



Humphreys, L.K. (2012) 'Does the Queen know about this? Audience development and reaction to the Enchantment of Kensington Palace'.

*Rosetta* **11**: 31-55.

[http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue\\_11/humphreys.pdf](http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue_11/humphreys.pdf)

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## **Does the Queen know about this? Audience Development and Reaction to the Enchantment of Kensington Palace**

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### **Abstract**

In 2009 Kensington Palace closed down two-thirds of its public spaces, removed all but two items from the infamous royal dress collection, and filled the remaining staterooms with conceptual art, fashion design and performance artists: 'The Enchanted Palace'. This experimental exhibition was designed to keep the Palace open during a multi-million pound refurbishment, but also to reach out to new and wider audiences ahead of its re-opening as 'A Palace for Everyone' in 2012. Audience reactions to the Enchanted Palace have been mixed, with enormous strength of feeling. This paper looks at the audience reactions to the exhibition, audience development during its run and the learning outcomes for Historic Royal Palaces and the wider cultural sector, drawing on a number of interviews with the staff of Historic Royal Palaces.

### **Introduction**

Kensington Palace is in a unique position. It is a well-known historic royal residence as the former home of Queen Victoria and Princess Diana among others, and it is also home to the Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection and a vast array of art and historical objects. It is located in London, the most densely-populated city in the UK with around 7 million residents (Office of National Statistics 2002), and around 14 million international visitors a year, 70% of whom will make at least one visit to a 'Built Heritage' site (Visit Britain 2010: 4-5). These factors all contribute to generating a large potential audience for Kensington Palace.

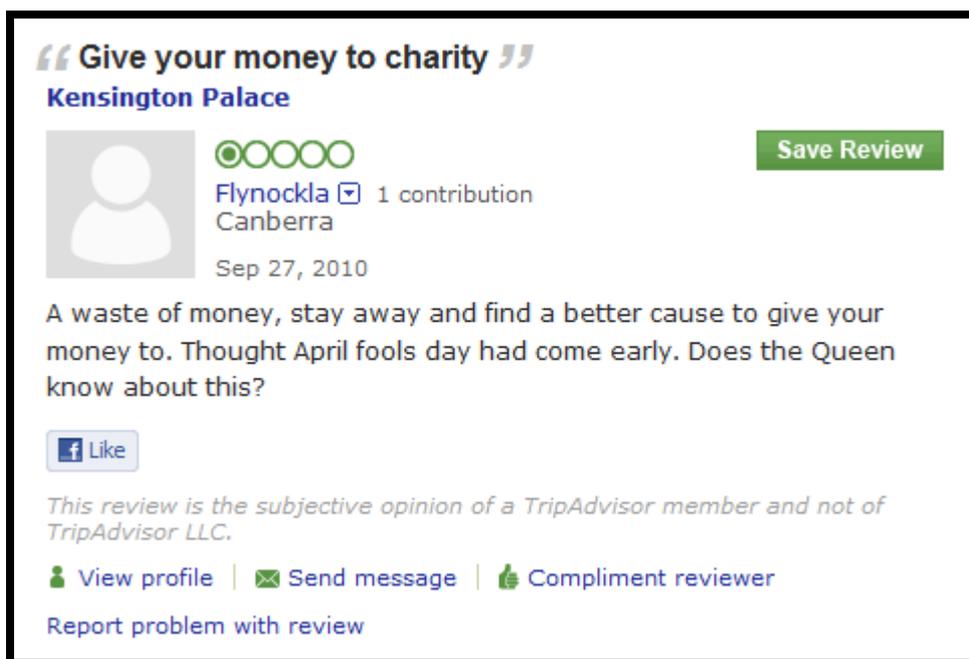
Architectural alterations at Kensington Palace have continued throughout its history, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century is already no exception. Faced with a disruptive £12million modernisation project over two years, Historic Royal Palaces (HRP) considered

three approaches. Complete closure was ruled out to avoid staff redundancies and lost income (Visitor Experience Manager Natasha Woollard 2011: pers. com.<sup>1</sup>), and offering the State Apartments (the only part of the building open throughout the building project) in their current, necessarily-sparse state (the object and dress collections have been removed to avoid damage in the volatile environment surrounding the building works) was deemed an insufficient Visitor Experience to merit the admission charge (Day 2010). The third option was to do something experimental in the State Apartments; something that ‘didn’t feel like a museum’ (Hill & Marschner, forthcoming: 19).

