The Architecture of Social Immobility in John Edgar Wideman’s *Philadelphia Fire*

John Edgar Wideman’s *Philadelphia Fire* from 1990 is an exploration of the urban disintegration of African American communities in the context of the violent 1985 police intervention and bombing of 6221 Osage Avenue and their inhabitants - members of the Afrocentric, anarcho-primitivist organisation named “MOVE”. Fictional in its nature, but at times autobiographical, Wideman tells the story of the protagonist Cudjoe, an African American writer from Philadelphia. What starts as Cudjoe’s search for a boy who survived the bombing of Osage Avenue and the desire to write a book about his experiences turns into a series of personal revelations of Cudjoe’s youth and life in the city before his flight to an island in the Aegean Sea. Readers of *Philadelphia Fire* are introduced an array of characters, such as Margaret Jones, a former member of MOVE; Timbo, Cudjoe’s childhood friend, now a “cultural attaché” (Wideman 72) to the mayor of Philadelphia, Cudjoe’s ex-wife, children and friends, the “Money Power Things” gang and JB, a college-educated but mentally ill homeless African American. At the centre of the story lies the city, and Wideman’s lively description thereof. Most notably, Wideman relates Philadelphia to human bodies and geometrical grids, inherently creating tension between these two poles of narrative. Furthermore, Wideman refers to Philadelphia’s colonial past and its influence on how the city is perceived by different communities of inhabitants. This
essay will examine how Wideman successfully conveys how African American communities experience the inner cities of America through his portrayal of Philadelphia, specifically how he defines its “shape” and the implications thereof.

From this vantage point in the museum’s deep shadow in the greater darkness of night it seems an iron will has imposed itself on the shape of the city. If you could climb high enough, higher than the hill on which the museum perches, would you believe in the magic pinwheel of lights, straight lines, exact proportions, symmetry of spheres, gears meshing, turning, spinning to the perpetual music of their motion? … A miraculous design. A prodigy that was comprehensible. He can see a hand drawing the city. An architect’s tilted drafting board, instruments for measuring, for inscribing right angles, arcs, circles. The city is a faint tracery of blue, barely visible blood lines in a new-born’s skull. No one has used the city yet. No one has pushed a button to start the heart pumping. He can tell thought had gone into the design. And a person must have stood here, on this hill, imagining this perspective. Dreaming the vast emptiness into the shape of the city. In the beginning it hadn’t just happened, pell-mell. People had planned to live and prosper here. Wear the city like robe and crown. (44-45)

This passage begins to draw out Philadelphia’s identity struggle as a city – the identity of a grid, a sketch or a design, with specific purposes in mind, or that of an organism, a living and breathing body. Cudjoe describes to the reader how the city was designed by an architect, using a “tilted drafting board, instruments for measuring, for inscribing right angles, arcs, circles” (45). To give some historical background, the person the protagonist describes at the drawing board could arguably be William Penn, as he is reminded of the Founding Fathers in the next paragraph; "Dead now. Buried in their wigs, waistcoats, swallowtail coats, silk hose
clinging to their plump calves. A foolish old man flying a kite in a storm” (45). The link to William Penn as the symbolic architect of the city is further given weight as Wideman uses his Instructions as an epigraph to the novel: “Let every house be placed, if the Person pleases, in the middle of his platt... so there may be ground on each side, for the Gardens or Orchards or fields, that it may be a greene Country Towne, which will never be burnt, and always be wholesome”.

According to Jean-Pierre Richard in "Philadelphia Fire", or the Shape of a City, Penn is giving instructions to raise a “latter-day Paradise” (604), similar to the creation of a god-like figure that is meant to last “for ever and ever”; the city, according to Penn, will "never be burnt" and "always be wholesome”. Furthermore, though Richard argues one should not ignore theological interpretations, contemporary advancements during Penn’s lifetime in science might have had an influence on his ideology regarding city planning and the architecture of towns. William Harvey, an English physician credited with the discovery of blood circulation, died when Penn was thirteen years old (604) – the concept of “easy flow of circulation through broad avenues and large squares” (604) was henceforth applied as a blueprint for cities.

