

# THIS CLADDING WON'T GET TAGGED: YEAH RIGHT!

**Graffiti is one of the more obvious and annoying forms of vandalism. It can be found in most urban environments but some buildings attract far more than others.**

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**G**raffiti vandalism (tagging) can be found across the country but with some local variations. In some forestry towns, for example, nearly all graffiti appears in the timber industry's three primary tree marking colours. In other places school marker pens cause thousands of dollars of damage, although the average age of a tagger in New Zealand is actually 23 years. Graffiti is generally symptomatic of more serious underlying social issues and often increases when there are political, social or economic tensions in a community.

Any cladding surface can be tagged but some building designs and locations attract graffiti. Problems often stem from poor planning and design, coupled with poor management. The result can be neighbourhoods that appear uncared for, and this encourages more vandalism and other crime.

Preventing graffiti damage is best achieved with a combination of both environmental and social measures. Everyone in a community has a role to play.

## Location, location, location

The location of the clad surface is usually more important in determining the risk of a wall being targeted than the cladding type used. Also critical is the access to the area. Free and unchallenged access provides the opportunity to 'throw up' a piece (graffiti the wall).

Minimise risk by approaching a development or plan from the perspective of a would-be offender (writing, painting, spraying, etching, or otherwise marking any structure without the consent of the owner or occupier carries a not-so-hefty \$200 fine!).

Aesthetically pleasing cladding materials and large flat surfaces might well be appealing, cost effective and adequate in the light of day but once the legitimate users of the area go home and the natural surveillance



Legal aerosol art by Spel enhances a sports pavilion wall in a high-risk tagging area.

(which creates a perception that the wrongdoer might be challenged or caught) ceases, how easy is it to damage the surface?

If you are unfamiliar with the area check with local police to see if your development or building is in a local 'hotspot' or falls within a known crime corridor – a regularly used route from one part of the city to another. Loitering facilitators nearby, such as phone boxes and park benches, may also result in increased tagging. This approach will help determine the level of preventative measures that needs to be put in place.

## Design out the opportunity

Get the basics right from the start. It may help to seek the advice of a crime prevention specialist during the design phase to minimise the risk of tagging. Generally you should:

- avoid light coloured, large smooth walls
- use hardy, easily-replaced, standard sized materials
- use lighting specific to the task which will support legitimate use of the area only, for example metal halide bulbs are better for pedestrian environments

- encourage mixed-use developments that foster favourable activity and natural surveillance throughout the day and night.

Make sure the maintenance schedules for the cladding include details for graffiti removal and funds are budgeted for rapid removal and rectifying any design faults.

## Graffiti-resistant surfaces

For high-risk locations there are a wide range of products on the market claiming to provide superior graffiti-resistance. Some coatings



Rough surfaces are less likely to get tagged, but when they do the graffiti can be difficult to remove. The tag on this split stone is still visible months after removal.



This weatherboard building is adjacent to a public walkway with no boundary definition. It is regularly tagged and the tagging is infrequently removed.



In an isolated location on a crime corridor, the exposed cladding between these plants gets tagged often.

are designed to peel away the graffiti while others are intended to provide an easy clean surface. While these do provide a degree of protection it is important to remember that they are costly to install and still require clean-up or repair after a graffiti hit.

Painted surfaces are easier to keep graffiti free because any tags can simply be painted over. Dark colours which cover in one coat are most effective. If the surface is a lighter colour than the graffiti, the tag might bleed through. Rough or textured, dark-coloured, clean and freshly painted surfaces have been shown to be a less attractive target for graffiti, although maintenance costs will escalate where graffiti has to be repeatedly removed from a split stone or similar rough surface.

## Rapid removal

All research has found that the *most* effective method for reducing graffiti is rapid removal, ideally within just a few hours, accompanied by diversionary programs that engage youth in other activities. Wilson and Kelling's 'Broken windows' theory stressed that damage not fixed often encourages further destruction and crime. Tagged surfaces will attract more graffiti.

One of the key drivers for graffiti 'writers' is to be seen – quick removal reduces the recognition that writers crave. Writers would rather find a location that has a good payback for their risk, money and time than one that quickly and quietly removes any trace of their efforts. While rapid removal might roll off the tongue easily and can often be seen in the 'zero tolerance' rhetoric of media articles, it is actually far harder to achieve. In reality it is a high cost maintenance issue that is often overlooked.

The best way to remove graffiti will depend on the material used by taggers (usually oil-based spray paint or felt-tip pen) and the type of surface tagged. Discuss removal with the cladding supplier or manufacturer before starting. When removing graffiti for the first time try different methods on a small test area to check that the removal method is not causing more damage.

Try to remove tags when they are fresh. Products that may remove tagging include methylated spirits, turps, paint-stripper, dishwashing liquid, branded graffiti removal products or oven cleaner. Graffiti removal products contain hazardous chemicals so always wear protective clothing and a mask. Unpainted walls or fences can be cleaned by sanding or waterblasting.

## Murals can reduce tagging

Consider painting a mural on an area being targeted. While there is little evidence to show that sanctioned aerosol art actually reduces the occurrence of graffiti, it has been shown to enhance certain public spaces and to engender greater community ownership which then tends to reduce damage and other anti-social behaviour.

Brush art murals arguably provide a more widely accepted vehicle to involve people, beautify an area and prevent ongoing tagging.

It is important when planning a public space mural to treat the entire wall surface with the chosen design in order to prevent taggers adding their signature in the white spaces around a partially muraled wall.

*The 'National guidelines for crime prevention through environmental design' provide sensible and low cost approaches to reduce anti-social behaviour, theft and vandalism. It is available from [www.justice.govt.nz/pubs/reports/2005/cpted-part-1/](http://www.justice.govt.nz/pubs/reports/2005/cpted-part-1/).*

## HOT TIPS TO DETER TAGGING

If your property is being tagged:

- remove all graffiti immediately, including any on storage sheds or containers
- keep matching paint supplies handy to cover over tagging
- request graffiti free rubbish skips – why introduce more to the area
- restrict access with clearly defined boundaries or transparent fences
- remove unnecessary light sources so taggers can't see to paint at night
- plant hedges against walls but avoid creating natural ladders to roofs or places to hide
- build strong relationships with local communities
- support community-based initiatives like Neighbourhood Support or community patrols. ♦