The State Apartments are currently home to an exhibition that brings together contemporary art, fashion design and theatrical performance in an historical setting. Working with theatre company Wildworks, HRP have capitalised on Kensington’s existing relationships with artists and designers such as Vivienne Westwood, who created installations interpreting a select history of Kensington Palace alongside fantasy-inspired performance from Wildworks interpreters (Wildworks Core Member Sue Hill 2011: pers. com.). It has attracted attention from all over the world (Chief Executive Michael Day 2011: pers. com.). However, not all of this attention has been positive:

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<sup>1</sup> As this paper has relied heavily on the input of staff from Historic Royal Palaces, job titles have been included alongside their first citations. All pers. com. interviewees work for HRP unless otherwise stated.



**Figure 1 - Review by user Flynockla (from Canberra, Australia) of the Enchanted Palace at Kensington Palace. © Tripadvisor, 2011.**

The title of this study comes from this user review of Kensington Palace at [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com), (Tripadvisor), a travel review website. This is user Flynockla's *only* contribution to the website; their sole motivation for registering was to write this review, which is typical of the 'strength of feeling' elicited by the Enchanted Palace exhibition:

It's interesting that Kensington has garnered that kind of response, because two years ago it would not have. We used to get comments like 'Nice', 'Lovely' and 'Peaceful'; now we have people emotionally reacting. Whether positive or negative, there is real strength of feeling, and the fact that a heritage building can do that is an important step.

(Woollard 2011: pers. com.)

The Enchanted Palace has caused a seismic shift in audience feedback at Kensington, but has also caused changes to the audience profile. Audience development was a key objective of the exhibition, because in 2012 Kensington will re-open as 'A Palace for Everyone' – an ambitious epithet for a site that was, until recently, 'behind the pack' (Woollard, 2011: pers. com.).

## Keeping Kensington Palace Open

The principal objective of the Enchanted Palace was ‘to keep Kensington Palace open and sustain visitor numbers’ during the building project (Day 2010). At first, ‘fairy-tale’ installations were planned, using well-known characters like Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty (Hill 2011: pers. com.), before Front-of-House staff suggested a different approach:

Our curators had the creative vision for the Enchanted Palace, but they were wandering into the realms of fairytales and fantasy. When they were explaining this to Front-of-House, they felt very strongly...the real stories were what we needed to focus on.

(Woollard, 2011: pers. com.)

The Enchanted Palace has meant that Kensington has remained open, linking the history of the Palace with performance (Curator Alexandra Kim 2011: pers. com.). Incredibly, this has so far been achieved with only a two-week closure (Explainer Team Leader Richard Mutton 2011: pers. com.). Visitor numbers reached a peak of a 22% increase on the previous year (Woollard 2011: pers. com.). This period of flux was seen as an opportunity for experiment, however, it is the *only* visitor experience on offer at Kensington; there is no traditional interpretation that an average visitor to Kensington might expect. This has been the cause of some consternation, with 19% (see fig. 2) of Tripadvisor reviewers complaining about keeping the Palace open at all:

*Please just shut the place and get on with the refurbishment –*  
**ResSheBu**, London, 8/6/2010

*It would have been better to close the palace –*  
**jillwindsor2**, London, 30/1/2011

(Tripadvisor 2011)

A further 44% (64) of Tripadvisor reviewers complained about value for money, the most common complaint about the Palace remaining open.

There is a real danger that museums facing temporary closure will lose audiences as well as revenue (Lotz 2009, and Ken Arnold, Head of Public Programmes at the Wellcome Collection 2011: pers. com.). The fact that Kensington has been able not

only to remain open throughout such a large building project, but also to attract more visitors to a site with a smaller carrying capacity (Woollard 2011: pers. com.) is commendable.

However, the decision to remain open and charge full admission has angered a vocal portion of the audience. It would be interesting to see if the negative feedback regarding value for money will affect future visitor figures.

## **Audience Development**

Audience Development has been a driving factor throughout the Enchanted Palace, and in light of the ambitious plans to reopen in 2012 as 'a palace for everyone', the change in audience profile has been closely monitored. The core audience of Kensington Palace was previously made up of 'traditional' visitors, mostly international, and 'Icon-Seekers' whose interest in Kensington stemmed from its association with Princess Diana. Two audiences that were under-represented were families and young, urban Londoners, and to some extent the Enchanted Palace was aimed at reaching out to these groups in particular ahead of 2012 (Woollard 2011: pers. com.).

