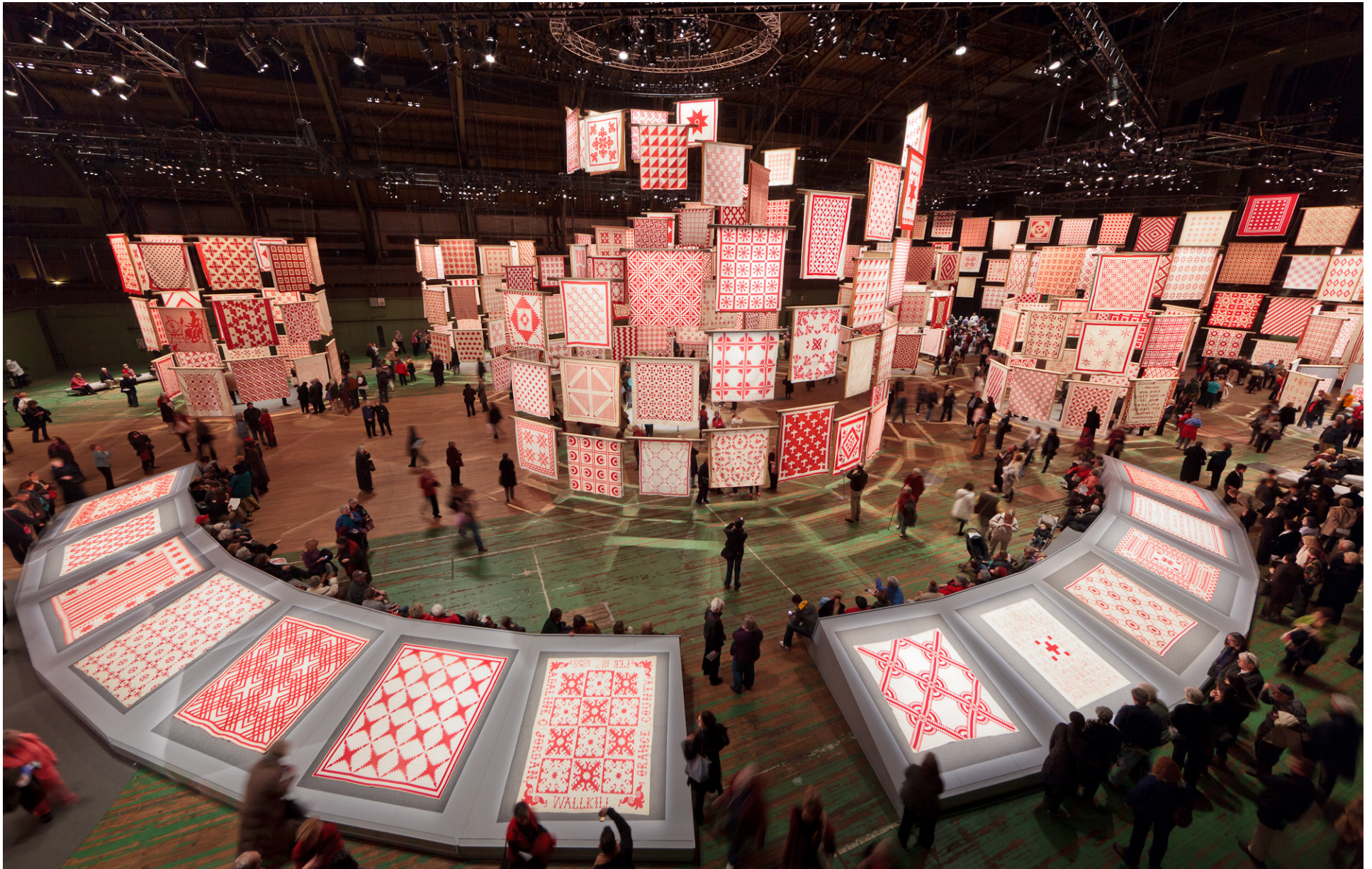




## Infinite Variety: Three Centuries of Red and White Quilts

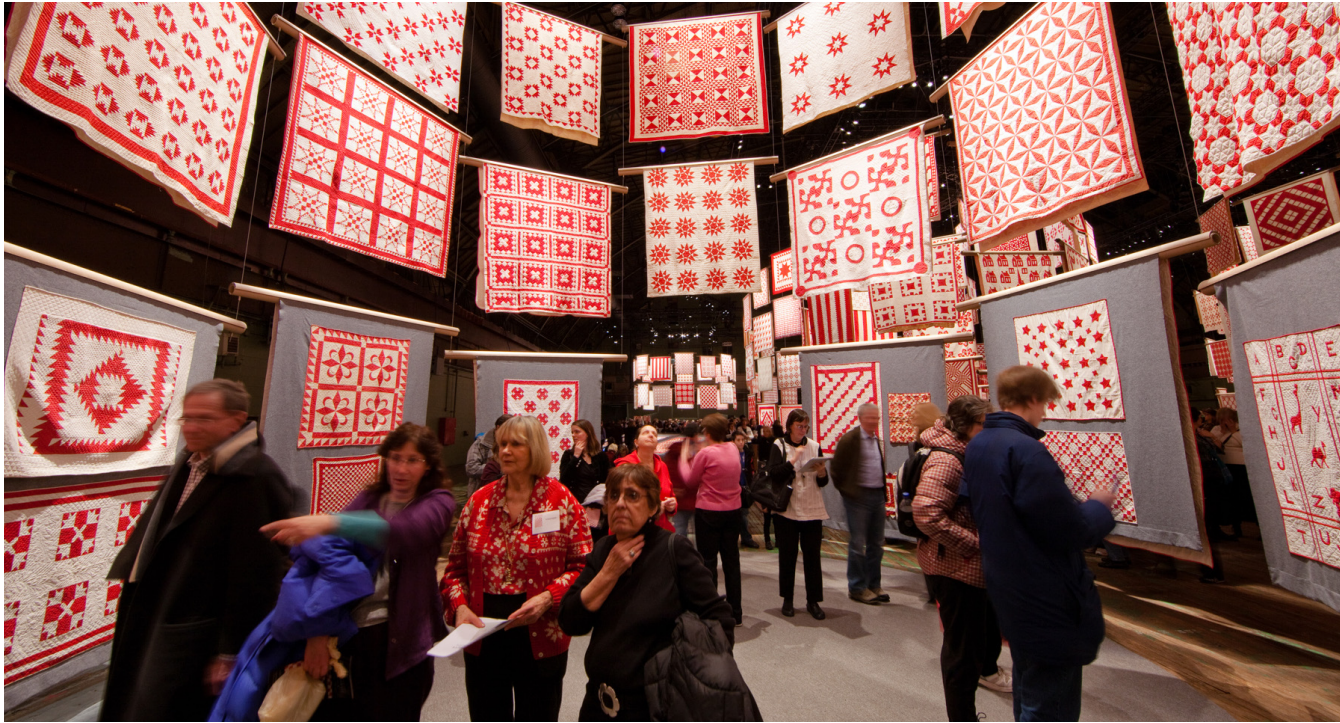
Infinite Variety: Three Centuries of Red and White Quilts opened to acclaim at the Park Avenue Armory for six days in March 2011. Utilizing the bold quilts as both object and exhibition environment, it filled the tall volume of the hall with gossamer pavilions, sweeping walls, and arcs of exuberant quilts. The sheer volume of quilts—651 in all—was both the star feature and the central exhibition problem: how to display this spectacular collection in a way that hints at its origins and thrills the public, while enabling extended inspection without fatigue. The design team centered the exhibition on a ring of chairs with a “tornado” of quilts rising more than 45 feet above them—a representation of quilting circles and their prolific production. Flowing outward and around this feature were cylindrical pavilions that enabled intimate viewing while permitting people to take in a breathtaking array of patterns criss-crossing the exhibition.

The first challenge was to show the entire collection as a whole without overwhelming the public. The collector wanted to show the collection as a *collection*, in addition to exhibiting the individual quilts well. Indeed, the sheer number of quilts was one of the show’s defining characteristics; the array of patterning and the volume of material were breathtaking and would draw a multitude of visitors to the show.

