

# *Graffiti, Crime Prevention & Cultural Space*<sup>\*</sup>

ROB WHITE<sup>1</sup>

---

## **Introduction**

In 1984 I travelled to Nicaragua, which at the time was in the midst of a major war against the Contras, counter-revolutionary forces backed and funded by the United States. Upon arrival in Managua, the capital city, I couldn't help but be struck by the widespread presence of graffiti. It seemed that every wall and building surface had some kind of message, or flag, or symbol, on it. The city was alive! Slogans such as 'Viva el FSLN' [Sandinista National Liberation Front], references to and silhouette figures of Sandino [a revolutionary leader from the 1920s and 1930s], and FSLN red and black flags dotted almost every wall, signpost, and gate. In the poorer neighbourhoods and in the shanty communities of those who had moved in from the rural areas, the revolutionary graffiti was especially prominent and ubiquitous. By way of contrast, the most notable feature of the well-off areas of the city was the broken glass placed on top of high walls, designed to deter interlopers from encroaching upon the property of the privileged. These walls were clean – and mean. (Author's note)

The aim of this paper is to discuss the nature of graffiti production and the different ways in which we might respond to the graffiti phenomenon. The paper is exploratory in its scope and intent. My concern is to provide a rough guide to different types and styles of graffiti, and to survey some of the issues surrounding anti-graffiti campaigns and anti-graffiti crime prevention strategies. The basic argument of the paper is that graffiti is a complex social issue that incorporates a wide range of concerns and conflicting interests. The starting point for analysis, and action, therefore, is examination of the dynamics of graffiti, rather than assuming that it is necessarily a problem requiring a 'solution'.

There appears to be a major tension between that literature which approaches the issue from a crime prevention perspective (and thus which views graffiti as socially threatening), and that literature which approaches the topic from a youth culture perspective (and thus which views graffiti as a youth phenomenon reflecting wider issues of power, subversion and containment). There are significant limitations with each perspective. Graffiti ought not to be condemned, nor celebrated, without due attention given to the ambiguities inherent in its various manifestations. Accordingly, one of the concerns of this paper is to highlight the need for specificity in mapping graffiti activity, messages and locations, and in devising appropriate strategies (which include 'doing nothing') to deal with graffiti at the local neighbourhood level.

---

\* A version of this paper was presented at a Graffiti Management Seminar sponsored by Crime Prevention Queensland, in association with Queensland Rail and Brisbane City Council in May 2000.

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor in Sociology/Law, University of Tasmania.

## **Types and Styles of Graffiti**

If we are to understand the nature of graffiti, then a good starting point is to ask what is its cultural meaning (as determined by whom) and legitimacy (for which groups) in any particular community. In other words, we need to identify different types of graffiti and the politics associated with different graffiti forms. Some graffiti is generally deemed to be 'bad'; other graffiti, however, is perceived to be 'good', or at the least tolerable. As will be seen, this distinction also underlies recent crime prevention interventions in the area.

### ***Graffiti Messages***

Graffiti varies greatly in the message being conveyed and the style of its presentation (see for example, Forrester 1993; US Bureau of Justice Assistance 1998; Ferrell 1996; Iveson 2000). Even a cursory review of different graffiti forms reveals the following types of graffiti work.

### **Political Graffiti**

This is graffiti with an explicit political message of some kind. Mostly this kind of graffiti originates from the grassroots, from individuals and groups who wish to challenge the legitimacy of the present political economic order or specific government policies. It might include anarchist graffiti [with the anarchist circle around an 'A'], socialist graffiti [Down with the IMF and World Bank], feminist graffiti [Wimmin Take Back The Night] and Third World solidarity and national liberation graffiti [Free East Timor; English out of Ireland]. Alternatively, it could be racist or homophobic graffiti [anti-Asian pictures and words]. Interestingly, political graffiti can also occasionally reflect the efforts of the powerful to claim legitimacy, in the form of top-down propaganda designed to look like grassroots activity. There is an archetypal story among Latin America solidarity activists, for example, that when the United States invaded the small Caribbean island of Grenada in the 1980s, US troops allegedly spray painted 'welcome' slogans in the main town centres.

### **Protest Graffiti**

This graffiti is also political in nature, but tends to have specific issues and specific targets directly related to the form and content of existing commercial signs. In essence, it is a subset of political graffiti. For example, the activities of the BUGAUP [Billboard Utilising Graffitists Against Unhealthy Promotions] organisation, as well as spontaneous actions by individual citizens, is directed against racist, sexist and violent billboards and advertising. This graffiti is designed to highlight the offensive nature of mainstream commercial visual objects in our cityscapes and public spaces.

### **Graffiti Art**

This form of graffiti tends to be a well organised, skilled activity which has a strong aesthetic dimension. It involves the crafting of 'pieces' in which artistic effort is the major consideration. It is informed by defined techniques, learning strategies, evaluation and group forums – it is a socially organised activity with subcultural elements of association, group deliberation, initiation processes and development of mastery in the execution of the art work.

### **Tagger Graffiti**

This form of graffiti is often, but need not be, linked to graffiti art. In some cases, it is seen to represent the first stages of a 'career' in graffiti art, in which novices begin by simply applying themselves to low level 'tagging' of city sites. The emphasis is on being 'seen' in as many places as possible. It often takes the form of peculiar forms of writing, with distinctive signatures being developed to establish individual and/or group identity. The message is simply one of 'I'm here' and 'This too is my space'.