## **Families**

In contrast to the audiences at Hampton Court and the Tower of London, families did not feature very much in the previous audience profiles of Kensington Palace (Mutton 2011: pers. com.). The Enchanted Palace has provided an experience for children in the form of a quest (HRP 2010), and the staff has been trained to adapt their storytelling for different age groups (Woollard 2011: pers. com.). There is anecdotal evidence from the Front-of-House team that more families are now visiting Kensington:

There are a lot more families coming, and quite a lot of them have said that we didn't have anything to offer them before, but this quirky, different exhibition has brought them in.

(Mutton, 2011: pers. com.)

Unfortunately, no information on the proportions of this increase was available to the author.<sup>2</sup> However, it has been significant enough to reduce the average age of the audience (Day 2010). This increase has an especially important part to play as Kensington makes its transition into 2012, when the Visitor Experience will be more accessible to children in a variety of ways that previous interpretation was not (Woollard 2011: pers. com.), including the introduction of a 'Kids go Free' policy (Mutton 2011: pers. com.).

Families appear to be responding well to the Enchanted Palace, although it would have been useful to have seen more statistics on this. National Trust Visitor Experience Director Tony Berry talked about a similar demographic shift at Antony in Cornwall, following the filming of Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) at the property. Contemporary installations were introduced in the grounds, and theatrical programming was introduced on certain days:

The impact on annual visitor numbers was to take them from about 20,000 to 90,000... families came at the weekends and loved it.

(Berry, 2011: pers. com.)

By limiting themed programming, Antony avoided alienating their core audience as they were still able to provide a more traditional Visitor Experience on certain days. This suggests that a balanced approach may be more effective to develop new audiences without alienating existing ones.

Partnerships can also be beneficial when trying to develop new audiences. Kopke (2010) praises the partnership of HRP and Wildworks, and it is something that the National Trust are also exploiting with their Trust New Art programme; by working with Arts Council England, the Trust are exposing themselves to a new and diverse arts audience, and vice versa (Trust New Art Programme Co-ordinator Tom Freshwater 2011: pers. com.). The Wildworks core audience is traditionally very

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this study, the author has used evidence gathered from interviews with curatorial, front-of-house, and theatrical staff, as well as the Chief Executive of HRP. Unfortunately, however, the marketing department did not respond to queries, and as such detailed internal visitor feedback was not available.

different to that of HRP (Hill, 2011: pers. com.), so this will hopefully prove to be a mutually beneficial relationship.

### **Cool Rejectors and Londoners**

Cool Rejectors [sic] is a term being used by HRP to define the young, urban Londoners who did not feature in the visitor profile:

So few Londoners came to the Palace before we got there – there’s a sustainable audience of 9 million people to reach out to, but Kensington was pitching at the international, “once-in-a-lifetime” market...

(Hill, 2011: pers. com.)

Woollard credits a variety of events with raising Kensington’s profile with this audience, especially with the Palace’s first foray into late opening. A series of events throughout the Summer of 2010 and 2011 (2011: pers. com.) proved an effective strategy in attracting a younger audience.

According to Day (2010), the 2010 Visitor Survey demonstrated a 20% increase in visitors from London, and an increase of 8% in 25-34 year old visitors. Cool Rejectors represented 4% of the audience in this survey also, having been entirely absent in 2009. Woollard acknowledges that ‘A Palace for Everyone’ will not attract everyone, every day, but things like late opening will help Kensington continue to reach out to new audiences at certain times.

However, to reach out to new audience segments in the most effective way, it is essential for museums to identify which segments are not attending (French & Runyard, 2000), and find out why they are staying away:

Many museums survey their own visitors only, and thus receive a distorted picture... It is more important to find out why people **do not** attend.

(Silberberg, 1999: 91, original emphasis)

The Enchanted Palace was not based on non-visitor research (Woollard and Hill, both 2011: pers. com.), but instead on the 'creative vision' of the curatorial staff mentioned previously. However, it seems that Wildworks, the Front-of-House team (Hill 2011: pers. com.) and HRP knew that new visitors may well be disappointed:

It's almost impossible to create something that everybody will like, and if you set out with that as your only goal, then you might not end up with something particularly exciting.

(Kim, 2011: pers. com)

The notion of being unable to please everyone is a recurrent theme (Kim, Woollard, and Hill, all 2011: pers. com., and Day 2010). Although this is true, significantly more people could have been pleased if research into what non-visitors want from a historic house was conducted. For example, Cool Rejectors still only account for a relatively small proportion (4%) of the total audience (Day 2010).

