

Ready, Set, Improv!

A Playful
Beginner's
Workbook



WHERE IMPROV
MEETS INTENTION

An A' La Mary Learning Guide

Skill Level: Beginner

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Beginning Improv Piecing Workbook

WHERE IMPROV MEETS INTENTION

Discussions: basic improv quilting techniques.

- creating “found fabric” from scraps
- visualizing how to “talk through” ideas
- color theory
- creating large-scale blocks
- building alternative blocks
- slashing blocks or large pieces of fabric you will build easy-does-it new blocks
- finding creative ways to move forward, you build bigger pieces.
- create your own blocks by restructuring traditional blocks
- see how blocks (and quilts) are organized into steps and sections
- to put your own sections together to create a wall-hanging.

As a workbook, this paper occasionally asks questions for you to think about. Answer them as you go along and, later, you can review the answers to see how well you have learned the concepts or grown as a quilter.

Class Overview

1. Improv defined: creating with an intuitive approach that may have the beginning of a plan but is open to interpretation and change.
2. Seeing and hearing your quilt: stepping back, using your camera, getting feedback from others.
3. Going with your feelings. Answer questions about yourself; favorite colors and blocks; what kind of design and gridwork do you most like to work with, what do you know about background, scale, negative space? Do you want to use known ideas and apply them? Or, do you want to go all in and learn new techniques? Only you can decide this.
4. Improv with a friend: work with a friend taking turns making decisions concerning size, color, fabric or changes
5. Redesigning your favorite block: ways to slice into the block, how to fit angles into your quilt, changing the scale of parts of your block, using patterns in different configurations, cutting patterns, adding skinnies between pattern parts
6. Wrap up: more quilts, recommended books.

This workbook includes examples of quilts that show:

- Improv Techniques—creating fabric from scraps, using traditional blocks, turning scraps into complex blocks, creating your own blocks
- Organization of Improv Blocks and Chunks
- Color Theory
- Minimalism vs Maximalism in Modern Design
- Alternative Gridwork in Modern Quilt Design
- Negative Space in Modern Quilt Design

Tools you'll need:

- your sewing machine and everything you keep with it (scissors, pincushion, seam ripper, etc.)
- a good rotary blade
- your best pair of scissors
- if possible, a small design board
- a sense of adventure.

Fabric:

variety of solids, a few prints, those blocks you've been hiding, and your what-was-I-thinking? fabric. Oh, yeah, those too!



Solicitude, 45" X 60", 2017
(Inspired by Cindy Grisdela's *Adventures in Improv Quilts*)
(use of negative space, alternative gridwork)

QUESTION BLOCK

WHAT MAKES SOLICITUDE (ABOVE)
DIFFERENT FROM QUILTS YOU HAVE MADE?

A Playful Beginner's Workbook

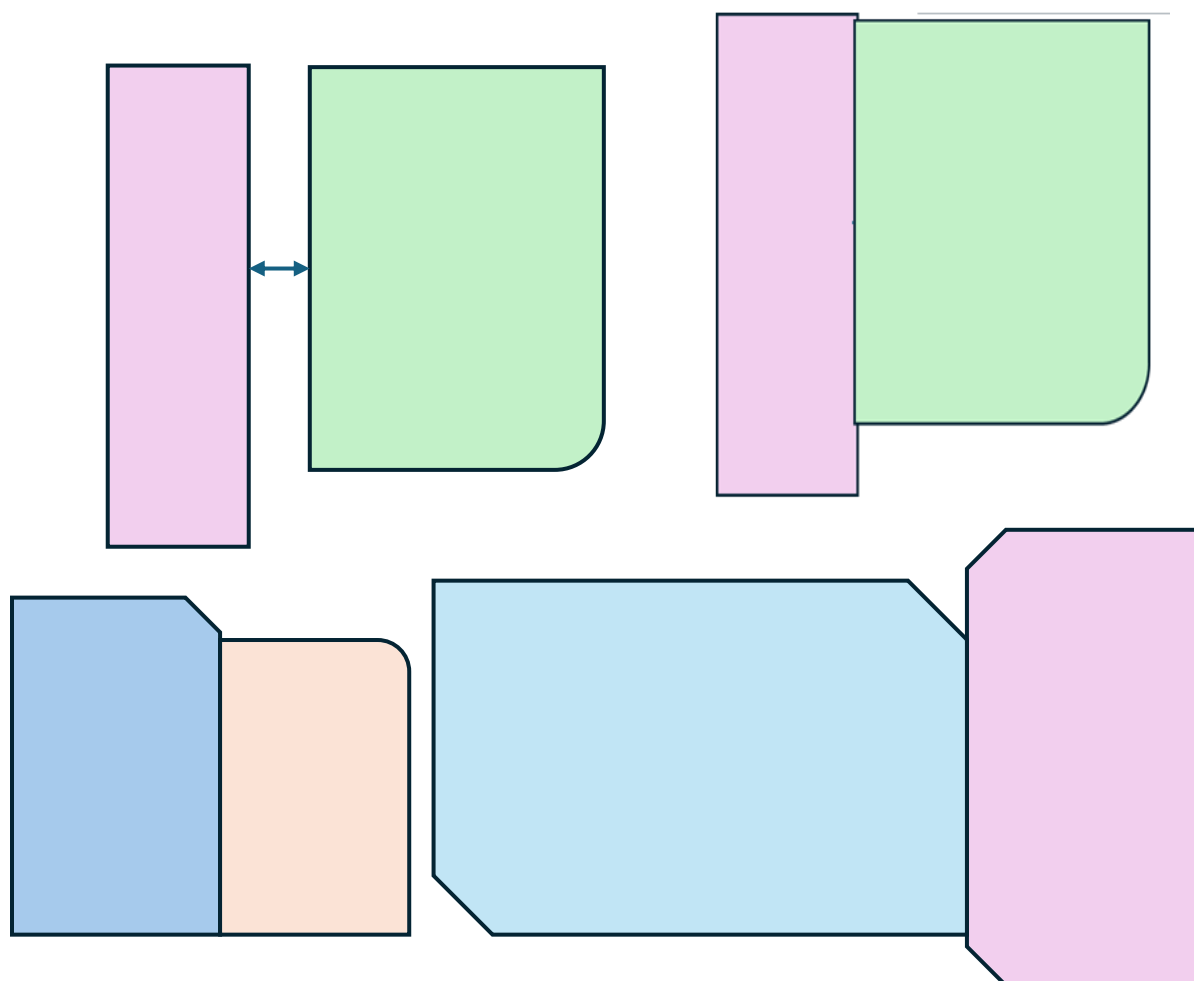
You Will Learn

- Improv Techniques—creating fabric from scraps, using traditional blocks, turning scraps into complex blocks, creating your own blocks
- Organization of Improv Blocks and Chunks
- Color Theory
- Minimalism vs Maximalism in Modern Design
- Alternative Gridwork in Modern Quilt Design
- Negative Space in Modern Quilt Design

