



# War is over (if you want it): rethinking the graffiti problem

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## 1. The long war on graffiti

In February 2009, an 18 year old woman was sentenced to three months imprisonment for writing her tag name with a marker pen on the wall of a café in Sydney's Hyde Park. It was her first conviction. The sentence was celebrated by many, including NSW Premier Nathan Rees, on the grounds that it would 'send a message' to others that graffiti will not be tolerated (Vallejo 2009). The fact that this 'message' will also cost taxpayers over \$30,000 in prison costs (for a piece of graffiti which cost less than \$200 to remove—see Cuneen (2009)) tells us how high the stakes have been raised in contemporary struggles over graffiti in Australian cities.

Indeed, for over 20 years now, urban authorities in Australian cities have waged a long and futile war on graffiti. Those waging this war on graffiti have marshalled an impressive array of weapons and strategies. New solutions to the 'graffiti problem' are constantly advanced—rapid removal, surveillance, harsher penalties, reduced access to spray paint, crime prevention through environmental design such as green screens, more powers for police, and so the list goes on. ABC TV's *New Inventors* recently showcased a new sensor which can detect aerosol fumes, and automatically alert property owners to the presence of graffiti writing activity—a new weapon enthusiastically embraced by the city of Newcastle in a world-first trial (Jones 2009).

Advocates of these solutions to the graffiti problem can point to localised victories. Some offer proof that one of these weapons or strategies greatly reduces the incidence of graffiti at an identified 'hot spot'. Occasionally, a particularly prolific writer is arrested in a successful police sting. But while such battles might have been won, a victorious end to the war is nowhere in sight. Indeed, the history of graffiti policy is a history of winning some battles but losing the war. With each victory, a new front in the war is opened up. As some locations and forms of graffiti are stopped, graffiti sprouts up in other places and in other forms. And the guerrilla army of graffiti writers is constantly replenished. Indeed, the attraction of graffiti is unlikely to wane given that we have also seen a full-blown embrace of graffiti and street art in some segments of the marketplace and cultural industries.<sup>1</sup>

Like all wars, the graffiti war has been costly. For example, the NSW Government's best estimate is that the removal of graffiti costs public authorities over \$100 million per year—and this estimate does not take into account resources devoted to graffiti removal by private

landholders (NSW Attorney General's Department 2007). And like all wars, there has been collateral damage—most notably in the fierce enmity that has developed over the course of such a long and protracted campaign between warriors on both sides.

In this article, I present no new solutions to the graffiti problem as it is currently defined. I have invented no new weapons or strategies for achieving a final victory. Rather, I argue that we urgently need to rethink 'the graffiti problem' itself—that is, we need to rethink the problem we are trying to solve, and to develop new approaches based on this new understanding. This is not an argument for 'giving up', or 'anything goes'—far from it. Rather, I argue that in order to bring an end to the costly graffiti war, we must redefine 'the graffiti problem' to make it primarily a matter of *planning*, not *policing*. Planners can play a crucial role in ending the costly war on graffiti, by working to involve a variety of stakeholders in a democratic and pragmatic compromise that takes account of genuine differences in how we value and appreciate the urban environment.

The article proceeds in four stages. First, I expand upon my claim that the war on graffiti has failed, and that victory will be ever elusive. Here, I argue that the war has resulted in changing forms and location of graffiti, rather than its eradication. Second, I trace the roots of this failure to problems with the way that the 'graffiti problem' has been defined in dominant anti-graffiti policies. In particular, I examine the limitations of the 'broken windows' approach to graffiti, and identify a set of flawed assumptions which underpin the war on graffiti. Third, I offer a new definition of the graffiti problem for urban policy, arguing that planning can play a key role in unpacking and responding to different forms of, and attitudes towards, graffiti. Here, I argue that graffiti policy must engage with graffiti writers, must seek to distinguish between good and bad forms of graffiti, and that the costs of implementing the policy must be proportionate to the harms caused by (some forms of) graffiti. Finally, I conclude by assessing the prospects for ending the long and costly war on graffiti in favour of alternative policy settings advocated in the paper.

## 2. The failure of the war on graffiti

For all the resources that are devoted to reducing and eliminating graffiti, current approaches are demonstrably failing to achieve their goals. We only need use our eyes to confirm that this is the case. One of the most compelling reasons to end the war on graffiti is that it is a war that is not being won, a war that can never be won.

The statistics tell part of the story here. For instance, NSW police statistics indicate that if anything, incidents of graffiti have remained

1 This article does not consider the history of graffiti, nor does it explore the motivations for graffiti writing. For readers not familiar with graffiti cultures and graffiti writing, some useful sources include Cooper (1984), Ferrell (1996), Powers (1999), Austin, (2001), MacDonald (2001), Ganz (2004), Dew (2007).



static or have risen over recent years.<sup>2</sup> While I acknowledge that these statistics are to be treated with caution because they may reflect higher rates of reporting rather than higher rates of graffiti, I believe the overall picture reflected in these statistics is correct. Observably, 20 years of efforts to eradicate graffiti have not succeeded. Anyone who pays attention to public spaces in our towns and cities can confirm this with their own eyes.

Certainly, advocates of existing approaches will claim success for their efforts. But as noted above, all of the successes are highly localised. In other words, it might be possible to reduce the incidence of particular kinds of graffiti in particular locations using existing approaches. But this has not resulted in an overall reduction of graffiti. Rather, existing approaches have only resulted in *changing forms* of graffiti, and *changing locations* of graffiti.