A lack of engagement with absent audiences is especially disappointing in light of how well both the curatorial team and Wildworks engaged with the Front-of-House team at Kensington Palace. The Front-of-House team has been widely praised by Management (Day 2010 and Day, Kim and Woollard, all 2011: pers. com.) for contributing significantly to the exhibition's development:

...the theatre company and the curators involved the staff in everything...they took on board a lot of comments from Front-of-House staff...

(Mutton 2011: pers. com.)

Hill also commented that the 'culture change' in the Front-of-House team's role at Kensington is one of Wildworks' proudest achievements (2011: pers. com.). The importance of internal communications is well understood, but often overlooked in museums (French & Runyard 2000). Out of the 148 Tripadvisor reviews of the Enchanted Palace, positive mention is made of the team 26 times (see fig. 2). This is the most common target of praise, even in negative reviews, and shows just how important internal communications have been to this exhibition.

Interestingly, the Icon-Seeker segment decreased dramatically (by 58%) from 2009–2010 (Day 2010). They are acknowledged as being one of the groups most vocal in rejecting the Enchanted Palace, but they have been in decline following a peak in the late 1990s–early 2000s (Day 2010), so it is difficult to ascertain how much of this decrease is due to the exhibition itself. It will be interesting to monitor this trend over the next year, as the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge will have a home in the grounds of Kensington Palace from 2012 onwards.

## **Educational Visitors**

The Educational Visitor Experience at Kensington has changed considerably over the course of the Enchanted Palace, and is perhaps the most laudable of its audience development achievements. Previously, Kensington provided history workshops for Key Stages 1 and 2 that catered exclusively to the history curriculum, but the Enchanted Palace has provided an opportunity to expand the range of subjects covered:

...it has allowed us to branch off into other subject matter. Storytelling has allowed us to look at things like poetry, creative writing and drama...

(Education Officer Jenny Wedgbury, 2011: pers. com.)

Formal Educational Visitors to Kensington Palace have increased by around 40% since the Enchanted Palace opened (Wedgbury 2011: pers. com.). Not only this, but they are coming from a wider subject and age range. Teachers are using the Enchanted Palace as a starting point for GCSE Art students, and the prestigious Wimbledon College of Art based final year work on the installations, and their work was shown at the Palace (Wedgbury, 2011: pers. com.).

Strangely, the development of the Educational Audience appears to have been overlooked in the Chief Executive's interim report (Day 2010), despite this dramatic 40% increase. It is a shame that this area is not being focussed on; not only could this kind of expansion of subjects be applied at other HRP sites, but could also benefit from non-visitor research as discussed previously, potentially expanding the Educational audience even further.

## **Audience Reactions**

HRP accept that the Enchanted Palace has split opinion:

We have never done a project that has had such a polarising effect on visitors. People who love it, really love it...But, traditional visitors arriving with traditional expectations have been highly vocal in rejecting it.

(Day 2010)

Kim highlights that positive responses have been far greater in number than negative (2011: pers. com.), and the responses in the Palace visitor books (collated monthly) confirm this, with 75% positive, 20% neutral and 5% negative responses (Woollard 2011: pers.com., slightly improved from the statistics given in Day, 2010).

However, as Day says, those who disapprove have been 'highly vocal' – not only has the online community been very critical, and some visitors have voiced their opinions in person:

People were quite vocal, and quite aggressive to the staff...we had people shouting in the staff's faces, and really upsetting them...

(Mutton, 2011: pers. com.)

There have even been letters to the Queen complaining about the exhibition (Hill 2011: pers.com.); extreme reactions that would not usually be expected from an historic house audience.

No matter what proportion of the response has been positive, this strength of negative feeling cannot be ignored. Unfortunately, HRP's marketing department would not share detailed market research data for this project. However, there is considerable critical response available in a variety of national publications, as well as many reviews on websites and blogs, which HRP are using themselves:

...we have been watching very carefully how people have responded to it...we have been looking online to see how people have been reacting on

blogs and on tripadvisor.com. It has been a really valuable source of information...

(Kim 2011: pers. com.)

As a result of limited data being available directly from HRP<sup>3</sup>, the author has made use of the feedback that Kim mentions here.

