Patching the Present

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Abstract

This submission proposes a paper that will report on a community collaboration exploring patchwork as a means of bringing generations together and engendering dialogue around the themes of sustainable living, personal fulfilment and bridging intergenerational disparity. The project will create environments in which individuals from a range of generations, backgrounds and life experiences can exchange views, and explore the way in which working with our hands informs and influences our relationship with the world around us. In contemporary society patchwork articulates the symbolism of repair, restoration and reuse. Furthermore, it will examine ways of confronting contemporary throw-away consumerist culture. Through engagement with pupils from Plymouth School of Creative Arts, clients from Hannah's at Seale Hayne and older members of the local community it will provide an opportunity to interrogate the supposition (possited by the author) that society has moved beyond having that which is 'needed' to live a safe and fulfilling life, to a culture of 'want'. The resulting conversations will be recorded and used to inform the paper. The essayist Josie Appleton describes contemporary culture as, '... not so much that we have an ethic of consumption, but that – by default – it remains as one of the few meaningful experiences in our lives...'. (Crawford, 2009, p216) The proposal draws on several theories that propose a different approach. Including Viktor Frankl, who suggests that fulfilment comes from finding meaning in life (Frankl, 2007); Thomas Declan Walsh who posits that happiness resides in the gap between expectation and reality; the narrower the gap, the greater the sense of wellbeing (Walsh, et al, unknown); Serge Latouche's philosophy of decroissance (Crouch et al, 2015, p14); and Jugaad Innovation the Hindi principle of creating more from less, flexible thinking, and a simple approach (Radjou, et al, 2012). Patchwork and patching are traditionally sustainable, low or no cost forms of making and mending; using and re-using textiles from household, clothing and dressmaking applications. Patches hold the threads and fabric of our lives together and contribute to sustainable living and social cohesion. Individual patches retain their identity and meaning, yet through their interaction each is enhanced. The same may be said of people. Sewing and quilting bees were once community activities; groups of women used these opportunities to be productive, creative, pass on skills and discuss the concerns and the issues of the day. Making is an opportunity for interaction, conversation and a means of finding and sharing meaning and understanding. The process of piecing the patches together acts as a physical manifestation and symbol of the meaning and understanding generated through the conversations, which in turn create an aural patchwork, drawing the disparate threads of thought and meaning together.

Patching the Present is a collaborative community project exploring patchwork as an agency for dialogue between generations and around themes of sustainable living, personal fulfilment and intergenerational dialogue.

This paper will report on an evolving community collaboration that has brought generations together via hand-stitched patchwork. It will outline the nature of the collaboration and the tenets that inspired it, the processes and techniques used to execute it, and outcomes as they stand at the time of writing. It will investigate the author's proposition that finding personal fulfilment through making, satisfaction through creativity, and empowerment through connection and learning, has potential to change awareness of, and attitudes to, consumption and sustainability in society.

Themes of sustainability, 'make do and mend' and avoiding waste underpin my practice. Born as World War 2 rationing ended, the 'waste not want not' ethos permeated my formative years and never left me. I articulate these principles using an archive of materials which includes fabrics, lace, ribbons, buttons and other ephemera inherited from my great aunt, grandmother and mother; fabrics purchased in the past for dressmaking and craft sewing; and additional pieces gifted by friends and acquaintances.

Inheriting the content of my mother's workroom – she was a skilled needlewoman – prompted me to emphasise the sustainable concepts underlying my practice, through actively resisting the purchase of new materials and concentrating on using only those in my possession. In this regard, Claire Wellesley Smith says:

Some years ago, in my practice, over phased by the amount of stuff I collected – particularly fabric remnants, printed scraps, leftovers from previous projects, and samples, washed, folded and stored just in case – I resolved that I would draw a line and try not to accumulate any new materials. It gave me the opportunity to reassess the types of fabric I use and look anew at what I already had. (Wellesley Smith, 2015, p. 30)

Hand-stitched patchwork and embroidery are old skills that speak of a slower pace of life, enhancing the reflective nature of the work and providing opportunity for meditative absorbing practice. This approach to materials and techniques grounds my practice and authenticates my belief that sustainable making is a way of life rather than an artistic statement or choice, and that re-purposing, mending and cherishing artefacts and materials in our possession can improve the emotional durability of our material relationships, which could in turn lead to reduced consumption.