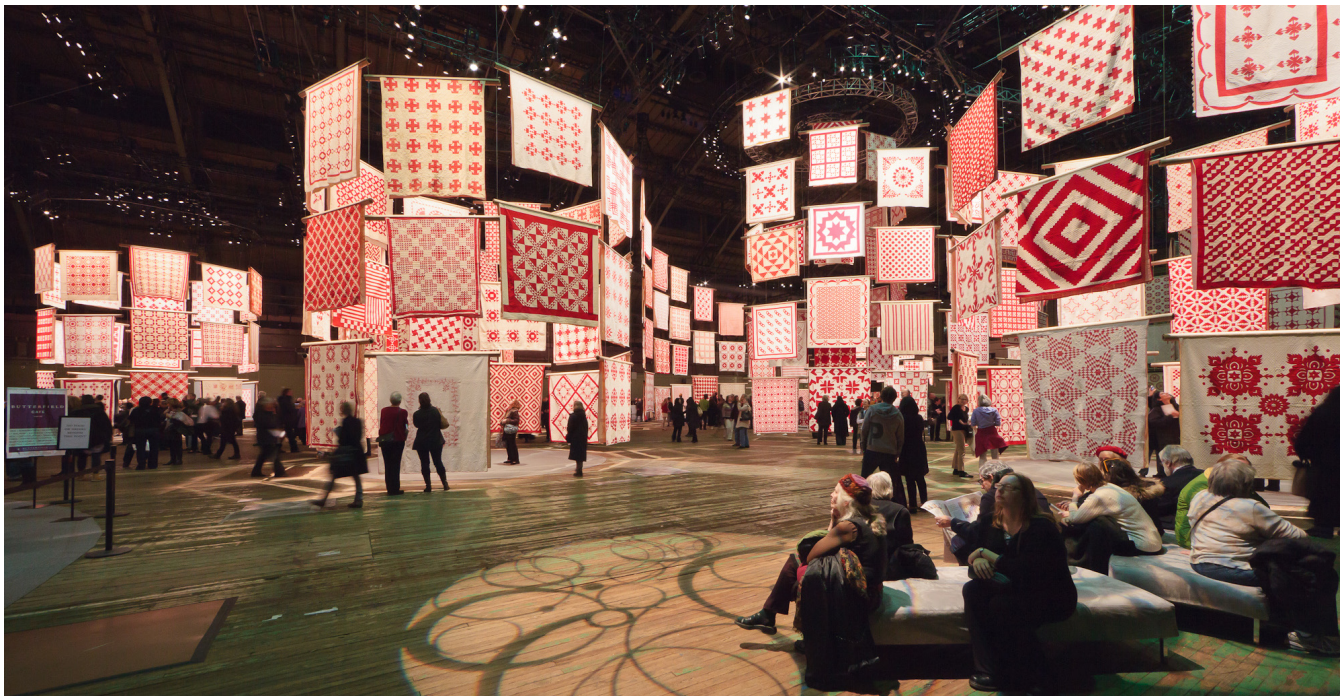


We used the quilts both as display objects and collectively as exhibition architecture on a grand scale. Cylindrical pavilions, each formed of quilt pairs that generated an inner and outer surface, snaked through the exhibition hall with changing vistas. A huge sweep of quilts formed the background of the exhibition, rising up over a large café.