### Critical Response

The Enchanted Palace has been covered by a wide variety of press and media, including *Vogue* (Bumpus 2010), *The Guardian* (Gardner 2010) and *The New York Times* (Day 2011: pers. com. and Kent 2010). Press reviews have been largely positive – Gardner awarded 4 out of 5 stars in her theatre review; Time Out London called it ‘dazzling’ (Davis 2010); and Cuture24 called it ‘a beautifully crafted alternative view of the royal residence’ (Sexton 2010). However, it has split opinion within its own sector, with comments ranging from ‘something really quite wonderful’ (Slack 2010) at [www.museumsinsider.co.uk](http://www.museumsinsider.co.uk) to the more critical *Museums Journal*:

At its worst, it falls into the trap of what historian David Starkey recently and scathingly referred to as ‘historical Mills & Boon’.

(Selwood 2010: 47)

Being reviewed in the theatre section of a national newspaper (Gardner 2010), the world’s leading fashion magazine (Bumpus 2010) and the New York Times (Kent 2010) is a completely new experience for Kensington Palace (Day 2011: pers. com.). This range of media interest is indicative of a much wider appeal than that of a traditional historic house, and has been echoed elsewhere; Price states that even at a small site, a past contemporary art programme had reached out to new audiences through new media outlets such as *Tatler* and *Vogue* (2011: pers. com.).

As this largely-positive national and international media response is not something that Kensington Palace has experienced on this scale before (Day 2011: pers. com.),

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<sup>3</sup> See note 2, page 6.

it has likely generated a significant number of visits from new audiences as Price suggests (although detailed visitor survey data would be required to confirm this).

Interest has been maintained on small websites throughout the exhibition. Below is a selection of recent comments from the blogosphere:

...we went to Kensington Palace and the exhibit they have called the enchanted palace: AMAZING. [sic]

(Turner 2011: 'The Enchanted Palace')

Stepping into a world of the surreal, a place of fantasy, a place of historical magic.

(Garde 2011: 'The Enchanted Palace')

However, as with the critical response, not all visitors have enjoyed the experience:

I was pretty disappointed they had made such a beautifully historical building so kitschy.

(Kurt 2011: 'Queen of the Underground')

This kind of feedback continues to be generated almost daily on travel and lifestyle blogs. When the exhibition comes to an end, it would be interesting to make a comprehensive study of blog posts on the exhibition, as these personal websites can provide a rich and detailed source of insight into visitor opinions that has not been available previously. The continued attention from websites and blogs also indicates that although opinion on the Enchanted Palace remains divided, it is still being talked about almost two years into the exhibition.

### **Audience Responses from Tripadvisor**

Tripadvisor ([www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com)) is the most widely used tourist review site on the internet, with around 10 million unique visitors a month (Compete.com 2011). It allows its registered users to post reviews of hotels and attractions that they have experienced, and to rate them out of five, with five being "excellent" and one (users cannot award zero) being 'terrible' (Tripadvisor 2011).

At present, Kensington Palace has an average score of two ('poor'), and is ranked 541<sup>st</sup> out of 745 attractions in London (Tripadvisor 2011). This response has been noted by HRP as a cause for concern, and something that is being monitored (Kim, Woollard, Day, all 2011: pers. com.). In comparison to other HRP sites, it is undeniably underperforming:

Site	London Attraction Rating (Out of 745)	Number of Reviews	Average Review Score (out of 5)
Kensington Palace	541	173	2
Banqueting House	272	16	4
Tower of London	15	2078	4.5
Hampton Court Palace	N/A*	193	4.5
Kew Palace	N/A*	3	4.5

**Table 1 – HRP’s London sites and their Tripadvisor.com rankings as of 28 November 2011. \*Hampton Court Palace and Kew Palace are classed as East Moseley and Richmond attractions respectively, and are not ranked with other London attractions. © Tripadvisor, 2011.**

There are a wide variety of attractions in London in the 745 listed on Tripadvisor, including tours, restaurants and regular events. However, in the top ten attractions, six are museums and three are theatrical:

Site	London Attraction Rating (out of 745)	Number of Reviews	Average Review Score (out of 5)
The Courtauld Gallery	1	72	5
National Gallery	2	515	4.5
Lion King Musical	3	239	4.5
Priscilla, Queen of the Desert Musical	4	140	4.5
St James's Park	5	216	4.5
British Museum	6	901	4.5
Wicked the Musical	7	190	4.5
Churchill War Rooms	8	347	4.5
Imperial War Museum	9	362	4.5
Victoria and Albert Museum	10	264	4.5

**Table 2 – The Top Ten Attractions in London as of 28 November, 2011. © Tripadvisor, 2011.**

The Enchanted Palace is a collaboration between a theatre company and an historic house, so nine of the top ten attractions indicate that there is a large potential audience already available. This raises further concerns about Kensington's low score.

