

# BUILDING *quilts*

A CONVERSATION with ARCHITECT and  
QUILTER VALERIE GOODWIN

BY PIPPA ECCLES



*W*hen you stand in front one of Valerie Goodwin's quilts, you feel as if you are peering down on it from hundreds of feet above. Inspired by architectural plans, maps, and blueprints, her work is at once highly literal and appealingly abstract. Having studied architecture at both Yale University and Washington University in St. Louis, Valerie is now a tenured professor of architecture at Florida A&M University, and it is this background in design that infuses her work with its unique aerial perspective. Here, she shares her experiences in architecture and art, and how she incorporates these two passions in the creation of her quilts.

**PE:** How did you get involved in art quilting?

**VG:** Oddly enough, I became interested in quilting through my work as a professor of architecture. I read an article in an architectural education journal that was written by a woman who also taught architectural design. She asked her students to use traditional quilt blocks as a way of diagramming their initial ideas for the layout of a quilt museum. I became fascinated with this idea and developed a series of projects to teach my beginning design students about basic design principles such as pattern, rhythm, color, etc.

As a child, I learned to sew simple things from my maternal grandmother, Mama Steele, but had never made a quilt until 1998. Shortly thereafter, a friend shared a copy of the Quilt National catalogue with me. A whole world of possibilities was revealed! From then on, my goal was to discover how I could combine my love of architectural design with the medium of quilt making. Soon afterward, I took a class at Quilt Surface Design Symposium (QSDS). I think I grew artistically by leaps and bounds after these two experiences.

**PE:** How would you describe your working process (materials, techniques, studio space, etc.)?

**VG:** Currently, I am lucky enough to have two studio spaces. One is very small and at home in a spare bedroom. The second one I recently acquired since I needed a larger space to work on a commission. It is in an art park, in a funky warehouse area near the campus. Right now, I usually work in this satellite studio.



*Above: "Riverside Settlement" • 50" x 38" • "This quilt depicts an aerial view (site plan) of an imagined place. The composition is anchored at the base with a site section through the landscape. Together, these two views interact in that the aerial view appears to act as a field behind the site section."*

*Opposite: "Economic Landscape" • 54" x 32" • "I created this quilt in response to the economic crisis that came to our attention late in 2008. I was struck by the sense of looming disaster that gripped our consciousness during the last election. The feeling that the structures of our cities, our nation, and our economy were fragmenting really affected me, and I wanted to convey this emotion in the quilt."*



I used to work very much like an architect. After the initial design phase, most architects work in a very linear fashion. Conceptual or schematic design progresses forward with few major changes until the building is complete. That's the way I used to think about the design of my quilts. However, I discovered that as an artist I don't have to work that way. Now I may start with a sketch, but I give myself the freedom to let the design morph and change during the entire process. I think that my work became richer and more fluid when I started working this way.

I also had to come to grips with the fact that the media of fabric and thread would not produce the crisp, clean, rectilinear style that I was comfortable with in the field of architecture. My work became more improvisational and spontaneous—taking on a whole new life.

**PE:** Tell us about your materials, techniques, and working process.

**VG:** My work combines traditional materials such as fabric and thread with sheers, paints, and digitally printed images. At the beginning of the process, I create rich surfaces that

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*Opposite: "African Burial Ground II" • 44" x 32" • "This quilt pays considerable attention to multilayered composition. The account of a real place, the African Burial Ground, served as the inspiration for this particular work. In 1991, during the excavation for the Foley Square Federal Building in lower Manhattan, workers discovered the biggest colonial cemetery for slaves and free Africans in our nation. A map of the slave farmlands, the cemetery, and the Dutch settlement during 1755 is depicted on the left side of this quilt. The right side is a map of lower Manhattan as it exists today. The piece is anchored on the bottom by an imaginary scene of the burial site. These three parts of the quilt work together to show the significance of what happened long ago."*

are analogous to the ground plane upon which the map-like elements (streets, structures, etc.) are layered. The fabric and paint, along with machine stitching and hand stitching, make for interesting surface details that a viewer may not even discover until they do a closer inspection of my quilts. Many of the really small pieces are fused down and then stitched in place. Larger pieces may be hand appliquéd.