### **Gang Graffiti**

This graffiti is not simply about establishing a presence, but to claim territory. The intent is to communicate claims about gang identity and prowess, and to establish, often in a threatening manner, that this or that 'gang' rules a particular neighbourhood. Whether or not a group of youth is in fact a 'gang' as such, is irrelevant [some middle class suburbs periodically may be targeted in this way, even though the members of the group do not engage in criminal gang activity]. The connotation of the graffiti is that particular territory is the preserve of certain young people.

### **Toilet and Other Public Graffiti**

This type of graffiti may contain a wide range of messages. It is intended to communicate certain points of view, to be part of a 'discussion', to 'gossip', to establish ascendancy of some writers over others, to simply have fun by stirring the pot. The precise character and content of the graffiti will tend to vary according to location [e.g., train stations, bus shelters, university student toilet blocks]. It incorporates contributions from a wide range of individuals, over a wide range of concerns.

### ***Social Differences in Graffiti Production***

In assessing the nature of graffiti it is important as well to consider the social differences in the production of graffiti. The location of graffiti gives us some indication of the circumstances under which it is produced (see for example, Carrington 1989).

Graffiti appears in a variety of 'private' and 'public' spaces, such as toilets, exterior walls, pedestrian tunnels, under bridges and on trains. Where the graffiti is located can imply different protagonists, with different messages, and different dynamics underpinning the graffiti production. One could look here at differences in patterns of graffiti production (including content of the graffiti) between, for instance, boys and girls toilet graffiti, the substantive content of train graffiti, and the types of wall graffiti in particular urban sites. The physical place of graffiti implies different types of audiences (e.g. girls only), and different types of messages (e.g. emphasis on sexuality and social relationships).

Furthermore, we need to take into account the fact that some locations are considered 'safe' places for graffiti production (e.g. toilets), while others are 'dangerous' in terms of the risks accompanying the production process (e.g. moving trains). This will impact upon who does which graffiti and why they do so. These factors can be linked to particular conceptions of social identity – such as, for example, male bravado stemming from certain notions of masculinity, that in turn may be associated with particular kinds of risk-taking behaviour on the part of young men.

Assertion of specific kinds of social identity also may have relevance to consideration of ethnic differences and status, as manifest in graffiti work. For example, I remember in Adelaide in the mid-1980s how bus shelters began to feature the slogan 'Wogs Rule OK', an assertion of a unique and empowered identity by ethnic minority youth in a polyethnic but monocultural society. Conversely, the heightened attention given to the 'race debate' in recent years has been accompanied by various kinds of racist graffiti, in its own fashion a statement of perceived disempowerment and disillusionment on the part of some sections of the white, Anglo Australian majority.

Grffiti is meaningful activity. That is, it is undertaken for a reason. But how and why it takes places varies enormously. We can learn something about its general character by examining the literature on vandalism. Before doing so, we need to emphasise that graffiti and vandalism, while often equated with each other, do not necessarily mean the same thing. Vandalism implies destruction, whereas graffiti is generally creative and intended not to destroy existing surfaces but, if anything, to preserve them – in order that there be spaces to comment, protest, demonstrate artistic skill or identify territory. How vandalism is defined has a major bearing on general perceptions of graffiti. As a broad category, however, it does little to illuminate the substantive and varied nature of graffiti work. Having said this, there are nevertheless things to learn from general studies of vandalism which include graffiti within their purview. Recent Canadian research, for example, indicates that vandalism is distributed evenly among young people generally. It is pointed out that although 'some vandals may be antisocial youths who deliberately seek ways to express themselves in costly rampages of destruction – as is believed by the public and portrayed by the media – many are ordinary youths who do damage spontaneously and with little thought of its costs or consequences' (LaGrange 1996:140). If this is so, than graffiti writing, in its many forms, can be seen as basically a fairly normal, rather than exceptional, part of everyday social life.

From another point of view graffiti can be seen as vandalism insofar as it affects the preservation of property in a particular way, namely its appearance. Nevertheless, specific types of vandalism do warrant close attention. For example, the incidence of graffiti varies according to whether or not it is organised, whether it is tied to a particular graffiti art culture, or whether it is linked to certain locations such as toilet blocks or bus shelters. So too, the motivations behind particular kinds of graffiti work or vandalism vary as well. For instance, graffiti artists may partake in their activity as part of a collective creative endeavour; others do so in a less artistic fashion (through the use of tags or slogans) in order to mark out territory or convey social messages. Some indigenous young people engage in vandalism as a form of resistance to colonialism, as indicated in vandalism in some communities directed at school buildings, European staff houses and the store (Brady 1992).

### ***Benefits of Doing Graffiti***

While the motivations and causes of graffiti vary considerably among individuals and groups, there are certain general factors that appear to have bearing on graffiti production as a social phenomenon. One feature of graffiti production is that graffiti artists tend to share several characteristics in common. Specifically, graffiti work tends, in general, to be associated with marginal or transitional status. On the one hand, various kinds of political and protest graffiti largely emanate from individuals and groups who engage in activity that represents a departure from mainstream modes of communication and conventional understandings of the society in which we live. The messages and views represented in the graffiti stand as assertions that challenge dominant images and ideologies. Both the ideas and the participants are perceived (at least in mainstream media representations) to be on the margins of social and political life.