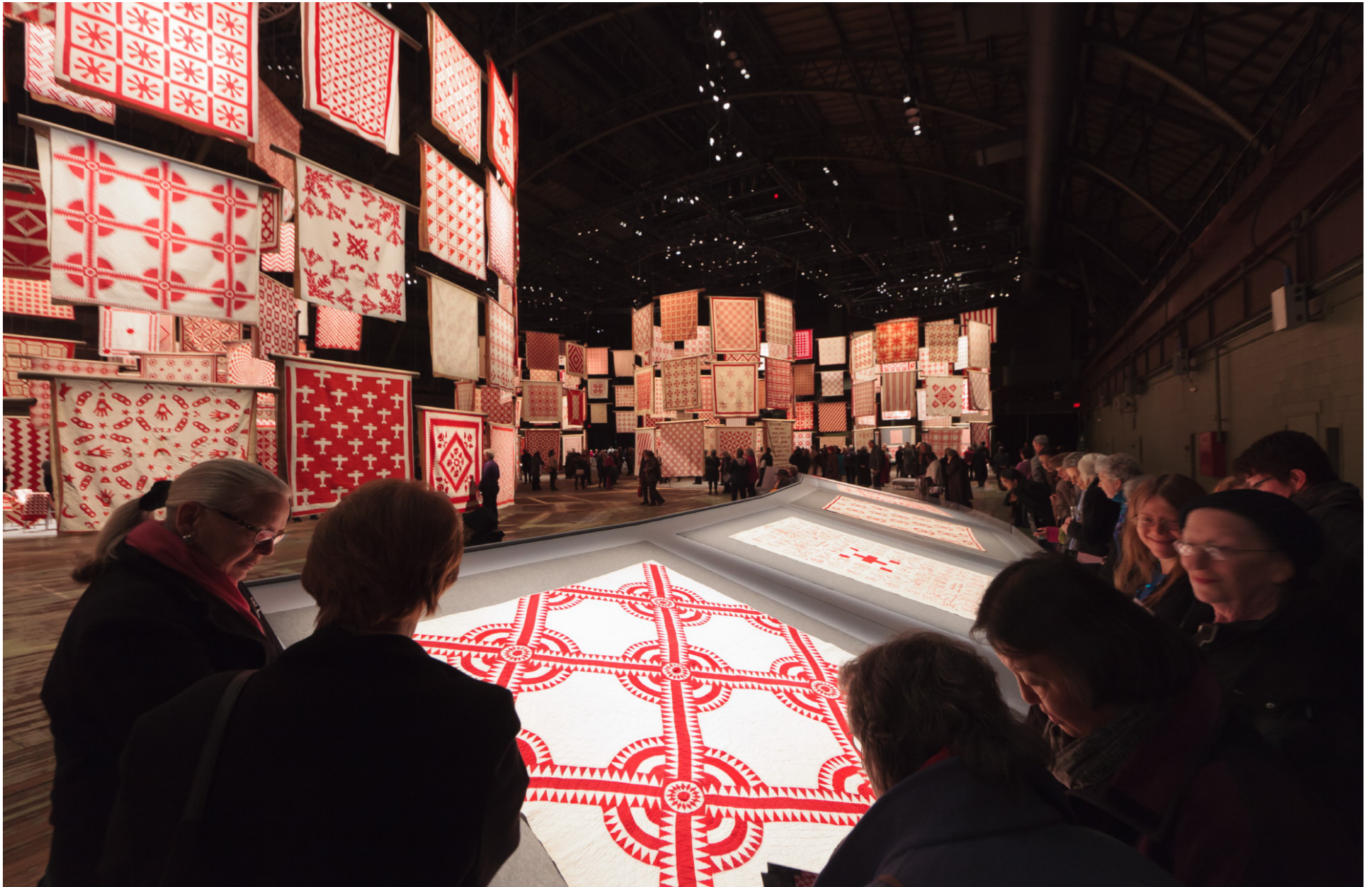
The most detailed and important quilts were arrayed on a long, sloping arc that provided close-up viewing while forming a long bench along its inner wall. Together, these elements formed a breathtaking first impression and a multitude of viewing possibilities.



The second challenge was to experience the quilts without a feeling of relentless repetition—particularly for those not already passionate about quilts. Show organizers typically array quilts in long rows that make viewing large numbers of them tiring because the perspective and the viewer's body position never change. If people were to enjoy a viewing experience of this many quilts, the design would have to encompass a variety of environments and vistas that could measure up to the variety of the quilts.



Ample upholstered poufs at strategic vantage points allowed clusters of people to sit, take in the view, and talk with each other. The exhibition was characterized by long stay times and very social, open interactions even among strangers. The lighting also engaged the eye and provided visual relief. Each quilt was framed separately and the whole exhibition pulsed subtly and gently in waves.