**PE:** You mentioned teaching the basic principles of design. What roles do these principles play in your own work?

**VG:** My work explores the use of the basic elements and principles of design; of course, I am talking about the compositional tools used in all design disciplines. The elements of design are line, shape, form, color, space, texture, and value. The principles are balance, movement, rhythm, contrast, emphasis, pattern, and unity. The elements are the basic components used to create works of architecture or art, and the principles are the qualities inherent in the choice and arrangement of the elements.

However, in my work, I also incorporate the ordering principles that are more specific to architecture and the layout of cities, such as the axis, grid, path, place, nodes, and edges. In a way, I am using the elements and principles noted above, yet they have more specific architectural meaning for me as I compose my abstract map-like quilts or quilts based on real places.

**PE:** Clearly, your work is influenced by architectural plans and maps. Would you explain how you began putting these two ideas together and what it is about this combination that intrigues you?

**VG:** I am drawn to what I perceive to be the language found in maps and architectural drawings. Maps use symbols such as points, lines, patterns, and color to convey information. As a child, I was fascinated by maps and spent hours poring over them, intrigued by their beauty. Later on, I noted how architects and other design professionals use maps to communicate information to contractors, clients, the public, and many other audiences. When I began to make art quilts, I was intrigued by the aerial views of places. Then I began to refer to my books on urban planning and specific site plans of places that interested me. Gradually, I narrowed my focus to maps of real and imagined places.

Sometimes I am drawn to specific places like the African Burial Ground, because there is a story to tell or the location fascinates me for a particular reason. Other times, like in "City Grid V" or "Riverside Settlement," I work abstractly, focusing on the expressive use of line, shape, and pattern. These works make oblique references to concrete architectural ideas about the city grid, path, or place that help to guide my design decisions.

**PE:** Do you have other passions or interests that influence your work?

**VG:** I have a passion for teaching. I don't think I would have accomplished what I have in art quilting if it were not for my involvement in teaching architectural design. It's great how one informs the other.

I am fortunate in that I teach a design elective in the spring semester called Cloth Constructions. In the class, I introduce the students to mixed media, such as fabric, paint, and thread. I challenge them to use the media to express architectural ideas.

**PE:** What do you enjoy most about working with the quilt medium?

**VG:** I love the solitary activity of creating an art quilt. Being an introverted person at heart, the experience of working alone seems to appeal to me. So I suppose I am attracted to the fact that, for the most part, I have total control.

I am also fond of being able to manipulate, control, and touch the materials. As architects, we sometimes only see the materials in the abstract—unless we're actually out there in the field doing the construction. However, in art quilting, I absolutely love the process of working with the fabric and thread, and the fact that I can combine my design experience with the materials of quilting.

**PE:** What are your proudest accomplishments as an artist?

**VG:** The proudest accomplishment would have to be my most current work, a triptych called "The Lay of the Land." It was commissioned by Jack Walsh, a well-known and respected collector of art quilts. He was an ideal client because he is an experienced patron of the arts and he lets the artist assume control of the design vision. The whole experience was very liberating. I thoroughly enjoyed the entire process. It gave me the opportunity to explore ideas about composition that I have been interested in as an architect. It was the artistic opportunity of a lifetime.

**PE:** Is there anything else that you feel is important about the design, influence, or construction of your work that we haven't discussed?

**VG:** In some of my work, I explore the use of what is sometimes called the composite drawing, which interweaves graphic elements such as aerial views, plans, sections, and elevations in a cohesive and creative way. The composite drawing relates back to the



"City Grid V" • 53" x 33"

beaux-arts Analytique method, where several types of drawings related to an architectural project are carefully composed on one sheet. Oftentimes, they interact in a way that creates a sense of layering, depth, framing, and the interpenetration of one drawing

onto the next. In the right hands, the Analytique could be a work of art. ♦

**To learn more about Valerie and her quilts, visit [quiltsbyvalerie.com](http://quiltsbyvalerie.com).**