On the other hand, the involvement of youth, as a specific segment of the population, in graffiti work is partly explainable by reference to their ambivalent status in society. That is, young people between 15 and 17 often occupy a 'no man's land' in which they are neither children, nor adult. They are marginal to the family and occupational structures of society (at least in public portrayals and perceptions), yet are in process of becoming voting citizens and adult members of their communities. Marginal status can translate into assertions of presence. This can take the form of graffiti as well as through other means (e.g. group activity in public spaces). For those with diminished social status and/or marginalised status, the appeal of graffiti may also be a reaction to real and perceived abuses of authority by the dominant institutions and agencies of society.

A significant part of the explanation for prevalence of graffiti as a public form relates to the re-configuration of public spaces and public forums. For instance, many contemporary crime prevention and law and order strategies are premised upon social exclusion of designated people from public spaces (see White 1998; Ferrell 1996, 1997; White & Sutton 1995). Exclusion from public spaces has been matched by an inability for many people to voice their concerns in public debate and discussion. The media are highly concentrated and informed by commercial, rather than public interest, concerns. And it is the marginalised, the poor, the vulnerable and the young who are most usually targeted for negative media treatment, particularly and especially around law and order themes (see Bessant & Hil 1997). Meanwhile, there is increasing state regulation of surface spaces and physical platforms that formerly may have allowed for a modicum of 'free speech' (e.g. rules relating to postering, restrictions on public gatherings). In this context, graffiti, for some young people, becomes an important resistance to the closing off of mainstream ways in which to be heard and seen.

Graffiti can offer a number of specific benefits to such participants. Some of these include:

- Availability of technologies (e.g. spray paint, textas) which allow *low-cost* ways to make a personal mark on the environment
- Achievement of spiritual well-being through actively doing something in which the *meaning* of the action is ostensibly given by the doer
- It is tied up with the idea of *free expression* and the notion that power is within one's own hands
- It is a form of *democratic* expression that is open to anyone regardless of background or skill
- It is experienced as somehow more *authentic* than either commercial activity or doing something for, or dictated by, someone else
- It is often accompanied by an adrenaline rush and buzz of *excitement* that relates to doing something broadly perceived to be deviant or wrong (but not particularly harmful).

At an existential level, therefore, there are a number of compelling reasons why people in marginal and transitional social situations may engage in graffiti. As indicated earlier, there are also specific political, artistic and other reasons that influence why people of many different ages, and from different backgrounds, partake in the activity. Nor should we forget that graffiti production also has a spontaneous, impulsive dimension. Some people do graffiti without really thinking about why they are doing it, except that it was the thing to do at the time.

## Anti-Graffiti Campaigns

The apparent proliferation of graffiti, especially in the larger metropolitan centres, has periodically engendered various 'moral panics' and enforcement backlashes against the phenomenon. The criticisms against graffiti take different forms, and give rise to different responses among graffitiists.

### *Arguments Against Graffiti*

There are a number of reasons why graffiti has become a 'public issue' of some concern. To a certain extent the presence of graffiti has been linked to the 'fear of crime'. That is, graffiti represents the visible signs of disorder and unruliness, a threat to the 'quality of life' of residents and the private property of businesses. The pervasiveness of graffiti may lead people to be fearful of walking in their neighbourhoods, of becoming patrons at certain shops, of feeling safe and secure in their communities. One reason for this is the constant link that is made between graffiti work and criminal behaviour. This takes several forms. For example, at a concrete level, at least in the United States, part of the fear generated by graffiti is that it is linked directly to criminal youth gangs (US Bureau of Justice Assistance 1998). There is some evidence that such linkages are periodically made here as well, particularly through media portrayals of 'graffiti gangs' (see White 1990).

In theoretical terms, an association is also frequently made between graffiti work and more serious types of crimes. This has been described in terms of the so called 'broken windows' metaphor (Kelling & Wilson 1982). This refers to the idea that if a broken window in a building is not repaired, then the sense that nobody cares or is in control will inevitably lead to more windows being broken. By analogy, some people feel that if activities such as graffiti work are ignored and go unchecked, then the atmosphere of lawlessness implied by this will lead to even more serious crimes being committed.

Related to this idea is the feeling on the part of some that the anti-authoritarianism represented in graffiti is a threat to those in control (i.e. institutional authorities and political leaders), and thereby a threat to 'ordinary' law-abiding citizens. As such, what needs containment is not so much the crimes and potential crimes posed by graffiti work, but the subversive element that graffiti represents generally (see Ferrell 1997). Moreover, the threat is not only to existing institutional regimes of power, but to those wishing to shape cultural spaces in ways which reflect commercial objectives and consumption agendas. Graffiti can be seen to threaten the conventionalised and homogenised ways in which public places are being re-constructed to emphasise managed shopping spaces, where the impetus to act is based upon consumption, not expression; the spending of money, not the spending of energy.