First, consider *changing forms* of graffiti. Existing graffiti policies have indeed made it harder and more risky to write graffiti. In response, we have seen the growth of those forms of graffiti which are able to be rapidly executed and applied (etching, tags, stickers, etc.) at the expense of those forms of graffiti which take longer to complete (pieces, etc.).<sup>3</sup> For instance, if a particular place is under surveillance, a tag which takes seconds to execute is more likely to occur than a piece which takes hours to complete. Furthermore, tougher penalties for those over the age of 18 caught writing graffiti have meant that many graffiti writers stop when they reach this age—and so, there are far fewer adult graffiti writers who may have developed the sophisticated artistic skills required to complete a colourful and well-executed piece. Once again, this shifts the balance in favour of ‘easier’ forms of graffiti over those that require skill. So, while these policies have not eradicated graffiti, they have had the effect of changing its form and, arguably, eroding its quality (I will return to issues of quality below).

Second, consider *changing locations* of graffiti. In existing approaches,

‘hot spots’ are identified and treated to policy measures such as surveillance, rapid removal and graffiti-proofing of surfaces. In many instances, those responsible for such measures can point to success in that particular hot spot. But graffiti is highly mobile. When one location or surface becomes less prone to graffiti, graffiti writers tend to move to different locations or surfaces. So, when we examine these ‘victories’ from a wider, non-local perspective, we see a different picture. There are countless examples of these dynamics at work. Consider for instance the ‘success’ that urban authorities have had in reducing the incidence of marker and spray paint tags on bus stops, through the use of new graffiti-proof and easy-clean materials. There is certainly much less of this kind of tagging on bus stops than there used to be. However, this ‘victory’ has been accompanied by a marked increase in the number of etched-tags on glass used in bus stops (Offler *et al* 2009). Of course, these etched tags are much more difficult and costly to prevent and remove. Further, in my view etched windows are more unsightly. Here, then, we have an example of a ‘success’ which is not in fact a success—not only has graffiti not been prevented, but it has been made even less attractive.

Certainly, some advocates of current policy approaches will acknowledge that there have been failures. But these failures are frequently put down to an incomplete application of current approaches, rather than being seen as a fundamental limitation of these approaches. Failure, from this perspective, is an incitement to escalate the war rather than consider alternatives.

But the final victory will not be achieved, no matter what resources and resolve are mobilised. The failure of the war on graffiti is not the result of an incomplete application of current approaches. Rather, the current approaches are doomed to failure, because they are premised on faulty assumptions about the nature of graffiti writing. The very definition of ‘the graffiti problem’, in other words, is the problem that we need to overcome.

### 3. The problems with ‘the graffiti problem’, or, why graffiti isn’t like a ‘broken window’

The core objective at the heart of graffiti policies in most Australian jurisdictions is the reduction or elimination of illegal graffiti. At first, such an objective might appear to be a relatively straightforward and neutral assertion of the legal rights which attach to property owners (both private and public). That is, graffiti is illegal if it does not have the authority of a property owner. The regulatory measures are simply designed to uphold the rights of property owners via prosecution of offenders through criminal codes of malicious damage, and via preventative measures which make it harder and more costly for graffiti writers to write graffiti.

2 See the statistics provided at [http://www.graffiti.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/cpd/ll\\_graffiti.nsf/pages/graffiti\\_statistics](http://www.graffiti.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/cpd/ll_graffiti.nsf/pages/graffiti_statistics), accessed Feb 10 2009.

3 A referee quite rightly asked me if there was evidence to support this observation, and others I make in the paper about the changing forms of graffiti. I can not provide reliable quantitative evidence, which simply does not exist. However, I can say that my own observations about changes in the kinds of graffiti over the past 20 years on the streets of Sydney and other Australian cities are supported by the observations of other scholars in other cities internationally. Ferrell and Weide (forthcoming), for example, argue that the application of zero tolerance graffiti reduction strategies supported by the ‘broken windows’ theory of crime prevention ‘will not likely prevent future graffiti’ but change writing practices such that ‘graffiti continues, but in a less sophisticated form’.

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However, things are not as simple as they might at first appear. The goal of reducing or eliminating graffiti is not always consistent with the sovereignty of property ownership. For instance, in many jurisdictions, property owners do not have the right to invite artists (including graffiti writers) to adorn their property with artwork, if that artwork is to be visible in the public realm. Recently, for instance, a property owner within the city of Sydney who invited a group of graffiti artists to paint an external wall returned home to find that mural being painted over by council officers (Creagh 2008). Here, so called 'legal graffiti' is rendered illegal by planning regulations rather than criminal law, because while the artists had the permission of the property owner, the owner did not have the permission of council. Indeed, it is increasingly common for public authorities to grant themselves permission to remove graffiti from private property if the owners do not take action to remove it themselves. In Queensland, for instance, the *Summary Offences (Graffiti Removal Powers) Amendment Act 2008* gives state and local governments the power to designate 'graffiti removal officers' who can remove graffiti which is in, or can readily be seen from, a public place without the prior consent of property owners if the officer does not need to enter that property to access the graffiti (e.g. if it is on a wall or fence). The harm caused by graffiti, then, is not only one of property violation.

Nor is the harm caused by graffiti often a harm of functional damage. The application of spray paint on a wall does not stop it standing, the application of a marker on the inside of a train carriage does not stop it moving. Certainly, in some instances graffiti could be said to cause functional damage—for instance, if identification numbers on traffic signal boxes or safety notices on railway corridors are rendered illegible. But for the most part, while the surfaces which carry graffiti look different, they do not stop doing their job because of that graffiti.