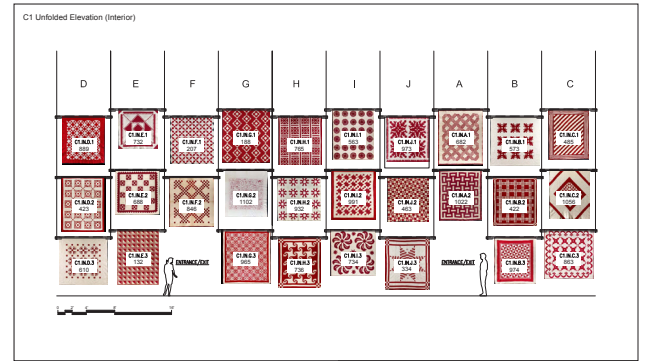
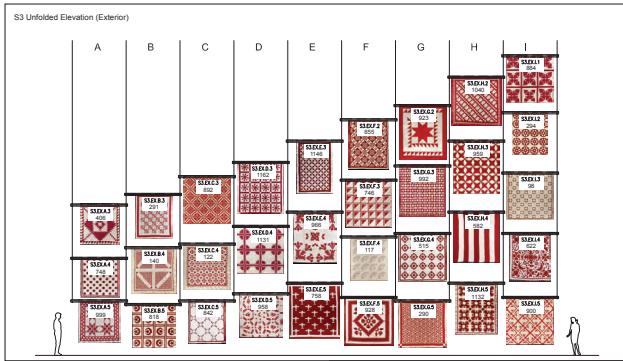
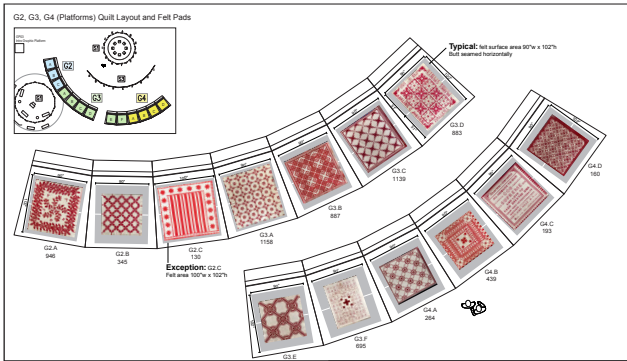
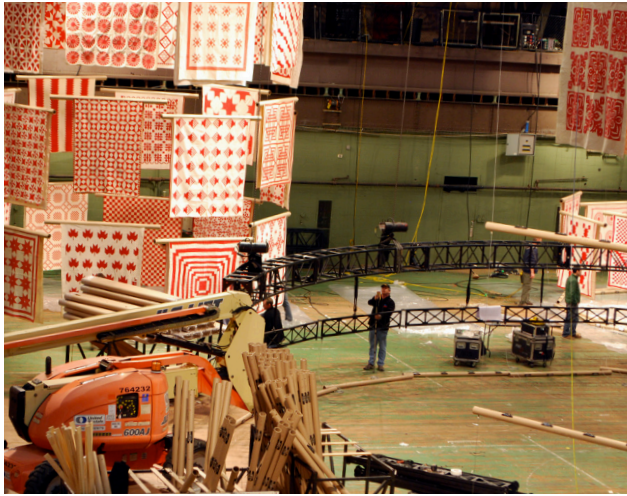
The third challenge was to use the quilts themselves to convey a felt sense of the often-anonymous makers and communities of makers whose creativity, skill, and cooperation are literally stitched into the quilts. Neither the collector nor the curator wanted this to

be a didactic experience; they wanted people to be able to engage with the quilts on their own terms. This meant that the exhibition forms themselves would have to embody the essential characteristics of the absent maker communities and their passions.

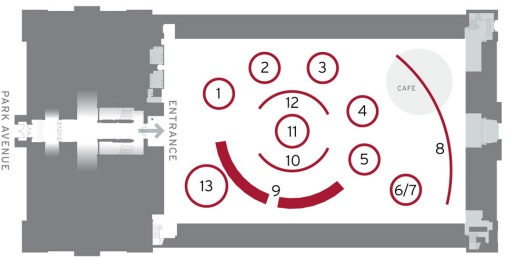


The fourth challenge was to develop a sustainable, inexpensive system of display that would utilize the height of the Armory, retain the quilts securely and safely, configure in a variety of ways, not call attention to itself, and be fully installed in a very short time. This also meant that the system had to be designed not only as a finished product, but also as a straightforward sequence of installation steps that could be reliably repeated by several crews working simultaneously in the hall.

Visitors felt energized and inspired by the experience. Many wept at the entrance. Quilters traveled from around the world, describing the experience as once-in-a-lifetime and reporting that their art form had been acknowledged and revealed as never before. Many non-quilters returned daily, describing the experience in transcendent terms.



All of this was made possible by a simple system of suspension cables threaded through cardboard tubes mounted with binder clips that held the quilts. These were suspended from rented theatrical truss and enabled the entire assembly to be done from the floor in a series of stages. Each pavilion was raised independently while several crews worked simultaneously from the top rows downward as the trusses were gradually raised toward the ceiling.

Top row: installation process  
 Middle row: quilt layouts  
 Bottom row, from left to right: lamppost street banner, Armory exterior banner, save the date card with computer rendering, a floor plan for the mobile app