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'An aristocratic palace of monarchical intent': The Interiors of Northumberland House in the Strand, 1605-1874

Royal courts were almost always polycentric. Court historians have been well aware that it should not be assumed that the life of a court took place only within the palaces of its monarch. The consort, the heir and other members of the ruling family might have their own, rival establishments. Then there were the leading aristocratic families who usually had townhouses in close proximity to, but still separate from, the principal royal palace. In early-modern London the grandest of those aristocratic houses were ranged along the Strand. The Bedfords, Exeters, Worcesters, Arundels and Essexes all had their houses along (or just off) the street connecting Whitehall with the City. Proud symbols of noble status and independence, the houses were of a scale that could dare visitors to compare them with even the king's palaces. But, of them, Northumberland House alone survived into the age of photography. Manolo Guerci was therefore able to use the rich photographic record dating from the years immediately before its demolition to illustrate the complicated history of its décor over three centuries. Almost every generation remodelled at least some of the interiors. A long series of celebrated architects (John Webb, Robert Adam, Sir Charles Barry), along with a number of lesser figures, proposed ambitious redesigns; in some cases they got the opportunity to carry them out. The history of elite interior design in Britain between the reigns of James I and Victoria can thus be chronicled within this single building. In the 1620's, after the 1st Earl of Suffolk got into serious financial difficulties, Northumberland House (then called Northampton House) almost passed into royal ownership, just as that other great Strand residence, Somerset House, had done eighty years earlier. Would the subsequent redecoration have been as sumptuous if Northumberland House had indeed become a real royal palace? During the discussion Anna Key asked about the inconvenience of the river access to the seventeenth-century house. Was not the river the preferred approach to these Strand houses? Guerci disagreed, arguing that the importance of the Strand as a processional route made the street side the usual ceremonial entrance. **AB**