At a more mundane level, objections to graffiti also include the costs of clean-up, and the presence of what some people deem to be unsightly art or slogans or tags on public walls, trains and buses. The notion of visual pollution is important to consider here in a bit more depth. For example, while often cited in relation to graffiti, arguably the most ubiquitous form of visual pollution is that provided by commercial billboards and advertising signs. In other words, value judgements are made regarding what is acceptable or not acceptable in the public domain, and this is largely driven by whether or not money is being spent, and on what visual devices. We might here briefly consider the content of a recent Windsor Smith shoe company billboard advertisement, which has been described in the following terms: 'This image of a scantily clad, blonde, buxom woman seated with legs apart, arms hidden (bound behind her back?), and her face level with the groin of the fully clothed man towering over her, evokes a sense of both sexual engagement and of implicit violence' (Willson 2000:10). It is thus not only the presence of billboards, but their content, which can present as pollution.

Interestingly, some of the criticism of particular kinds of graffiti work comes from within the ranks of graffitiists themselves. For instance, while acknowledging the appeal stemming from the unrestricted nature of graffiti work, some 'artists' disapprove of those who do illegal stuff and thereby disrupt others who wish to engage in legal graffiti art work, whether this be for community or commercial purposes (O'Leary 1997). Such critique may combine elements of disapproval based upon the legal/illegal distinction, aesthetic judgement regarding skill level, and consequences for entry into mainstream art cultures and markets. At a minimum, this indicates significant social differences and diverse opportunity structures within the broad pantheon of graffitiists. It also tends to ignore the many different motivations and purposes of graffiti work identified earlier.

### *Media Attention, Identity and Street Culture*

The critiques of graffiti work, both from the outside and from the inside, need to be placed in the context of how particular graffitiists view themselves and the nature of their activities. Extensive media attention that is critical of particular types of graffiti activity, or particular groups of graffitiists, may actually serve to increase or exacerbate such activities (White 1990). Such media attention may in fact serve to:

- Affirm the identity and notoriety of graffiti makers
- Amplify their identification with the excitement of graffiti work
- Contribute to the bonding of individuals involved in the activity.

Such media treatment also tends to exaggerate the social harms of both the graffiti and the 'dangerousness' of the graffiti 'gangs'. This has implications for how such graffiti work may be responded to by authorities, which shall be discussed shortly.

Another aspect of media coverage of graffiti generally, however, is a close, and positive, identification of graffiti with 'youth culture' (regardless of the specific differences in forms and contents of graffiti). This can serve to foster the value of graffiti as a commodity, and as such a valuable commercial skill to develop on the part of young people, insofar as advertisers and others incorporate various components or aspects of 'street' youth culture into their sales campaigns. Thus, the commercial uses of graffiti work, premised upon the visual and cultural attractiveness of such work to potential consumer audiences, may likewise foster engagement in, and experimentation with, graffiti on the part of some young people.

The critiques of graffiti are also tied up with whether or not particular types of graffiti or specific projects are legal or illegal. Legitimacy has been granted in a number of cases to those artists performing work for government departments, community agencies, private businesses or commercial ventures. Here acceptance of graffiti is defined by contract, or by formal approvals. The media is often called upon to lend credence and legitimacy to graffiti created under these kinds of conditions.

The question of illegality is largely beside the point for many political and protest graffiti writers. The message is central, and the means of communication is meant to serve a particular end regardless of legality or illegality. Media attention may be important, but primarily if it helps to convey the message to a wider audience. Illegality is a consequence of, rather than focus for, the activity at hand. Nevertheless, groups such as BUGAUP do make strategic use of the illegality of their acts, insofar as this may engender greater publicity.

For others, however, illegality is precisely the point. The thrill of graffiti work in this instance is premised upon the rush of excitement from 'doing wrong', in breaking the conventions, in sending a message to those in authority that the rules will not be adhered to.

The question of legitimacy may in fact be posed in reverse. How can we presume to obey, and to accept the pronouncements of media and political leaders, when inequality and social injustice are so entrenched in society? Why should we respect public property, train carriages and business interests when we aren't treated with respect or dignity by those wielding authority? Nobody cares about us (who have so little), so why should we care about you (who have so much)? Analysis of graffiti work can never stray too far from considerations of social justice. Nor should we underestimate the emotional attractions of, and fun attached to, behaviour that transgresses conventional norms and values.

## **Graffiti and Crime Prevention**

The complexities and ambiguities of graffiti production itself are mirrored to a large degree in the variety of responses it calls forth from those within the crime prevention field and within the community generally. Importantly, different forms of graffiti resonate differently, depending upon the specific audience. For example, most 'official' graffiti prevention programmes are oriented toward what is perceived to be youth graffiti, including tagging, artwork and gang-related identifiers. However, there are others in the community that focus primarily upon graffiti that is not age-related as such, but which has a certain political content. We can cite here the case of community groups that target racist graffiti and engage in collective clean-up campaigns specifically in relation to this kind, but not other kinds, of graffiti. Still others may involve themselves in graffiti vigilante work as a means to improve the appearance of landmarks and public walls that in their defacement bring disrepute to a particular neighbourhood. Alternatively, while illegal, some graffiti – such as that carried out by BUGAUP – may carry with it a modicum of community approval insofar as the target of the graffiti may be seen to be more offensive than the graffiti itself. The response to graffiti, therefore, will tend to vary depending upon its content, appearance, authorship and location.