So, if the harm caused by graffiti is not solely one of property violation or functional damage, then what is it? The harm of graffiti is also symbolic. That is to say, the criminalisation and regulation of graffiti is premised on the claim that graffiti degrades the urban environment by introducing an intolerable level of disorder which unsettles the community. To say that the harm caused by graffiti is in large part symbolic is not to trivialise it, nor to say that it does not matter. Indeed, we know that people's perceptions and uses of the urban environment are fundamentally shaped by symbolic meanings that they attach to difference places (as safe, dangerous, edgy, etc.) (Lynch 1960; Creswell 1996). But it is important to be clear about how and why this symbolism is attached to graffiti, if we are to understand the current policy approach to graffiti regulation and prevention.

Graffiti is a problem because it erodes 'quality of life', so the theory goes. This conception of graffiti as a 'quality of life' offence has a particular conceptual heritage in the significant 'broken windows' theory of urban order and disorder. First advanced by Wilson and

Kelling in an influential 1982 article for the *Atlantic Monthly*, the broken windows theory can be summarised briefly as follows. The theory is based on the premise that law and order efforts ought to focus on the small-scale criminal infractions because 'serious street crime flourishes in areas in which disorderly behavior goes unchecked' (Wilson and Kelling 1982). Broken windows are a problem, then, because 'one unrepaired window sends a signal that no one cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing' (Wilson and Kelling 1982). Broken windows, here, stand in for a variety of minor infractions such as begging, public drinking, teenage rowdiness, etc. Writing in New York City at a time when graffiti was particularly prevalent, Wilson and Kelling also included graffiti in their list of problematic disorderly behaviours. The broken windows approach, they argued:

helps one understand the significance of such otherwise harmless displays as subway graffiti. ... The proliferation of graffiti, even when not obscene, confronts the subway rider with the inescapable knowledge that the environment he (sic) must endure for an hour or more a day is uncontrolled and uncontrollable, and that anyone can invade it to do whatever damage and mischief the mind suggests (Wilson and Kelling 1982).

This 'broken windows' theory continues to provide the conceptual framework for justifying the war on graffiti. For example, it was used by a number of NSW parliamentarians on both sides of the House to support the government's *Graffiti Control Bill 2008*. In the UK, former Prime Minister Tony Blair justified his government's approach to curbing so-called 'anti-social behaviour' like graffiti with reference to the 'broken windows' theory (Blair 2003). From the 'broken windows' perspective, not only is graffiti intolerable, the toleration of graffiti is intolerable. Those who write graffiti without permission are said to be anti-social vandals with no regard for the community. And those who tolerate or encourage graffiti on their property are failing to properly execute their responsibilities as property owners, thereby undermining the community's amenity.

Now, since the theory was first advanced over 25 years ago, 'broken windows' has received a significant amount of critical scrutiny. It has its passionate advocates and detractors, and it is not my intention here to summarise these debates (see for example Herbert and Brown 2006; Mitchell 2003). Looking at the application of this theory specifically with regards to graffiti, however, I do wish to make several observations about the limitations of 'broken windows' as the basis for policy interventions.

First, the claim that graffiti is akin to a 'broken window' has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Wilson and Kelling's theory rightly gives prominence to the role of perception in feelings of community safety. As they note, regardless of actual levels of crime in a given locality, people may still *feel* unsafe if they *perceive* the local environment



to be dangerous. Now for twenty years or more, politicians and media commentators have told us that graffiti is a problem because its existence sends a signal that no-one cares for a place, and that it therefore makes people feel unsafe.<sup>4</sup> But this constant representation of graffiti as a sign of degradation and danger also serves to generate the very perceptions it claims to reflect. In other words, representations of graffiti as a sign of intolerable and anti-social disorder are not necessarily *reflections* of reality—rather, these representations also *create* the reality in which many people feel uncomfortable in the presence of graffiti because they perceive it to be an indicator of danger.

The significance of these representations and perceptions of graffiti was recognised in one of Australia's earliest criminological studies of graffiti. The authors of a 1986 report for the NSW State Rail Authority argued that 'both staff and public must accept a certain level of rail vandalism and graffiti as inevitable—which they are'. Given that they could establish no link between graffiti and other forms of crime, and that graffiti would never be totally eradicated, they argued instead that State Rail ought to make the distinction between graffiti and violence 'clearly, frequently and publicly' in order to ease any fearful perceptions caused by graffiti (Wilson and Healy 1986, p. 64). If only their advice had been taken seriously. Instead, a harmful feedback loop has been created. Because graffiti is constantly *represented* as indicative of the possibility of more serious crime, the appearance of graffiti is *perceived* by many observers as a signal of disorder which makes a place feel unsafe. These perceptions are socially constructed, and are open to being socially deconstructed. Indeed, it is possible that we come to see the existence of (good) graffiti as a symbol of vibrancy and energy rather than danger and crime—this is already happening in some parts of our cities like Melbourne's world-famous inner city laneways (see Box 1).

Second, the 'broken windows' approach to graffiti wrongly asserts that graffiti-writing is 'anti-social'. In doing so, it confuses difference with deviance. Based on the notion that graffiti writers are anti-social, law and policy makers have absolved themselves of any responsibility to engage with those (mostly young) people who write graffiti. Instead, they have taken the easy route of vilification and condemnation, arguing that graffiti writers are simply vandals who are out to wreck society, and therefore there is no room for negotiation or discussion with them. This notion that graffiti writers are anti-social is simply wrong. Graffiti writing is a profoundly social activity. By this, I mean that graffiti writers are generally not writing in isolation, but rather they are involved (to varying extents) in a cultural scene that connects them with other graffiti writers. Graffiti writing is also a profoundly ethical practice. By this, I mean that the overwhelming majority of

