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The majestic neoclassical silhouette of a public building known as the Somerset House dominates over the pre-City north bank of the river Thames. The project was initially started in 1547 by Sir Edward Seymour, Lord Protector and Duke of Somerset. It was after its demolition in 1755, Sir William Chambers immediately started working on its reconstruct. This grand building, unfortunately, replaced the old and prestigious Somerset Palace, better known as Denmark House in honour of Anne of Denmark wife of James I of England (James IV of Scotland) when she moved in, in 1603. It was then she sent an invitation to Indigo Jones and other architects to rebuild some parts of the palace, this work continued till her death in 1619. The house had served as a home to royals and was used as grace-and-favour apartments, storage, stables and offices, moreover, ironically, as the headquarters for the parliamentary army during the English Civil War. Following decades of negligence, the old Tudor style building was authorised by King Georg III to be demolished to create a new site for public developments. William Robinson, the secretary of Board of Works, was given the task to design the new Somerset House by the Treasury as he had the post of clerk in the Somerset House and had notable experience as an executant architect, involved in Horse Guards (1750-8) and the new Excise Office (1768). Sir William Chambers believed he would be more suitable for the role as Robinson's ideas lacked imagination. Robinson unexpectedly died in October 1775, paving the way for Chambers to take the position as leading architect of the construction of a complex of new public buildings, known to be the new Somerset House. In the building, the main government office was to accommodate the Navy Office as well as the Navy Pay and Victualling Offices and housing for the treasurer and commissioners of the Navy Office. The

main construction of Somerset house spanned a quarter of a century from 1776-1801, after Chambers retirement in 1795. Sir William Chambers was born in Gothenburg, Sweden on 23rd February 1723, as a son of a Scottish merchant. He received education in Yorkshire, England, and at the age of sixteen, he entered the service of the Swedish East India Company, where he travelled India and China. In 1749, he returned to Europe and studied architecture first in Jacques-François Blondel's École des Arts, Paris and then, in 1750, he travelled to Rome, Italy, where he spent five years and was taught drawing skills by Clérisseau and studied antique and contemporary buildings. When he returned to England, he set up practice in London, and in 1756 he had the fortune of becoming architectural tutor to the Prince of Wales: future King George III. He was commissioned to lay out the grounds of the Dowager Princess of Wales' house at Kew, where he ornamented the gardens with an exotic array of temples and garden-buildings, including the Chinese Pagoda (1761-2). Without a doubt, his experiences in East Asia have influenced his work here. In 1760, he was one of two architects appointed by the Crown in the Office of Works. His work combined the English Palladianism with French neo-classicism, seen at Casino, Marino, Dublin. This granted him a very successful career as an official architect. He was one of the leading Palladian-style architects of his day during the Georgian period. He used a profound knowledge of European (especially French) to give a new look to Palladian-style buildings. His best works were Casino at Marino (1776) Dublin, Duddingston House, Edinburgh and Pagoda (1757-62). The term Palladianism refers to a style of architecture established on Andrea Palladio's workings (1508-80) one of the most influential architects of the 16th century. It is fair to say Chamber's experiences certainly influenced his ideas,

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studying in across Europe, he absorbed ideas that would lead to Neo-Classicism. Palladian Architecture was introduced to England by Inigo Jones, who was involved in the construction of the old Somerset House. His style was based on his first-hand experience of ancient and renaissance architecture in Italy. He believed architecture should follow the principals of classical antiquity. The work of Vitruvius also influenced him, symmetric, simple and ordered. It is clear Chambers followed used Palladianism with his use of symmetry, antiquity-style columns and general style. Neo-classicism is an architectural style that started around 1750 and lasted until early 19th century. Unlike Palladianism, neoclassicism focused on the antiquity style of Roman and Greek architecture rather than through one man's perception. It focused on simplicity of geometric forms, in particular, Doric and Roman features, use of columns and large blank walls. Such simplicity in the design of buildings is a general reaction from the previous trend of Rocco and Baroque which was lots of things happening at once. (Valuable observation.) An excellent example is the National Gallery in London with the bold eight columns, large blank walls and another simple, yet grand shapes. Hotel de Ville de Metz is a hotel designed by Chambers' teacher in Paris, Blondel, with a similarity to the House of Somerset. The façade of the hotel looks nearly identical to that of the Strand entrance, with one exception, colour. The Aubette is another design by Blondel that was initially built as the main guard of the Strasbourg Guard du Corps. They are strikingly similar to their arches with windows with a larger window above it and then a slightly smaller square window on the top. Sir Chambers certainly has followed this style in his designs. However, he has a somewhat different style which includes columns, something Blondel appears not to use. They both make

