



# WRITING IS ON THE WALL

Failure to immediately remove graffiti comes with consequences

BY JOHN KALIMERIS

**G**raffiti is a fact of life for commercial building owners and managers in major urban centres. It is almost inevitable that at some point in time every property owner/manager will come face-to-face with an unsolicited tag, whether scribbled, scratched or sprayed illicitly on a wall or other building surface.

This unauthorized “art” is typically the first sign that undesirable people are loitering around a building after normal weekday operating hours and on weekends. What usually follows is garbage, drug paraphernalia, and other forms of vandalism and criminal activity.

If left ignored, as has been done in many large European cities, the graffiti

will only grow. In Berlin, the graffiti capital of Europe, it has become a stain on not just many historic buildings but society. What the German city and other European municipalities failed to foresee was that their overall image would be affected. Graffiti gives the impression that a building isn’t cared for or respected, resulting in loss tenants and/or customers and a potential devaluation of the property.

## **TAKING AIM AT UNWANTED SCRAWLS**

Immediate removal of unwanted scrawls is necessary to prevent further tagging and the problems that come with it. In many municipalities, property owners are also required by law to remove the illegal

markings within a specified period of time. Failure to do so may result in a fine and/or removal by city workers, with the cost added to the property owner’s tax bill.

While there are various graffiti removal products available in home improvement stores, some of which have proven successful when used on non-porous surfaces, it is best to leave eradication to the professionals. Improper removal can embed graffiti or cause further damage to the property. For instance, power-washing glass can break and crack it, and cleaning brick too aggressively may chip and damage the building material, seriously harming the finish and allowing water to seep through. As well, if a “tagger” is aware a



property was previously graffitied, it will generally mark the building before defacing a clean one as the tagger knows their "art" won't be washed away.

The right way to remove graffiti is to make it appear as if it was never on the property. The first step in the removal process is for the abatement expert to assess the surface to be treated (brick, concrete, glass) and the product to be removed (ink, paint, stickers, posters). Digital photos should be taken at this time so that "before" pictures can be compared with "after" images to confirm the quality of the contractor's work.

The abatement expert will then select the best product and process to eliminate

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## FROM GRAFFITI TO ART

Toronto property owners who are tired of being victims of graffiti vandalism may qualify for a grant to create an art mural on their building.

The city's StreetARToronto (StART) support mural program supplies up to \$2,000 worth of materials, like spray paint, brushes and rollers, for the art projects. Property owners must hire an artist independently and pay for any other costs related to the project, like equipment rentals or permits, if required.

To be eligible for funding, the applicant must be a private residential or commercial property owner and have received a minimum of one notice of violation for graffiti from the city's municipal licensing and standards division. The property must also be located within the City of Toronto and the proposed mural wall must be clearly visible from a city street.

Property owners are responsible for maintaining the artwork on their building in good repair, including the removal of any graffiti vandalism, for a period of one year from the completion date of the project.

Launched in 2012, StART is a central feature of Toronto's graffiti management plan. It is a proactive approach to both eliminating graffiti vandalism and supporting street art that adds character and visual interest to city streets.

the graffiti. Often, high heat, low-pressure water washing provides the best result for most building surfaces, with the least risk of wearing down the building material and compromising the property's structural integrity. It is also an environmentally safe tool for graffiti removal. However, each surface is unique so treatment needs to be addressed on a case-by-case basis. For instance, concrete is one of the strongest building materials so it can be washed with a higher pressure.

Once the scrawls have been successfully removed, the contractor may apply a graffiti-resistant coating to protect the building surface from wearing down and/or making future cleaning easier.

### PREVENTING CRIMES OF OPPORTUNITY

While the most important step a building owner/manager can take to keep graffiti off their property is to remove it in a timely manner, there are several prevention measures that can reduce the opportunities for tagging. These are based off CPTED (crime prevention through environmental design), a multi-disciplinary approach to deterring criminal behaviour through proper design and effective use of the built environment. "Designing out crime" includes (but is not limited to) clearing sightlines and creating natural surveillance through sufficient lighting, appropriate landscaping, and low-height walls or 'see-through' fencing.

Good lighting is one of the most effective crime deterrents. A near-constant level of exterior lighting should be maintained at night, if possible. At the very least, bright motion sensor security lights should be installed in secluded areas.

Landscaping should predominantly include low-growing plants and be properly maintained. Tall shrubs and/or overgrown vegetation are welcome hiding places for criminals. An exception to this is the planting of climbing vines or thick bushes along low-height walls, which can impede undesirables from passing through. ■

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