

Security and the Entrepôt: The Solidification of London's Imperial Networks

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INTRODUCTION

Liminal spaces within cities demarcate boundaries and act as thresholds. Enclaves within these liminal spaces transcend location and are sites of transnational activity. These enclaves become sites for the operation of both legitimate and illegal activity, the consequences of which often have a global resonance. As spaces of hybrid negotiations and legal lacunae, they are also spaces where power can be examined and critiqued.

This paper addresses the warehouse urbanism of the Port of London that developed adjacent to the River Thames at the height of the British Empire. The activities of import and export that occurred in the port were connected to a vast system of overseas networks that reticulated the globe. Contact with colonies thousands of miles away manifested itself in enclaves in this area of the port. In London's docklands the port was a testing zone for the metropolis' first police force. The urbanism developed in this area was different than that of urbanism elsewhere in the city, and was a response, in part, to warring strategies of piracy and policing specific to the port and overseas networks.

LONDON'S LIMINAL SPACES

In London, the River Thames acts as an elongated threshold between the open sea and the city. The daily ebb and flood tides of the river complicate this linear relationship. There is a twenty-foot discrepancy between the two, and the muddy river bed is often exposed at low tide. Twice a day the river is a non-place, a place of flux that is simultaneously not sea but also not city. The sea has a profound affect on the city. Striated with shipping

routes that connect the port to a vast network overseas, the sea was considered a possession of the British Empire.^{1 2} The wealth of nations flowed into London via this conduit.

But it is unstable. The fluctuations of tides combined with the shipping traffic of the burgeoning British Empire created a scene of confusion on the river. Within this confusion there were few mechanisms of control. Identities were fluid; pirates impersonating customs officers raided ships, gangs of thieves in league with the crews of the merchant ships plotted heists of cargo, and the day laborers that unloaded cargo pilfered unimpeded. The scale of theft ranged from what fit in a pocket to the stealing of entire ships and their cargo. There was no established and reliable means of receiving imports. Merchants and investors lost money as captains began turning away from the port. Something had to be done to remedy the chaos on the river.

EXTRA STATE ACTORS: THE BRITISH EAST AND WEST INDIA COMPANIES

During this era of colonial expansion, the British East and West India Companies suffered because of the chaotic port. The companies held spatially-defined monopolies and controlled large portions of the Empire overseas. They were separate from and not controlled by the state. For example, the East India Company acted as a government in India, building cities, ports, and establishing other infrastructure, along with maintaining a standing army. Similarly, the West India Company controlled islands in the Caribbean, altering the land and ecosystems, building structures, and taking on governmental roles. The result of these activities overseas had a major impact in England, spe-

cifically in London, and it was manifest first in the port. The invisible shipping routes that mapped the unstable surface of the sea and their related trade networks influenced the port urbanism, as warehousing compounds were built to accommodate and secure growing amounts of imports.

MITIGATING PIRACY

The Companies often operated on the fringe of legitimacy, verging into acts of piracy when beneficial. At this point in the British Empire, piracy was not a new concept. For years England had issued letters of marque to privateers enabling them to engage in low-grade aggressions against other nations. Pirates and privateers made it possible for the British to inexpensively wage covert war on the high seas. Pirates were not technically organs of the state or part of the state's apparatus of war, but a knowingly duplicitous national sovereignty engaged privateers and pirates when necessary.³ A fluctuating identity enabled the pirates to engage in this fluid sovereignty, backing whichever state proved the most profitable. Reciprocally, the state could choose to support or revoke support of the pirate's actions as needed. In the late 16th and early 17th century, as the limits of the British Empire became more defined, the state found it increasingly difficult to find a use for the alternative sovereignty of pirates.⁴

In fact, pirates became a hindrance to the activities of the state and the East and West India Companies, and merchants (especially the British East India Company) had difficulty keeping trade routes open to India because of the British piracy. When the British pirate William Kidd attacked and plundered the British ship *Quedah Merchant* in the Indian Ocean in 1698, it was the last straw. The British state arrested him, even though significant members of the state and the East India Company had invested in his actions. In *To Rule the Waves* Arthur Herman explains Kidd's situation:

Kidd had fallen victim of a new, less tolerant attitude towards the time-honored tradition of theft at sea. A few years earlier Kidd's exploits would have been business as usual. His investors included not just Governor Bellomont but...Edward Russell, now Lord Orford, along with three other Whig peers—and even, for a 10 percent cut, King William III.⁵