In order to identify specific reasons for this score, the author analysed their content.<sup>4</sup> All the reviews were read and recurrent themes were noted, with distinctions made between positive and negative mentions. These are some examples of positive comments:

*We also liked the actor/facilitators who wandered around and played with us –*  
**justanothermum**, London, 29/7/2010

*Incidentally, the sunken garden is stunning and best of all is free –*  
**Ceeffcee**, Bedford, 15/7/2010

*I really liked the artsy touch the artists had put into it –*  
**lienma**, California, 26/7/2010

Interestingly, in many negative reviews (such as that by user Ceeffcee) there were positive comments, and the same variety could be found in positive reviews, such as the below by user Hyl38:

*They could really improve this with a few tweeks here and there but they would still need to give a reduced entrance fee for sure –*  
**Hyl38**, Hampshire, 13/7/2010

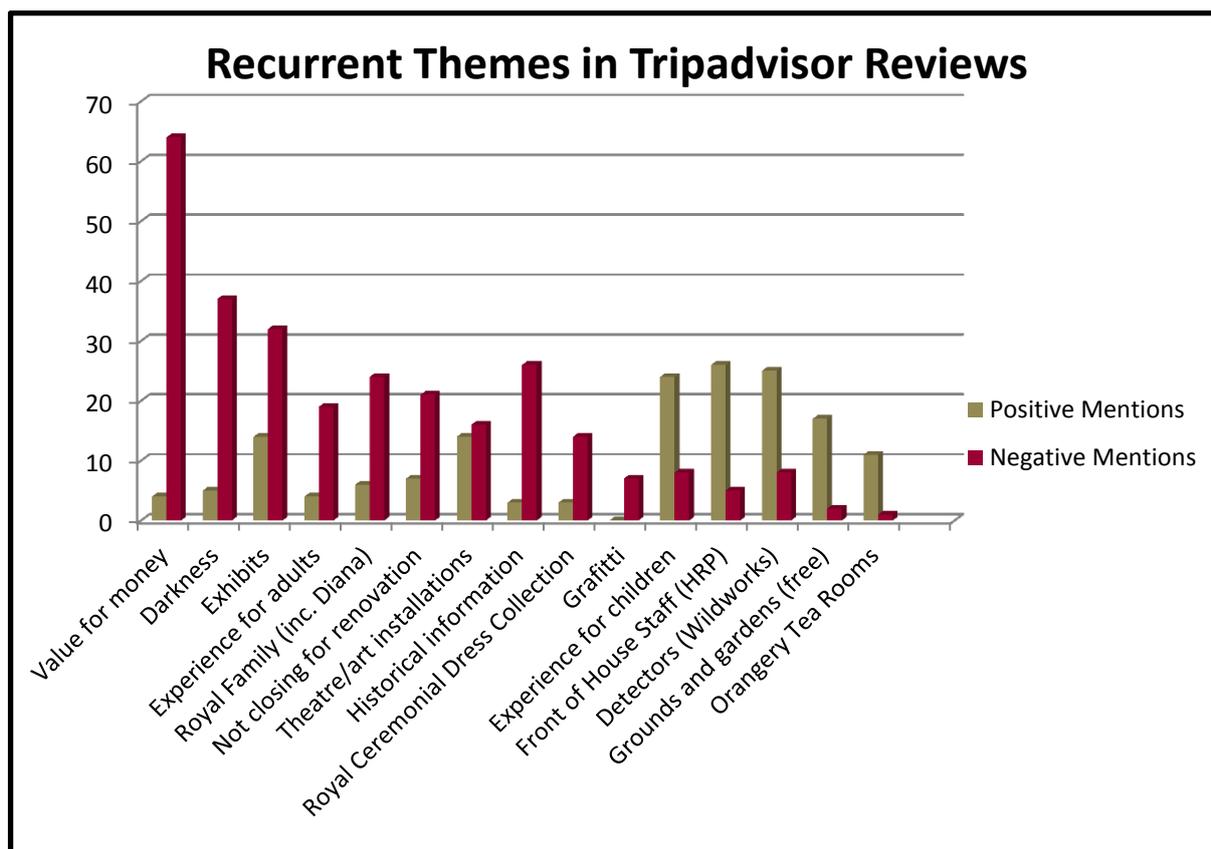
*There are two dresses from Lady Diana on display but that is all -*  
**verona1965**, Michigan, 9/11/2010

*The hallways are covered with cartoonish graffiti –*  
**Mittens67**, New York, 13/7/2010

The results of the analysis were used to create this graph charting the positive and negative aspects of the Enchanted Palace according to the Tripadvisor community:

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<sup>4</sup> Of the 173 reviews on Tripadvisor relating to Kensington Palace, 148 have been posted since the installation of the Enchanted Palace. As such, only these reviews have been included in this data.