Taking another work of Wideman into account, Fever explores the “physiological foundation of the city … at variance with its ethical reality” (604), likening men in cities to circulating blood in the body, and their selfishness to the clogging of arteries and blood vessels, preventing the necessary exchange between communities leading to isolation and despair. With its gridded, “angled and straight edged” (Fever 248) arrangement, Philadelphia is a reflection of Penn’s ideal city as portrayed in Fever, "the mirror of [Penn’s] rectitude” (248); a city that is meant to “reflect in its layout one of the most basic but vital principles of human life – blood circulation” (Richard 605). However, the city ironically turns out to be the antithesis: a lifeless, inert structure. According to Wideman’s stories, Philadelphia does not enable “circulation”
between communities, as the town splits into the gridded and angular centre of the city and the “chaotic maze of periphery where the latest immigrant and the vast majority of the Black inhabitants barely survive” (Richard 605). What was conceived by Penn – the symbolic architect behind the city’s layout – as “a faint tracery of blue, barely visible blood lines in a new-born’s skull” (Philadelphia Fire 45), grows into the grotesque abomination mentioned earlier in the novel.

Using historical reasoning, Cudjoe identifies the will of a white colonialist as the defining legacy of Philadelphia, and therefore sees the city inherently intolerant to the African American communities, banishing them “for ever and ever” to the edges of the structure, “cocooned like worms” (Wideman, Fever 248) consuming a rotting body. Mary Paniccia Carden adds to this interpretation with her analysis of Wideman’s novel in “If the City is A Man”: Founders and Fathers, Cities and Sons in John Edgar Wideman's "Philadelphia Fire", an exploration of the “raced and gendered spaces created by white founders” (Carden 472). As Cudjoe makes his way back home from a basketball game with childhood friends, he sees Philadelphia as it "was meant to be viewed. Broad avenues like bright spokes of a wheel radiating from a glowing centre. No buildings higher than Billy Penn's hat atop City Hall. Scale and pattern fixed forever. Clarity, balance, a perfect understanding between the parts" (Philadelphia Fire 44). Carden argues that Cudjoe wants to believe in the myth behind the symmetry of the city and to trust in the security of citizenship. "I belong to you, the city says. This is what I was meant to be. You can grasp the pattern" (Philadelphia Fire 44), he hears the city speak, yet he understands that this longing upholds the stronghold on power behind the “founder's scale and pattern” (Carden 482), fixed forever. The struggle of Philadelphia, conceived as a grid for morality and production but grown into a monstrous and divisive form, can therefore be backed by examining Cudjoe’s view of the
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city in its historical context. The two poles of gridded layout and organic body show the compositional tension within the city, influencing the present through its past.

Madhu Dubey’s *Literature and Urban Crisis: John Edgar Wideman's Philadelphia Fire* further follows this line of argumentation of a designed but flawed city. The “order” that is implied by Penn as the symbolic architect of the city more likely conveys the implication of "law and order," suggesting a “rigid system of exclusions protected by cruising police cars” (580) rather than the "miraculous design" (Philadelphia Fire 44) desired by the Quaker colonialists. Cudjoe conveys one of Wideman’s core issues, the repressive maintenance of order within the African American and other racially and economically profiled communities, in the same breath as describing his view from the vantage point by the art museum:

Everybody had zones. Addicts, prostitutes, porn merchants, derelicts. Even people who were black and poor had a zone. Everybody granted the right to lie in the bed they'd made for themselves. As long as they didn't contaminate good citizens who disapproved. As long as the bed's available to good citizens who wished to profit or climb in occasionally. As long as everybody knew they had to give up their zone, scurry down off this hill, no questions asked, when the cops blow the whistle. (46)

The term “contamination” in the context of the perfect, symmetrical and designed city could refer to JB, the college-educated homeless man. After Cudjoe’s lavish meal in an expensive restaurant paid for by the government through Timbo, Wideman illustrates the grotesque consequences of extravagant consumption as Cudjoe contemplates "possibility of excess made real by the city" (92):

Accumulating. Bloating. Smiling and chattering while piles of bones, hunks of fat, discarded gristle and cores, skins and decorative greens and sculpted peels, corks, cans,
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bottles, grease, soiled linen, soggy napkins, crumbs on the floor, shells, what was unconsumed and unconsumable [sic.], waste and rot and persiflage heaped up, the garbage outweighing him, taller than he was, usurping his place. Eaten by refuse faster than he can cram it down his throat (92).