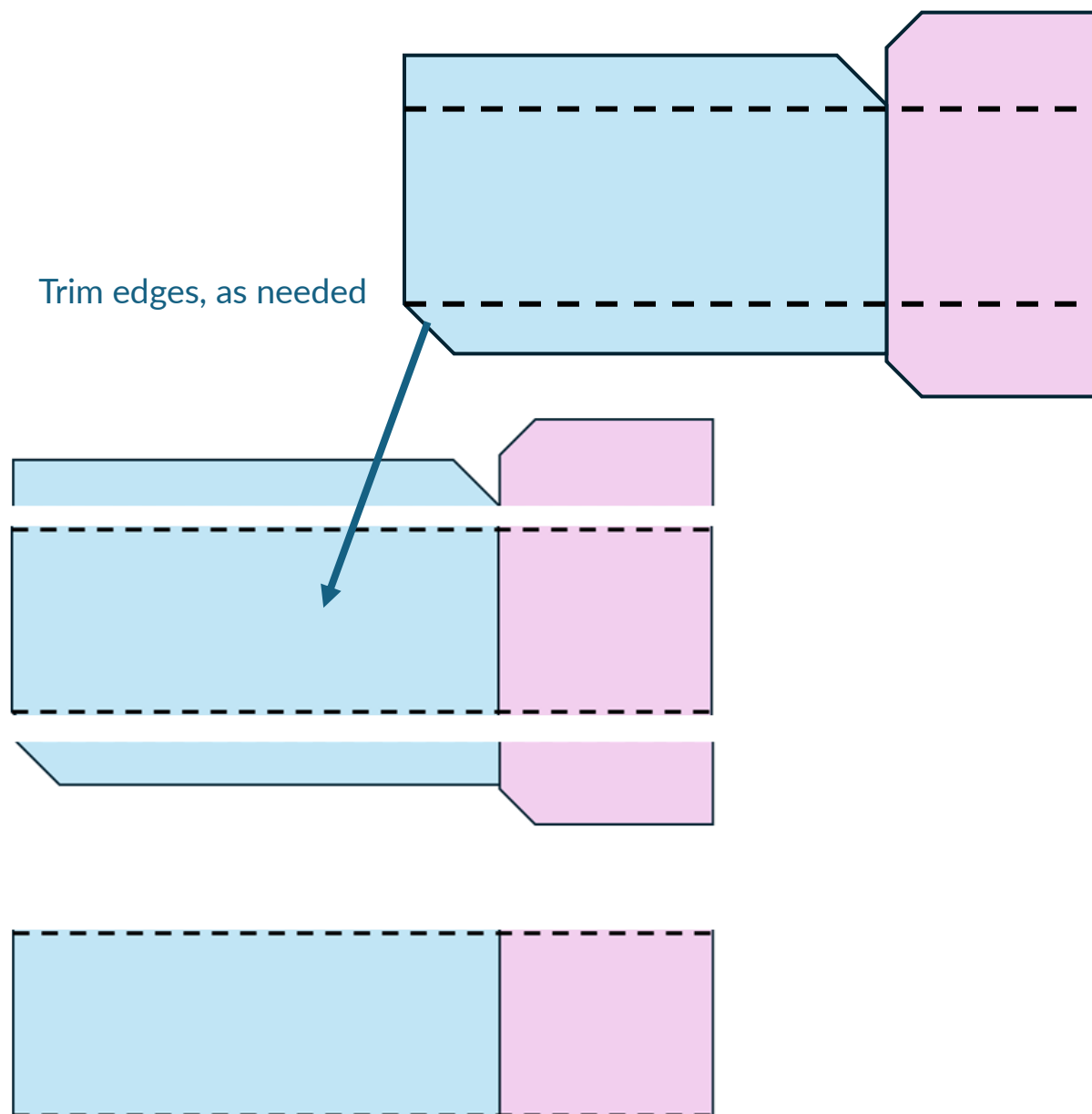


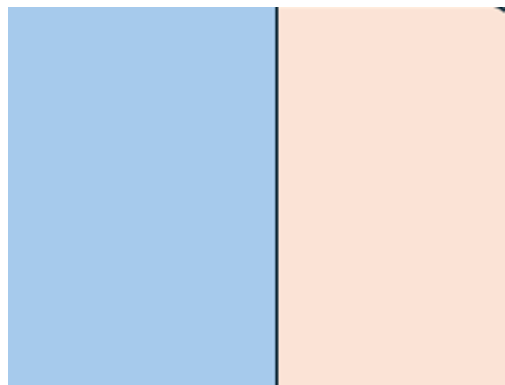
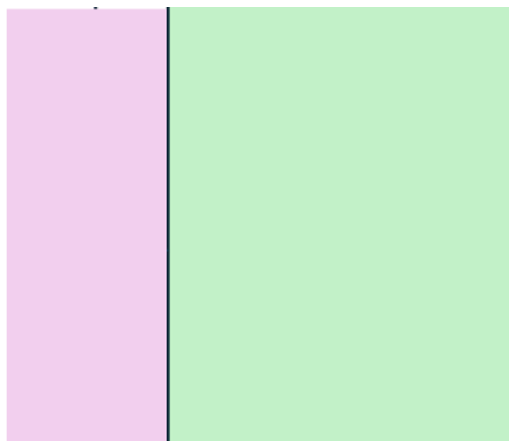
Reflections in Gray; 70" x 84"; 2012 (Quiltcon 2013)
(maximalism, alternative gridwork)

Ready, Set, Play!



Begin with two pieces that are approximately the same size and sew together. Continue sewing scraps in the same way. Don't worry if some do not fit precisely. Just have fun.

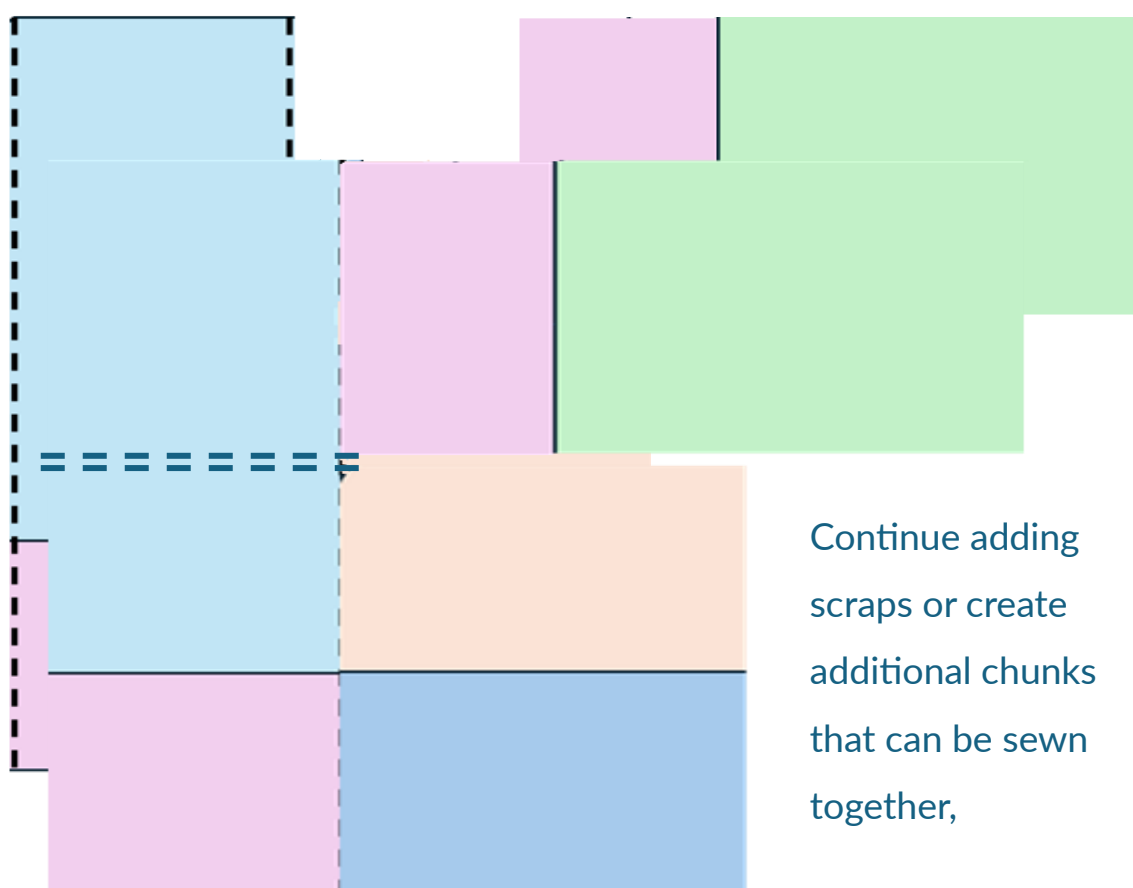




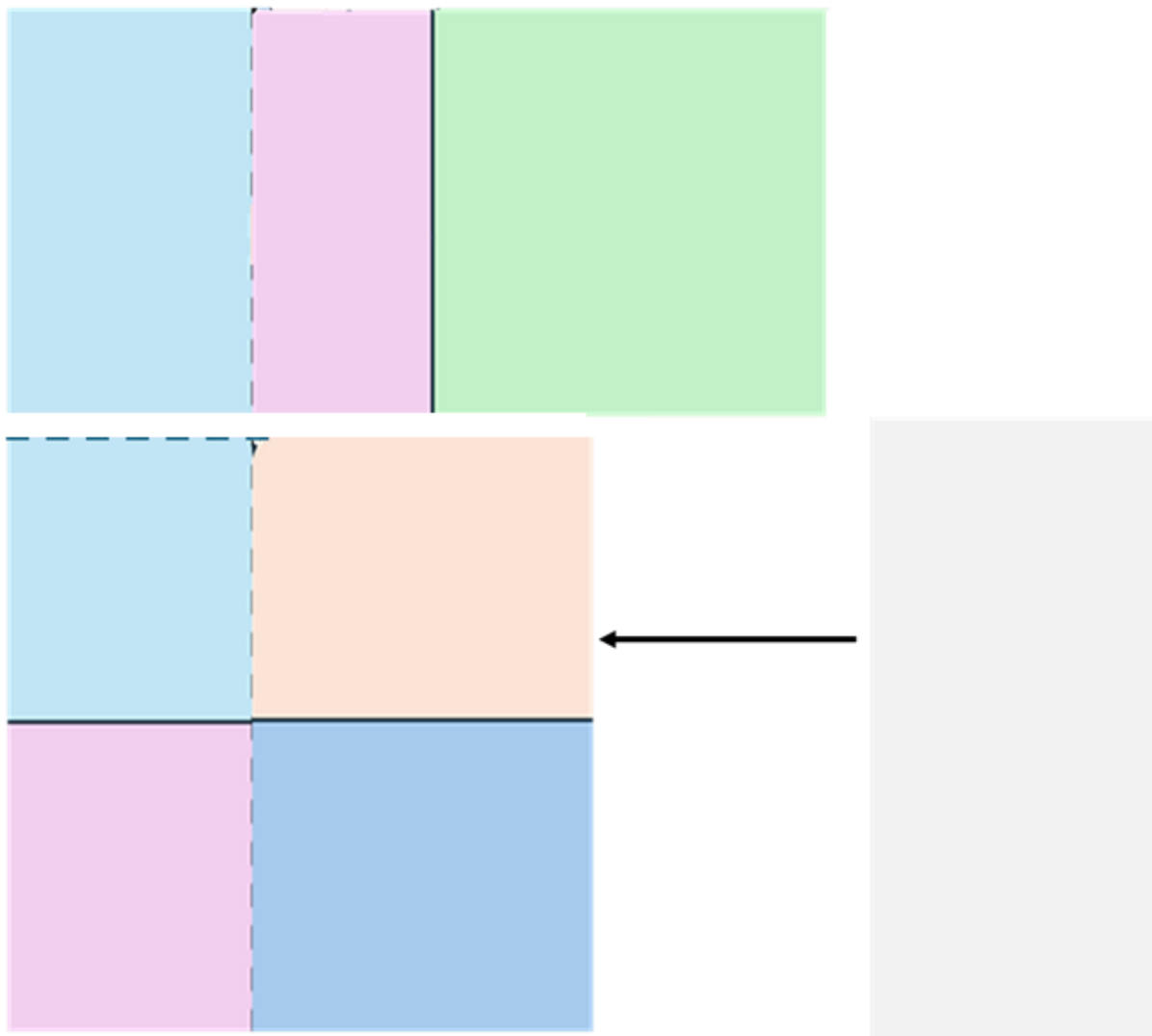
QUESTION BLOCK
HOW DIFFICULT IS THE PROCESS THUS FAR?

