical project that the Quilting Studio is a part of, is an interdisciplinary project that seeks the formation of an Alabama Cultural Trail – through identification of local communities that have sustained themselves through strong craft and art activity.

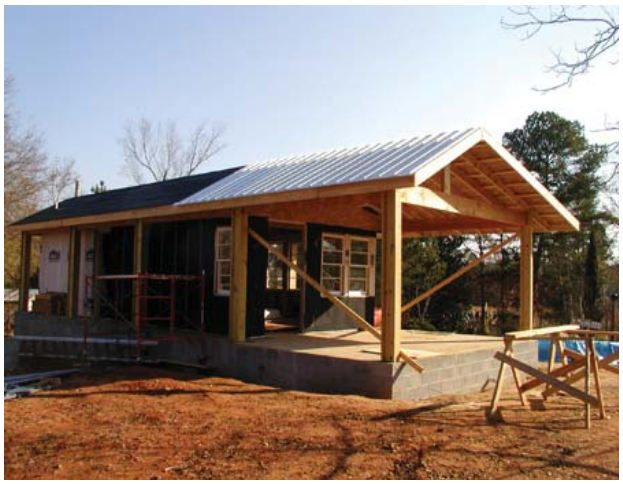

Figure 3. Work in progress.

The Quilting Studio was a design-build project, with a myriad of issues that arose simply from the fact that the project left design studio setting for the real-life experience – exchanging a pencil, or a click of a mouse, for a hammer. Yet, from the very beginning of the project, the pedagogical frame was much broader, and inspired by the study of not just quilting techniques but also of quilting activity as a cohesive social force in small rural communities. Quilting provided physical and spiritual sustenance to these communities for centuries: it had defined their world - using the quilt as a metaphor - as measurable, safe, warm, and beautiful. All of these characteristics were born out of necessity – and incredible ingenuity and adaptability of the women in these impoverished areas. They have stitched the com-

munity together through the patience and sharing of work, and through defining an aesthetics based on available and everyday resources, and close proximity to the land and their personal histories.

One of the particularly important issues in this project was a preservation of authenticity and sense of place through choice of appropriate technology and local materials. We were reminded of Henry Glassie's lament that in the shift from local to imported materials, there is loss in environmental efficiency and a loss in beauty. Glassie argues that vernacular technologies that involve local materials and the touch of hand, preserve nature and memory of natural origins.

Unlike industrial systems of production, these technologies depend on direct connections: direct access to materials and direct connections among suppliers and producers as opposed to the alternative of complex machinery and costly infrastructure.

During design and fabrication of the Quilting Studio there was an attempt to highlight the differences between local and imported materials, handmade and industrial materials, as well as old and new materials.

> The meanings that lie in the selection of materials are social and economic as well as environmental. But environment sets the stakes. Living wisely in a tight place, people learn the environment. They know how to select from it right materials for the job. The prime virtue in materials is their ability to alter the climate, shaping a little environment in which architecture can be forgotten and life can go on. (Glassie 1999, 29)

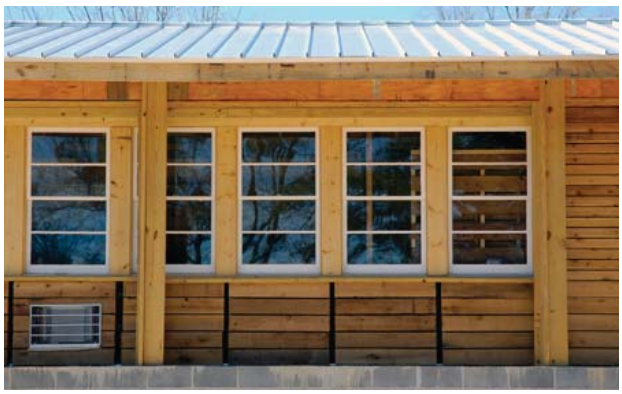

Figure 4. Exterior skin: windows and rainscreen layer.

In the initial site planning, the house and the studio were positioned around the desire to preserve, as much as possible, Ms. Benson's old house. It became quickly obvious that there was very little that could be saved, since most of the original structure was rotten. Over the period of several months, different groups of students volunteers (architecture as well as non-architecture students not directly involved in the project) came to the site and disassembled the house, carefully putting aside anything that could be salvaged. Most of this material found its way into the new structures.

All the windows for the studio came from the recently remodeled house – a collection of more than thirty single pane windows were reconfigured into a system of transparent/translucent modules.