The passage illustrates the consequences of the tensions between the gridded city and its reality once the heart of the city starts beating and running its course. What is regarded by the luxury restaurant – representing the socio-economically privileged of Philadelphia’s society and arguably the government – as waste, becomes “a necessary means of survival for JB” (Dubey, Literature and Urban Crisis 583). Waste and scarcity are the inherent of the progress achieved by a city of oblivious consumption: "At the same time over in the north and in the west where people from here [are] forced to move, what's growing is garbage dumps" (79). Dubey continues to argue that the “most conspicuous proof of consumer society's aestheticization [sic.] of waste” (583). Hence, the ideologies of consumption that are backed by the “designed city” work by “fetishistically repressing the structural interdependence between the renovated city centers and their adjoining urban wastelands” (583). These "garbage dumps" are populated by the likes of JB, whose expulsion enables the creation of the city according to the ideals of the architect. The trash, both materially and symbolically in their attitudes, of this privileged, consuming society is what clogs the arteries of the grid and prevents the body of the city to function properly. The city begins to rot under the heaps of garbage, enabling the compartmentalisation of communities such as the African American inhabitants of Philadelphia.

This transformation from the idealised grid to a languid, rotting body is illustrated as Wideman leads Cudjoe through an instance at the beginning of the novel while travelling to meet Margaret Jones, a former MOVE member:
If the city is a man, a giant sprawled for miles on his back, rough contours of his body smothering the rolling landscape, the rivers and woods, hills and valleys, bumps and gullies, crushing with his weight, his shadow, all the life beneath him, a derelict in a terminal stupor, too exhausted, too wasted to move, rotting in the sun, then Cudjoe is deep within the giant's stomach, in a subway-surface car shuddering through stinking loops of gut, tunnels carved out of decaying flesh, a prisoner of rumbling innards that scream when trolleys pass over rails embedded in flesh. (Wideman, 21)

Carden quotes William Carlos William’s vision of Paterson, New Jersey, to give another account of a city as a body, as the city … the man, an identity … an interpenetration, both ways: Paterson lies in the valley under the Passaic Falls its spent waters forming the outline of his back. He lies on his right side, head near the thunder of the waters filling his dreams! Eternally asleep, his dreams walk about the city where he persists incognito. Butterflies settle on his stone ear. Immortal he neither moves nor rouses and is seldom seen, though he breathes and the subtleties of his machinations drawing their substance from the noise of the pouring river animate a thousand automations. (Carden 485-486)

Williams’s description of New Jersey as a dreaming giant, embodying “the mythic masculine potency that animates the American city” (486), stands much in contrast to Wideman’s immobile monster of a city. The lethargic abomination is “unmanned” (486), the city void of possibilities, and the rotting body renders Philadelphia exposed to violence towards its most powerless inhabitants. The African American is a prisoner, “deep within [the] stomach” of the city, an immobile and impotent “patient laid out on a table” (Philadelphia Fire 82), consumed by the gridded city and the colonial ideal that failed to live up to the demands of the present.
Timbo himself doesn’t seem to be entirely sure how he perceives the city. For one, he explains to Cudjoe how the mayor is “orchestrating forms of progress that will redeem the city, creating solid gold out of stone ghetto, producing high-tech replacements for old, worn-out parts of the city's guts” (Carden 486). Alternatively, Timbo also admits the banishment of poor African Americans "off the map" and into the previously mentioned “garbage dumps”; the clogged arteries of the body. The city continues to compartmentalise its citizens by race and class according to historically colonial ideals: the mayor's new city “repeats and extends the exclusions of the old in zones containing difference” (Carden 486). Timbo resumes: “What's the mayor gon [sic.] do when the city starts to cracking and pieces break off the edges and disappear. It's thin ice, man" (Philadelphia Fire 80). The argument that the colonial ideal with Penn as the figurative architect of Philadelphia has failed its wide variety of citizens is supported by Carden. She argues that “the layered fragility of this new/old city suggests the potential collapse of the founder's vision without offering alternatives … instead, Timbo scrambles to remain above the thin ice, to avoid joining the other Philadelphia's growing population of dispossessed and lost citizens” (Carden 486).