A word about color: color can be important in an improv quilt, any quilt for that matter, but quilters don't *have* to worry about color unless they're making a specific quilt using a particular palette.

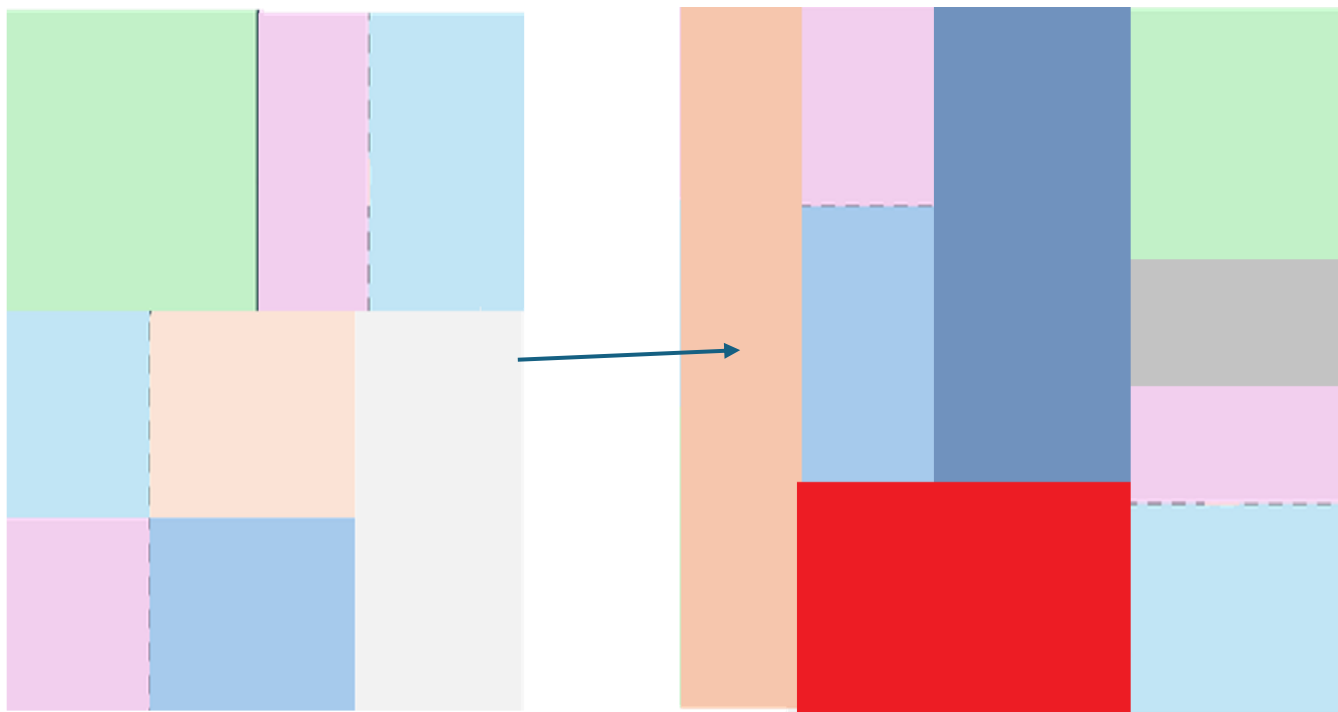
Improv quilts are more *forgiving* in almost every aspect. Color is something to think about and decide beforehand but, even in the midst of sewing, there is always the opportunity to *pivot*, to add or take away a particular color. Some considerations when creating a palette: one color family, a mix of two, using the 60-40-10 rule, everything but the kitchen sink idea, use your favorite, or eliminate the colors you turn to most.



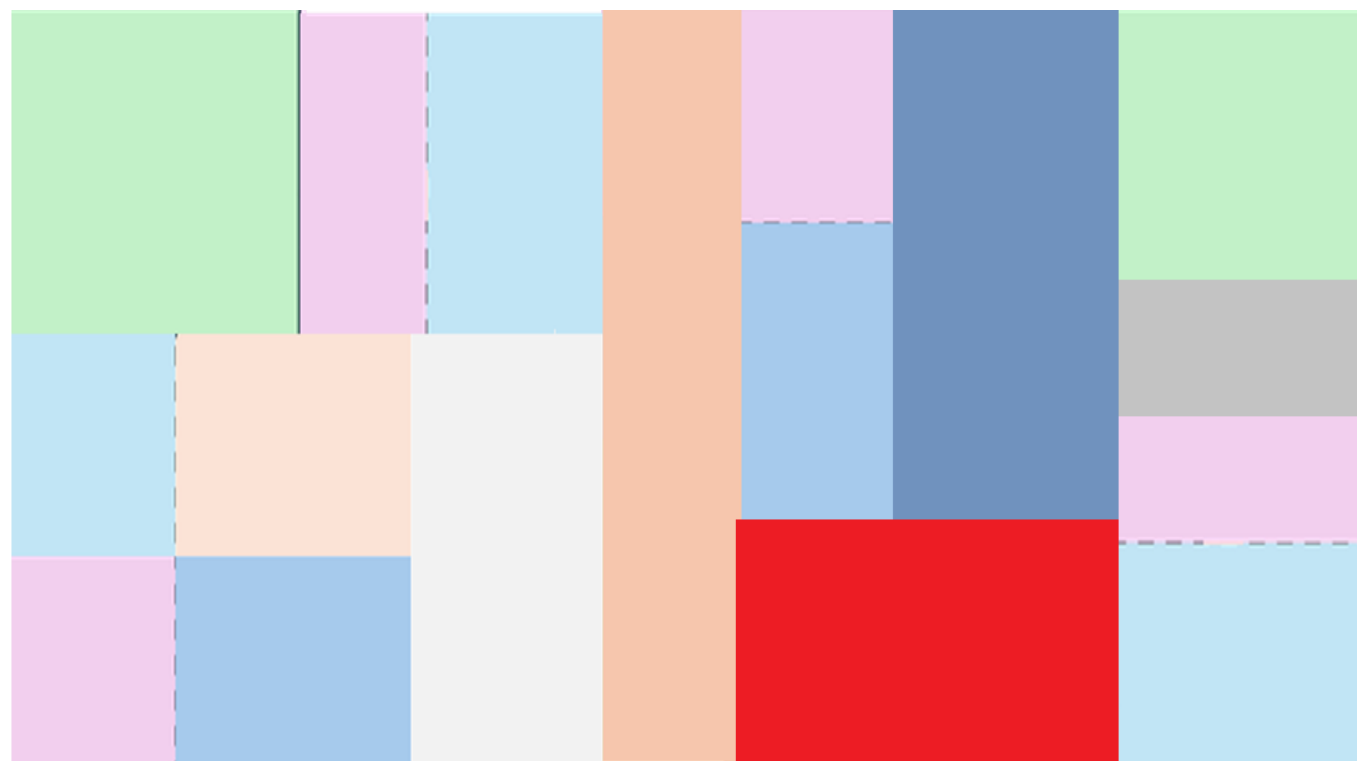
Continue adding pieces and chunks together. Once the blocks are relatively large, begin putting them on the design wall. It's a good idea to step back and look at the piece on the wall. Squint at it or take a photo to get a different perspective.



Create large chunks by adding same size blocks together



Adding the two above will give you this one below.



Play!

