

Artist: Amanda Williams
Location: Englewood, Chicago, USA
Year: 2016
Researcher: Jessica Fiala

Amanda Williams' multiyear project *Color(ed) Theory* overlaid her fascination with color onto intersections of race and place. Speaking to the experience of race within the social landscape of a city, she explained "In a city like Chicago and growing up black on the South Side, you cannot ever be separated from your race" (Idowu, 2020). At the same time, she underscored the longstanding influence on her work of academic and theoretical examinations of color, making connections between her own lived experience and an analysis of color as subjective and existing in relationship with other colors. Describing the concept of relationality as "the first time that I was able to see my own neighborhood as a relational context," she noted "Each color is affected by its neighbor. Each other is affected by its neighbor." Poetically tying together these themes of relational color as both an aesthetic tool and a racial signifier, she asserted, "Racism is my city's vivid hue" (Williams, 2018).

From 2014-2016, Williams painted eight homes in Chicago's Englewood neighborhood that were slated for demolition with bright, eye-catching colors. Each home was covered from foundation to roof in its monochrome hue, standing out as a brilliant anomaly. Williams' chosen palette was derived from colors she grew up with—products and services marketed largely to Black communities during the 1960s-1980s that represented shared touch points and instances where consumer culture, memory, and community converge. These products—Pink Oil Moisturizer, Ultra Sheen Hair Grease, Harold's Chicken Shack, Newport 100s/Loose Squares, Flamin' Red Hots, Currency Exchange/Safe Passage, Crown Royal Bag—became a palette standing boldly out from its surroundings, from rich purple to vibrant orange, warm yellow, and deep teal.

With *Color(ed) Theory*, Williams harnessed the power of color, paint, and scale to draw attention, elicit memories, foster conversations, and point toward alternative futures. Summing up the approach, she explained that in so doing, she hoped to "Better understand color as both a medium and as an inescapable way that I am identified in society" (Williams, 2018)

DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Williams' colorful intervention into public space responded to the changing city. Driving through the neighborhoods, she would look for homes that had been marked as condemned. Cross-referencing these homes with the city's data portal to confirm that each had indeed been scheduled for demolition, she gathered buckets of paint and a team of volunteers, family, and friends to surreptitiously paint each house. These focused interventions—the extended act of painting a canvas the size of a building—both sparked conversations with passersby and served as what Williams described as an "open-ended conversation with the community about value of place and personal agency." Once painted, the homes opened the door for a range of reflections—a home as a nexus of private and public, the history of a parcel of land, the relationship of a condemned home to remaining houses and vacant lots, and the power of color to make these histories and relationships visible. Amplifying colors associated with Black experiences to the scale of buildings, Williams posed the question, "Can such an odd gesture inspire a shift in individual or collective thinking about how we might act upon and value our own context differently?" (Beete, 2016)

These boarded up homes echoed larger histories of race and place—redlining, restricting loans for Black homebuyers, predatory lending, foreclosures. Describing the state of the structures, Williams explained, “These are structures that can't be saved, that are not going to be rehabbed, that are not even good enough for people to squat in” (Williams, 2016). The homes tell stories, but the stories needn't end with their quiet elimination.

As *Color(ed) Theory* unfolded, the work gained attention. The final home painting was scheduled to coincide with the 2015 Chicago Architecture Biennial, where more than 60 painters gathered to complete the project. Seeking to avoid enticing gawkers to the neighborhood and objectifying the community, Williams refused to provide addresses or issue maps to the project. Instead, she documented the homes and their demolition with photographs, now in the collections of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Her [TED Talk](#) on the project has been translated into 16 languages and viewed nearly 341,200 times.

ARTWORK EXCELLENCE

Williams has described *Color(ed) Theory* as “Painting at the scale of architecture” (Beete, 2016). In this project, the physical act of painting leaves a dramatic, but ephemeral, mark on the landscape. The ultimate erasure of this mark is a component of the project itself, with the trajectory from dramatic, monochrome presence to absence showcasing a range of possible spatial gestures. This range is part what Williams described as the project “properly contextualizing the role that an architect or an individual can play in choreographing the landscape” (Spirit, 2015).