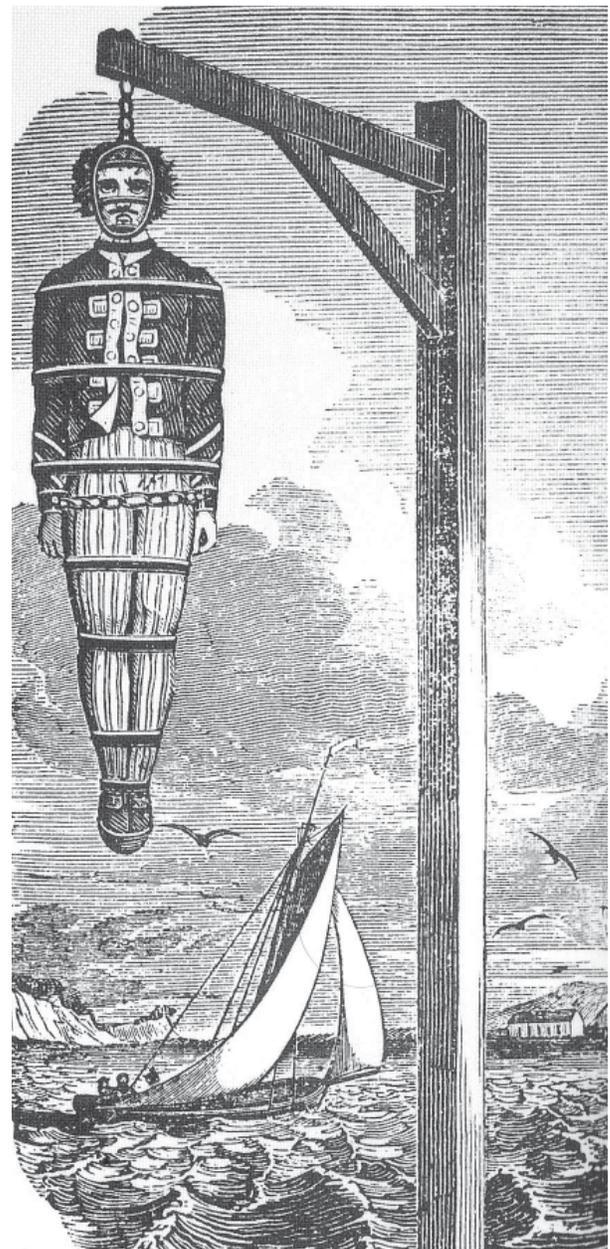


Fig. 1: William Kidd in the gibbet.⁶

DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH: THE GIBBET

Even though Kidd's piratical activities happened overseas and miles away from the capital, he was brought back to London for punishment. Kidd was hung at Execution Dock in London in 1701. Afterwards his body was displayed in a gibbet in Tilbury Reach. The gibbet was a metal cage that enclosed the bodies of executed pirates suspended from a yardarm at the edge of the Thames; passing ships

had a clear view of the gibbet and its contents as they sailed into port.

Kidd's body was displayed in a gibbet nearly ten miles downriver from London at a point where the river channel suddenly constricts. The abrupt narrowing of the river caused incoming ships to navigate the Reach very slowly. Consequently, ships entering and exiting the port were forced to slow down at the point that Kidd's body was displayed. This treatment of piracy establishes the state's new position. The gibbet was developed in concert with hangings at Execution Dock to dissuade future pirates by presenting an example of the state's lack of tolerance towards piracy. As Michel Foucault writes, "The body of the condemned man was...an essential element in the ceremonial of public punishment."⁷ In Kidd's case, the expression of state control is situated in the body of the executed pirate as displayed on the Thames.

THE PRODUCTION OF SPATIAL STRATEGIES

Even though he was executed, most of Kidd's early acts of piracy were supported by the East India Company. These acts acted as catalysts and irritants that precipitated spatial developments in London. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Execution Dock and the gibbet were used less and a new species of urbanism took over as the chief instrument of controlling the liminal space of import. Enclaves of dock compounds were built at the edges of the Thames, and in the port a new spatial language emerged.^{8 9} The interface between the East and West India Companies, other pirates, and the city of London fueled this strain of warehouse urbanism that developed only where trade networks converged in London's docklands. Before entering the river, ships were under the influence of naval laws that existed outside the state. This international sovereignty of the high seas was often influenced by actions permissible at sea yet illegal on land. Once on land, this extra-state sovereignty was replaced by the sovereignty of the state. The site of negotiation between the two realms of power was the border between the open seas and the port of London. Wet docks on the Thames acted to enforce this border and enforced state sovereignty as ships sailed into the port. In the enclaves of wet docks, policing systems emerged and were rehearsed as mechanisms of asserting state control.

CHOREOGRAPHING THE ENCLAVE

In 1799 a proposal for a compound of excavated wet docks, quays, and warehouses all enclosed by a 30' high wall was presented to the Corporation of the City of London. This proposal for the West India Dock effectively quarantined all trade coming from the West Indies in a securable system of wet docks. The plan dictated a sequence of ships entering the wet dock, berthing at the quayside, and systematically unloading cargo.

