By the beginning of the 18th century the British Empire had been embracing contact with difference from overseas for some time. The Empire had grown to include an array of colonies and dependent nations when necessary. Through the guise of private gain) allowed them to attack the navies and merchant fleets of rival nations when necessary. They were free agents, interested only in profit. This fluctuating identity enabled the pirates to engage in a mutable sovereignty, backing whichever state proved the most profitable, when feasible. Reciprocally, the state could choose to support or invoke support of the pirate’s actions as needed. In the late 17th and early 18th century, as the British Empire became more powerful with better

Import companies like the British West India Company and the British East India Company (chartered as early as 1600) were at the forefront of the increase in imports to England. Based in London, they nevertheless controlled large portions of the Empire overseas. Both companies were separate from and not controlled by the state, enabling them to engage in a variety of activities, not always within the law. The East India Company, for example, acted as a government-recognized trading authority, overseeing the port of Madras, building cities, ports, and establishing other infrastructure, along with maintaining a standing army. Similarly, the West India Company controlled the island of Jamaica, enforcing the laws and customs of the island. The port was a hub of commerce, with goods, diamonds, and other precious stones, ivory, and shells from ports in India, China, and Indonesia. Trade was seasonal in the sense that trade volume varied from year to year, but the growing season was largely irrelevant. These high-quality luxury goods were sold not in markets but in showrooms which were app-ended to the warehouses in the 18th century. Wealthy clients or other merchants could bid on goods in semi-public sales that were held in the Sale Room in the East India House, the building that also served as the headquarters of the East India Company.

In this sense, one particular species of urbanism grew out of the East India Company’s imports. But the warehouse urbanism that this study considers is that of the West India Company at the West India Docks. In 1799, the company announced a competition for a housing masterplan for the West India Company’s port. The post drew as much traffic to it as any other in London. Within this conflagration, there were few mechanisms of control. Identities were fluid: pirates impersonating customs officers raided ships, gangs of thieves in league with the crews of merchant ships plotted thefts of cargo, and the day laborers who were hired to unload the ships pilfered unimpeded. The scale of theft ranged from what fit in a pocket to the stealing of entire ships and their cargoes. There was no established and reliable means of receiving imports. The British West and East India Companies and their investors lost money due to these dependences, and ships’ captains began turning away from the port. Something had to be done to remedy the chaos on the river.

The import companies themselves often operated on the fringe of legitimate, verging into acts of piracy when beneficial. In the early 1700s, when the East India Company was becoming increasingly powerful in India and the West India Company was mechanizing sugar production in the Caribbean, piracy was not a new concept. For years England had issued letters of marque to pirates, effectively changing their title to “privateer,” and enabling them to engage in low-grade aggressions against other nations with the blessing of the state—a practice tolerated and encouraged as a means to disrupt trade. The East India Company, with its vast resources, was able to carry out this type of piracy more effectively than anyone else. It could afford to send entire fleets of ships against other nations with the blessing of the state, and it did so repeatedly. The East India Company’s ships were equipped with cannon and armed with a large crew of sailors and soldiers. They sailed under the British flag, and their captains enjoyed a certain immunity from legal prosecution. This made them formidable opponents, and other nations feared the consequences of engaging them in battle. The East India Company was able to use its military power to protect its interests in India and the Caribbean, and to maintain control over its overseas territories. This allowed it to extend its influence and power, both in India and in other parts of the world.
defined spatial boundaries, the state found it increasingly difficult to find a use for the alternative sovereignty of pirates. 34

In fact, pirates became a hindrance to the activities of the state, and merchants (especially the British East India Company) began to have difficulties keeping trade routes open to India because of the British piracy. When the British pirate William Kidd attacked and plundered the British ship Goodeath Merchant in the Indian Ocean in 1698, it was the last straw. Kidd claimed that the ship was flying a French flag at a distance of 150 miles away from the capital, the ship was brought back to London for punishment. But there was no supporting evidence of this, and the accusation was 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 thal spirit. A few years earlier, Kidd’s exploits would have been business as usual. His inven-
tors included not just Governor Belknap but Edward Ross,
newly Lord Orford, along with the three other Whig peers—and even, for a 10 percent cut, King William III. 17

Even though Kidd’s practical activities happened overseas and miles away from the capital, he was brought back to London for punishment and hung at Execution Dock on the banks of the Thames in 1701. Afterward his body was displayed in a gibbet (a metal cage for the body) in the city. The body was exhibited for several days, and the crowds were enormous.

The development of the gibbet and Execution Dock established the state’s new lack of tolerance for piracy: In Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, Michel Foucault writes of a similar strategy in 18th-century France: “The body of the condemned man was... an essential element in the ceremonial of public punishment.” 35 In Kidd’s case, the exhibition of his body expressed the new alliance between state and Company control; these practical acts became catalytic and instant in precipitating political and spatial developments in London. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, Execution Dock and the gibbet were used less as a new species of urbanism became the chief instrument of controlling and mitigating difference in the liminal space of import. Enclaves of dock compounds were built at the edges of the Thames, a new temporal language emerged in the port. 36 The interface between the East and West India Companies, other pirates, and the city of London fueled this system of warehouse urbanism that developed only where trade networks converged in London’s docks.