#### Box 1: Graffiti as a neighbourhood development strategy

As noted in section 3, graffiti is often decried on the grounds that it contributes to neighbourhood deterioration, by sending a signal of urban decay and neglect. However, in several nooks and crannies in our cities, we are witnessing precisely the reverse—graffiti actually contributing to neighbourhood regeneration. Melbourne's inner city laneways are a case in point—the much-lauded and emulated regeneration of these laneways was, at least in part, kick-started by the efforts to stencil, and graffiti artists who helped bring these lanes to life with their artwork. The lanes were ideal spaces for artists, away from the glare of surveillance cameras and police and unlikely to be painted over by owners. As the reputation of laneways grew, so too did foot traffic as people made a point of visiting to see the latest artworks. Small-scale entrepreneurs made the most of this, establishing small bars and galleries to capitalise on the visitors. And so a virtuous cycle has been established, through a relatively 'organic' process which was not policed out of existence before it had a chance to bear fruit (see <http://citylights-projects.blogspot.com>). Here, the kind of planning required involved a fairly 'light touch' (Fincher and Iveson 2008, 145–170), in which creative activity was neither sponsored nor curtailed by bureaucratically-determined goals—a lesson that the city of Sydney unfortunately seems not to have learned, with its approach to laneway regeneration placing emphasis on formal planning permissions for any public art from graffiti to busking.

graffiti writers have a strong sense of acceptable and unacceptable forms of graffiti (on the social and ethical dimensions of graffiti art as a movement, see Austin, forthcoming). Now, many non-graffiti writers may not approve of the forms of sociality and ethics which inform graffiti writing. But just because people may disapprove of them does not mean they do not exist.<sup>5</sup> It does not make for good policy to ignore these forms of sociality and ethics, as happens when graffiti writers are understood as 'anti-social' (Halsey and Young 2002, p. 171). Rather, law and policy would be better served by engaging with these forms of sociality and ethics. This is not necessarily to approve of them, but it is to start from the reality that they exist and cannot be legislated away. Indeed, the very fact that there is a sociality

4 For a history of this representation of graffiti in Sydney, see Iveson (2007).

5 Infamous graffiti writer Banksy made the distinction between graffiti writers and criminals this way: 'Graffiti writers are not real villains. I am always reminded of this by real villains who consider the idea of breaking in someplace, not stealing anything and then leaving behind a painting of your name in four foot high letters the most retarded thing they ever heard of' (see [www.banksy.co.uk](http://www.banksy.co.uk)).

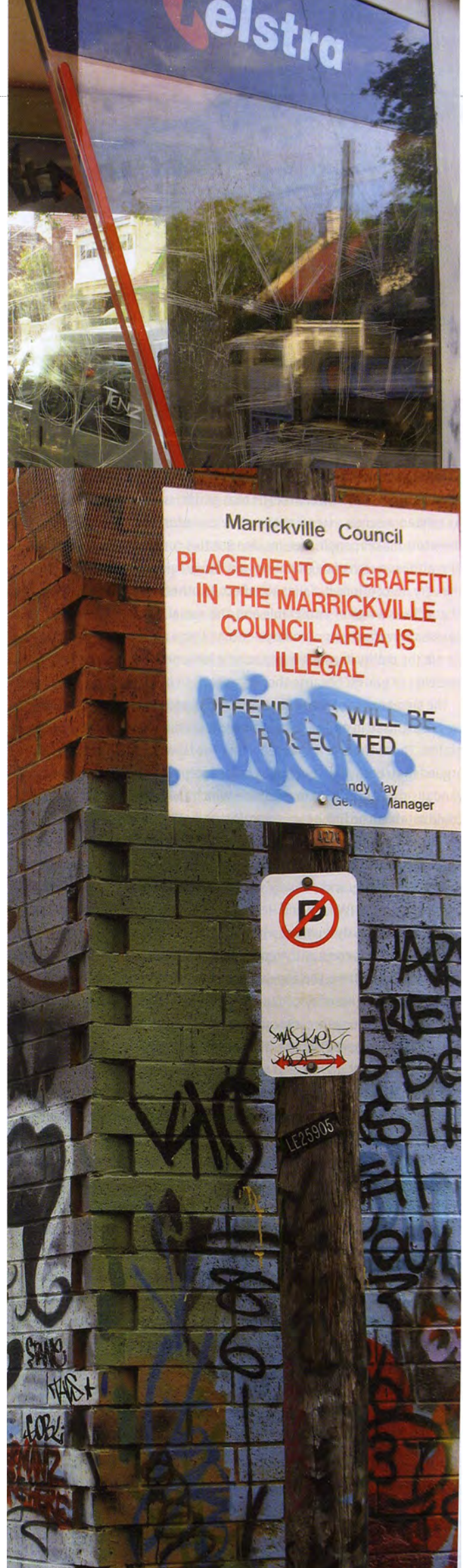
and ethics to graffiti writing ought to be viewed as a resource for planning and policy making (this will be explained further below).

The third flawed assumption underpinning existing 'broken windows' approaches to graffiti is the notion that the only difference between 'good' and 'bad' graffiti is the difference between 'authorised' and 'unauthorised' graffiti. In other words, all forms of unauthorised graffiti are seen to be bad and in need of eradication, regardless of their artistic merit or content (see also Halsey and Young 2002, pp. 176–7). But is this really the most important distinction between different kinds of graffiti, the one that ought to underpin policy responses? Consider the following pieces of graffiti: scratchies and tags on a public telephone (Figure 1); a turf claim (which has itself been altered) (Figure 2); various tags and figures in a back alley on a light-industrial area (Figure 3); an illegal mural or 'piece' on a railway corridor (Figure 4); an illegal stencil in a car park (Figure 5); an illegally altered bus stop advertisement (Figure 6); a legal piece in a laneway (Figure 7); a legal piece on a prominent wall at Bondi Beach (Figure 8).