The only two doors in the studio – both exterior - were custom made by the small team of students from the material that was either donated or reclaimed from different sources . The interior pivoting wall which serves as a visual divider and an element of spatial organization, was painstakingly crafted and assembled by a single student. He designed and built it using quilt making as an inspiration; it is made of three layers of reclaimed wood (again, coming from different sources), with a series of perforations that recall tacking. Although he used computer and CNC router to fabricate the piece, the student spent a week sanding the curved exterior by hand. The production of this screen represents a translation of Ms. Benson's quilting techniques and attitudes into an interior architecture element. Its beauty comes from the combined use of technology and hand, and from the ability to see something extraordinary in the pile of discarded pieces.

The enclosure for the Quilting Studio was built as a three-layered structure, with a cedar rain-screen on the exterior, denim insulation, and a soft storage skin on the interior. The horizontality of the exterior cedar cladding is reminiscent of M.s Benson's strip quilts. The environmentally friendly, low maintenance cedar allows for the studio to connect aesthetically with the natural environment, while at the same time providing a unifying quality to the heterogeneity of other design elements. It almost reverses a quilt metaphor by actually placing a more unifying, or solid, surface on the exterior of the building, and a playful, dynamic one on the interior.

The carpet wall was created from donated backless carpet tiles formed into pockets; it is part of the elaborate storage system that also includes a hard storage - wooden shelving and a bench.

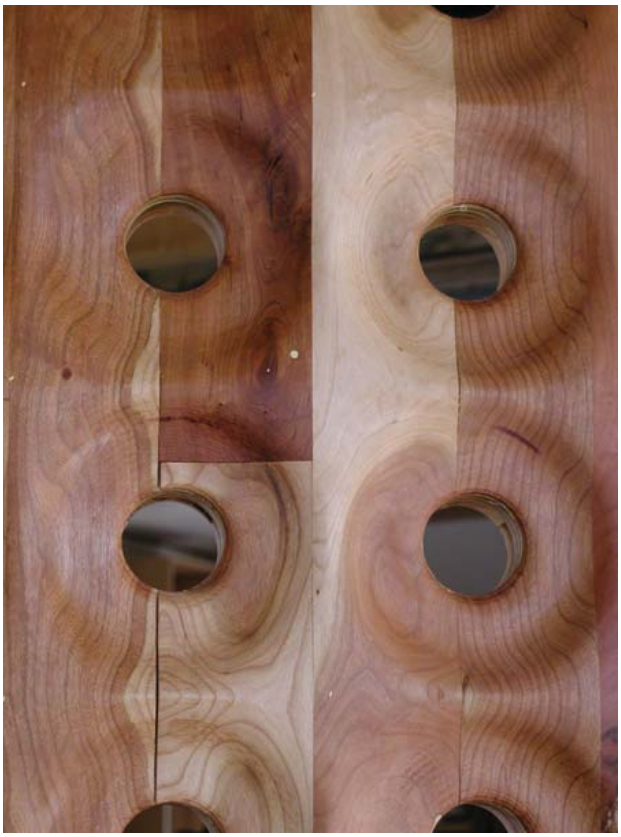

Figure 5. Pivot wall detail.

The theory that textiles were the first architecture, as proposed by Gottfried Semper in his well known writings, and most notably in his seminal *The Style in Technical and Tectonic Arts*, has lent itself to a pragmatic examination in this project. The notion that built enclosures have preserved this memory through concealment of the structural core with exterior and interior cladding, is particularly intriguing in its relationship to quilts. Quilts exemplify that primordial enclosure through their three layers: the cover, the batting, and the backing, which translate so readily into architectural enclosure. One can start to conjecture the possibility of a soft, rather than rigid, structure, and in this way, the notion of a house as a soft, enveloping enclosure, becomes a tempting possibility. Can we wrap ourselves in a house? And how do we reclaim that wonderful desire, that Torsney and Elsley so aptly identify:

> "No matter who we are, we all want to wrap ourselves in a quilt, metaphorically speaking. Like those comfort foods of childhood - macaroni and cheese, peanut butter and bananas, tapioca pudding - quilts provide a sensory experience that makes us feel good about ourselves."

ENDNOTES

Torsney, Cheryl B. and Elsley, Judy. *Quilt Culture Tracing the Pattern*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press,1994.

Glassie, Henry. *Material Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

Wahlman Southwell, Maude. *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African American Quilts*. Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2001.

Yanagi, Soetsu. *The Unknown Craftsman – A Japanese Insight into Beauty.* Tokyo, Japan: Kodansha International Ltd., 1982.