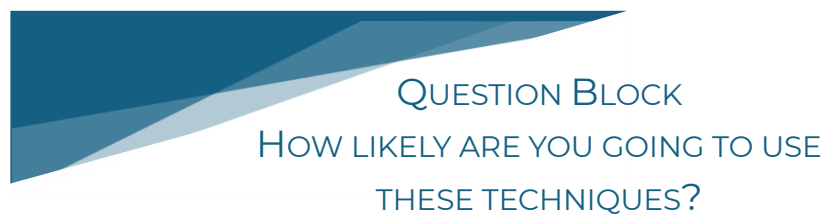
Improv play date:

Make a *play date* with an improv friend to take turns making improv decisions concerning

- fabric
- color
- size
- block
- changes

Create alternative blocks by finding ways to:

- fit angles into your quilt
- slice into the block
- changing the scale of parts of your block
- use patterns in different configurations
- cut patterns and create new ones
- add any element (such as an extra strip) between pattern pieces



You can make entire quilts with scraps by simply creating and sewing chunks together. Now comes the fun: design wall play!



Murky Waters; 54" X 56"; Jan 2017
(maximalism; alternative gridwork)

Five of your many options:

- Chinese coins (strips of solid fabric between strips of improv)
- Shape your fabric chunks into interesting forms and surround with negative space (works especially well for times when you don't like the outcome)
- Use your chunks as the centerpiece of blocks for a medallion quilt
- Throw some neutrals in the mix and separate chunks or parts of chunks
- Create different kinds of improv blocks—controlled improv—and mix them in



The Retreat 48" X 60"; 2020

(use of negative space; alternate blocks; alternative gridwork)



The Sherry Lynn Wood Quilt,
(Chinese coins; maximalism, alternative blocks)

QUESTION BLOCK

DO YOU KNOW ANY MODERN QUILTERS?



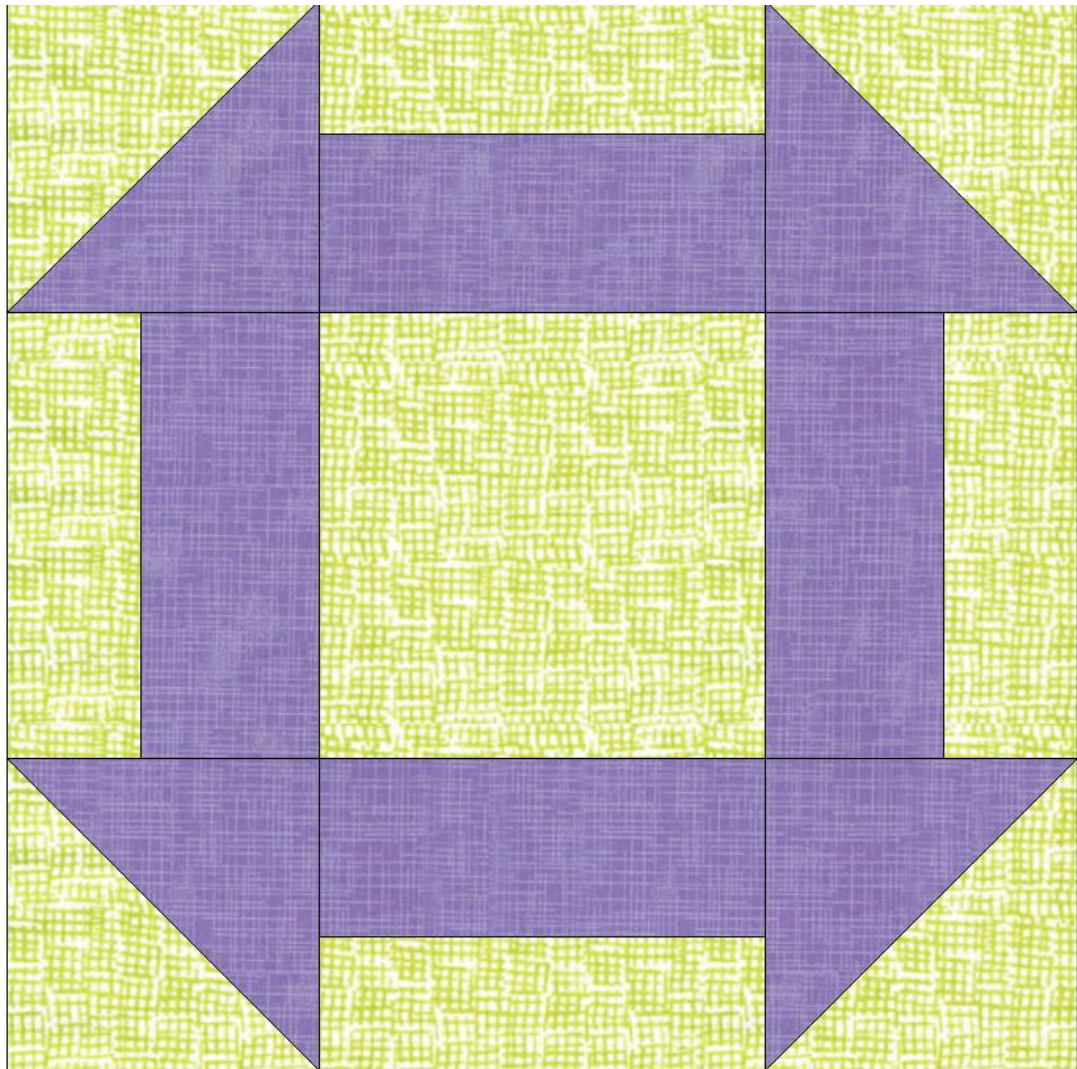
Math Is an Expletive; 59" X 59"; 2015

(use of negative space; alternative gridwork minimalism)

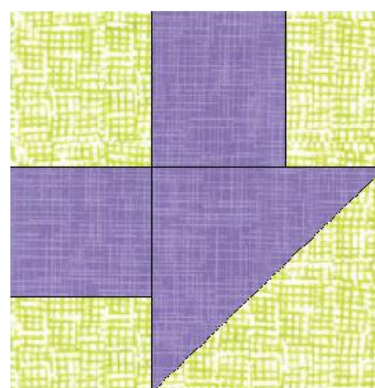
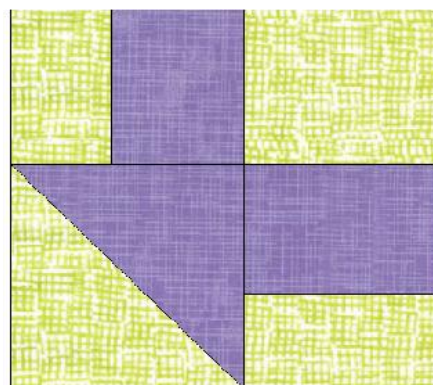
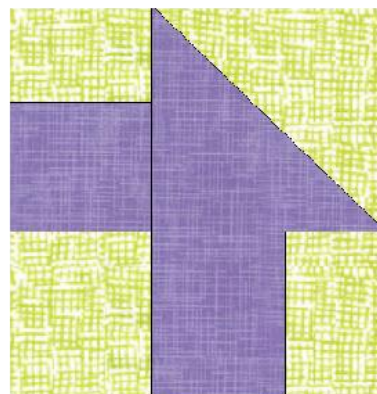
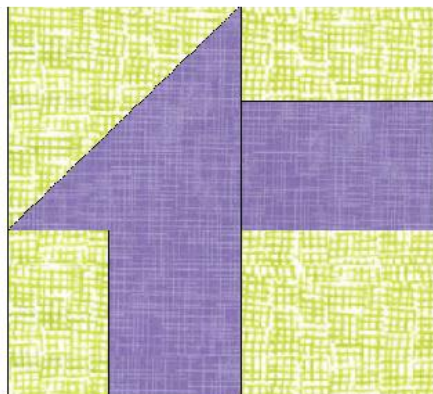
I quilted math equations in the negative space, another reason for the title.

Modern Traditionalism—using something (block, technique, etc.) from traditional quilting and applying modern ideas, colors, etc.

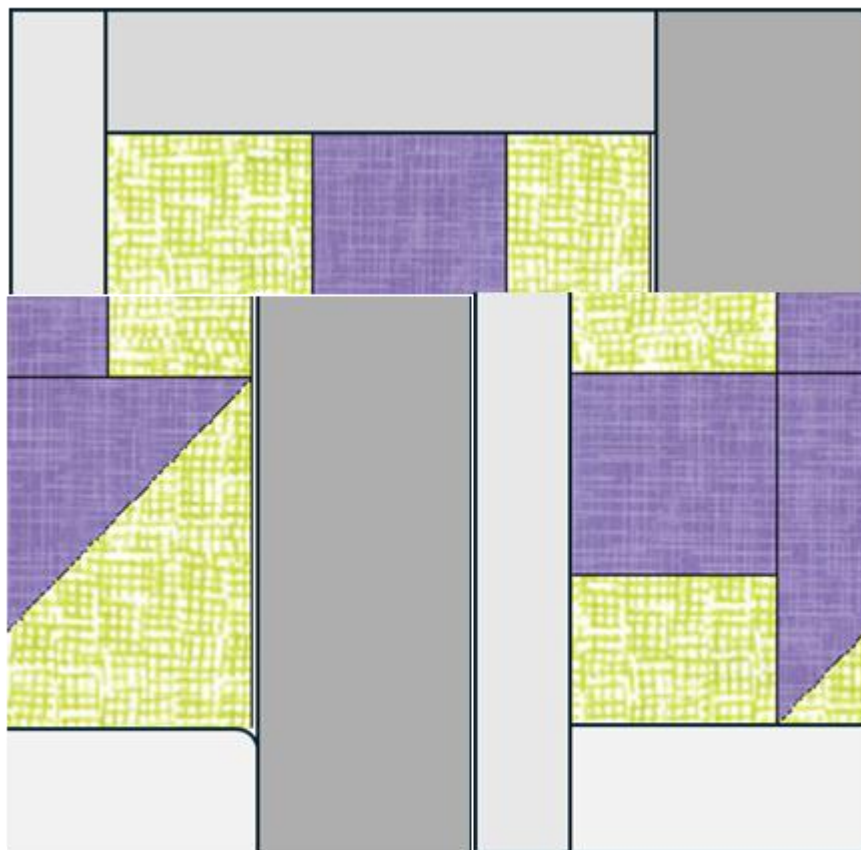
Make blocks from previously unwanted or orphan blocks. Let's look at the opportunities I found in this Shoo-fly, or Hole in the Barn Door block.