Now, what do you think of these pieces of graffiti? If readers of this article are anything like the wider public, some of you will hate all of them, some of you will like them all, some of you will dislike the tags and the hateful graffiti but like the murals, some of you will only like the murals that are legal, and so on. But such distinctions, which most of us are capable of making, are almost completely ignored in current policy approaches. In the zero tolerance approach, there is no way of making distinctions between hateful graffiti, tags which are indecipherable to the general public, etched graffiti on a bus stop or a train window, and murals and pieces which are clearly the work of skilful artists. The distinction which matters most in current graffiti policy is *where* graffiti happens (Cresswell 1992). If these different forms of graffiti are unauthorised, they are subject to exactly the same policy measures, regardless of their quality.

These policies set up perverse incentives for graffiti writers. They send the message that there is not much point making any effort, as your work will be treated in the same way regardless. And, as noted above, they encourage the 'quick and dirty' forms of graffiti over those which take more time and involve more skill.<sup>6</sup> So, viewed from this perspective, current graffiti policies in fact shift graffiti writing towards the very forms of graffiti which members of the public seem to dislike most. In other words, not only do current policies fail on their own terms, but they are arguably contributing to the 'graffiti problem' as it is understood by members of the public who are capable of making distinctions between different kinds of graffiti.

6 This is not to say that tagging does not require skill—graffiti writers themselves certainly value tagging as a skill, and make distinctions between good and bad tags (Halsey and Young 2002, p. 173).





*A democratic approach to the graffiti problem would be premised on three key principles: engaging with graffiti writers, differentiating between good and bad graffiti, and cost effectiveness.*

There are significant problems, then, with the way that the graffiti problem has been defined with reference to the 'broken windows' theory of crime and disorder. And because of a political failure to take account of these conceptual problems, the costs of the on-going war on graffiti continue to escalate. In fact, while politicians and others frequently talk about the costs of graffiti to the community, it would be more accurate to talk about the cost of graffiti *removal*. This is a crucial distinction. I would agree with those who believe that the amount of public and private funds devoted to the removal of graffiti is unacceptable. Indeed, it seems to me that the scale of resources allocated to current failing approaches is a significant waste of public funds, and is disproportionate to the scale of the problem associated with graffiti. We are devoting ever increasing resources to a set of policy measures which do not work because they are premised on faulty assumptions.

It is time to end the war on graffiti. We urgently need to redefine the graffiti problem, in order to generate new policy goals and strategies for responding to graffiti.

#### 4. A new definition of the graffiti problem

To say that the current approach to regulating graffiti is not working is not to say that we should simply ignore graffiti. Rather, it is to say that we might need to re-conceptualise the problem posed by graffiti, in order to generate new policy approaches.

I suggest that this re-conceptualisation ought to start by considering graffiti in the context of the wider politics of the urban public realm. The underlying problem at the heart of conflict over graffiti is this: urban inhabitants disagree over what makes for an attractive urban environment. Graffiti is one of those features of the urban environment—along with outdoor advertising, high-rise apartment buildings, smog, litter, car parks, and countless others—which generates intense disagreement. For some, as noted above, every incidence of graffiti is an act of vandalism which has a deleterious effect on the urban environment. But for others, every incidence of graffiti is an affirmation of life in the city, like a flower appearing through a crack in the pavement. And of course, there are others who occupy every conceivable position in between these two extremes.

Graffiti, then, provokes disagreement. The question becomes: how should we handle this disagreement? The war on graffiti is what we might call a *police* response to disagreement. Here, my use of the term 'police' is not simply to refer to officers in uniform. Rather, I am following Jacques Rancière (1999, p. 28-29) in using the term 'police' to refer to a wider set of procedures which seek to allocate and contain particular bodies and behaviours to their 'proper' places in the city. In the police response, there is no room for discussion—graffiti simply has

no proper place in the city, it is 'writing out of place' (Cresswell 1992). Policy responses are therefore charged with re-asserting the purity of place and property, by removing and preventing unauthorised markings and punishing and discouraging transgression. Those who disagree are literally not part of society, they are 'anti-social'. From this perspective, it does not matter a jot what the graffiti looks like, or why it was written. No disagreement over whether some forms of graffiti are 'good' or 'bad' is tolerated: quite simply, unless there is legally-authorised permission, it is bad by definition.

It is time for a *political* approach to graffiti. Here, I don't mean 'politics' in the conventional sense—elected politicians have of course made plenty of mileage out of their attacks on graffiti! Rather, I am again following Rancière in understanding politics as the opposite of police. Politics, here, is an open-ended democratic procedure with no outcome prescribed in advance. Difference is not reduced to deviance. Instead, the place of graffiti is open to dialogue in which those who are currently excluded from the city as 'anti-social' will have their voices heard. A political approach to graffiti would allow for the fact that we disagree over what kinds of graffiti (and urban environments more generally) are 'good' and 'bad'. It would also, no doubt contentiously, insist that disagreement over graffiti should not be finally settled by assertions of property right. Recognising these differences, it would seek to find a democratic and pragmatic compromise which puts the graffiti problem in wider perspective.

Planners have a genuine opportunity to help end the war and start making the peace through such a democratic and pragmatic compromise. A democratic approach to the graffiti problem would be premised on three key principles: engaging with graffiti writers, differentiating between good and bad graffiti, and cost effectiveness. Let me now consider each of these principles in brief.

##### 4.1 Engaging with graffiti writers

Public authorities and property owners need to engage genuinely with the culture of graffiti writing (and indeed with youth cultures more generally—see Iveson 2006). The limitations of the police response to graffiti stem from its lack of engagement with graffiti writers. As Richard Sennett observed some time ago, when we rely solely on police to handle conflict, there's nothing to 'force people to look beyond their images of threatening outsiders to the actual outsiders themselves' (Sennett 1970, p. 147). Not only is this unjust, it is also unproductive. Indeed, the existence of a graffiti culture could and should be viewed as a resource for public policy, in a number of ways.