Collaboration

The collaboration engages and brings together groups from contrasting generations. KingsCare Community Group is a patient support group attached to Kingsteignton Medical Practice. It aims, through voluntary help, to improve quality of life for those in need within the local community. The group offers activities that help individuals overcome some of the difficulties experienced through loneliness, isolation, dementia and other medical problems, membership is through GP referral. The oldest of these participants, typically in their eighties, are the last generation to have endured the shortages imposed by war rationing. They grew up at a time when sea blockades restricted imports of food, raw materials and goods. During this time, clothing and household items were often home-made, handed down, re-purposed and repaired: make do and mend was a way of life.

Plymouth School of Creative Arts is a mainstream city centre school with a cohort aged from 4 to 16. Its teaching ethos is grounded in learning through doing (kinaesthesia).

Life is not a theoretical process. It involves doing alongside being and is a 'whole body' experience. We recognise that to fulfil our potential requires us to be active in mind and body together; making something connects us to ourselves and to others. (Plymouth School of Creative Arts, 2017)

In contrast to the senior group, these young participants are growing up in a commodity culture that is consumer driven and heavily dependent on imported goods. The manufacture of these goods, and the resulting detritus is removed from their, and our, daily experience. It could be argued that they are growing up in a culture that bestows greater status on owning than making, cherishing, or even achieving. To paraphrase Josie Appleton 'consumption remains as one of the few meaningful experiences in our lives' (Crawford, 2009: 216).

The KingsCare Craft Group, which meets once a week for two hours, provided a platform for the senior group. Sessions took place on a bi-weekly basis within their existing structure. Timetabling considerations at Plymouth School of Creative Arts led to a day-long 'drop in' event, in which pupils could determine the amount of time they gave to the work.

Both groups engaged well with the project, enjoying the practical and community aspects of the encounters. Working as a group is reminiscent of quilting bees and sewing clubs, which have historical associations as community and professional activities. In each case a group of women with a common aim (the making of a quilt) would gather to share skills and discuss the issues of the day. It was at a quilting bee in Cleveland, USA, that Susan B. Anthony 'gave her first speech on women's suffrage.' (Showalter, 2012: 159). Referring to Indian states, Bangari tells us that 'there were women folks available in every village who involved themselves in preparing quilts. It was a leisure time activity.' (Bangari, 2017). In contrast to these leisure activities, Walker describes the 'quilting clubs' organised by women in British mining areas during the 19th Century to help subsidise their household incomes (Walker, 1985) and Osler refers to the itinerant professional quilters of that time (Osler, 1987).

Hand sewing is a quiet occupation; the materials and equipment are easily transported, it requires no machinery, and the work can be done in small sections, all of which make it an accessible activity. The simplicity of this format can be effective in supporting and facilitating conversation 'I have observed that often the techniques that use minimal equipment and easily found materials are the most popular and inspire the most conversation and sharing in the group.' (Wellesley Smith, 2015: 28)

Patchwork

Patchwork is defined by the Concise Oxford English Dictionary as 'Needlework in which small pieces of cloth in different designs are sewn together' (Pearsall, 1999: 1044).
The following examples give a brief history of the technique, and evidence ways in which textiles and patchwork have articulated sustainable practices and principles across cultures and generations – often through need rather than choice – and provide examples of the declining interest in, and association with, the old traditions. The methodologies employed in this project are exemplified in these examples.

The Welsh Quilt Centre displays remnants of quilts, stuffed with sheep's wool gathered from the hedges, patched over and over in a process of ongoing repair and renewal. An anonymous New England mill worker recording the making a quilt in 1845 amply describes the use and re-use of scraps of fabric, saying:

How many passages of my life seem to be epitomised in this patchwork quilt. Here… are remnants of that bright copperplate cushion that graced my mother's chair…Here is a piece of the first dress I ever saw cut with what were called "mutton leg" sleeves. It was my sister's …and here is a fragment of the first gown that was ever cut for me with a bodice waist…. (Stallybrass, 2012: 73)

Walker describes hexagons, the shape used to create the ‘Grandmother’s Flower Garden’ design as ‘one of the earliest institutionalised patterns’. She tells us that it is thought to date back to the late 18th Century, and is referred to in women’s magazines of the 1830’s (Walker, 1989).