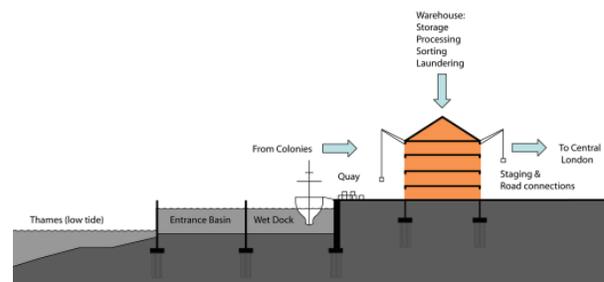


Fig. 2: Diagram of the wet dock sequence.

In this enclave that both enabled a species of piracy (the duplicity of the West India Company) and protected against other species of piracy of the port, the metrics of trade influenced the form of the structures. For example, the depth of the wet docks excavated from the fabric of the city was determined by the draught of a fully loaded merchant ship. The metrics of the barrels that West India merchants used to ship sugar dictated the floor to floor heights and the loading capacities of warehouses that were built within the enclaves. The architecture and infrastructure of these zones responded to mercantile forces from beyond the city as they met the London market.

The tract printed in 1799 titled *A brief comparative statement of the merits of the two plans now under the consideration of Parliament, for improving the port of London, by wet docks, &c.* explains the merchant's point of view regarding these plans: "no Plan can effectually remove the Evil and Loss sustained under the present system, which does not provide for a Part of the Trade of the Port in Wet Docks..."¹⁰ The Merchant's plan was influenced by profit. If the goods entering the city could be stabilized in warehouses and released when demand in the market rose, risk could be minimized. The impact of acts of piracy outside the structure of the West India Company

was lessened while the acts of piracy by the West India Company were further enabled inside the enclave. The wet dock space that the City of London proposed was removed from the shipping lanes of the river, and received the ships directly as they came in from the sea.

The ships were immediately brought into a system of locks and docks, the architecture of which mitigated piracy. The crew remained on the ship until she was docked and a revenue officer could board. Both the crew and the cargo were unloaded while the ship is docked and “under the entire control of the Revenue and Dock Officers.”¹¹ The warehouses were located “immediately contiguous” to the docked ship, and these spatially contiguous warehouses with adjacent quay space allowed the unloaded cargoes to be systematically and precisely handled. Goods flowed from the ship to the quay to the warehouse in one simple sequence.

This unloading sequence was enclosed with a system of walls that surrounded the whole enclave. Unassailable walls were an essential part of the architectural elements of control. The only means of entrance and exit was through a heavily monitored gate.¹² The enormous scope of these walls and gates can still be discerned from the remnants at the West India Docks.¹³



Fig. 3: A replica of the West India Entrance gate with the West India Warehouses beyond. The gate was originally integrated into the wall that surrounds the warehouse compound.

The choreographed sequence of movement within the dock walls was scripted in the proposal for the buildings at West India Docks. This script included the roles of Revenue officers and Landing Waiters,

two antecedents to a dock-side police force.^{14 15} A police force simultaneously developed as a result of Patrick Colquhoun's exposition of waterside crime in *A Treatise on the Commerce and Police of the River Thames: Containing an Historical View of the Trade of the Port of London; and Suggesting Means for Preventing the Depredations Thereon, by a Legislative System of River Police*. Colquhoun, a magistrate of the East End and an avid statistician, realized that the rampant piracy within the port was taking a toll on the profits of the import companies. Convinced by his argument, the West India Company with assistance from the government funded the force.¹⁶

SURVEILLING AND POLICING THE ENCLAVE

Colquhoun's treatise influenced the eventual creation of the Marine Police force, which specifically patrolled the river. The Marine Police along with the Military Guard and the Peace Officers monitored the West India Docks. The Peace Officers, formed in 1802, specifically patrolled the warehousing compound and were essentially constables with surveillance duties. Like the Military Guard, the Peace Officers were a land-based police force. Accommodations such as guard stations and check points were provided for both these police within the walls of the warehousing enclave at the West India Docks.

Two “round houses” or detention areas were commissioned by the West India Company shortly after the warehouses were completed. The architects of the warehouses, George Gwilt and his son, also George, designed the two small structures which were round in plan and roofed with a small dome at the North and South sides of the docks. One of the round houses was used primarily to store weapons and the other was a guard station, but both functioned as interrogation and holding cells for suspects caught within the West India Dock's walls.

Both round houses were surrounded by moats and connected to the rest of the compound via drawbridge. They were designed by the Gwilts in the same austere neo-classical style as the warehouses at the West India Docks, but they take on an architecture of surveillance reminiscent of Foucault's Panopticon. Like a city besieged by the plague, the enclave walls surrounded a zone

of surveillance. "Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere."¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Extra state actors with dispositions akin to the East and West India Companies influence the creation of space today. Enclaves are still created. Territories with spatial implications similar to those of the compounds created in the port of London are still negotiated. Networks enable the execution and realization of global grand strategies, and even if their dispositions have changed, architectures of surveillance and control remain as places to critique power.