At the same time, *Color(ed) Theory* made visible the manifold, and at times hidden, currents of history and racism that have crafted the city of Chicago's built environment. Divisions between communities on maps and in space form instances of the many ways that policy informs personal experiences of place and community.

Addressing the context and ethos of the project, Williams explained:

This was not a neighborhood beautification project. This wasn't a paint flowers on the windows to put a Band-Aid over this deep incision. When you live in an environment where a bulldozer means something's going away and nothing else is ever coming back it doesn't mean prosperity or future or potential, it means erasure of your history. So what action can be taken to shift how you see your environment and shift how we think about the value of that environment? (Spirit, 2015).

In this vein, the project both acknowledged disparities while also emphasizing the creation of new alternatives in and through the built environment. If injustice can be constructed and demarcated across a city's spatial grid, how can ingenuity be deployed to carve out something different across these spaces? How can the city be a palimpsest for writing a better future?

The reflections and discussions prompted by the project are a core aspect of the work, raising meaningful and pointed questions about what and whom a society values or disregards, and how this valuation becomes etched in space. A member of Williams' team of painters spoke to the project's lingering significance, commenting that “This didn't change the neighborhood, it changed peoples' perceptions of what's possible for their neighborhood, in big and small ways” (Williams, 2018). By centering pervasive products and services, Williams' color palette revealed the intertwined aspects of the personal, cultural, and spatial, bringing to light often overlooked resonances that form a key pillar of

community.

CONTEXT & ANALYSIS

In her TED Talk, Williams described how her world came to be determined by someone else's color palette. Outlining the history of racial segregation in Chicago, she shared maps with colorful, irregular, geometric parcels marking territories across the city—designating the neighborhoods where investments would and would not be concentrated. The spaces of her childhood, similar to the locations where *Color(ed) Theory* brightly dotted the landscape—were all zoned 'red' and deemed hazardous.

Writing on the many intertwined histories of racism that came to inform this contemporary geography, author Ta-Nehisi Coates (2014) underscored the “assiduous planning” behind Chicago's racial segregation, from the Federal Housing Administration's institution of maps for the direction of mortgage backing, to the echoing of these practices by the larger mortgage industry. These practices went hand-in-hand with broader institutionalized segregation, racial terror, white flight, and predatory lending practices, setting the stage for current disparities in home ownership (Husein et al., 2020).

Coates noted the dual sides of this history—a strong sense of belonging among neighbors that was nevertheless “premised on denying black people privileges enjoyed by white Americans.” These two sides of a coin are potently conveyed in *Color(ed) Theory*. Shared experiences and cultural memory are brightly foregrounded in the project's racialized palette. These same colorful symbols cast shadows and stains on the deeply embedded historical relationships of place, race, and inequity that continue today.

Emphasizing her continued interest in the meeting points of color, race, and space, Williams described her practice as “invested in constructing new potentials and narratives about personal identity and the connections of social and physical place.” In this vein, *Color(ed) Theory*, fits within a larger approach that “imagines artful ways to construct new narratives about zero-value landscapes that will allow them to shed an identify of victim and embrace instead the role of active protagonist” (Beete, 2016).

More recently, Williams is a founding member of the Black Reconstruction Collective, a group of 10 artists, architects, and designers who came together around an exhibition titled “[Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America](#),” at the Museum of Modern Art. Now a 501(c)3 nonprofit, the organization offers funding, design, and thought leadership in service to dismantling white supremacy and amplifying “knowledge production and spatial practices by individuals and organizations that further the reconstruction project.” Asking, “How can Black people move through spaces in ways that are self-determined?” Williams noted the possibilities that such reflection opens up: “To empower architecture as a vehicle for liberation and joy.”

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