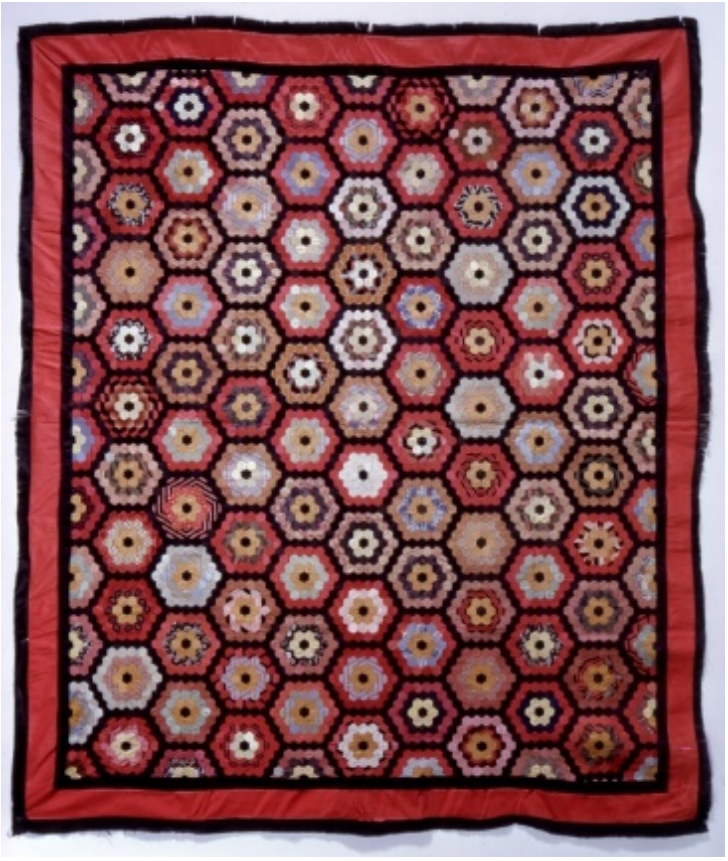


Fig 1. An example of the design can be found on the National Museum of American History’s website.

Eliza Jane Todd's ‘Grandmother's Flower Garden’ Quilt, constructed 1835–1850.

Top fabric, silk (overall material) thread, silk (overall material)

catalogue number T07742

National Museum of American History

This quilt, made by Eliza Jane Todd, has been dated to 1835 from a paper (part of a dated letter) left in its patches. It is thought to have taken 15 years to make. Made of silks, it is not a make do and mend artefact, and was probably made as a family heirloom. A supposition in keeping with its remaining in the family until its donation to the museum in 1936 (National Museum of American History, not dated).

According to Bangari, 'the traditional art of transforming well-worn scraps into functional warm bedding' in the district of North Karnataka, India continues to be popular. He goes on to say that 'preparation of the quilt is one of the folk arts in Karnataka State. It is linked with folk rituals and beliefs' (Bangari, 2017).

Wellesley Smith tells us of the Japanese practice of Boro, sometimes known as Mottainai, which translates as 'too good to waste', in which an adult kimono might be transformed into child's clothing, then reassembled into a family futon and finally into hearth and floor rugs (Wellesley Smith, 2015: 80).

The practice of reconfiguring household items is advocated in the Big Book of Needlework, which I inherited from my Great Aunt. In a chapter entitled 'Household Renovations' under the heading New Life for Old Sheets, it gives instructions for renewing sheets worn in the middle 'simply turn the unworn sides to the centre…', going on to suggest that sheets torn or badly worn could be used to make 'bolster slips, pillow cases, cot or drawer sheets…' It also recommends that the good parts of worn linen sheets may be used 'to advantage in making dainty tea and tray cloths…' and includes instructions for 'Making a Bedspread from Faded or Worn Curtains and 'Cosy Curtains from Old Blankets' (Hendry, 1935: 364-370).

The decline in these traditional practices, as the demands of modern living and quest for the new have impinged on societies across the globe, is also recorded. Bangari says:

Due to modernisation and urbanisation there was a drastic change in attitude and lifestyle of people especially in rural sectors. Every time modern life demands new things to lead their life. Therefore quilt prepared with old cloths lost its demand but retained its importance in modern life. (Bangari, 2017)

Osler also comments on the changes triggered by industrialisation and urbanisation in Britain and how, despite a resurgence through the auspices of the Rural Industries Board in the 1930s, interest in traditional patchwork and quilting techniques declined as society embraced the novelty of the new, (Osler, 1987) and Wellesley Smith notes that 'Boro has not always been celebrated in Japan where it was seen as a visible sign of poverty and often shame' (Wellesley Smith 2015: 80).