The metaphor of port is often used to describe the way networked entities function today.¹⁸ The port both prefigured contemporary global networks and remains active in them. In the heyday of the British Empire, the Thames drew everything from information, to cargo, to conflict into London. Through the progression of spatial responses from corporal punishment to controlling imports via enclaves, London's port was the site of the convergence of a network of imperial power struggles. In this way the nineteenth century port and its enclaves prefigured aspects of today's global networks.



Fig. 4: The remaining round house at the West India Docks.

ENDNOTES

1. Hugo Grotius's treatise *Mare Clausulum* proposed that the seas could not be claimed as possessions by a single country. John Welwood's refutation of this claim for the British underscores that not only that the British imagination conceived of the ocean as having land-like characteristics, they also believed that it was a British possession.

2. The striated sea is a notion posited by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Million Plateaus*:

The sea is perhaps principal among smooth spaces, the hydraulic model par excellence. But the sea is also, of all smooth spaces, the first one attempts were made to striate, to transform into a dependency of the land, with its fixed routes, constant directions, relative movements, a whole counterhydraulic of channels and conduits...-
-Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. trans. Brian Massumi. (Minneapolis MN: U of Minnesota Press, 1987) p. 387.

3. Thomas Gallant, "Brigandage, Piracy, Capitalism, and State-Formation: Transnational Crime from a Historical World-Systems Perspective". *States and Illegal Practices*. Josiah McC Heyman, ed. (New York, NY: Berg, 1999), 27-8.)

4. N.A.M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*. (New York, NY: Penguin, 2004), 162-3.

5. Arthur Herman, *To Rule the Waves*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2004), p.247.

6. Image courtesy <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Kidd.JPG>. Accessed 12 April 2007.

7. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (New York, NY: Vintage, 1995), p.43.

8. Piracy and extra-state actors also engendered architecture in coastal cities such as Gibraltar, Halifax, Savannah, and Key West. Often the architecture was the residue of the military intervention to prevent piracy. Britain kept a standing naval fleet at Gibraltar, for example, as both a means of controlling the Mediterranean from the triple threat of state enemies (i.e. France or Spain), privateers or brigands (with *letters of marque* sanctioning their actions), and pirates. See Arthur Herman's book, *To Rule the Waves*, pp. 233-236.

9. Thomas Gallant, "Brigandage, Piracy, Capitalism, and State-Formation: Transnational Crime from a Historical World-Systems Perspective". *States and Illegal Practices*. Josiah McC Heyman, ed. (New York: Berg, 1999), 40.

10. *A brief comparative statement of the merits of the two plans now under the consideration of Parliament, for improving the port of London, by wet docks, &c.* London, 1799. p.1

11. Ibid 2.

12. Ibid.

13. The Survey of London describes the construction of the walls at the West India Docks:

The inner perimeter wall was built in 1802. The Gwilts prepared plans with an estimate of £39,500, Holmes and Bough undertook the excavation, and Adam and the Robertsons built the wall, which was 30ft high, with 12 million bricks made on site by John Fentiman. (ref. 697) It enclosed the north, east and west quays of the Import Dock, with articulation to accommodate warehouses that were not then built. Parts of the wall survive as the outer elevations of the Ledger Building (Dock Office) and the link blocks west of Nos 1 and 2 Warehouses (see page 313) (Plate 53b; fig. III). The wall undulated, with long curved sections alternating with short straight ones, using the strengthening principal typical of a crinkle-crankle wall. The concave outer faces of the curved sections were slightly battered, and the angles were defined by projecting piers. On John Rennie's advice, cornice-caps to the piers were replaced with beveled caps, to discourage climbing. At the ends of the wall, north of the Import Dock locks, there were tall cylindrical piers, probably used to guide ships into the dock.

Survey of London: volumes 43 and 44: Poplar, Blackwall and Isle of Dogs, "The West India Docks: Security", (1994), pp. 310-13. <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=46499>. Accessed: 2 April 2007.

14. *Copies of reports of the Elder Brethren of the Trinity House, and of the practical officers of the revenue, on the plan for improving the port of London at the Isle of Dogs*. Trinity House, London, 1799. p. 2

15. Ibid p. 3

16. 'The West India Docks: Security', *Survey of London: volumes 43 and 44: Poplar, Blackwall and Isle of Dogs* (1994), pp. 310-13. URL: [http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=46499&strquery=Patrick%20Colquhoun%20police"%20docks](http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=46499&strquery=Patrick%20Colquhoun%20police). Accessed: 20 April 2007.

17. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (New York, NY: Vintage, 1995), p.153.

18. Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, technological mobilities and the urban condition*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), p. 356.