**Figure 2 – Thematic analysis of 148 user reviews of the Enchanted Palace on Tripadvisor. Author, November 2011.**

With 63 negative against four positive reviews out of 148 in total, value for money has been a major sticking point for reviewers (although this may be a disproportionately significant motivator for posting a review in the first place). Front of House staff (employed by HRP) are closely followed by Detectors (employed by Wildworks) as the most common targets of praise, which is testament to training on the part of both HRP and Wildworks, and will hopefully continue into 2012.

Looking at these results as a whole, poor management of expectations has been a major source of negativity: 92 reviews (62%) specifically mentioned that the Enchanted Palace was not what they were expecting (Tripadvisor, 2011), and many negative comments refer to disappointed expectations:

*Unaware of the exhibition, we were initially caught off-guard*  
**DancingBee48**, New York, 29 July 2010

*we were informed too late that the dress collection had been moved*  
**Pigrissima**, Naples, 4 September 2010

This is an issue that HRP have now tried to address. At first, they wanted to embrace the 'surprise' element of the Enchanted Palace (Day 2011: pers. com.), but staff are now explicitly telling people what they can expect as they enter the exhibition (Mutton 2011: pers. com.).

Also, according to Hill (2011: pers.com.), children's paintings on the walls of the servants' stairs have been painted over as a direct reaction to the reviews on the site. However, as figure 2 shows, 'graffiti' was mentioned by only 7 reviewers (9%). Also, because HRP have not communicated that the 'graffiti' is now gone, it is unlikely to have any effect. It is an example of a missed opportunity, and perhaps more importantly, of wasted time and money.



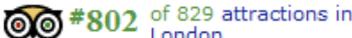
**Figure 3- Tripadvisor reviews are being taken in to account, but in light of how low down in figure 2 'graffiti' figures in the list of complaints, it appears that only insignificant concessions are being made. The fact that these drawings on 'The Wrong Stairs' have been removed has not been communicated to the public at large. © HRP, 2011.**

Managing expectations is widely recognised as an essential part of changing a visitor experience, especially in such an extreme manner (Caulton 1998 and Freshwater 2011: pers. com.). However, HRP have not adhered to this policy. Although visitors are now being “warned” before the point of sale about the exhibition contents (including a digital photoframe at the ticket desk with changing images of the exhibition), much of the negative feedback online has gone unaddressed. For example, Tripadvisor offers a facility for a ‘Management Response’ to reviews (which is visible to all site users) but this has not been utilised by HRP. This is a shame, as it could have gone some way to managing visitor expectations and may even have reduced the volume of negative reviews on the site. However, this lack of engagement with Tripadvisor is not surprising, as even the Tripadvisor owner description of Kensington Palace (visible above all the reviews) has not been updated to include the Enchanted Palace.

[Home](#) → [Europe](#) → [United Kingdom \(UK\)](#) → [England](#) → [London](#) → [Things to Do](#)

## Kensington Palace

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**TripAdvisor Traveler Rating:**  **TripAdvisor Popularity Index:** 

[Write a review](#)

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[Read 100 reviews for this attraction »](#)

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**Owner description:** Once the favored home of kings and queens, this royal residence, redesigned by Christopher Wren for William and Mary in 1689, was home to Princess Diana, and today features the Court Dress collection. [« less](#)

**Attraction type:** Castles, Historic Sites, Historic Walking Areas, Landmarks/ Points of Interest, Gardens

**Activities:** Group Tours/Walking Tour, Walking

▶ <http://www.hrp.org.uk/kensingtonPalace/>  
▶ [kensingtonpalace@hrp.org.uk](mailto:kensingtonpalace@hrp.org.uk)

**Address:** The Broad Walk  
Kensington Gardens London W8 4PX  
England

**Tel:** 44 20 7937 9561 , 44 870 751 5170

**Figure 4 - The Kensington Palace "Owner Description" has not been changed to include the Enchanted Palace or the building works; another example of a missed opportunity to manage expectations. © Tripadvisor, 2011.**

Managing visitor expectations has been identified as HRP's 'Learning #1' by Day (2010), and should be taken into consideration at the outset of future exhibitions. However, the current failures in communication, such as the graffiti remediation and the Tripadvisor owner description could have been simply rectified, and do not inspire confidence at present.