The solution to this fundamental problem – to return to the central topic of *Philadelphia Fire* – was offered by John Leaphart, founder of MOVE, in the destruction of what he viewed as a progeny of the “manmade systems built by technology and geared around consumption” (Dubey, Literature and Urban Crisis 585): The gridded, designed city. Leaphart identified the systems “as all forms of technology and culture, including science, industry, medicine, electricity, and education” (585). Continuing this line of argument, King, the character modelled after Leaphart in Wideman’s novel, describes human beings as "seeds" destined "to carry forward the Life in us" so that, when "society dies from the poison in its guts, we'll be there and
the Tree will grow bigger and bigger till the whole wide earth is a peaceful garden under its branches" (Philadelphia Fire 11). Ironically, his metaphorical description of his utopian idea of a garden city “aimed at recovering an essential human nature” (Dubey, Literature and Urban Crisis 585-586) seems awfully similar to that of Penn’s “greene Country Towne”. Nonetheless, Wideman acknowledges Leaphart’s primitivist intentions partially: "Even though he did it wrong, he was right" (13). The reader is to understand that although MOVE was right to reject the consumerist notions predicated by the capitalist intentions behind colonialism and the inherent structure of the city, it was wrong to seek to “recapture an organic ideal of community which is not only impossible to maintain in modern times but is also deeply suspect even as an imaginary ideal” (Dubey, Literature and Urban Crisis 586).

King’s idealism is also found in “The Book of Life” authored by Richard Corey, the novel’s counterpart to Donald Glassey, co-author of the MOVE Manifesto. In the book, Corey likens MOVE to the Tree of Life “that would regenerate the decaying city” (587). After he and his wife are assaulted by a group of adolescents, arguably by the “Money Power Things” gang, he realizes that the metaphorical “seeds of hope the book [were] meant to breed, embodied in the children of the city, have degenerated as they grew into terrible weeds” (Dubey, Literature and Urban Crisis 587) and are "gnawing at the gates of the temple of reason. The Life Tree is wizened, gaunt, crooked, dying at the top, dripping sickness in dead leaves that are drowning the city" (Philadelphia Fire 175). Disillusioned by the distortion of his “green ideal, Corey translates the secrets, stores in the sacred Book of Life into the snarly pig tongue of law and order” (Dubey, Signs and Cities 82), by informing on MOVE for the police. It’s to no surprise that Corey chose the 19th floor of a bank building that’s “taller than Billy Pen’s hat” (Philadelphia Fire 173) to commit suicide. The “spanking new Penn Mutual Savings Bank” (173) symbolises the eruption
of modern capitalism that goes beyond the colonialist ideals of Penn’s contemporaries. It proves as an unsurpassable obstacle for the sort of idealism that MOVE represents. Neither MOVE, nor the misguided interpretation of “The Book of Life” by the MPT gang were able to “unclog” the modern city.

In conclusion, Wideman establishes Philadelphia’s timeline starting as a colonialist and capitalist centre of white commerce to the present situation of crime, poverty and decline for a majority of the population. He draws parallels between the city in its current state to a monstrous, rotting body; a grid that has decayed into chaos like the rotting carcass of an animal. The garbage of a conspicuously consuming minority clogs the once “barely visible blood lines” (45) of the city as the button has been pushed to “start the heart pumping” (45). The passage where Wideman has Cudjoe gaze across the city panorama is of principal importance to establish the inner conflict both Cudjoe and the city experience. It is arguable then, following Carden’s interpretation, that it is truly the minds of the individual subjects of a city are animating its body, and it’s their responsibility modernise Penn’s ideals for the sake of citizenship for all the people of Philadelphia and cities across the United States.
Works Cited

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