Begin by choosing how to cut the block into manageable pieces. An easy way to begin is to cut it into four semi-equal pieces.

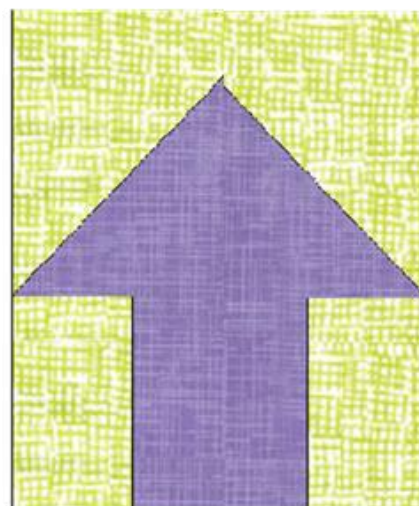
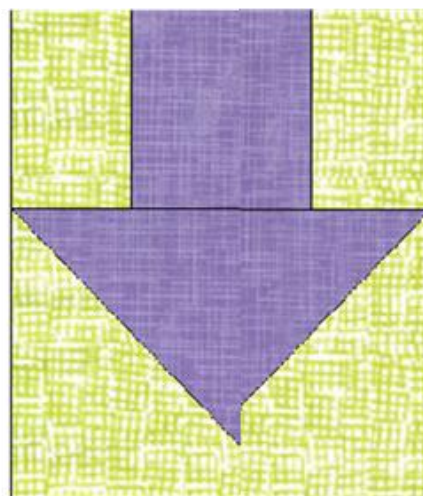
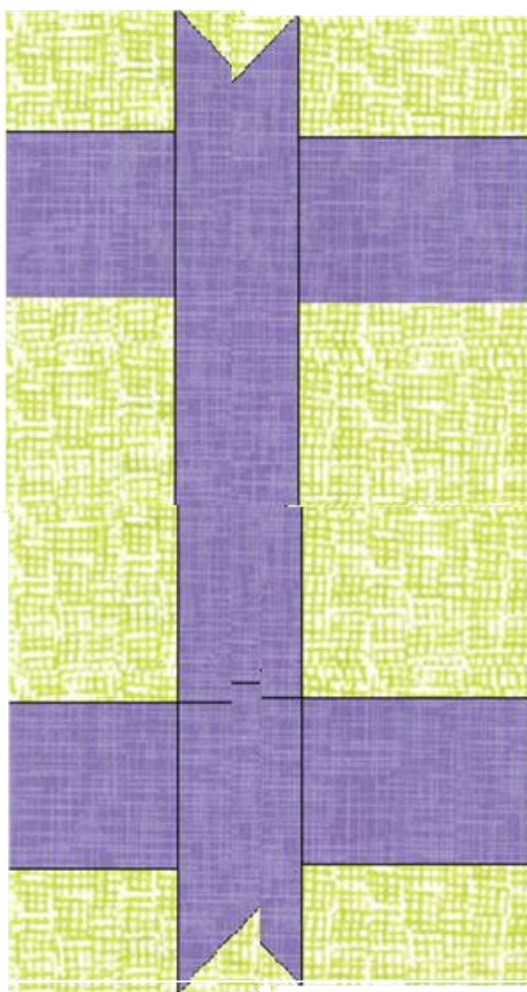


Take one orphan block, cut it, and/or twist and turn the pieces to create a new block(S).

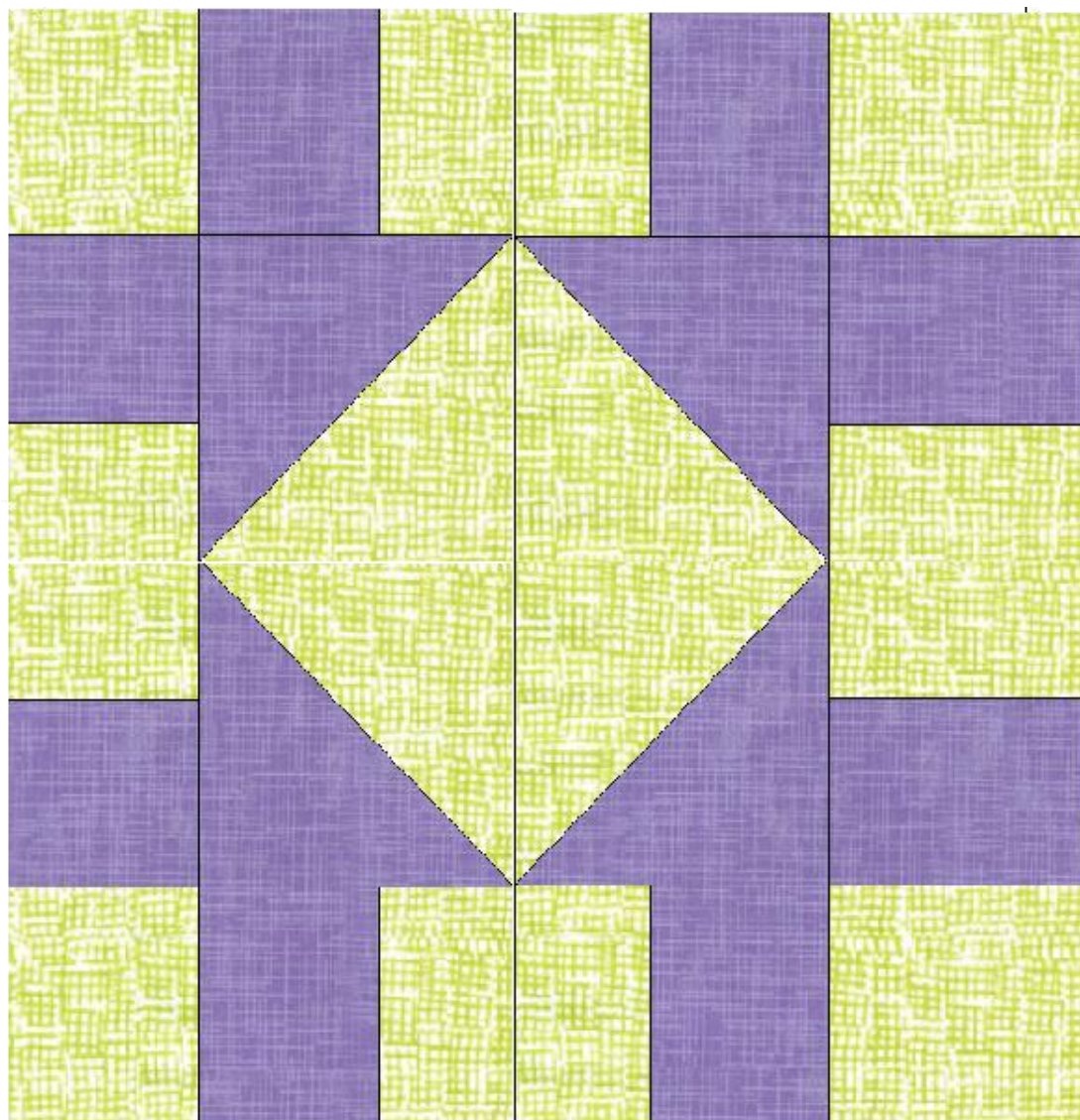


Here, I've taken a quarter piece wrapped it in neutrals, cut it down again, and rearranged them