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the brickwork very bold, but Sir Chambers chooses to have a flat roof whereas Blondel prefers to include a tiled roof. By the act of parliament in 1775, the freehold of Buckingham was given to the queen. While writing to Edmund Burke, who then was a Member of Parliament, working in Somerset House, Sir William Chambers referred to it as 'a child of your own' and 'tis but right you should see it fledge before you leave it'. When the project was assigned to Sir William Chambers, in all his joyousness, he made sure to acknowledge Burke's role in establishing the character of this elaborate project. Despite the fact Chambers regretted the demolition of the Jonesian parts of the building, he was incredibly welcoming to the prospect of creating his art on a massive, six-acre land. In Chambers' likely to be first and, certainly, his only plan, he is observed conveying his concepts unrestricted and resolute. John Harris in his book 'Sir William Chambers: Knight of the Polar Star' describes this plan as 'astonishing performance of oval and oblong courts linked in the most intricate columnar manner reminiscent of Le Geay and the Francy Italian fantasies evocative of Imperial Rome'. He further mentioned that reasoning would rather triumph with a more mundane arrangement. However, there were two limitations: first, he had to keep the Strand front plan untouched, which was a protruding neck of land enclosed on two sides of private buildings. The second limitation was that he was compelled to keep the Dutch lane open as it was a public way that bisected the western parts of the site and gave access to the river gate. The concern at the time was providing accommodation. However, it was not as big of an issue as the allocation of the workplaces as the offices regarded themselves as autocratic and demanded a large working space. To cater best these demands and to suffice the requirements Chambers sent the units of his

proposed plan for approval. Original plans are not currently available, yet the manner of development may be deduced through careful investigation of the design development materials. One of the architect's schemes cuts out the Strand from the side via wings of the building, creating an 'E' shaped solution. Accommodation zone of the project would limit the access to the river, creating a court. Two further courts would find their place in the east and west. Visually, this strongly resembles the plan of the existing building. Location of the offices does not differ greatly from contemporary solutions, as they were distributed tightly around long corridors, which created a 'spine' of the working space. In the book 'Sir William Chambers: Knight of the Polar Star', John Harris mentions that Chambers was rather eager to take up this massive project, he states 'By no mere coincidence he was off to Paris just after the Savoy Somerset agreement, not for pleasure, but to 'examine with care and make proper remarks upon' the 'many great things' that had been built there since his last visit in 1754. The trophy of his brief excursion was a beautifully delineated album of watercolour drawings of the latest Parisian hôtels and public buildings - Antoine's La Monnaie, Gabriel's Ecole Militaire and Palace Louis XV, Gondoin's Ecole de Chirurgie, and Chalgrin's Hôtel de la Vrillière.' his belief being Chambers' visit to Paris was essentially in search for an inspiration or 'models for a potential Somerset House'. He further adds 'The Strand front is first and foremost a monument to John Webb's Jonesian New gallery, one of the choicest parts of the old palace and the first home of the Royal Academy. Its nine bays of one and-a-half storeys over an arcade are the expansion of the five-bay gallery; three-quarter columns replace the original Corinthian pilasters; and the ornamentation is spelled out in contemporary neo-classical terms. Secondly,

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it pays homage to Ammanat, Palladio, Vignola, Peruzzi, and to Salvi, an exponent of late baroque Classicism who Chambers thought sometimes 'hit upon the right'. The attic, fronted by four statues and surrounded by a court-of-arms, is taken from Salvi's Trevi Fountain measured by Chambers, and an appropriation for which he found precedent in Soufflot's Hôtel Dieu at Lyons."Chambers ability to take a number of renaissance models and fuse them into a composition entirely his own also makes him comparable to Jones, similarly, he was at his best with small-scale units of the design of which the Strand block is a perfect example - a polished academic jewel set aside for the academic bodies'. Sculptural ornamentation continues throughout the elevations and interiors of the Somerset House, representing Britain's marine power. Keystones in the arcades symbolise English control over oceans and the great eight rivers of the motherland. Ocean, Thames, Humber, Mersey, Medway and Tweed were carved by Wilton; and Tyne, Severn and Dee by Carlini, yet the front of the Strand block houses icons of the 'Lares or Tutelar Deities of the Place' by the skilful hands of Nollekens. A quartet of Wilton's attic statues represent the Continents. Doric gateways framing the space between the Strand block extension and the court wings lure eyesight, inviting to explore the site and discover exquisite detailing of the court elevations. Unity is created through the elegance of the ornament, not its excess and exaggerated splendour, which places the visuals nearer French stylistic inheritance than English. One would immediately think of Garbiel or de Wailly. Chambers's Gallic style preferences and tastes can be seen in doorways the style of Hôtel de Conti. One of Chambers' greatest successes in the design of the Somerset House was the pile driven foundation. The Strand apartments have Parisian roots, housing shallow

coved and consoled ceilings, or walls compartmented by pilaster strips. It becomes apparent: as a master of his craft, Chambers had the right to push his Gallic, adventurous taste forward, free from obligation to follow prevailing fashion. His first attempt at a French-style room was the Saloon at Gower House, c. 1768-70. The results, as might have been expected were hesitant and unresolved. Extremely unfortunate, the Somerset House came but very late in Chamber's career and became his final, crown creation. It is a symbol of his very own victory with convention, without sacrifice coming from dignity, perfection or rather, academic correctness. Without the slightest hesitance, Somerset House's every intricate detail was deeply thought-through. A combination of such kind of precision with a lot of personal input creates a unique element of the European grandeur of architectural heritage. " It is a perfect marriage of the principles of Architecture expounded in the Treatise and the best of Georgian craftsmanship."