

Inch by inch, row by row

Adams County, Ohio, launched a homespun innovation in 2001 that North America soon embraced: a community folk art project known as a barn quilt trail. Suzi Parron wrote about the grassroots aesthetic—quilt squares painted on boards, usually 8' x 8', mounted on barns—in her 2012 book, *Barn Quilts and the American Quilt Trail Movement*, with its founder Donna Sue Groves. They explained the origins of the pastoral patchwork and the spread to 25 states and Canada. Barn quilts now number into the thousands. Parron returns to the subject in *Following the Barn Quilt Trail*, with a foreword by Groves; it was released in April. “The second book is more personal,” said Parron, a former high school English teacher. “It talks a lot about life on the road”—13,000 miles in a converted bus with new husband, Glen, a software developer who works remotely, and their dog, Gracie, encountering barn quilts and the makers of them. Parron answered questions about the latest installment, part memoir, part travelogue. Edited excerpts follow. —Megan Henry, BSJ '18

What are some benefits of barn quilts?

It's definitely a way of bringing people together because these days, people are so involved with electronics and social media. I think we get very drawn into things that are happening elsewhere in the world, and we don't often get involved with people that are close by in our community. Barn quilts give people a reason to come back around to something and spend time with people that are close by. A lot of people make the greatest friends through barn quilts. Also, there's a whole lot of community pride in them. People don't always have a reason to be proud of where they live or get excited about it. All of a sudden, they've got these wonderful works of art, and they have visitors coming to see.

What makes a barn quilt memorable?

They can certainly stand out visually; typically, barn quilts try to use really bright colors. Although you might think the really bright colors might not be as pleasing up close, you want them to be visible at a

distance. So a lot of times, barn quilts are memorable because you see these bright colors that you don't normally see in the landscape. And if you talk to folks involved in a barn quilt, you may find out that it's the replica of a family quilt, or it was done in memory of someone in the family. That's always really memorable, too—when you find the meaning behind it.

How long does it typically take to make an 8' x 8' barn quilt?

Some folks will put on a layer of paint in the morning and come back maybe that afternoon and put another layer, and then the next day, do a different color. So, either several days or a week.

What does the process entail?

You start with the material, usually either plywood or a board called MDO [medium density overlay], also called a sign board. And, of course, you select patterns. You prime the boards, then draw them out. Sometimes, there is a little bit of math involved if there are a lot of angles, but it's not too difficult. Most folks use painter's tape and do one color at a time.

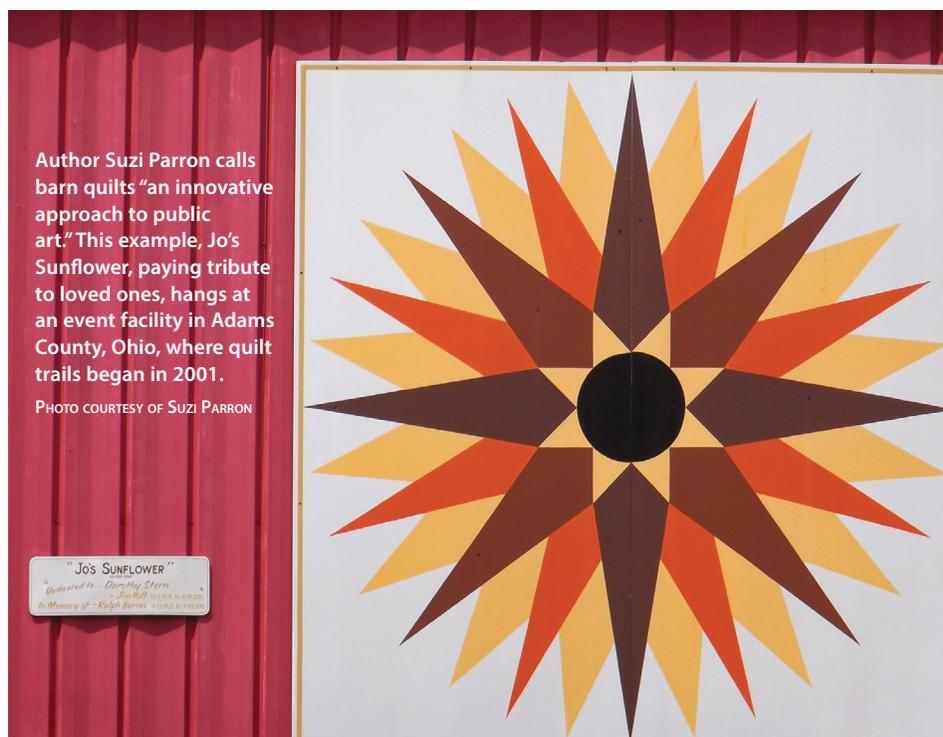
You make presentations about barn quilts full time.

I've been extremely lucky. The year the first book came out, I gave about 40 talks to various organizations and it got to the point of, well, I could probably quit my job and do this full time. I share the story of the barn quilt trail, how it began in Ohio with Donna Sue, and how different people moved it forward. A lot of it hinges on the personal stories.

What was Adams County, birthplace of the barn quilt trail, like?

It was like being dropped into this wonderful piece of history that was just there waiting for me.

► For barn quilt photos and more about the book, go online to ohiotoday.org/summer-2016.



Author Suzi Parron calls barn quilts “an innovative approach to public art.” This example, Jo’s Sunflower, paying tribute to loved ones, hangs at an event facility in Adams County, Ohio, where quilt trails began in 2001.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SUZI PARRON

“Jo’s SUNFLOWER”
Dedicated to: Dorothy Stern
— Jim Hill 1998
In Memory of: Ralph Barnes 2012

Editor's note: Each edition of Ohio Today covers a recent Ohio University Press book.