### **Some Conclusions**

As Kensington Palace prepares to fully re-open in 2012 and the Enchanted Palace draws to a close, there is no doubt it has been a bold experiment that has been very successful in some aspects of attracting new audiences, but less so in others. Either way, it has provided some extremely valuable learning outcomes:

### **Key Successes**

- **Remaining Open:** Kensington Palace has so far only closed for two weeks during a major two-and-a-half year building project, and visitor numbers have increased slightly during the 2010/11 financial year (Day and Woollard 2011: pers. com.).
- **Attracting New Audiences:** Cool Rejectors and Families have now begun to appear in the audience profiles at Kensington Palace, and Educational visits in particular have increased significantly. The expansion into new subjects such as art and design has been especially successful (Wedgbury 2011: pers. com.), and deserves recognition.
- **Engaging with Staff and Partners:** Front-of-House staff were actively involved in the development of the Enchanted Palace, by both the Curatorial and Management teams at Kensington (Hill 2011: pers. com.) as well as having on-going training with Wildworks (Mutton 2011: pers. com.). As a result they are achieving much greater

job satisfaction, and are regularly being identified as one of the best aspects of the exhibition (even in negative Tripadvisor reviews). Also, working successfully alongside an established theatre company is likely to have exposed new audiences to both partners.

## Learning Outcomes

- **Market Research:** As Silberberg (1999), Dodd and Sandell (1998) and French and Runyard (2000) all point out, one of the most important aspects of reaching new audiences is talking to non-visitors as well as visitors. This will be especially important as Kensington moves forward into its permanent incarnation. For smaller organisations, marketing budgets can be prohibitive in this regard (Price 2011: pers. com.), but this does not change the fact that if heritage sites want to expand their audience profile effectively, they must invest in this area.
- **Balancing the Visitor Offer:** Because it constitutes the entire Kensington Palace Visitor Experience at the moment, visitors with traditional expectations could not help but be disappointed by the Enchanted Palace. It is in a difficult position in this respect; building works mean that there is a very limited amount space available (and HRP are unlikely to produce a 'whole Palace' experience again - Day 2010). However, HRP and other heritage sites should bear in mind that a balanced visitor offer is key to pleasing the greatest portion of their audience (Berry and Price, both 2011: pers. com.).
- **Managing Expectations:** Much of the negative feedback directed at the Enchanted Palace could have been avoided if visitors had known what to expect. Kensington Palace had previously had a clearly-defined reputation as a historic house, but the transition into the theatrical world of the Enchanted Palace was not communicated well. Although some initial confusion was unavoidable, reviews at Tripadvisor as late as November 2011 still complain of disappointed expectations. This is something HRP have recognised, and will take forward:

If we're going to be experimental in the future, we need to be clearer at the outset. We can't assume that people will accept change.

(Day 2010)

It is worth noting, however, that the negative reviews of the Enchanted Palace are not necessarily an indication that experimental exhibitions like this should not be attempted in the future:

Clearly, when you are going to do something very challenging there is always a risk of alienating your core audience, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't be challenging them.

(Berry 2011: pers. com.)

Quite the opposite, in fact. Sewell refers to exhibitions as 'laboratories' of visitor experience (1998: 4), and HRP have treated the Enchanted Palace as a 'giant R & D [research and development] project' (Day 2010). Whilst some approaches taken with the Enchanted Palace could have been considerably improved, there were significant successes in terms of audience development, and much has been learned from what is undeniably a bold experiment in interpretation.

This boldness is perhaps the most praiseworthy aspect of HRP's Enchanted Palace; such a daring approach to historic house interpretation in particular is groundbreaking. Sadly, many historic houses have barely changed their interpretive approaches since the last private occupants left, and it is the legacy of this that has left HRP and others fighting to bring younger audiences into their visitor profiles. The Enchanted Palace has shown that a bold, collaborative, holistic approach can change the way audiences interact with the history of a place, and although some have reacted negatively, the most important thing is that visitors have become highly vocal in engaging with Kensington. Whether they love it or hate it, they have said so. The true test of the Enchanted Palace will only come when it closes. Public perception of a museum is easily altered by a temporary exhibition (Spencer 1999), and Kensington's audience has begun progressing from 'passive onlookers' into 'active participants' (Kopke 2010). It will be a challenge to maintain the interest of new audience segments with the new visitor experience of 2012. However, if the

lessons evident from the Enchanted Palace are truly applied, there is every chance that the challenge of making Kensington into 'A Palace for Everyone' will be met.

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