### ***Law Enforcement and Reactive Approaches***

Such fine distinctions are liable to be lost, however, in the implementation of general strategies of graffiti reduction and management. Most states and territories have some kind of legislation that can be drawn upon to prosecute a person committing a graffiti offence. The extent to which such laws are used, and their effect in deterring future graffiti work, is basically an empirical question that requires further study. Beyond legal technicalities, however, the use of such laws is contingent upon the general enforcement and prevention strategy adopted within a particular locale or jurisdiction. It is relevant here to discuss two broad approaches which have a major bearing on how graffiti work, especially that carried out by young people, is subjected to state and private security interventions.

The first form of intervention is related to policing styles. In a number of places, both here and overseas, great attention has recently been given to the notion of 'zero tolerance' policing. This refers to a style of policing in which the emphasis is on being tough on crime, on the strict non-discretionary enforcement of laws and/or the taking of action against minor offences (see Marshall 1999; Grabosky 1999). This approach calls for a maximum street presence and the targeting of specific, usually minor, offences, such as graffiti. It is an intensive form of policing, designed to 'nip crime in the bud' by taking an aggressive law enforcement approach on highly visible public offences. Zero tolerance policing has been heavily criticised on a number of grounds, not the least of which being that it may actually increase the level of public disorder insofar as it undermines community-police relations. It has been argued that such approaches tend to be highly discriminatory, in terms of which offences and which groups are targeted, and that it very often involves the violation of civil



and political rights in its practical applications (see Cunneen 1999; Dixon 1998). Be that as it may, our concern is with the issue of whether or not it is appropriate, or effective, in preventing graffiti. The general consensus among writers in the field would appear to be 'no'; such broad based strategies have been largely unsuccessful (Ferrell 1996; Collins 1998).

A second major trend in strategic crime prevention has been the adoption of what might be described as 'coercive crime prevention' measures. These include such things as youth curfews, the persistent use of 'move on' and 'name check' powers by the police in relation to young people, high levels of surveillance of public areas (involving both personnel and electronic equipment), and extensive rules of entry and behaviour as these apply to particular city sites such as shopping centres and malls (see White 1998; 1999). The application of such measures is basically designed to exclude certain individuals and groups from public areas, and to ensure that what people do in public spaces is highly circumscribed and regulated. Again, major questions can be asked regarding the appropriateness, and effectiveness, of such a strategy as a means to prevent graffiti. The evidence would certainly suggest that such measures are often perceived by the 'targets' as unfair, unwarranted and unnecessary (White 1999). In fact, they can increase the level of resentment toward authority figures among young people and other vulnerable population groups, and thereby increase the potential for anti-social and criminal behaviour (as conventionally defined).

Even where coercion has not been adopted as a strategy, the use of law enforcement measures is seen to play an important role in graffiti crime prevention. For example, arrest and the use of courts to deal with graffiti is viewed as appropriate in instances where specific individuals have been caught in the act, whether they be BUGAUP activists or graffiti 'gang' members. Some also argue that targeted reactive measures (rather than broad band 'zero tolerance' measures) can and should be used to curb the activities of those graffitiists who are most opposed to what are presented as constructive graffiti projects (see Collins 1998). Similar arguments could be posited with regard to, for example, racist graffiti writers, political writers and so on. There are, however, significant problems with this type of measure, which will be discussed later in the paper. The nature of law enforcement, and the idea of specific enforcement targeting, raises once again the thorny issue of the value judgements that are made in relation to different types of graffiti. Major questions can be asked regarding precisely how what is 'good' or 'bad' graffiti is to be discerned, whose standards ought to count in assessing graffiti content, whether tolerance or censorship is the way to go, and so on.

### *Techniques of Management and Control*

While not entirely inconsistent or incompatible with more coercive and reactive measures, other forms of crime prevention focus on ways in which to deter graffiti work through manipulation of the physical and social environments. In theoretical terms, these approaches are generally referred to as aspects of 'situational prevention' (see Clarke 1992). The emphasis here is on removing the opportunities for graffiti work by modifying the environment within which graffiti takes place. A number of measures have been developed along these lines (US Bureau of Justice Assistance 1998; Clarke 1992; Geason & Wilson 1990). They include for example:

## **Graffiti Removal Campaigns**

The rapid removal of graffiti has been demonstrated to have an impact in some circumstances (e.g. New York Transit System), as it removes the incentive for those graffitiists who want an audience for their work. Graffiti removal may involve policy decisions within government departments, such as a transport organisation. It may also entail the introduction of laws that require private property holders, both businesses and home owners, to remove graffiti within a specified time limit.

### **Target Hardening**

This refers to measures taken to make it more difficult for graffitiists to make their mark. Specifically, in addition to increasing visible signs of surveillance (e.g. closed circuit cameras, security patrols), the idea is to use materials which are resistant to graffiti and/or which are easy to clean. Dark surfaces are also seen as discouraging graffiti. Better lighting is also cited as a factor influencing perceptions of risk in undertaking graffiti work.

### **Discouraging and/or Displacing Graffiti**

The idea is to forestall potential graffiti work by covering a potential target with something else, such as replacing footpaths with landscaped walkways or covering walls with climbing vines. Another measure is to reduce the availability of graffiti tools, such as restricting sales of spray paint, or stocking spray paint nozzles separate from the paint can. The use of chalkboards/whiteboards in toilet blocks is designed to encourage graffiti work within established boundaries, on surfaces that are relatively easy to monitor and clean.