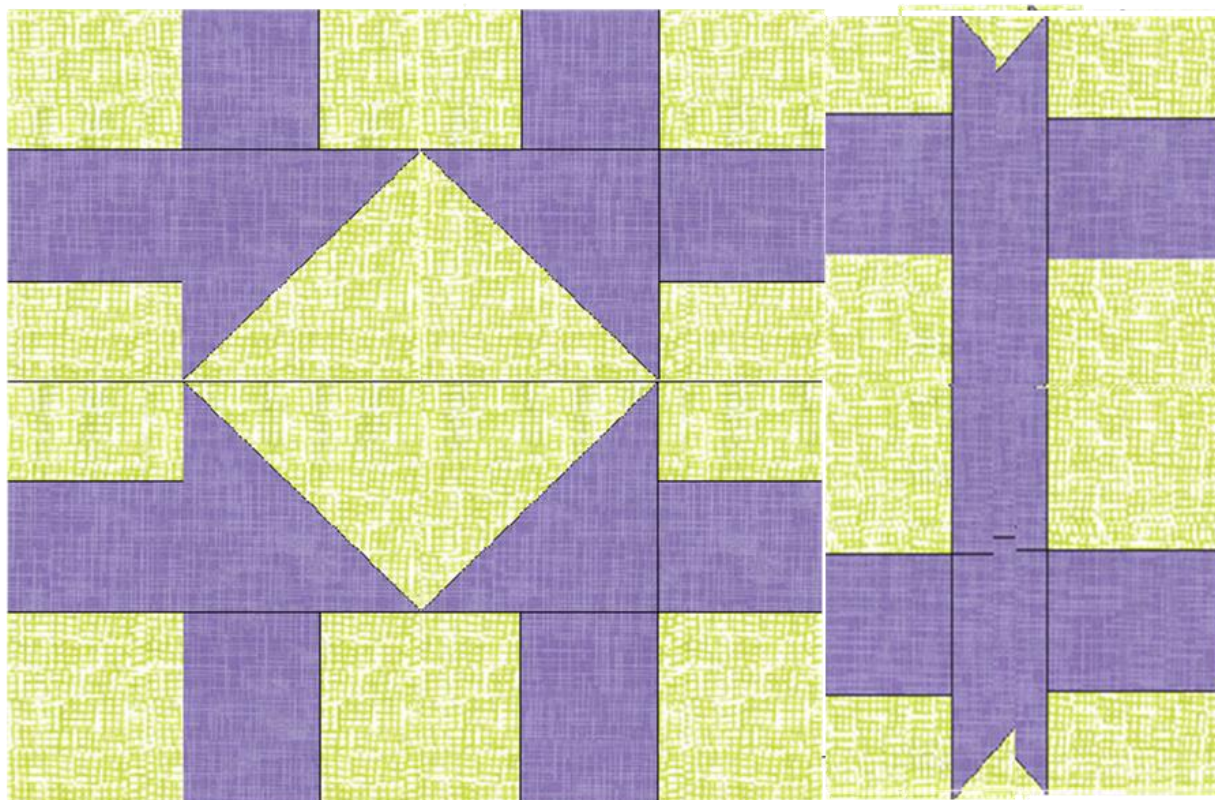
Another way to utilize a quarter of the Shoofly is to cut it into fourths and rearrange the pieces. I discovered arrows using parts of the corners and a ribbon motif using the rest of the pieces. One of the delights of using this form of improv is the “discovery.”



And finally, I simply switched each corner with the one opposite it and discovered this block. Imagine what might happen if I were to match the ribbon piece to this one...

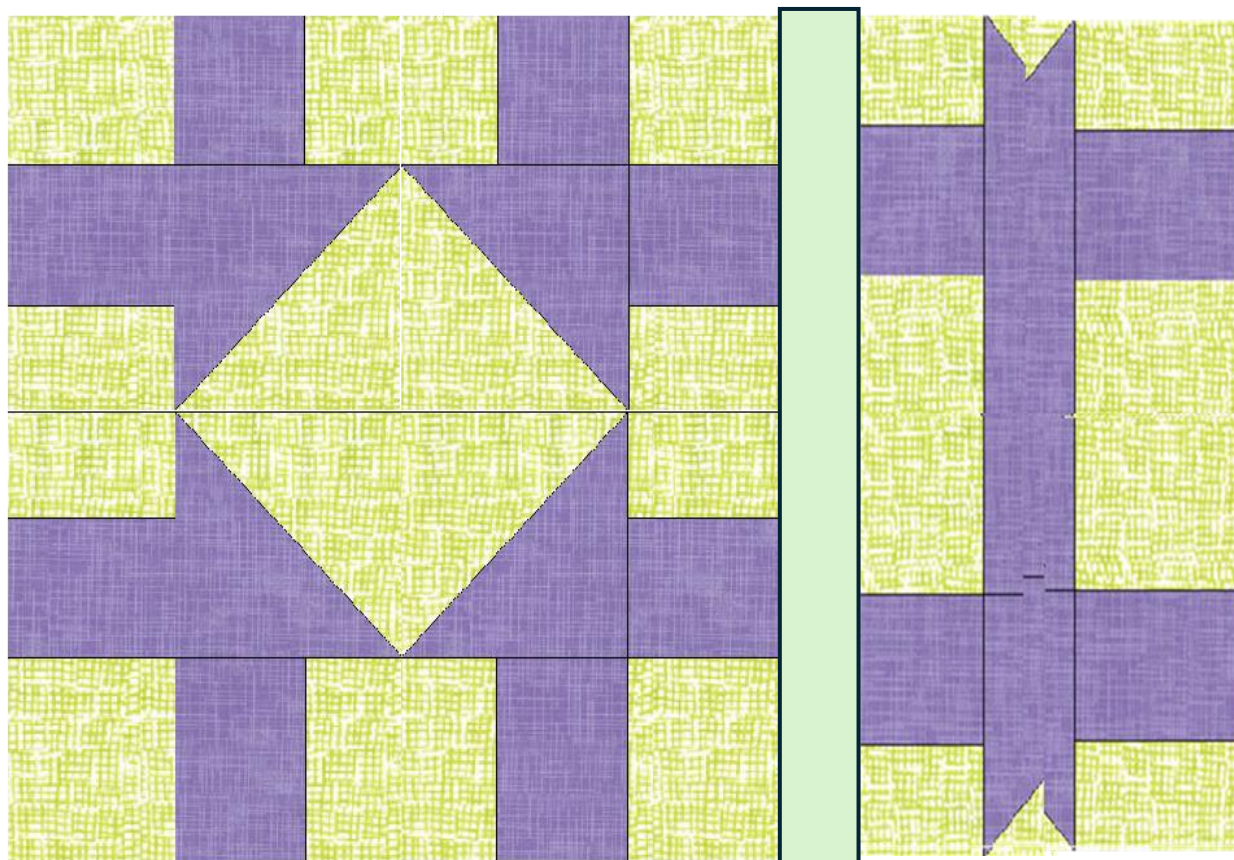


Voila!