First, the existence of a graffiti culture is a regulating mechanism for graffiti writing. For young graffiti writers starting out on their graffiti 'career', exposure to graffiti culture is exposure to a culture that rewards better graffiti. That is, as they are exposed to this culture



(through hanging out with senior graffiti writers, through watching videos and reading magazines, etc), they are inculcated with standards that value not just quantity but also *quality*. So, efforts to eradicate the graffiti culture are efforts to eradicate a culture which could be a useful resource in encouraging those forms of graffiti which least disliked by members of the public. Further, for young graffiti writers, exposure to graffiti culture is exposure to a culture in which ethics are important, shaped through on-going discussions the spaces and surfaces which are 'off limits' for graffiti.

We can already see an example of the regulatory effect of graffiti culture in action, by looking at the amount of graffiti on private cars. Graffiti is rarely written on cars, and this is because cars are generally considered to be 'off limits' within the graffiti writing culture. This is not to say that graffiti is never written on cars, or other spaces typically considered 'off limits' within the culture, such as sandstone monuments. But it might surprise folks to know that when graffiti is written on such surfaces, other graffiti writers are often among the harshest critics. Indeed, we might even speculate that the only people who write graffiti in such places are those young people who have not yet been sufficiently exposed to the wider graffiti scene to have developed an ethical position on where it is appropriate to write.<sup>7</sup> As Halsey and Young (2002, p. 173) note, '[c]ritical to whether someone graduates from tagging to murals is his/her proximity to the knowledges and practices associated with producing murals.'

Second, despite the 'war on graffiti', I believe there exists a tremendous amount of goodwill among senior graffiti writers in particular towards any attempt to try something different. Rather than assuming that all graffiti writers are simply anti-social, we need to recognise that many graffiti writers care deeply about the aesthetics of the urban environment. They view their work not as wrecking, but as beautifying. Why not, then, put writers together with others who are attempting to beautify urban environments? Surely, there would be disagreements about standards of beauty! But an airing of these disagreements would mean that they have the potential to be democratically negotiated, rather than undemocratically settled in the absence of such negotiations.

However, due to current policy settings, the very graffiti culture that could be a resource for public policy is forced further and further underground. Young graffiti writers have less exposure to it, and senior graffiti writers are loathe to participate in policy discussions which

would require them identify themselves, lest they end up with fines or custodial sentences.<sup>8</sup>

Ironically, perhaps, the market provides an excellent model for this form of engagement. Many companies have opened up discussions with graffiti writers very productively in developing marketing campaigns, in sponsoring artistic events, and developing new products. It is time that governments began to think seriously about such an approach.

#### 4.2 Differentiating between good and bad graffiti

Public policies towards graffiti must be able to identify and distinguish between different forms and locations of graffiti. There simply is no such thing as a graffiti-proof city—or at least, the only possible graffiti-proof city is also a totalitarian city without an open and accessible public realm. Given that graffiti simply will not be eradicated, we ought to be mature enough as a society to accept policy measures which have the more modest goal of shifting graffiti writing practice towards those forms and locations of graffiti that are better liked (or at least more tolerable to more people). Here, I have been particularly influenced by a draft graffiti policy for the city of Melbourne written primarily by Alison Young (City of Melbourne 2005; Young, forthcoming). This policy, unfortunately not adopted by the city, proposed (among other things) that an inclusive council graffiti committee be established to democratically determine 'zones of higher tolerance' for graffiti, where council resources would not be directed towards rapid removal and criminalisation. The assumption underpinning this approach was that 'by directing graffiti writers into areas of higher tolerance, this will lead to the creation of mostly mural type work and stencilling with less tagging' (p. 18). As that report also noted:

Creating and supporting areas of higher tolerance in which high quality street art can exist is also recognition of the cultural significance that street art has for today's young people (p. 18). So, I am certainly not advocating an 'anything goes' policy to replace existing approaches—far from it. Following Young, it would also be my view, for example, that 'zero tolerance' should continue to be applied to hateful forms of graffiti (such as homophobia and racism). As noted above, while the current zero tolerance approaches cannot succeed in eradicating graffiti, they can be quite effective in changing the form and location of graffiti. Here, if we took a different approach to the policy problem (that is, if we decided that the policy objective was to reduce 'bad' graffiti, as defined through debates between graffiti writers and

7 While this might be hard to prove, the poor quality of most graffiti on these 'off-limits' surfaces would suggest that it is not being written by people with much skill or experience in writing graffiti.

8 In some ways, my suggestion that graffiti culture is a resource for public policy is akin to the idea that idea that sexual cultures are a resource for public health efforts to minimise sexually transmitted diseases. Of course, as we know, this approach based on community engagement has had tremendous success in this policy area (Bartos 1996).



*The resources devoted to addressing the graffiti problem ought to be proportionate to the harm caused by that problem.*

members of the public), then the limitations of existing approaches would become their strength—they would be useful in helping to change the form and location of graffiti from ‘bad’ to ‘good/better’.

Of course, those of us who propose that we ought to be working to improve the quality of graffiti, rather than to eradicate it, are usually met with a mix of incredulity and anger. Surely, we are asked, you are not suggesting that the state sends a message that it is acceptable for people to write on other people’s property without permission?<sup>9</sup> Well, yes, I suppose we are. However, the notion that we might tolerate graffiti which does not have permission is grounded in a democratic approach to property relations in the city. Property right is frequently conceptualised as a right to exclude (Staheli and Mitchell 2008, p. xxiii). But the characteristics of a democratic urban public realm should not be determined solely by the exercise of exclusionary private property rights by owners of land which is publicly accessible—be they individuals, corporations, or state authorities. To say, as I have above, that we ought to work towards a political response to graffiti is precisely to say that private property rights do not somehow trump democratic determinations about what is possible and not possible in a given publicly accessible space.