The reliance upon technical solutions to graffiti, however, is insufficient on its own to prevent graffiti, except in very specific locations and circumstances. Accordingly, in recent years more attention has been devoted to community-based strategies that target offenders and potential offenders in efforts to modify their attitudes and behaviour in relation to graffiti work.

### ***Pro-social Graffiti and Self-policing***

Community-based strategies have several different dimensions. In some instances, the key point of intervention is the community-as-a-whole. In others, the focus is on working with graffiti groups directly (see especially Collins 1998).

### **Community Involvement**

The emphasis here is to encourage active community involvement in dealing with issues surrounding graffiti work. This might include school and community-based education programmes that emphasise both the costs of (what is perceived to be) graffiti vandalism and the benefits of participating in structured graffiti skill workshops and projects. Education can also be directed to the community at large, to inform residents about the nature of graffiti culture, and to decrease any fears associated with graffiti production.

An important component of community-based measures is engagement in clean-up campaigns, or more proactively, participation in 'pride' campaigns designed to improve the appearance of local amenities. The latter is not only concerned with clearing litter and covering over certain types of graffiti, but, as well, the creative sponsorship of graffiti to enhance community appearances. Such campaigns can also serve to reinforce a proprietary interest among graffiti enthusiasts.

### **Graffitiists' Involvement**

In this case, the focus is more directly on the graffiti writers. It has been suggested that local knowledge is essential in determining who is doing graffiti and why. Furthermore, the idea is to orient existing graffiti work toward pro-social, legal community projects, and away from illegal, graffiti vandalism. This can be accomplished by assisting young people in their skill development, providing avenues for the undertaking of community projects, increasing the prospects of writers/artists receiving an income from involvement in commercial projects and so on. By positing 'positive' versus 'negative' forms of graffiti work, the intention is to foster a graffiti culture that is essentially self-policing. This assumes certain standards of judgement regarding what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour within a graffiti culture and the community at large.

A particularly impressive example of this kind of intervention is provided by the City of Gosnells (Western Australia) 'Road Safety Urban Art Project'. This is a project focussing on educating the community on road trauma issues using art related projects. Young people were invited to use their graffiti art skills to paint bus shelters with 'safe driving' messages – such as 'Please Slow Down, Be a Safe Driver', 'Don't Drag Dude', 'Don't let the Bottle Control the Throttle', and 'Don't let Beer Steer'. The bus shelters were painted in vivid colours, and featured largely humorous figures.

The point of community-based interventions such as these is less to eradicate graffiti than to contain and re-direct it. Such approaches acknowledge that, for some graffiti writers, the movement from 'tags' to 'pieces' is firmly grounded in a local graffiti culture. The intention, therefore, is to shift the nature of this culture in ways that will channel the graffiti production along more socially acceptable lines, as determined by authority figures.

### **Graffiti and Alternative Cultural Spaces**

The crime prevention measures described above are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, most practitioners in the field recognise the importance of adopting multi-pronged approaches in dealing with graffiti. Big questions remain, however, as to the social costs and desirability of enacting comprehensive anti-graffiti programmes. To understand why this is the case we can briefly examine some of the issues arising from the implementation of anti-graffiti measures.

#### *Unintended Consequences of Anti-graffiti Intervention*

Graffiti reduction or re-orientation projects and measures can, in some cases, be counter-productive from the point of view of the well-being and enjoyment of young people. For instance, in a study of girls' use of train station toilets, Carrington (1989) found that those toilet blocks that had been made graffiti-proof (through use of materials, and stepped up surveillance) were terribly unfriendly and seldom used. It was argued that changes in toilet design and regulatory practices 'degrades the sociability of the space and in the process redefines the function of the female public toilet as purely biological' (Carrington 1989:94). In other words, for the sake of deterring the proliferation of graffiti, this important 'girl's space' had been transformed from a place where social activity could occur, to a more restricted, sterile environment that was solely functional.

Another unintended consequence of anti-graffiti measures relates to the application of laws and by-laws in regards to graffiti. For example, community action groups have had to proceed carefully in anti-racist graffiti clean-up campaigns due to the potential to be charged with defacement or littering. There is also the case in Melbourne in 1997 when a person was charged with willful damage as a result of trying to paint over a Nazi swastika on a wall. The 'perpetrator' was asked to pay \$210 to get all the graffiti removed, and faced a further financial penalty if convicted.

Not all unintended consequences of anti-graffiti intervention are negative however. In a classic example of multiple social purposes being served by a specific form of intervention, young people were given the task of spray painting bus shelters by a local council in Western Australia. This served to delimit the areas where graffiti occurred. Simultaneously, it happened to also cover over the extensive racist graffiti that was particularly noticeable in this local council area. The young people had a strong sense of ownership, pride and protectiveness regarding their handiwork, and this was known within the local community. The result was the eradication, and non-replacement, of the racist graffiti. The sites were basically left untouched.

'Big stick' responses, on the other hand, have a tendency to reinforce the resolve of graffitiists to answer back through any means available. To put it differently, any amplification in control – especially that based upon coercive measures, but also including more liberal attempts to re-direct graffiti production – will frequently be matched by an amplification of graffiti activity. As Ferrell (1997:29) puts it: 'Grounded as it is in illegality and danger, the adrenaline rush grows in intensity and pleasure as aggressive anti-graffiti campaigns proliferate'. The imposition of spatial authority thus calls forth a counter-response on the part of those who resist this very imposition.

