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Today's article is inspired by all the beautiful quilts we were treated to at the Quilt Festival in Natal during July... a feast for the eyes and some really wonderful entries. Congratulations to every single person who was brave enough to put their work on show! I hope you felt enormously proud to see your quilt/s hanging there: I certainly did.

I know for sure that when my quilts make it home, they will have been folded up for quite some time and will have creases in them. Being the perfectionist that I am, I won't like the way they look or hang, so some TLC will be needed to get them back into shape.

When you quilt anything, you inevitably distort the fabric, no matter how careful you are. This leads to waves, wobbles and wrinkles...a 'www' that you can really do without. As long as you don't have a tsunami going on in your quilt, you can follow a simple procedure called "Blocking" to tame the beast. This is especially important for quilts that are going to hang anywhere (hence my reference to the Quilt festival!) but any quilt will benefit from being blocked. It will drape nicely, have square corners and just look more professional.

So, blocking is a process whereby you wet your quilt and then pin it out on a flat surface so it is perfectly square before letting it dry. Natural fibres such as cotton, silk and wool have 'memory' and can be trained to remain in a certain place, so something that is out of shape can be reshaped when wet (stretched slightly or

eased in) and will remember that new shape when dry...a wonderful property for us quilters to exploit! So here's a thing before we go much further!...Your quilt is going to get wet so it needs to be 100% colourfast otherwise you run the risk of colour bleeding on your beautiful quilt! How do I know this? Well, one of the quilts I made for the Festival was made with blue and red Shweshwe on a white background and all of the 7 (yes, luckily there were only 7) red hexagons bled when I blocked it....tears, screams and a touch of bad language followed for several days!



I had washed, washed and washed those fabrics knowing that they are notorious for losing colour! Blue and red are the worst and of course I had both! The moral of this quick side story is to always pre-wash your fabrics several times but also use a product such as Dylon

Colour Catchers or Retayne to remove and set any loose colour.



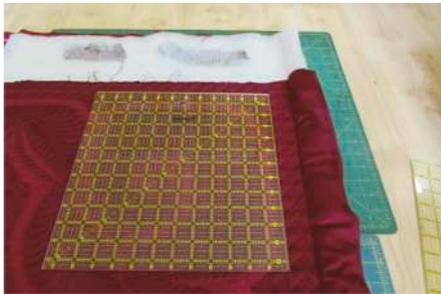
My quilt was saved by washing it about 5 times with Dylon SOS Colour Run, so keep some of that in your cupboard as well! A thorough blocking and no one would even guess at the stress it caused!

Ok, back to blocking. You need an area big enough to lay your quilt out flat. I use my studio floor covered with polystyrene sheets that you get from hardware or craft stores. Then you will need lots of pins, a tape measure and a friend would be very helpful, especially if you have a large quilt!

Square up your quilt first by

1,2,3, Block my Quilt!

marking the straight edges and making sure the corners are square before you cut it.



Diagonal measurements must also be equal.



I normally quilt over the edges of where I'm going to cut so I know I can get a perfectly straight edge. Make a note of the length and width measurements for later on. I want my quilt to be really quite wet for blocking and find that using a spray bottle gives too little water and is too time consuming. I therefore put my quilt in the bath or sink and get it really wet. Then I pull out the plug and let the water drain away as much as possible. Use towels to blot the quilt dry and carry it carefully to the area where you are going to work.



Spread out the wet quilt and start working along one edge of the polystyrene, pinning the quilt edge

to the polystyrene edge every few inches until you have pinned the whole edge to the same measurement that you had with the dry quilt.



Water and scrunching up your quilt will make it seem smaller but you can ease it back to its original size with a bit of effort.

Next you need to make sure that the corners are perfectly square so use a square ruler. Again, pin the edges down and keep moving along the edges of the quilt making sure each time that you are maintaining a straight line by measuring the width/length. Keep going until you get to the opposite end and then repeat the process of getting the corners perfect with the square ruler. If you have done it properly, you should be able to measure from one corner to its diagonally opposite corner and have the same measurement when you try the other corner set. The length should measure the same all across the quilt, and the width should be equal all down the length of the quilt. In theory it's a simple process but you only need to be a millimetre out with each measurement to have a big difference at the end when doing a big quilt. It's also time consuming and difficult to do alone on big quilts, but in my opinion it's really worth the effort. I keep checking until I'm 100% happy and by that stage I probably have a pin every inch or so along each border. So the quilt outline is pinned securely, even and square. You now have the chance to also pin

your borders and sashings in perfectly straight lines and any puffiness can be patted down to ease it in. Again, I'd use pins to secure any problems areas and make sure they stay in the places I want them to be.

Then it's a question of patience. You want that quilt to be perfectly dry before you remove any pins and in our lovely hot Pretoria summers that's not a problem, it will be done in a matter of hours. In the winter it will take longer. It will also take longer at the coast where it's more humid. If you have a fan or 2 that you can place to blow over the quilt that will also help. Just remember, you are trying to retrain the natural fibres to keep the shape you want them to hold, so removing the pins before it's totally dry will undo all your hard work!

Once it's dry you can proceed to putting your binding on and neatening up all the edges. Which reminds me, there's another story for next time! Add a sleeve and your masterpiece should hang beautifully!

Until next time...happy sewing!

Claire