Before entering the river, ships were under the influence of naval laws that existed outside the state. This international sovereignty of the high seas often involved actions permissible at sea yet illegal on land. Once on land, this extra-state sovereignty was replaced by the sovereign state, the border between the open seas and the port of London was the site of negotiation between these two realms of power. Wet docks on the Thames formed this border; in these enclaves, porting systems emerged and were rehearsed as mechanisms of asserting state control.

Diagram of the proposed warehouse urbanism on the Isle of Dogs showing warehousing surrounding the importing dock to the north of the export dock.

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 Landmark Visitors, two antecedents to a dock-side role in the modern era. The proposal for a police force of the Port of London was a result of Patrick Colquhoun’s exposition of waterside crime. A magistrate of the East End and an avid statistician, Colquhoun 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 what would dictated a sequence of ships entering the wet dock, berthing at the quayside, and systematically unloading cargo (figs. 2-3).

In this enclaves that both enabled a particular species of piracy (the duplicit of the West India Compa-
ny) and protected against other illicit activities, the metrics of trade influenced the form of the structures. The depth of the wet docks was determined by the draught of a fully loaded merchant ship; the metrics of the barrels that West India merchants used to ship sugar (newly introduced to the city’s diet on a large scale) dictated the floor to floor heights and the loading capacities of warehouses that were built within the enclaves. The architec-
ture and infrastructure of the port responded to forces from beyond the city as they met the London market.

A tract printed in 1799 explains the merchant’s point of view regarding the plans for the port: “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.” 37 The merchant was naturally motivated by profit; if the goods entering the city could be stabilized in warehouses and released when demand in the market rose, risk could be mini-
mized. The impact of acts of piracy outside the structure of the West India Company would be lessened while the acts of piracy by the West India Company could be 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.

Once reaching the Isle of Dogs, the ships were immediately brought into a system of locks and docks; 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 was docked and “under the entire control of the Revenue and Dock Offi-
cers.” 38 The warehouses were located “immediately contiguous” to the docked ship, and these spatially con-
tiguous warehouses with adjacent quay space allowed the unloaded cargo to be systematically and precisely handled. Goods flowed from the ship to the quay to the warehouse in one simple sequence, enclosed with a sys-
tem of unassailable walls that surrounded and controlled the whole enclave. The only means of entrance and exit was through a heavily monitored gate. 39 The enormous scope of these walls and gates can still be discerned from the remnants at the West India Docks (figs. 6-11).

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become the Marine Police force, which patrolled the river and monitored the West India Docks along with the Military Guard and the Peace Officers. 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 forces 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 [fig. 5]. Surrounded by moats and connected to the rest of the compound via drawbridge, the round houses 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 Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, designed in 1795. “The high enclose walls surrounded a zone of surveillance. ‘Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere’.”

The links between surveillance, commerce, piracy, and changes in the urban fabric explored by this study are frequently subtle. It is often difficult to establish causal links between imports and changes in infrastructure. However, it seems more than coincidence that in 1799, when only 32,000 hogsheads of sugar could be accommodated at the existing riverside warehouses and quays and when the West India Company was importing an average of 100,000 to 120,000 hogsheads a year, an architectural competition was announced for a design to accommodate the extra hogsheads. Many authors agree that London’s port in 1800 was ready for change, largely because of the cultural changes and differences that flowed into the city through the area. The port was a membrane through which different worlds came in contact. The increase in contact at the beginning of the 19th century engendered changes in the physical fabric of the city.

Today, extra-state actors with dispositions akin to the East and West India Companies still influence the creation of space. Warehouse urbanism is still used in an effort to mediate, control, and obscure difference. Territories with spatial implications similar to those of the compounds created in the port of London are still constructed. Networks enable the execution and realization of grand global strategies, and even if their dispositions have changed, architectures of surveillance and control remain as places to critique power and understand difference.
ary.com/ (accessed 12 September 2008) is especially useful because of its search options.

4. The Weaver's Riots highlight an example of this: in the late 1600s the East India Company imported silk already woven into cloth from Asian markets for sale on the English market. This import directly undercut local weaving businesses, and weavers coined in protest. In 1700 an Act of Parliament was passed prohibiting the Company from importing silk that had been already woven into cloth. Yet this does not seem to have hampered the East India Company's sales of silk. See William Louis, Nicholas Canny, F. Maitland, Anthony B. Bowen, eds., The Oxford History of the British Empire (Oxford: University Press, 1998), 278-8.


7. Arthur Henry Beavan’s book The Imperial London (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1901) describes the city’s imports during the height of empire. Another good discussion is found in Jonathan Schenker’s London 1910: The Imperial Metropolis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). Even though Schenker is writing about London 100 years later than this study, he paints a picture of the port as a “vicious capitalism,” where difference in the form of goods and people flowed into the imperial capital.

8. For a history of the East India House, see Leadenhall Street is described as a backdrop to the history of Pitt’s enforcement of the Commodity Act.


12. This map is in the collection at the Beinecke Library under the title “Buildings of England” Series, Nikolaus Pevsner discusses the East India Company’s Cutlers’ Gardens warehouses in the City. In the “Buildings of England” Series, Nikolaus Pevsner discusses the East India Company’s Cutlers’ Gardens warehouses in the City.

13. Ibid.


