

## URBAN DECAY - THE WRITING'S ON THE WALL (Newsletters Spring 2003, Summer 2003)



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Graffiti first found a home in Atlantic Canada during the late 1990s. On January 11th 2000 we wrote to the Halifax Regional Municipality advising them that their \$100,000 clean-up problem in Halifax Central Business District would explode into a \$1 million mess unless they took prompt action. Ours was not the first voice raised, the councillor for the area had already voiced her concern a few months previously. The C.B.D. is a treasure trove of heritage buildings: all were threatened. The late Kate Carmichael, Downtown Halifax Business Commission's energetic Executive Director threw herself into the fray, organised an Anti-Graffiti Clean-up Day and voiced her alarm *"A downtown covered with graffiti says a lot to tourists and visitors. It says we don't care. It creates the impression that many areas are unsafe, and it destroys Downtown Halifax's unique heritage identity. It is time for businesses, citizens, H.R.M. Council and H.R.M. Police to say 'enough is enough'"*. The media treated the matter as an "is it art, or vandalism?" issue. City fathers smiled indulgently ... and went back to sleep. A similar reluctance to treat the matter seriously prevailed throughout the Atlantic Region; graffiti spread like SARS. Two years later H.R.M.'s new Mayor and Council finally launched the Community Response Initiative, an attempt to rid us of "graffiti, scrawl, vandalism, litter and other incidents of property damage and destruction". Gary Martin its Co-ordinator, now estimates that annual clean-up costs, including law enforcement, are "easily \$1 million". He, we and you are losing the battle. Does it really matter? There is now a body of empirical data which explores that very question.

### Graffiti, Quo Vadis?

The Oxford Illustrated Dictionary (1962 Edition) defines graffiti as *"drawing or writing scratched on wall etc. esp. on ancient walls as at Pompeii; decoration by scratches through plaster showing different coloured under-surface"*. In Cambridge, guides at King's College carefully point out graffiti scratched on the ancient walls by Oliver Cromwell's soldiers when they stabled their horses there 350 years' ago. Our graffiti appears to be of more recent origin and is generally credited as having been spawned in Philadelphia in the late 1960s, and in New York at about the same time. The City of Victoria defines graffiti as *"any writing, etching, drawing or symbol applied to any public or private*

*property without consent of the owner or their agent and as such is an act of vandalism and a crime"* ... no doubt in their city council's mind apparently as to whether graffiti is "art"! In the United States, graffiti developed into two categories: "gang graffiti" used to mark territorial boundaries; and "Hip-Hop tagger graffiti" of the type currently washing across our region. The latter emerged out of the Hip-Hop culture in the Bronx and was disseminated on subway cars, and later, freight trains. It crossed the Atlantic to Amsterdam in the 1970s and eventually detoured to our region in the late 1990s. Hip-Hop taggers are usually males aged between 8 and 18 and are therefore treated as juveniles by the courts. This can be a limiting factor if the property owner wishes to launch civil proceedings since the police may be unable to release the identify of the individual when they catch them (45 arrests have been made in H.R.M. since June 2002). We understand that most graffiti writers in H.R.M. are aged between 15 and 24, with some aged up to 30, from all socio-economic backgrounds. Graffiti writers are motivated by a desire to be recognised, i.e. achieve "fame", by placing their signature tag in high traffic areas (this also makes their work identifiable to the police). They operate in "crews" usually with a unique three digit name; in H.R.M. crews are somewhat more economical, apparently settling for two digits instead, e.g. CB (Chemical Bombers); HW (House Wreckers). They can do an enormous amount of damage, in a short period, with little effort. One individual in the United States tagged 1,000 buildings in a few months; \$0.5 million USD of damage! Damage to property in the United States is estimated at between \$7 and \$18 billion USD and in Canada at "several hundred million". The Greater London Authority in England undertook a detailed costing of graffiti damage last year and placed it in excess of £100 million (\$230 million CAD) ... about half that of San Diego on a per capita basis. These are squandered resources which could otherwise be re-invested in health care, educational or other facilities.

## Graffiti Grammar



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Graffiti varies in complexity from simple scribble to complex paintings: the higher in the hierarchy, the greater the prestige ("fame") which attaches to the writer. The latter can elevate his "fame", literally, by creating "heavens" tags on inaccessible locations such as highway signs, the top of power station walls, etc. The following types of graffiti are common in Atlantic Canada:

Type of Graffiti	Description
Text	Writing conveying socio-political, racist, religious, amorous or other messages.
Stencil	Paint sprayed over a stencil figure and/or message.
Tag	Stylized signature or symbol in a single colour created quickly and randomly in as many high traffic areas as possible. Often on lamp posts, parking meters, "butt out" boxes, walls, etc.
Throw Up	Bubble type graffiti in at least two colours, created quickly and frequently in high traffic locations.
Piece	Complex (Master) piece created by talented individuals in several colours. Usually found on public "walls" donated by the municipality or other body.