Another aspect of anti-graffiti campaigns is that they may well produce what is intended – that is, clean, unmarked surfaces and well groomed communities. But again, one can ask whether or not sanitised, controlled spaces (and minds) is entirely desirable. Certainly there is some evidence to suggest that a degree of 'social disorganisation' can itself be a source of pleasure, as are inclusive spaces that incorporate a wide diversity of social groups and social practices (Morgan, Pudsey & Roach Anleu 1997; Sandercock 1997). Even 'nice' graffiti can convey a sense of sameness and containment. Interestingly, this type of environment may well lead to negative commercial ramifications as well, insofar as shoppers prefer to go to places where there is a more lively and energetic atmosphere, to which graffiti may be a contributor.

### *Local Community Contexts*

Discussions of graffiti and anti-graffiti campaigns cannot be divorced from discussions of social inequality, social justice and social change. There is no doubt that the contemporary economic and political climate has had and will continue to have devastating effects on a large and growing section of the Australian population. In this broad national and international context, there is nevertheless space to design policies and interventions which will do the least amount of harm and which may in fact enhance the well-being and life opportunities of the most vulnerable, disadvantaged members of our neighbourhoods, communities and households.

It is fundamental in this regard to acknowledge that issues surrounding graffiti are not simply about 'disorder' or 'crime' as such. They are about social relationships, and the nature of these. For instance, Ferrell (1997:22) makes the point that:

Within relationships of power, inequality, and marginalization, the control of cultural space is contested: while powerful adults attempt to define and impose cultural space, less powerful young people attempt to unravel this imposition, to carve out their own spaces for shaping identity and taking some control over everyday life. For kids who work to create cultural space within dominant arrangements, this space may indeed be physical – a teenager's bedroom, an inner-city street corner – but almost always physical space is constructed as a relatively independent zone of identity through symbolic displays, stylized details, and ritualized activities.

What Ferrell is getting at here is the importance of understanding the social worlds of the young (and the increasing restrictions placed upon them), and of the importance for young people of being able creatively and actively to make their own cultural spaces outside the zones of mainstream culture, institutions and meaning. Self-generated youth cultures are, in essence, a fact of life. They are here to stay. Yet, how we respond to young people has tremendously important implications for the nature of our society and, more concretely, the daily intercourse that occurs within our communities.

Given the wider social context within which young people are growing up – one characterised by high levels of unemployment, poverty, suicide, job insecurity matched by sustained law and order campaigns, cutbacks to social welfare and revamped taxation systems – it is little wonder that some young people will wish to rebel, to exercise a sense of their autonomy, to challenge the dominant values and institutions of society. So, too, will many older people. Graffiti is but one way in which this might be accomplished.

One question that we might ask in this regard is what kinds of avenues are open to those who do wish to transgress conventional boundaries, or who need to voice their discontent with the status quo? Our response to graffiti has to be tempered by the realisation that graffiti has an important social and political place in our society. Adopting a universal anti-graffiti stance is counter-productive from an enforcement point of view, and intrinsically insensitive to the sociological realities of graffiti production. Rather, it is more important to ponder over who is saying what, where, and why.

Having said this, there are nevertheless specific instances in which dealing with graffiti does demand an answer of some kind. It can be profoundly disturbing, annoying and threatening. It can affect our sense of neighbourhood pride, our public services, our shop trade, our collective identity. How then should we proceed?

A good starting point is to deal principally with graffiti at the local level. This is affirmed and reaffirmed in the literature constantly. There are no general prescriptions, no general strategies, which can accommodate the peculiarities of local experience. It is thus important to get to know a particular neighbourhood – its people, its amenities, its opportunities, its capacities – in order to understand its graffiti.

As part of this process, it is essential to map out the precise nature of the problem. This means gathering information about types of graffiti, the extent of graffiti, who is directly affected by graffiti, locations of graffiti, methods of graffiti, times when it occurs, and so on. We need to gain some idea of whether it is a problem, which types are perceived to be the problem, for whom is it a problem, and why it is a problem.

Action to deal with graffiti may be required in specific circumstances (e.g. graffiti covered classroom walls at school; racist graffiti in the local cemetery). In thinking about possible solutions to the problem, it is useful to adopt a problem-solving approach that interrogates not only the potential offenders and causes, but the nature of the victims and their possible contribution to the problem (where appropriate and applicable). For instance, an escalation in train graffiti may be due to the presence of a new cohort of taggers or artists

in the locality. But it also may have something to do with more authoritarian and interventionists forms of station management or train security. School graffiti may likewise raise questions about the experiences of those who currently or in the past attended the school, but feel disempowered by and/or resentful at the experience. Perhaps the answer in this case might be to open the school up as a community resource, and to offer art classes to those who might benefit from a different type of learning experience.

An important part of any response to graffiti is to try to tap into who is doing which graffiti and why. This can be done informally and in non-threatening ways. Dialogue is an important part of the process of reducing fear, if not anything else. Recent theoretical work on issues relating to urban planning and public spaces has likewise highlighted the importance of dialogue and communication, including over topics such as graffiti (Iveson 2000:234). It is recommended that differences in values and needs ought to be at the centre of the communicative process, as should principles of social justice and the lived realities of economic inequality. Through such exchanges we may find out that graffiti is in fact the very least of our problems. The challenge, as Iveson (2000) suggests, is to engage in a 'critical politics of difference'.