It seems that across cultures, the 'make do and mend' ethos became synonymous with poverty and need, consequently greater value is placed on acquiring the new rather than preserving and renewing the old. Danielle Todd suggests that we reinvent ourselves and our lives through consumerism, that we purchase to present new images of ourselves. As trends and fashions change we change with them and, in presenting our new selves discard the appurtenances of the self we leave behind. Todd says, 'one of the most liberating forms of consumerism is the concept of making a new self' (Todd, 2011:48).

This approach is far removed from the pride and sense of self experienced by the New England [textile] mill worker in 1845. Describing the history of the fabrics in her quilt, she writes, 'Here is a piece of the first dress ever earned by my own exertions! What a feeling of exhilaration, of self-dependence, of self-reliance, was created by this effort' (Stallybrass, 2012: 73). Using her dress as patches for a quilt re-iterate and reinforce the pleasure and sense of self she experienced when she first acquired it through her own efforts. The finished piece transcends the practical use of worn clothing and fabric scraps to form a quilt, and becomes a symbol of her past efforts, memory, and the pleasure she experienced in the process.

These historical examples articulate what we might now describe as sustainable practice. Making the most of what is available demonstrates creativity overcoming scarcity – a mantra referred to by Kevin Roberts in his

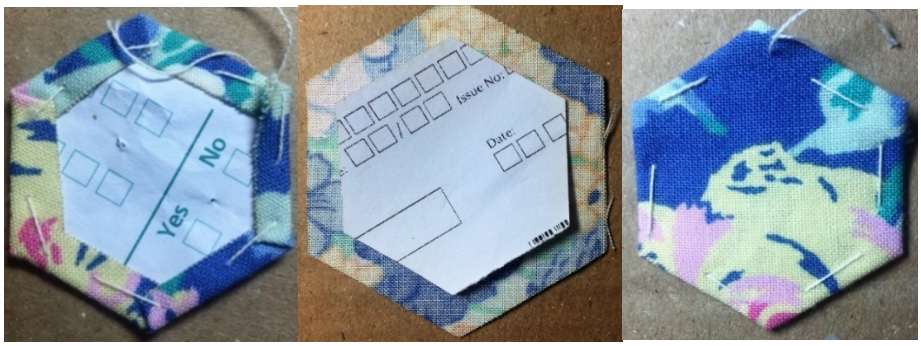
forward to Jugaad Innovation (Radjou, 2012: ix). One of the principle tenets of the Indian practice of Jugaad, 'doing more with less' (Radjou, 2012: 4) is evident in the use and re-use of materials to create household items, both decorative and practical.

Practical considerations

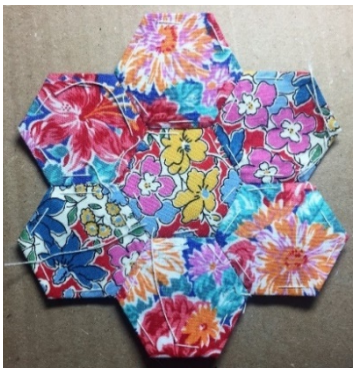
Facilitating workshops referential to the traditional ways of working, while offering participants the opportunity to take part irrespective of their skill level, presented a challenge. There was a wide range of stitching skills across the age range. Some participants had no sewing experience, others had previously made patchwork; all were keen to try.

Paper-backed patchwork involves a number of stages. The cutting of the papers and fabric, making the patches up, combining them to form a block, and combining the blocks to form the finished piece. Each stage needs to be accurate if the final blocks are to fit together. As Walker points out 'Accuracy is very important because cumulative error is more difficult to eliminate when working… in this shape' (Walker 1989: 18). Variables are always present in hand cut and stitched work, a circumstance referred to by Pye as the workmanship of risk (Pye, 2007: 20). An experienced stitcher can make adjustments to reduce the impact of such inconsistencies as they work, as Pye suggests 'the result depends on the judgement, dexterity and care which the maker exercises as he works' (Pye, 2007: 20).

Working with inexperienced stitchers led me to consider ways in which it might be possible to reduce the variables and their potential negative impact on the final piece. To achieve this, the papers and fabrics were prepared on a laser cutter, which gave perfectly sized and shaped pieces, a method Pye describes as the workmanship of certainty saying, 'Machine tools, which, once set up, perform one operation…in an absolutely predetermined form, are often used for the sake of accuracy…' (Pye, 2007: 21) The machine cut pieces were hand tacked (see below) to form individual patches in advance of the workshops.



