

Travelling communities

Allison Hui reflects on her research of travel within the quilting community

EVEN THOUGH I'VE never made a quilt, never picked up fabrics or unpicked stitches, I have spent years admiring the quilts of others. In 2008, while studying for my PhD in Sociology, this admiration turned to research as I spent several months interviewing quilters and attending quilting events.

My main interest was in finding out more about how quilting makes people travel. Thinking about my own interest in music, I recognised that every time I took a trip, the places I visited inevitably centred on the arts. So I set out to discover how travel occurs within the quilting community. Along the way I met many wonderful and generous quilters who helped me to realise that many of the communities of quilters wouldn't exist without travel.

While for hundreds of years it was common to think of communities as local groups with shared local spaces, changes in migration and communication mean that distant connections are now normal. People regularly have friends and family who live far away, yet who remain part of their communities through the internet or telephone conversations. As I spoke with quilters, I learned just how international the quilting community is. Not only had many taken occasional trips to national or international shows, but they often met other quilters from around the world there. On other occasions, connections were made

over the internet via various quilting forums. Sometimes this virtual online travel led to physical trips to meet up face to face at workshops or shows. While all of the people I spoke to had their own local quilting groups, they also spoke about being part of a wider quilting community. As one woman said, 'Quilters are quilters the world over'. This international and supportive quilting community is created through the travel of people – whether physically or virtually – to share stories and struggles, ideas and inspiration.

But it's not just the people that travel. My research also showed me just how much quilting communities depend on travelling objects. Think for instance about the last event you attended. Perhaps it was a quilt show or maybe a local meeting. Regardless, the event probably included a great number of bags: big bags, small bags, plastic bags, quilted bags... Within these bags you would find notebooks and cameras to record new ideas, or fabrics, threads, needles and scissors to work on a project that had a looming deadline. As I spoke to quilters, it became clear that sharing time with other quilters often involves making materials move. Though carrying sewing machines and UFOs around can be cumbersome (several bemoaned the lack of high-quality, lightweight sewing machines), making these objects move is



Travelling quilters – visitors at the Festival of Quilts, Birmingham, UK, August 2011

unavoidable if one wants to quilt with others. So quilters continue hauling, herding and setting up objects, a little like the roadies who haul musicians' equipment to make concerts possible.

Sometimes, materials and UFOs even travel by themselves. Several people I spoke to had taken part in 'swap quilts', where unfinished blocks or fabrics were exchanged with other quilters across the city or across the world. One quilt in particular involved participants sending blocks between Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, Washington, Colorado and Cumbria. The influx of Japanese fabrics, which I find particularly beautiful, also serves as a reminder that quilting really couldn't happen without all of these travelling materials. Travelling materials also help spark innovations. One quilter told me that he didn't think new quilt gadgets and tools would have spread as much without travel because even though you can see things on the internet, it's more valuable to see them in use and to be able to try them out yourself. The travel of stuff and people is important then for making 'techniques pass between communities'.

Just as important as travelling materials are the travelling quilts. Many people told me of wonderful experiences at quilt shows, becoming inspired and excited at seeing their own quilts or those of others. But even more

"'Quilters are quilters the world over'"



IMAGE © JUNE THORPE

Travelling quilts – quilts by the UK group By Design on show at The Patchwork and Quilt Days, Vijfhuizen, the Netherlands, February 2012

important are the occasions when quilts travel to help draw others into the community. The people I spoke to were often concerned about the long-term survival of patchwork and quilting and whether it would be taken up by younger generations. Certainly, in many areas those who attend quilt groups are often older, even retired, and the lack of younger faces can be worrying. But when I spoke to quilters, I found out that many had had a lifelong interest in arts and crafts, even if they didn't start quilting until later in life. For some, it was a deep-seated appreciation for quilts – for the comfort and community and care they represent – that eventually prompted them to pick up a needle and thread and fabric. It seems to me that the travel of quilts themselves can play an important role in attracting new quilters. Whether it is through Project Linus or other outreach programmes, exposing many people to quilts offers the potential that they too might be seized by enthusiasm and one day join in.

My own love for quilts came from a small group of quilters at the church I grew up in. These women and men kept finding innovative ways to incorporate quilts into the church space – making banners for church seasons and events, or quilts for the children to use during their story time. The centrality of quilts to the heart of this community became

visible when one of the quilters passed away. For her funeral, members of the church brought all of their quilts from home so that the church could be completely blanketed in quilts – two rows of quilts hung on the walls, quilts covering all of the seats, and piles of quilts available to wrap up grieving friends and family. The sight was a breathtaking reminder of how the love and care that makes quilts also makes communities, particularly when quilts are shared.

Having now finished my research, I am left wondering about how all of this travel matters. It certainly matters at a personal level because making objects move leads to incredibly enjoyable local work meetings. Travelling to meet quilters at shows leads to lifelong friendships and moments of great inspiration. The travel of quilts themselves shares the comfort and beauty of quilts with non-quilters, including the sick children touched by Project Linus. Since travel seems so important to making quilting communities, it is important for us to consider how inclusive this travel is. What values do we reinforce through travel? Who is left out? How can more people be included? For some, because of family or health reasons, getting to local meetings might be a problem. For others, the idea of being able to attend international shows is an impossible dream.

“Sharing time with other quilters often involves making materials move”

For many non-quilters, a complete lack of contact with quilts may lead to misunderstandings about why the quilting, or the travel, is worthwhile. While these are personal concerns, they are also collective ones because we all contribute to the movements that make up quilt communities. As we travel then, it is worth asking: where are we going? Our destinations may be apparent – a quilt show or shop – but travel also helps us to get to other places – places of community, of comfort, of generosity. By talking about where we want to go as a community – who we want to include, how we might use patchwork and quilting to support other social or cultural goals – it is possible that the generosity I experienced from quilters might travel to new and much-needed areas. Many worthwhile projects are already underway and I hope many more are to come.

© Allison Hui 2012

Dr Allison Hui undertook her studies in the Department of Sociology at Lancaster University. She is now a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at David C Lam Institute for East-West Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University.