## Conclusion

Addressing the issue of graffiti and crime prevention is too often founded upon prior assumptions that in many cases are either wrong or need to be explored much further than is often the case. Graffiti is not simply the preserve of the young. Graffiti has many different forms and social purposes. Graffiti can be a source of identity formation and group bonding. Graffiti does not necessarily, nor logically nor automatically, equate with criminality. Graffiti can serve positive social functions, whether it is produced legally or illegally.

Graffiti is a complex phenomenon, and there are numerous ambiguities surrounding its production, its consumption, and the ways in which we might wish to respond to it. The options available to us include attempts at eradication, instigating new ways to manage graffiti production, tolerance of graffiti in whatever form it takes, and expanding the alternative cultural spaces available to those who are already stretching the boundaries of convention and mainstream meaning. In specific terms, for example, perhaps one way in which to respond to graffiti production is to expand the range of canvasses upon which open and legal graffiti can take place. To do this, we could begin by auditing existing public and private spaces and surfaces for potential availability (e.g. walls of police stations through to retail shopfronts). Certain locations could also be designated as 'free spaces', in which (analogous to the old fashioned 'speakers corner' in Hyde Park) anything at all is allowed to be said or displayed. Such surfaces could be periodically 'cleaned' (say, every six months) to allow opportunities for display of new messages and new art work.

What we choose to do, and how we choose to act, will inextricably be intertwined with our conceptions of 'community', who comprises community and the kind of society we wish to live in. In the end, do we, too, really want walls that are clean, and mean?

## Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Warren Sproule, and two anonymous reviewers, for feedback and comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

## References

- Bessant, J & Hil, R (eds) (1997) *Youth, Crime and the Media*, National Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, Hobart.
- Brady, M (1992) *The Health of Young Aborigines*, National Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, Hobart.
- Carrington, K (1989) 'Girls and Graffiti', *Cultural Studies*, vol 3, no 1, pp 89-100.
- Clarke, R (ed) (1992) *Situational Crime Prevention: Successful Case Studies*, Harrow and Heston, Albany, NY.
- Collins, A (1998) 'Hip Hop Graffiti Culture', *Alternative Law Journal*, vol 23, no 1, pp 19-21.
- Cunneen, C (1999) 'Zero Tolerance Policing: Implications for Indigenous People', Law and Justice Section, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, Canberra.
- Dixon, D (1998) 'Broken Windows, Zero Tolerance, and the New York Miracle', *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, vol 10, no 1, pp 96-106.
- Ferrell, J (1996) *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality*, Northeastern University Press, Boston.
- Ferrell, J (1997) 'Youth, Crime and Cultural Space', *Social Justice*, vol 24, no 4, pp 21-38.
- Forrester, L (1993) 'Youth-generated cultures in Western Sydney' in White, R (ed) *Youth Subcultures: Theory, History and the Australian Experience*, National Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, Hobart.
- Geason, S & Wilson, P (1990) 'Preventing Graffiti and Vandalism', Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.
- Grabosky, P (1999) 'Zero Tolerance Policing', Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice, no 102. Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.
- Iveson, K (2000) 'Beyond Designer Diversity: Planners, Public Space and a Critical Politics of Difference', *Urban Policy and Research*, vol 18, no 2, pp 219-238.
- La Grange, T (1996) 'Marking Up The City: The Problem of Urban Vandalism', in O'Bireck, G (ed) *Not a Kid Anymore: Canadian Youth, Crime and Subcultures*, Nelson, Toronto.
- Marshall, J (1999) 'Zero Tolerance Policing', Information Bulletin no 9., Office of Crime Statistics, Adelaide.
- Morgan, M, Pudsey, J & Roach Anleu, S (1997) 'Perceptions of Safety in the Hindley Street Area: A Research Report for the City of Adelaide', Sociology Department, Flinders University of South Australia, Adelaide.
- O'Leary, J (1997) 'Making a Mark', *The Big Issue*, 24 February-9 March, pp 15-17.

Sandercock, L (1997) 'From Main Street to Fortress: the Future of Malls as Public Spaces – OR – 'Shut Up and Shop'', *Just Policy*, no 9, pp 27-34.

United States Bureau of Justice Assistance (1998) 'Addressing Community Gang Problems: A Practical Guide', US Department of Justice, Washington, DC.

White, R (1990) *No Space Of Their Own: Young People and Social Control in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.

White, R (1998) 'Curtailling Youth: A Critique of Coercive Crime Prevention', in Mazerolle, L & Roehl, J (eds) "Civil Remedies and Crime Prevention", *Crime Prevention Studies*, no 9, pp 117-140.

White, R (1999) 'Hanging Out: Negotiating Young People's Use of Public Space', National Crime Prevention, Attorney General's Department, Canberra.

White, R & Sutton, A (1995) 'Crime Prevention, Urban Space and Social Exclusion', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, vol 31, no 1, pp 82-99.

Willson, M (2000) 'Shock Fetish', *Arena Magazine*, April, pp 10-11.

Wilson, J & Kelling, G (1982) 'Broken Windows', *Atlantic Monthly*, March, pp 29-38.