Ron Shiffman: Can you describe the work you do at the Center for Social Inclusion (CSI)?

Maya Wiley: The Center for Social Inclusion is a national policy strategy organization whose mission is to dismantle structural racial exclusion. We think about the ways multiple institutions, policies, and actions serve to exclude communities of color from opportunity and from full participation in society—politically, economically, socially—and what the policy strategies are that could change or transform that into inclusion and opportunity.

Shiffman: In what way does CSI address space as a place for expression or debate of race?

Wiley: We think of space in three interactive, interconnected ways. There is psychological space, political space, and physical space. They are all interactive, and none of them are race-neutral—they are highly racialized, even when we’re not clear how they are racialized.

For example, the structure of physical space is driven by politics and attitudes. Once you say, “Occupy the Hood,” everyone knows you’re talking about people of color. The reason that is true is how we’ve racialized physical space through housing policies, land use planning, and many other public and private actions. Our politics are also driven by how our communities are defined. We have districts, and elected representatives represent a geographic area. To build political power, communities try to build racially identifiable districts.

Shiffman: How then does that translate into how we view spaces in our own city? How would you advise decision-makers, urban planners, policy makers, or even urban designers in how they plan and design space, keeping these ideas in mind?

Wiley: In the interaction between physical space and social/political space, who we are and who we think we are is shaped by space: how we organize it, who we are in it, and how we include or exclude people from it. That is both in the process of creating it and what we do with it: what purposes does it serve, who should it be for, what solutions it should help create. At this point, people of color have to fight very hard to be included in real discussions and decisions about space: what it’s for, how it should be used, and how it can be used to help us solve problems. If people of color are not formally included in a process of thinking about
what spaces we need and what kinds of relationships they drive, then we will ultimately have not only racially identifiable and segregated space, we will have a fragmented social and political community. So much of how we identify who we are—who we should be in relationship with, and what their value is to the larger community, city, region, nation—is so often expressed in space. Who is the space for, and whose needs does it meet? All of those questions need to be part of the decision-making process.

Shiffman: How can spaces be used to build up solidarity in neighborhoods—even spaces in the “hood”—and be used to create social cohesion and political awareness?

Wiley: Having physical space is important. Fundamentally, most space is exclusive: people have to find, and have ways of contesting that, and build on what we’ve got as assets in the community. There needs to be space for people to come together to contest that exclusion. I think about this as civic engagement…civic engagement is more than electoral politics. It’s how we come together to solve problems we need to solve. In communities of color in particular, there are very few such spaces for that sort of civic engagement. The schools are actually one of the few institutions in communities of color, but it can be very difficult to access that space as a community space, outside of the school day or school use. Very few community centers exist, and there are very few parks and recreational spaces for people to gather—let alone whether they are comfortable gathering there, which is another issue. There are so few spaces that it is often difficult to create the opportunities for people to come together and do that level of civic engagement.

I’m reminded of one theorist who, in relation to the Black liberation struggle, said that space has to come together as critique of the dominant order, or else it is just idle talk. It’s not just about physical space. Spaces that bring about the opportunity to think more collectively, to critique, and to challenge are the spaces we have the least of in communities of color. But we also need leadership and institutions that help that become a critical and constructive space, as well as celebratory space. We also need space for joy and appreciation of one another and the richness that is community, even if its income is poor.

Shiffman: There are also spaces like sidewalks, where an exchange can take place, but a lot of that has to do with how it’s programmed, how it’s policed…

Wiley: This is part of the psychological aspect of space. You are deemed a criminal or dangerous too often, for people of color, just because of how you look or the street you live on, not whether or not you’ve actually done anything. The Center for Constitutional Rights documented that 90 percent of police stop-and-frisks in New York City don’t result in any arrest. And of the arrests, many people are released later without charges. Almost all—87 percent of New Yorkers stopped—are African American and Latino. I know one kid who wanted to be a lawyer, but dropped out of school because he was harassed regularly by the police when he had never even committed a crime, and police were in his school. To avoid the police, he dropped out. People of color have very small activity spaces. They don’t go very far. Some of that is affordability—but some of that is psychological, because of the criminalization of space and an imposed order. This harkens to gang criminalization, and how just wearing certain colors can exclude you. Two people
wearing certain colors cannot stand together on a sidewalk because they are deemed to be in a certain gang. That history of criminalization is so endemic to so many people of color's experience living in this country, without even addressing class. It does matter how the government mechanisms of control respond to the space.

One more point we should make about race, particularly how it relates to physical space, is the changing demographics of the city. Even this notion of the “hood” is starting to change… where people are increasingly being priced out of not just their neighborhoods but also the city itself. People that fled the cities in the 1970s are now coming back into the cities, and the city itself is becoming wealthier and whiter, while inner-ring suburbs have become a place of low-income people of color. Dominicans from Washington Heights are moving to eastern Pennsylvania, and people from Williamsburg are being pushed up to Nassau County—they are physically leaving the city and not necessarily by choice.

Shiffman: The pressures on low-income people are felt in many ways beyond housing affordability. The businesses have changed and they can no longer find the services and goods that they need. So it’s not only the civic spaces but also the space of one’s own community, the streets, and commercial businesses that need our attention.

Wiley: When those small businesses that provide “cultural commodities” get priced out, this affects the identity of the community. On the one hand, we’re happy to see the nice restaurant open up, but then you start to worry about the 99-cent store next door. We need to have different levels of affordability of commercial space, which is actually a pretty radical idea. We think about affordable housing that way—we have private housing, public housing, quasi-public housing, but we don’t address commercial space in the same way. Those businesses serving and owned by low-income people need to be able to stay viable in the community.

AT CSI, we are trying to build this model of community economic development for social good. We are exploring how federal policy in broadband technologies can drive more opportunities for local employment in communities—everything from searching for and applying for employment using the Internet to the development of new job opportunities resulting from the technology itself. We believe that some of the money set aside for broadband activities should be going directly to communities to do this. We are also trying to help the elected officials, particularly ones representing communities of high need, to understand this, and we are also trying to help communities themselves understand the opportunities, so that community innovators can engage in this technological opportunity at the outset. We are working with lawmakers to find ways to support a federal-to-local incubation strategy, a ground-up strategy that can get to scale and reach large numbers of people.

Shiffman: Anything else?

Wiley: The demographics of many places [are] changing—becoming younger and with more people of color, where white people are predominantly sixty-five and older. If we don’t think about these spaces, we really are going to create this new form of apartheid, where the vast majority of people will be excluded while they are carrying the remainder of the country. It is really quite scary, and quite real. We need to re-evaluate the current trajectory.

Ron Shiffman, FAICP, AIA, is director emeritus of the Pratt Center for Community Development and a professor at Pratt Institute’s Graduate Center for Planning and the Environment. He coedited Beyond Zuccotti Park from which this interview is excerpted. Visit beyondzuccotti.org or see page 87 for more information on the book.
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ISSN# 1532-2874
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