Careful preparation of the patches, through the combination of machine and hand work seemed the most appropriate way of supporting participants' contributions, offering them the opportunity to complete a block in the time available (see below) and reduce the risk of incompatible or unstable blocks.



Pye says that 'in the course of doing a job a workman will be working freehand with a hand tool at one moment and will resort to a machine tool a few minutes later.' His principle differentiation between the workmanship of risk and certainty turns on one question 'Is the result predetermined and unalterable once production begins?' (Pye, 2007: 22)

The patches were prepared in a wide range of designs and colours, giving participants the opportunity to express their individual creativity in the combinations they chose to make up their blocks. In this way, although the patches were pre-prepared, the results were not predetermined. It was noticeable that some participants took considerable time in selecting their patches, paying attention to colour balance and contrast in their selections, others did not. This difference in approach will give the final piece a strong and distinctive visual aesthetic.

It is the nature of hand-stitched patchwork that it can be set aside at will or need, Showalter says, 'piecing is the art form which best reflects the fragmentation of women's time' (Showalter, 2012: 161). This benefitted participants with complex time demands, who continued their stitching at home or the next time they attended, and those who found prolonged concentration difficult. Social contributions to the group could continue whilst the work could be picked up or put down at will, without detriment to the result.

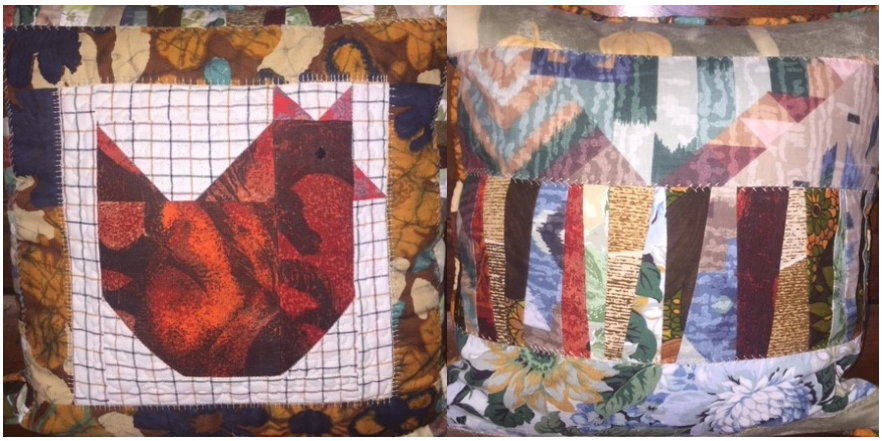
Memory and conversation

The theory of textiles and memory is an area of continuing academic investigation. Shelly Goldsmith explores the way in which 'emotional experiences might seem to become "attached" to – or even integrated with – garments (Wildgoose, 2015: 65) and Hemmings describes Stallybrass as observing 'the daunting accuracy of the textile's ability to remember size, shapes and traces of the body…' (Hemmings, 2012: 68).

Such memories are not immediately dissipated when a textile or garment is re-purposed. We have seen through the writings of the New England mill worker how, although derived from and composed of pragmatic foundations, patchwork can also be a trigger for and repository of memories. The intensity of an amalgam of memory created by the combined fabrics of patchwork can remain strong and evoke the textiles' history. Wellesley Smith says:

Patchwork and piecing techniques offer an opportunity to embed meaning into work. The connections you may have with the cloth used – the memories imbued in the materials, the stories you have about them… feel amplified… (Wellesley Smith, 2015: 82).

Conversations about fabric and memory prompted a KingsCare member to bring in a cushion made for her by her daughter (see below). It is made from old curtain fabrics, shirts, dresses and other fabrics with family memories and associations. The chicken motif is a direct reference to the family's farming life.



The fabrics used in the project include my sister's, mother's and my own summer dresses, old sheeting, and bits of fabric leftover from previous projects. Some of these fabrics were first made into dresses by myself or my mother in the 1970s and 80s and earlier. Additional materials were added by participants.

The younger group were captivated by the stories of the fabrics, even though they weren't personal to them. They had their own stories and examples of skirts, bags and other items they had made by 'up-cycling' old clothing. Whilst they had fewer experiences to recall, as a direct consequence of their youthfulness, the opportunity to sit and sew in a small group triggered far-ranging conversations, one of which developed into a discussion about the differences in, and advantages and disadvantages of democracy and benign and absolute dictatorships.