The World Trade Organisation protests produced "scratchiti"; text etched into glass with acid, or scratched with a drill bit or other sharp instrument which usually necessitated replacement of the window. It is applied to retail display, subway, bus and train windows, metal and other facings on buildings. The damage is usually irreversible.

### Graffiti Grief

In the early 1990s New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and his first Police Commissioner, William Bratton, declared war on graffiti and minor misdemeanours. They revisited the "Principles of Law Enforcement" first enunciated by Sir Robert Peel, founder of London's Metropolitan Police (Scotland Yard) in 1829, that *"the basic mission for which police exist is to **prevent** crime and disorder"* and launched their "broken windows" initiative. *Crime rates in New York City plunged. Between 1990 and 1998, murder declined by over 70%, robbery by over 60%, total violent offences by over 50%, and total property felonies by over 60%. These declines were the steepest ever recorded. Indeed the slide in murder was so abrupt it significantly affected the national murder rate.*

The "broken windows" theory had been formulated by Professors James Q. Wilson (Harvard University) and George Kelling (The Manhattan Institute for Policy Research). They suggested that the failure to control minor offences, such as prostitution and disorderly conduct, destabilised neighbourhoods by creating a sense of public disorder ... and that people were likelier to turn to crime in neighbourhoods where the toleration of petty crimes, such as graffiti scrawling and window breaking indicated a lack of effective societal control. Eliminate minor crime and you return "ownership" of the neighbourhood to the community. William Bratton had implemented the "broken windows" theory in 1990 when he was the New York Transit police chief. Graffiti covered subway cars were immediately taken out of service and cleaned before being returned to use. In retrospect the idea appears obvious: graffiti is an expression of contempt for the community. A neighbourhood that has been "bombed", withdraws into itself: residents report a sense of unease, their world has been violated. In the United States, municipalities report that people start to re-use public spaces such as parks, once graffiti has been eliminated.

The assertion that there was a causal link between minor misdemeanours and major crime was tested by Dr. G. Kelling of The Manhattan Institute and Dr. W. Sousa of Rutgers University—Newark in their study published in December 2001. They explored the results of Mayor Giuliani and Commissioner Bratton's "broken windows" policing by subjecting it to rigorous statistical testing and discovered that there was a one in one thousand chance that the results were unrelated. Their analysis indicated a decline of one violent crime for every 28 misdemeanour arrests: the initial 10 year period of broken windows policing prevented 60,000 violent crimes, a decline of 5% overall. Toronto police too have noticed a link between the swift and persistent removal of graffiti and a reduction (2%) in the level of crime in the neighbourhood. They also conducted a safety perception survey and discovered that 9% of participants felt safer, and believed their neighbourhood cleaner, once graffiti was gone: eradication was a quality of life issue with virtually all the inhabitants.

## Property Values

Graffiti initially hits the owners of residences and small commercial buildings the hardest because their properties are the most accessible and hence very vulnerable. Ultimately however we all suffer. Graffiti destroys property values in three overlapping and escalating waves.

Phase One, the cost of graffiti removal, is easy to quantify: commercial properties fall in value by about \$10,000 for every \$1,000 spent annually in graffiti remediation. A similar ratio probably holds true too for residential property. However since the entire neighbourhood will be blighted by graffiti there is also a systemic loss in value to all properties regardless of each individual property's graffiti status.

This second wave, the lowering of property values throughout the graffiti infected area, was the focus of attention by a 2003 study undertaken by Steve Gibbons, Lecturer at the London School of Economics. The study found that residential property values in London, England declined by 1.6% for every 10% increase in property damage reported to the police. The actual density of reported property damage was 101 incidents per square kilometre ... so every 10 additional incidences of (reported) graffiti, or other property damage, drove down prices by 1.6%, i.e. \$3,061 for an average dwelling in Halifax Regional Municipality (H.R.M.) if the same ratio holds true here.