From this perspective, there is less difference between the approach that I am proposing and the approach that we have in place already than it might first appear. We already have legislation in place which privileges the rights of the collective (as represented by the state) over and above the rights of individual property holders, when we say that the state can either paint over graffiti on private property, or that it can deny private property owners the right to invite graffiti writers to paint their walls. Here, a community norm (in this case, an anti-graffiti norm) is given more weight than a private property right. So, I am suggesting that we might come to a different conclusion about community norms and the collective interest, by deciding that there are parts of the urban public realm where the collective interest is not best served by the state expending vast resources rapidly removing every instance of graffiti on public or private property. If private property owners in any ‘zones of tolerance’ for graffiti want to paint over every instance of graffiti, that would of course remain their right. But unless that graffiti is hateful, should urban authorities either insist that they do so or remove it themselves?<sup>10</sup>

Certainly, this is to accept and even embrace a level of disorder in the city, to relinquish the fantasy of total control where everything remains in its assigned place. Instead, it is to think about (certain parts of) the city as available for creative intervention, or ‘remixing’, by graffiti writers and street artists. Scott Burnham (forthcoming) has proposed that we think about this process as a kind of creative ‘design dialogue’ between urban authorities, the public, and the writers/artists, similar to the dialogue between a performer of a musical work and an artist who remixes that work.

#### **4.3 Cost effectiveness**

The resources devoted to addressing the graffiti problem ought to be proportionate to the harm caused by that problem. With other funding pressures in areas of government policy, it is unfathomable that so much money is devoted to cleaning up graffiti and chasing, prosecuting and punishing graffiti offenders.

Even if current policy objectives remain in place (which I hope they do not), there are cheaper options. For instance, legal wall programs can have some localised success in reducing the incidence of tagging on a given wall or surface. Providing funding to local youth services or arts organisations to organise legal walls is considerably cheaper than expensive contracts for rapid removal and graffiti proofing. Advocates of legal walls as a form of graffiti reduction are generally less able to provide statistical evidence to support their claims of success as compared with companies offering rapid removal/graffiti proofing services. I would suggest that this has more to do with the limited resources of the youth services who offer legal walls compared with the resources of the graffiti removal industry, which makes it more difficult for the youth services to conduct conclusive research on such matters. Certainly, where statistics have been collected—for example, in Brisbane City Council’s Artforce program, which organises for community artists to paint traffic signal boxes—there is evidence of significant cost savings (Ovenden 2007). Furthermore, while legal graffiti often conforms to the police goals of keeping graffiti to its proper place by reducing/eliminating illegal graffiti, it does have the advantage of engaging graffiti writers and improving the quality of graffiti in the manner advocated above (see Box 2).

9 This was certainly the fate of Alison Young’s ideas for the City of Melbourne. In a recent interview with John Stanley on Sydney radio station 2UE, when I put the position that graffiti policy should be about quality and location rather than eradication, Stanley asked whether this was the kind of thing I taught students. If so, he argued, I was abusing my position by encouraging criminal behaviour.

10 For an excellent discussion of the relationship between property regimes and public space, see Staheli and Mitchell (2008).



*A profitable industry has now sprung up based on current approaches, offering services in surveillance, graffiti removal and graffiti-proofing. This industry has a vested interest in maintaining the current policy settings from which it profits.*

#### Box 2: Legal Graffiti Programs

A range of local governments and private property owners have experimented with establishing 'legal graffiti' spaces to provide sanctioned opportunities for graffiti expression. The question of how to evaluate the success or otherwise of these legal graffiti spaces, however, has reflected the dispute over graffiti more generally. For some, the ultimate goal of legal graffiti spaces is to stop illegal graffiti, and if they fail to do this, then they are of no value. Indeed, the NSW Government has recently backed away from the provision of legal graffiti as a goal of graffiti policy, arguing that legal graffiti may indeed encourage illegal graffiti in nearby areas. At the other end of the spectrum, the ultimate goal of legal graffiti programs is to make connections with young people through their interest in graffiti, introducing them to senior graffiti writers who may be able to assist them with career development and referring them to youth and community services that may be able to assist them with their other needs.

From the perspective developed in this paper, if we expect legal graffiti walls and programs to eradicate illegal graffiti, we are setting them up to fail. If young people develop skills, establish relationships with mentors and other members of the community, and access community services which meet their needs through referrals, while at the same time improving the appearance of the wall in question, then these programs have achieved something of great importance. As such, these criteria ought to be more important in legal graffiti programs, suggesting that programs which are long-term engagements between senior graffiti writers, youth services and participants are to be preferred over short-term programs which are little more than child-minding days that make up part of a school-holiday program.

The three principles I have articulated here are informed by the tireless efforts of many folks involved in trying to find alternatives to the war on graffiti. These 'graffiti alternatives' continue to emerge in different localities, often quietly and under the radar of political and mass media hype, precisely because it is at the local level that the failures and costs of the war on graffiti are most acutely felt. Unfortunately however, alternative approaches are frequently evaluated with reference to their effectiveness in eliminating illegal graffiti—in other words, they are presented (either enthusiastically or reluctantly) as different weapons in the war on graffiti. So, local government responses to graffiti categorised by Halsey and Young (2002) as 'welfarist' or 'acceptance' are often mobilised alongside, rather than in place of, criminalisation and zero tolerance (see pp. 177-8). This is often because state governments fund and audit local graffiti policy initiatives with respect to state-wide

policy settings, which are universally geared towards the eradication of illegal graffiti. With the principles articulated above then, I am not only suggesting different strategies, I am suggesting that we need to deploy a different set of criteria for evaluating these different strategies—moving from police (even if the police are friendly!) to politics.