Talking about the history of the fabrics with the senior group triggered memories of blouses made from parachute silk, coats made from army blankets, a grandmother cutting up old clothes to make rag rugs, and a mother hand sewing wedding dresses for a French designer in London. They also talked about side to middling sheets, making pillowcases from sheets worn beyond repair and turning collars and cuffs on shirts. All of which I remember, some of which I have done, and all of which are referred to in The Big Book of Needlework, mentioned above.

The two groups worked independently before working together. For their first joint meeting they gathered around three large tables, choosing where to sit and with whom. Each table was occupied by mixed age ranges and sewing abilities. This was the test of the hypothesis that craft might be a vehicle for discourse between diverse population groups through which different cultures of making and repair – one with its basis in the remembered experience of the senior participants, the other in the experience of those younger – might be shared.

It was not given that the two groups would find connections or be comfortable communicating and sharing their experiences and views. However, each table was soon engaged in lively conversation which was recorded as part of the documentation of the project.

A brief review of the conversations suggests that the proposition that meeting to sew, converse and exchange skills can facilitate connection and learning, and be a route to finding personal fulfilment through making, has foundation.

The conversations include comments that are encouraging regarding the value of communal working and learning new skills from others, in as much as it seems that they are positive. From 'Oh no my needle has come unthreaded', followed by 'I'll do it for you if you can't do it', across and between the generations, to 'I'm going to ask mum for a sewing kit, then, when I get cross with my brother I can go to my room and sew', 'It's relaxing

isn't it?', 'Oh! I love the ones you've chosen', 'How old were you when you learned to sew?', 'This is difficult!' and 'Look! I've finished it!', the essence of the conversations is positive and open. Interestingly, when asked by the seniors how or if they had learned textile skills previously, many of the younger group who had previous experience said that their Grandmothers had taught them: a strong indicator of the value and importance of intergenerational communication and learning.

Next steps

Participants will have the opportunity to embroider their names onto their blocks. Then they will meet to discuss and decide the final quilt design. Once the blocks are arranged and pieced together to form the quilt top it will be quilted and bound.

Transcriptions and recordings of the conversations made during the sessions will be used as documentation of the project and will inform aspects of the summative MA submission. The finished quilt will be displayed locally at venues including Plymouth College of Art, Plymouth School of Creative Arts, and venues in the Newton Abbot area. It is hoped that it will raise funds for and awareness of the work of Kings Care and Plymouth School of Creative Arts.

Conclusion

The aims of the project have been threefold: to explore participants' memories and understandings of life, and the way in which they might be shared through the medium of craft; to discover whether intergenerational dialogue can support and encourage sustainable making; and whether sustainable making can be instrumental in nurturing self-worth and emotional durability in material relationships.

The project has brought together people with an age range of 11 to 85. They have shared laughter and tears, frustrations and delight. Participants of both groups have expressed enjoyment in the creative process, in meeting and sharing their stories, and the learning that has come from that. There is something poetic in the two groups encountering each other at such distinct stages of life. One learning for and looking to the future, the other drawing on the memory and experience that comes with long life. It might be described as the basis for an understanding of the value of the knowledge and interpretations of life each generation can offer the other. Plymouth School of Creative Arts states:

In our 'learning village' we recognise that everybody can learn from everybody else, irrespective of age or ability. What might be fun and effective learning for a four-year old might also be helpful for someone aged 12 or 51 – and vice versa! Making and learning 'alongside' others supports effective teaching, mentoring and coaching…' (Plymouth School of Creative Arts, 2017)

The level of engagement, effort and interest that participants have shown at each stage of the process indicates that the project has been, and continues to be, a good introduction to the craft of patchwork. Their responses to the history of the fabrics, and each other's histories suggests a growing awareness of the need for a more sustainable approach to consuming. The satisfaction, pleasure, and sense of pride they have shown in their achievements indicate the possibility for emotionally durable relationship with craft-made items. Outcomes that seem to support the theory that craft has the potential to rebuild resilience in our material relationships, which could in turn have a positive influence on society's existing patterns of consumption and waste. Even more importantly, perhaps, it has the potential to rebuild relationships across and between generations, offering opportunities for greater understanding, compassion and learning.

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