The third wave of value declines is also systemic, but appears to be discrete rather than continuous. As indicated earlier, society relinquishes control of graffiti bombed neighbourhoods; property misdemeanours spawn major crime. The perceived lack of societal control encourages the infiltration of prostitution and drug peddling ... and the violent crimes associated therewith. In addition to the empirical results of the "broken windows" policing in New York alluded to earlier, various studies in the United States have established high collinearity between property crime and violent crime, e.g. Hellman and Naroff (1979), Lynch and Rasmussen (2001). Indeed in the latter study, the two crimes enjoyed a correlation coefficient of 0.75 ( $\pm 1.0$  = perfect correlation). The collapse in property values resulting from the incidence of violent crime in the neighbourhood is sudden and dramatic: it occurs when the area reaches its "violent crime" threshold, i.e. becomes entrenched in the public mind as an unsafe place to live. It is dangerous to generalise the results of United States' studies to Canada because there is less tolerance of homicides and other violent crime here. However a study of 2,880 residential property sales which occurred between 1st July 1994 and 30th June 1995 in Jacksonville, Florida, conducted by Professors Allen Lynch (Mercer University) and David Rasmussen (Florida State University), revealed a 39% drop in value when the neighbourhood reached its "violent crime" threshold. There are at least two neighbourhoods in H.R.M. where property values register similar discounts because they are regarded as unsafe ... even though they would not qualify as such, south of the border. Canadian cities therefore are much more at risk from graffiti than their American counterparts.

## Wall Piece



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Municipalities derive the majority of their revenue from property taxes, which in turn are based on the current market value of properties in their jurisdiction. Graffiti and the chain of crime it sets in motion has a devastating effect on property values. It is surprising therefore that municipal government, the chief stakeholder, is usually slow to take effective action. Unfortunately graffiti first takes root on public property and typically comprises between 60% and 70% of all graffiti incidents in any neighbourhood. Often too the municipality will encourage graffiti by providing "walls", apparently under the assumption that this provides an outlet to graffiti writers, and thus discourages them from exercising their paint cans elsewhere. This has proven to have the reverse effect: walls such as that shown in the photograph typically result in increased graffiti activity within a ten block radius. Municipalities often take a similar complacent attitude to "wild" or "fly" posturing as well; though cities such as Victoria recognise that whilst it emanates from a different source, its impact is the same, and include it under their definition of "graffiti".

## Stemming The Tide

Private property owners cannot combat graffiti alone: nor can public authorities. Graffiti eradication requires a concerted community effort. However owners can take action individually to reduce their property's graffiti profile by taking the following action:

1. Establish a clear boundary, with a durable fence, especially between your property and public property.
2. Display a sense of ownership by maintaining the property well: eliminate peeling paint, keep the exterior clean, litter and garbage free.
3. Eliminate "ambiguous" spaces such as alleyways, by giving them a purpose, e.g. planters and other types of landscaping.
4. Graffiti writers require high exposure locations with alleys or doorways to provide cover. Bank machines, pay phones, mail boxes, benches, etc. all attract pedestrian traffic ... and hence graffiti. Ask that they be moved or that video surveillance be provided.
5. Flank walls protruding into a busy street, with a side alley for "cover", are prime targets for graffiti. Provide video camera surveillance, motion sensor activated floodlights, or instal a graffiti resistant coated surface on the wall.

6. Avoid large unbroken areas of wall. It provides a “canvas” especially if painted white, or in very dark colours. Paint the wall with a mural: taggers usually respect another “artist’s” work. Alternatively reduce the paintable surface by installing creeper such as ivy, or instal video surveillance and motion sensor activated floodlights. Consider a sacrificial coating that can be removed with a high pressure hose, or instal graffiti resistant panels, to the most accessible parts of the wall .. or paint the wall in “modular panels” that will enable you to cover the graffiti without repainting the entire wall or leaving a “ghost” image.
7. Reduce the accessibility of walls and free standing signs by protecting their base with spiky plants, thick or thorny bushes.
8. When you are “bombed”, report the vandalism to the police immediately, record the graffiti with photographs, and remove it within 24 hours. These actions may identify the graffiti writer, may get you restitution when they are caught, and will reduce your chances of being tagged again. If you remove all visual clues to the former presence of graffiti, you reduce the chance of being tagged again by 90%. If you leave the graffiti, there is virtually a 100% probability of your property being tagged again ... and again ... and again ... as the graffiti writers ‘talk’ to each other with additional tags.
9. Municipalities such as Halifax have adopted Toronto’s “5E Program” of empowerment (getting neighbourhoods involved), environmental (designing new buildings with reduced graffiti opportunities), eradication (graffiti and litter removal), education and enforcement (prosecution for vandalism).

## Epitaph

Atlantic Canada stands to lose more from graffiti than the rest of the country because we are the custodians of its oldest buildings. It is often impossible to eradicate graffiti without destroying the original stonework. Add to that, the fact that resources are scarce and must be diverted from more useful ends such as health care and education to remedy vandalism, and we face a no win situation.

For more information on graffiti visit [www.nograffiti.com](http://www.nograffiti.com) or the more than 1.6 million web sites devoted to graffiti.