#### 5. Prospects for a new graffiti politics

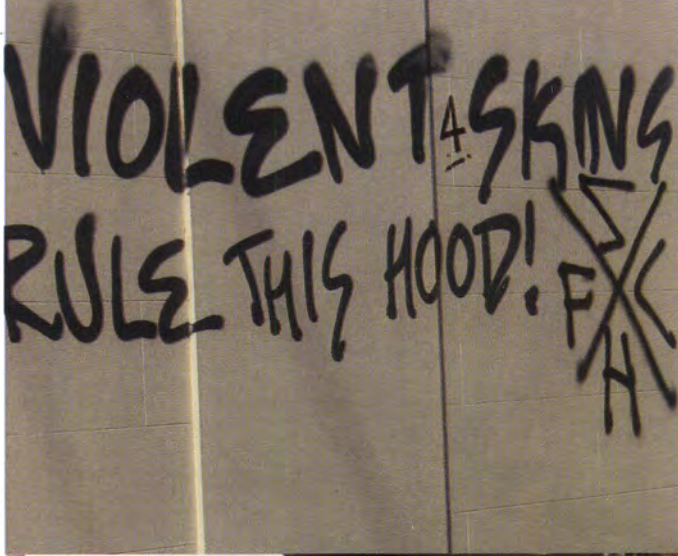
I am aware that the alternative approach I am advocating may sound hopelessly naive to practising planners. Local government officials are constantly fielding complaints from members of the public about graffiti, and both local and mass media frequently stoke the fires of anti-graffiti sentiment. In this context, politicians of all stripes like to appear tough on graffiti, and so the prospects for planners to experiment with alternative approaches are highly constrained.

What then are the possibilities for moving towards this new planning approach to the graffiti problem? While different opinions on graffiti might be strongly held, we should not presume that there is no point in fighting to establish a political process which brings these differences into some kind of democratic contact. The point of establishing such a process is not (necessarily) to resolve deeply held value differences—any attempt to do so would surely provoke scepticism from all concerned. Rather, as John Forester (1999, p. 465) has pointed out:

in the face of deep value differences many practical resolutions may be possible, even if (or indeed because) asking parties to change their fundamental beliefs is neither necessary nor relevant to settling the dispute at hand.

For planners who wish to embrace this approach, I would suggest that there is one potential point of departure, one value shared by graffiti's detractors and sympathisers that might open a space for political dialogue. Almost everyone seems to agree that *too much money is spent dealing with graffiti*. Those who support the current approach, and those who don't, all seem to agree that the money would be better spent elsewhere. Of course, it is a matter of debate whether this is the fault of the graffiti writers or those who pursue the policies which cost so much money to implement! Nonetheless, I think the shared desire to devote fewer resources to combating graffiti is an opening for dialogue across difference.

However, this desire to devote fewer resources to combating graffiti is not universally shared. A profitable industry has now sprung up based on current approaches, offering services in surveillance, graffiti removal and graffiti-proofing. This industry has a vested interest in maintaining the current policy settings from which it profits. It is not surprising, therefore, that this industry continues to talk up the success of their approaches, despite the failings discussed above.



Any planner or politician seeking to build support for alternative approaches, then, needs to come to the debate armed with their own research. I suggest that two kinds of research would help to ensure that policy is informed by evidence rather than assumptions. First, quantitative research (surveys of residents, including young people!) could establish the nuances of people's attitudes to graffiti in their area. Is graffiti a higher or lesser priority for residents than other 'quality of life' issues such as litter, noise, traffic, air pollution, diversity of local shops and amenities, etc etc? What kinds of graffiti do they find most problematic? Are there forms and locations of graffiti that seem to bother fewer people, and are there forms and locations of graffiti that are more likely to be appreciated or at least tolerated? Second, qualitative research could seek to construct safe spaces for dialogue between graffiti writers, their supporters and their detractors. Focus groups, workshops and other fora could begin to build bridges across divides that have been established by the long war on graffiti. Such efforts will not conquer these divides, and that is not their point—rather, they may at least forge the possibilities for mutual understanding and compromise.<sup>11</sup> Of course, alongside such strategies at the local scale, there is an even stronger need to shift the criminal laws and policy settings determined at state scale which are informed by the goal of zero tolerance. This will be the harder nut to crack.

The policy alternatives set out here are no more naïve than our current approach to graffiti. Indeed, arguments for an evidence-driven, and political, approach to graffiti at least have the advantage of challenging the most unrealistic assumption of all—that the war against graffiti can be won. The suggestions presented in this paper are informed by a pragmatic acknowledgement that graffiti is not likely to go away. Our response to graffiti may even be seen as a barometer of our capacity to live peacefully with some level of disorder in our cities. In *The Uses of Disorder*, Richard Sennett argued that urban governance in America in the 1970s was increasingly characterised by an 'inability to deal with disorder without raising it to the scale of mortal combat' (Sennett 1970, p. 46). He worried that every instance of disorder was turned into 'a situation in which the ultimate methods of aggression, violent force and reprisal, seem[ed] to become not only justified, but life-preserving. It is a terrible paradox that the escalation of discord into violence comes to be, in these communities, the means by which "law and order" should be maintained' (Sennett 1970, p. 45). This neatly sums up the logic which has resulted in the escalating war on graffiti. The war could be over, if we can learn to live with (good) graffiti.

11 I am sure that some readers will note the self-interested nature of these proposals – fancy that, an academic suggesting that more research is the answer! Guilty as charged.

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