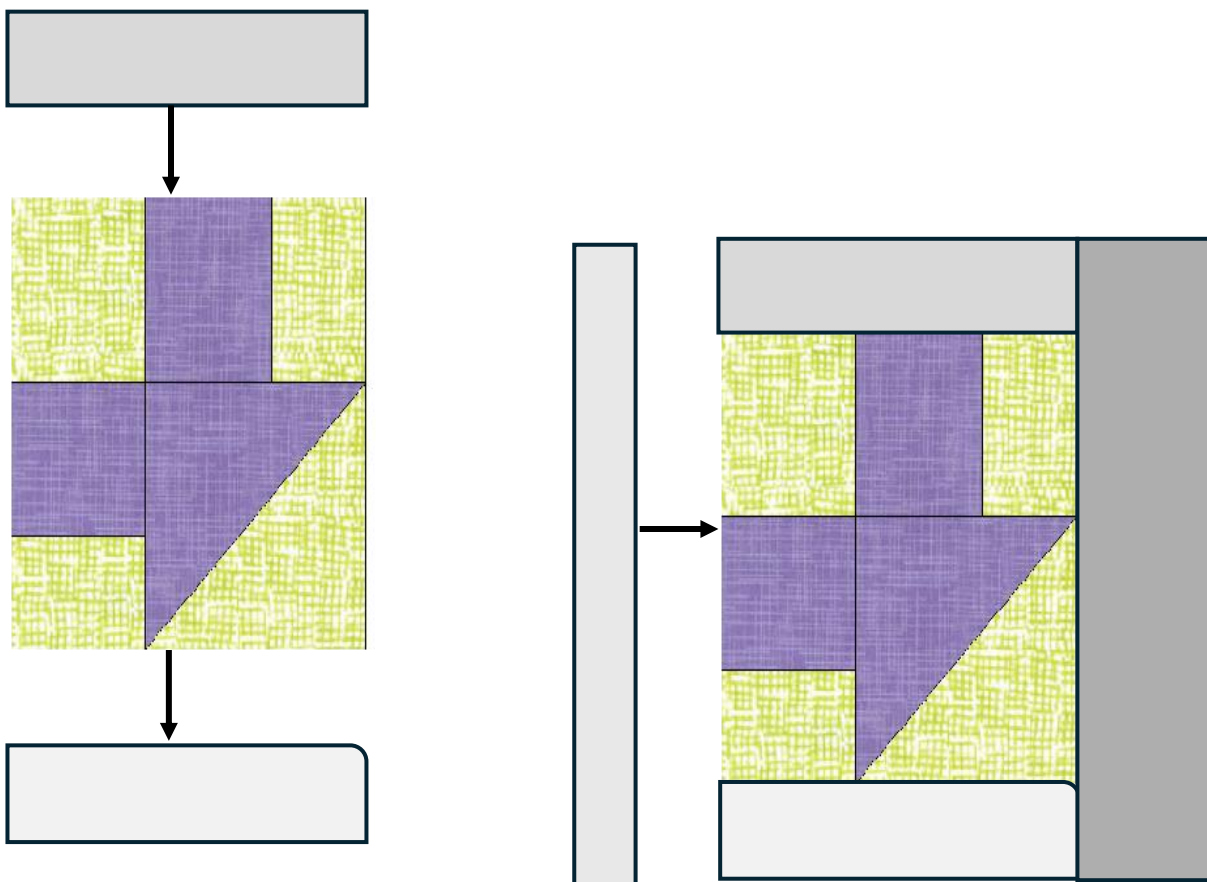


Now with a neutral strip between the two pieces

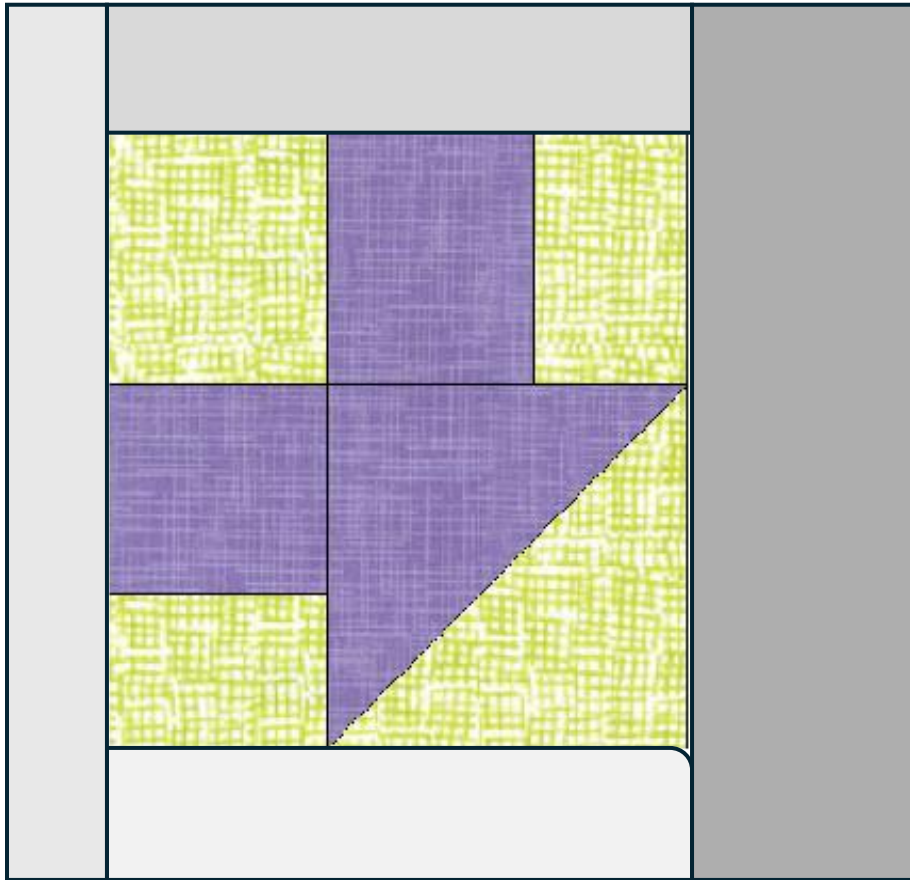
And speaking of neutrals...



And yet, there are still ways to alter the block. You can encircle the piece with neutral strips.



A piece like this one can be used in any way you wish. Note that I attached different colors and sizes to the edges. Now we have a piece of a block that forms the center of what could become a log-cabin block. Or any other block we can dream up!



QUESTION BLOCK

WHICH OF THE SHOOFLY OPTIONS DO YOU LIKE MOST?

Negative space: using large swatches of background color to leave display quilting motifs.

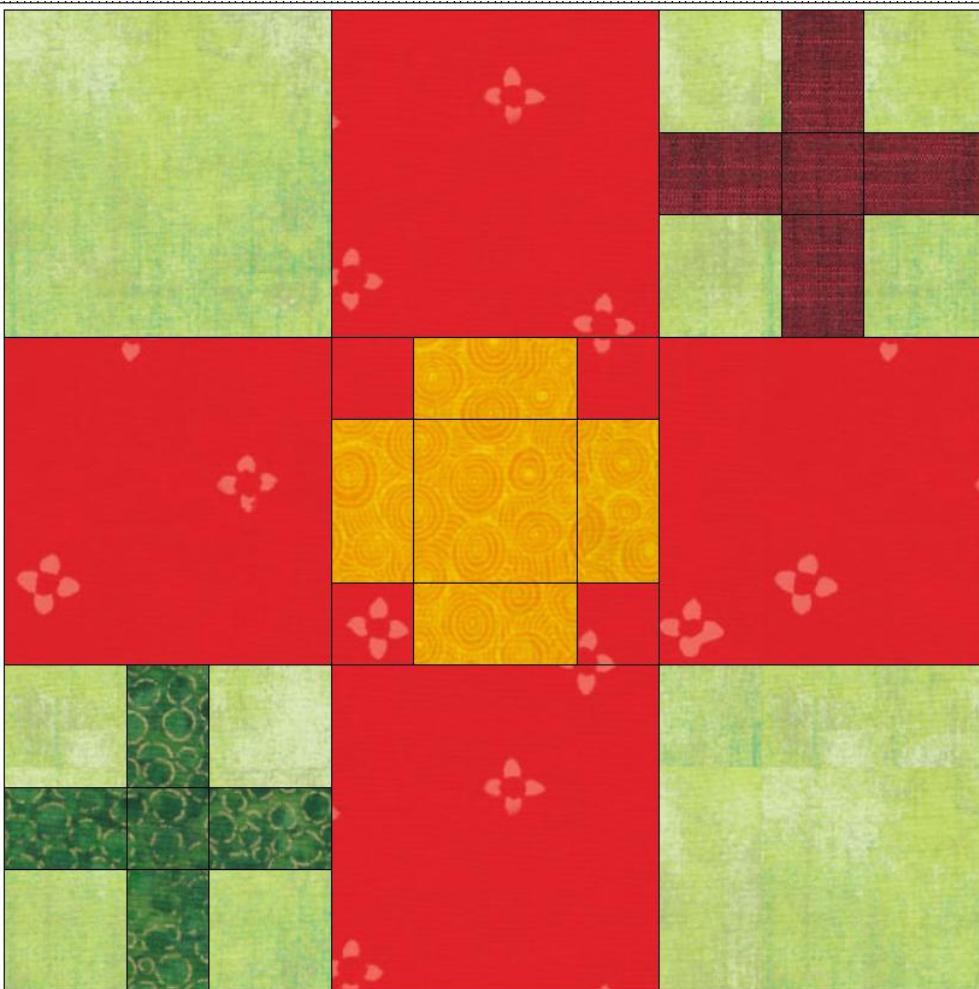
With enough neutral, and some scraps left over from another project, I made this sampler quilt. The original orphan block was a courthouse steps that I cut into four angled pieces. The pluses are from scraps. The corner pieces are some I was playing with in preparation to make a quilt using a technique from *Sunday Morning Quilts* by Amanda Jean Nyberg.



