

Quilt Along with Me: Finding Communal Creativity “Inside the Block”

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Introduction: The purpose of this design is to visually explore the role of the community in shaping the learning and creativity of quilters within a virtual quilt along. Quilt alongs are hosted by designers or online platforms where a portion of a quilt pattern is released at regular intervals. These programs offer guidance, inspiration, and support. Participants complete a quilt while interacting with others, typically in virtual spaces such as Instagram or Facebook. They are encouraged to share their design process, post progress photos, and interact with one another throughout the program.

This design embodies communal influence on quilters’ learning and creative expression. Social activities such as quilt alongs, guilds, and sewing circles are pivotal for acquiring traditional quilting skills, drawing inspiration, and expressing individuality (Buechley & Perner-Wilson, 2012; Cerny et al., 1993; Dickie, 2003, 2004). For example, guild events expose quilters to new techniques, influencing their design aesthetics (Dickie, 2003; Pauls, 2014). The communal sharing of the design journey activates a quilter’s creativity, offering a platform to learn and innovate within a supportive environment (Cerny et al., 1993).

Quilt alongs challenge makers to expand their skills within defined parameters, fostering creativity through constraints (Dickie, 2003). The interpretation of a simple 9-patch block, for example, can vary immensely based on color, orientation, scale, and patterning, allowing quilters to personalize their work within the given framework (Dickie, 2004; Pauls, 2014). This approach is not creativity in thinking “outside the box” but in thinking “inside the *block*,” where the constraints become a setting for innovation (Dickie, 2003). The layered community interaction within quilt alongs creates diverse interpretations, resulting in quilts that combine personal expression and community creativity. While previous research has explored the role of community in learning and creativity within quilt guilds (Cerny et al., 1993; Dickie, 2003), this design offers a tangible exploration of these dynamics, presenting personal experiences based on communal design activities.

Process: This design reflects my personal and communal making experience while participating in The National Quilt Museum’s 2020 Quilt Along, “Star Cluster,” hosted in a Facebook group. The design comprised seven elements: the center “star cluster” block and six successive borders (figure 1), with instructions released bi-weekly. The quilt top completed in October 2020 employed multiple piecing techniques, including improvisational and foundation paper piecing. Quilting was completed in March 2023 on a domestic sewing machine, blending free-motion and walking foot techniques. Interacting with the Facebook group became part of

my iterative design process, where I crowdsourced inspiration, sought feedback, and learned from other participants.

Materials: Pandemic constraints limited materials to my stash, including synthetic hand-dyed fabrics from a workshop in 2013. A monochromatic background grounded the vibrant colors. The choice of materials was a nod to the communal learning experience and creativity within constraints. The fabrics used were all 100% cotton, with cotton batting and a mix of cotton and rayon threads.

Design Process: The quilt along featured flexibility and autonomy within its design guidelines. Participants were provided instructions and general designs for each element, each with room for interpretation. This approach allowed for a diverse array of final quilts with similar design elements, as each quiltmaker's choices and interactions in the Facebook group led to unique designs (figure 2). For instance, border 1 offered four layout options, and border 2's pieced strips varied in size and scale. Design decisions were made sequentially, with each new border informed by the proceeding, leading to some unintended aesthetic outcomes, such as the layout chosen for border 1 creating arrowheads when the corner stripes of border 2 were added.

During the design process, I incorporated photos of completed proceeding elements into iterations created in Adobe Illustrator. I used improvisational techniques for borders 4 and 6, creating multiple flying geese and star elements and arranging them around the in-progress quilt for optimal layout. I focused on achieving cohesion in color, line, and movement.

Community engagement through the Facebook group was integrated into my design process. As new instructions were released, I scrolled through the group's photos, observing how others interpreted the design. This practice of communal learning and inspiration was akin to Dickie's (2003) guild observations of "learning aesthetics of quilts" (p. 125), where the exchange of visual ideas spurred creative thinking within constraints. For example, adding corner stripes in border 6, an element not originally designed, was inspired by quilts I observed within the group. This additional element created cohesion with the unintended arrows that emerged after border 2. The community's response to my adaptations, such as the multi-striped flying geese in border 4, was met with comments like, "Love this! May I steal your idea!?". Such interactions underscored the role of community in the concept of "learning to stretch oneself" creatively (Dickie, 2003, p. 126).

Quilting: Two and half years after completing the quilt top, the quilting process began, incorporating techniques acquired from later communal activities. During a subsequent quilt along, I learned the free-motion checkerboard quilting technique applied to the central black background. This pattern and the stippling on the white background added texture and dimensionality, making the unquilted colored elements pop off the surface. The final border's quilting employed lines and stars, adding lightness and movement. The quilting designs were iteratively refined in Adobe Illustrator, drawing inspiration from the group's completed quilts.

Contribution: This design reaffirms the role of community in quilting and brings a physical dimension to its influence on creativity and learning. The quilt is unique to its maker and shares an intrinsic connection with the collective creativity of the quilt along. Insights from this experience reveal new avenues for collaborative creativity and the need to study the design process within communal contexts. The experience of participating in the quilt along introduced me to foundation paper piecing, a technique that has since become a staple in my quilting process. The use of techniques and materials from previous workshops and quilt alongs underscores the cumulative impact of communal activities on skill development and creative exploration. This quilt embodies over a decade of personal learning and communal interaction. It reflects my continual learning to create a distinct creative voice “inside the block.”



Figure 1. Layout of quilt elements. Figure 2. Example of final quilts from the Facebook group.

References

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