Designing quilts is one of my favorite parts of the quilt making process. When I found improv quilting, I was hooked because it is a design-as-you-go process. Each step you have a chance to respond to what you’ve made before, and tweak your design accordingly. The more you know about design, the easier and more fun this becomes!

There are two parts to design, design elements and design principles. Keep in mind, they are not rules - there’s no one right way to design a quilt! Design elements and principles are tools for analyzing your design and helping to shape the quilt towards what you intended.

**DESIGN ELEMENTS**

Design elements are the building blocks that make up your quilt design. There are many of these, but the ones that show up most frequently in quilt design are:

**Color** – Color is one of the first things we notice about a quilt design and it plays a strong role in our designs. Color is made up of hue, saturation, and value.

**Hue** – Where the color falls on the color wheel or in the rainbow. It is the base of the color if it were in its purest form. For instance, aqua is a blue-green hue. Olive green is a yellow-green hue. A cool grey is a blue hue, while most warm greys are red or orange hues.

**Saturation** - High saturation is very colorful (rainbow colors) while low saturation is closer to white, black, or grey (for instance, a black and white photograph has no saturation). Neutral colors are low to medium saturation. Tan has low saturation while fuchsia has high saturation.

**Value** - How bright or dark the color is. When you get the advice to take a photograph of your quilt in black and white to make sure you have lights, mediums, and darks - that is checking the value of the colors. White is the highest value and black is the lowest value.

**Line** – Line is one of the most basic elements of design. In quilting, lines can make up the blocks of the quilt (e.g. stacked coin quilt), sashing, borders, binding, and the quilting design. Our eyes tend to follow lines when we see them in designs.

**Shape** - Shapes are used frequently in quilt design. With quilts, we use shapes to make bigger shapes. Blocks are made up of shapes, and the blocks themselves are shapes. And the blocks come together to make a big quilt-shaped quilt.

**DESIGN PRINCIPLES**

Design principles are concepts to keep in mind while combining design elements to create a quilt design. These are not rules, but things that exist to some degree in every design you make. By knowing what they are and what they do, you can change your design to increase or decrease any of these to fit your desired design. All of the principles can be used with any of the elements.

There are many design principles, but two that I use a lot in quilt design are contrast and movement.

**Contrast** – Contrast is the measurement of how different two design elements are. For instance, there is high contrast between white and
black or chartreuse and fuchsia, and low contrast between white and light grey or mint and aqua. Circles and hexagons are lower contrast than circles and triangles. Solids and prints are higher contrast than solids and blenders.

**Tips:** If your quilt design feels “flat” or “muddied”, try increasing the contrast of some of the elements. If the quilt feels “overwhelming” or “too loud”, try reducing the contrast.

**Movement** - When we look at quilts, we don’t just look at them as a whole, or stare at one spot (generally). Instead our eye moves throughout the design. That relates to the movement of the quilt. Movement is tied to the energy of a design, as the more you move your eyes, the more energetic or “dynamic” a quilt will feel.

Smaller pieces create more energy than bigger pieces. Large pieces are considered “resting spots” for the eyes. Horizontal lines are calmer than vertical lines, which in turn are calmer than diagonal lines.

**Tip:** If your quilt feels “static”, add more movement by adding smaller pieces, vertical elements, or angles. If your quilt feels too “overwhelming” or “chaotic”, reduce the movement by using larger pieces and more horizontal shapes and lines.

**IN ACTION**
For this quilt, I started with the strips on the left, but felt that the overall design was a little too chaotic and lacked cohesion. To address that, I made three major changes (as well as adding more strips to flesh out the quilt) which resulted in the quilt on the right.

1. I changed the strips from vertical to horizontal. Horizontal lines feel calmer than vertical lines.
2. I moved like colors closer together. This reduces the contrast between stripes and reduces movement since the eye is not drawn haphazardly across the quilt to find the highest contrast areas, but can move through the quilt more smoothly.
3. I added larger blocks of solid color as resting spots between each stripe. To keep the quilt from looking like a single color with stripes on it, I varied the colors of the sashing, but kept like colors together, again to keep the movement smooth.

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