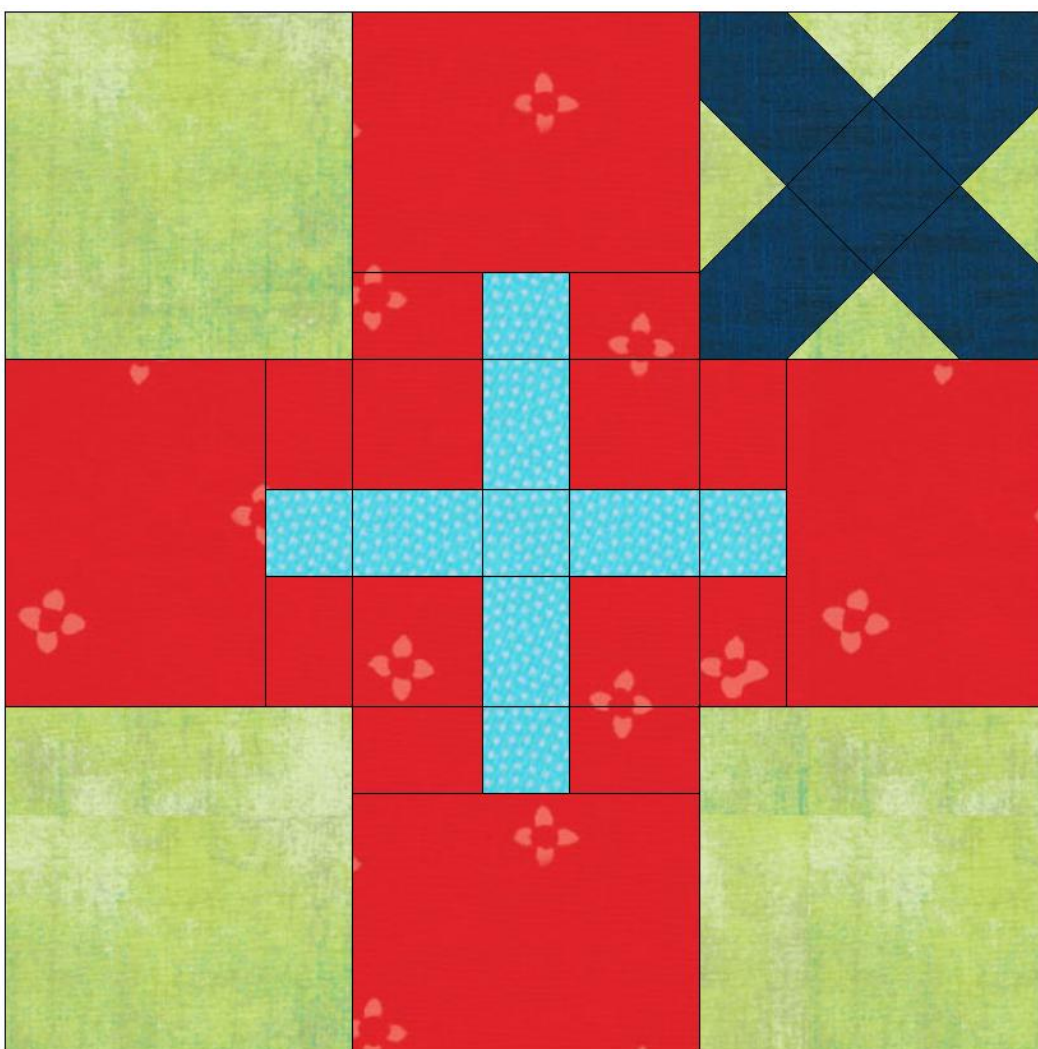
Modern Scrap Sampler; 37" X 44"; 2016
(alternative gridwork; use of negative space)

More ways to play with blocks:

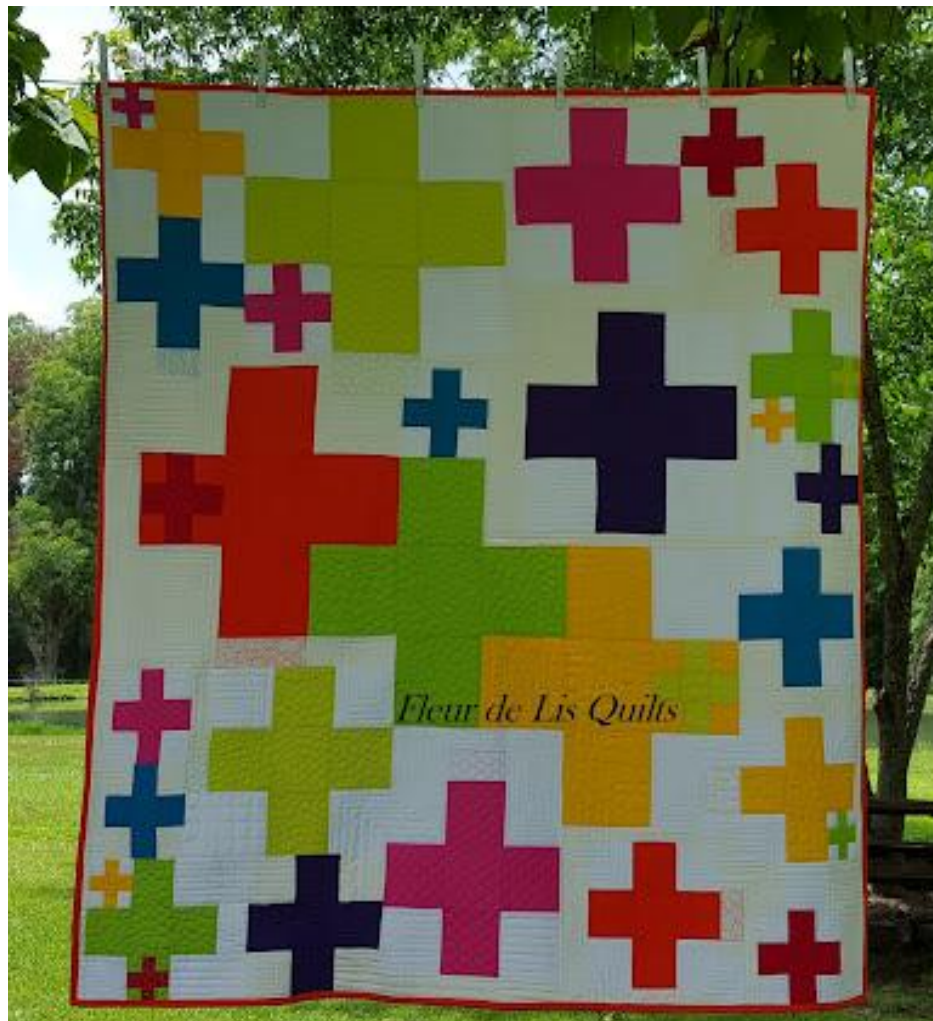
Change the scale so that a small block will fit into a patch.



Make some blocks appear to be on point to create a secondary design, as in the upper left patch. Also, play with the size of a design so it bleeds into surrounding patches as in the center patch.



This happy cross quilt has five sizes of crosses. The largest ones are 12" blocks, the rest are in multiples of three. I did not stress over how or where they would fit. In fact, I decided to make the smallest blocks to fit into the patches of the largest and second largest as I was sewing it together. Hence, the reason there are no tiny blocks in the center of the quilt.



Modern Crosses, large lap quilt, July 2015
(altered blocks, alternative grid work; use of negative space)

Neutrals make wonderful backgrounds because they blend well and “sink” away from the main color.

But they can play a supporting role, as well. In *Row Houses*, I “ghost-quilted” doors and windows in the background so the rally blocks become the roofs, and the neutrals seem to be part of the houses.



Row Houses; 30" X 27"; 2020
(use of negative space, minimalism)

QUESTION BLOCK

DESCRIBE A BLOCK OR QUILT YOU MADE CHANGES TO.

Daystar began as easy, mindless sewing on a difficult day. Eventually, I had large pieces of “fabric,” but they made for a bland flimsy. I needed some color somewhere. I remembered a student’s use of green and purple and played with improv stars. Those stars added fresh color to my flimsy.



Daystar, 2023
(use of negative space)

Quilts

1. *Reflections in Gray*; 70" x 84"; 2012 (Quiltcon 2013)
2. *Modern Crosses*, lap quilt, July 2015
3. *Math Is an Expletive*; 59" X 59"; 2015;
4. *Modern Scrap Sampler*; 37" X 44", 2016;
5. *Tranquility*, 55" X 60", 2016 (Inspired by Cindy Grisdela's *Adventures in Improv Quilts*);
6. *Solicitude*, 45" X 60", 2017 (Inspired by Cindy Grisdela's *Adventures in Improv Quilts*);
7. *Murky Waters*, 54" X 56"; Jan 2017;
8. *Give Me Words*; 54" X 58"; 2020;
9. *The Retreat* 48" X 60", 2020;
10. *Row Houses*; 2020; 30" X 27"
11. *Daystar*, 2023;
12. *Summer Sangria*, 88" X 92", 2024;
13. *Seasoned in Louisiana*, 76" X 92", 2024;



Citrus Sherbert, 50" X 50", 2023
(maximalism)



Give Me Words; 54" X 58"; 2020
(use of negative space; minimalism)

QUESTION BLOCK

WHICH OF THE EXAMPLE QUILTS WOULD BE
ONE YOU'D CONSIDER MAKING?

Suggested Titles

- *Sunday Morning Quilts by Amanda Jean Nyberg*
- *Improv Quilts: Building confidence in color and technique by Laura Lowen*
- *Imperfect: Embracing Improv Quilting by Julie Burton*
- *Adventures in Improv Quilts by Cindy Grisdela*
- *FreeHand Curve Quilts by Cindy Grisdela*
- *Improv Quilting by Irene Rodrick*
- *Intuitive Color & Design: Adventures in Art Quilting by Jean Wells*
- *Getting Started in Improv Quilting by Amy Ellis*
- *The Improv Handbook for Modern Quilters by Sherri Lynn Wood*

What have you learned about

- Improv Techniques—creating fabric from scraps, using traditional blocks, turning scraps into complex blocks, creating your own blocks
- Organizing Improv Blocks and Chunks
- Color Theory
- Minimalism vs Maximalism

A few warm questions:

- What surprised you about your process?
- What felt easier than you expected?
- What felt harder?
- What did you learn about your own intuition?
- What do you want to try next?

À La Mary Quote:

“Improv quilting is a lifelong conversation between your hands, your fabric, and your imagination. Every block teaches you something new. Keep playing. Keep trusting. Keep following the spark.”

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Use and Respect

These materials were created especially for this class and for your personal use. Please don't share or distribute them — keeping them within our classroom helps support my work and allows me to keep creating À La Mary resources for you.

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TRUST YOUR HANDS. FOLLOW YOUR CURIOSITY. MAKE SOMETHING ONLY YOU CAN MAKE.