

RECREATION MANAGEMENT

Maintenance Series: Vandalism & Graffiti

Straighten Up, Fly Right

Preventing Vandalism, Graffiti With Smart Maintenance

By Dawn Klingensmith - November 1, 2011

“Blank walls will always be vandalized because they offend people,” said Dan Biederman, who transformed New York City’s Bryant Park from a menacing eyesore to an urban mecca.

Today, the privately managed public park is an exemplar of urban renewal. Biederman credits the successful turnaround largely to beautification.

When it comes to creating public spaces that promote orderliness and deter property damage, “Pretty is always better than ugly,” he said.

Biederman subscribes to the Broken Window Theory developed and made famous in 1982 by social scientists James Q. Wilson and George Kelling, who co-wrote an article titled “Broken Windows” for the Atlantic Monthly. Their theory states that keeping an eye on and continuously caring for urban environments prevents vandalism and crime. More specifically, it states that property damage can be kept in check by fixing problems when they are small.

The classic example: A kid throws a rock through the window of an old building, and nobody bothers to fix it. “So another kid comes along and sees that no one does anything, so he does the same thing,” Biederman said, until eventually not only are all the windows busted out, but scofflaws are also climbing through them and committing vandalism and other crimes inside the building.

“It’s like a chain reaction. It’s like nobody cares anymore, so it just breeds on itself,” agreed Levi Conner, who worked full time fighting graffiti and vandalism for the Boise Parks and Recreation department in Idaho for several years before his recent promotion to crew chief of sports fields. Had the window been repaired quickly, the theory goes, it’s much less likely that further damage would have occurred.

The Broken Window Theory isn’t just about windows; an area that tolerates a small amount of litter can eventually turn into the town dump. In urban areas, metaphorical “broken windows” can include persistent foul odors, rundown playground equipment and dilapidated public restrooms. Bryant Park in the 1970s was a hotbed of drug crime amid unkempt vegetation, bent and broken play equipment, park benches with slats missing and graffiti galore. Oil drums were being used as trash cans, sending the wrong message about the park’s intended occupants and uses.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BIEDERMAN REDEVELOPMENT VENTURES CORPORATION

Under Biederman's leadership, these problems were all addressed, and efforts to maintain the beauty of the painstakingly restored park have consistently kept vandals and other criminals at bay.

Act Fast to Stop Graffiti

Whether or not they've heard of the Window Theory, most law enforcement and municipal workers who have dealt with graffiti agree that it needs to be stamped out as soon as it pops up. Studies show that rapid removal within 24 to 48 hours usually thwarts repeat incidents in the same spot, perhaps because graffiti "artists" can't stand when their work is erased before it attracts a satisfying amount of attention.

"It's all about having fame. If their friends don't see it, it's kind of a letdown for them," said retired highway patrol officer Randy Campbell, president and executive director of the Nograp Network (www.nograpffiti.com), a nonprofit clearinghouse of graffiti prevention and abatement information.

Rapid response requires community involvement. Cities should educate the public about the impact of graffiti and provide an easy way for them to report it such as an 800 number, a dedicated telephone line or a mobile-friendly Web site.

In Boise, "We try to make the property owners responsible for abatement," Conner said. A law being considered by the city council would give owners 72 hours to respond compared to the 24-hour response time required for public property.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BOISE ANNE MORRISON PARK

But though rapid removal is a key means of preventing graffiti, "if all you're doing is painting over or cleaning up graffiti and nothing more, you're not really stopping it," Campbell said. "If you spend \$100,000 a year to remove graffiti, what do you expect to spend next year and the year after that? Your costs just continue, and removal becomes a line item on your annual budget. You need to take a more proactive approach to actually catch the vandals and prosecute them."

Indeed, graffiti cleanup takes a big bite out of municipal budgets. Large metropolises like Chicago can spend upwards of \$6 million on removal, while midsize cities like Denver and Milwaukee spend about \$1 million.

Besides draining tax dollars, graffiti costs communities in other ways. Graffiti sends the signal that nobody cares, attracting other forms of crime to the area.

"Aesthetically, when you get a lot of graffiti in an area, it tends to make your city look rundown," Campbell said.

Real estate values drop by as much as 10 to 20 percent, he added, and business growth and tourism decrease.

Graffiti erodes people's sense of safety, owing in part to its association with gangs and also to the perception that the very presence of graffiti implies crime is tolerated in an area.

For all these reasons, it's important to catch and prosecute vandals, Campbell said, and there

are proven ways to do it.

Partner With Police

Boise began seeing a significant decline in graffiti and vandalism after the parks department forged a stronger relationship with local law enforcement officials, Conner said. He started documenting and building a database of graffiti, using a camera that would take the type and quality of photographs required to be admitted as evidence in a court of law. To avoid duplicate efforts with the police in taking and filing reports, Conner was entrusted to collect evidence at the scene and assign a police report number to his official documentation.

On a broader scale, as a highway patrolman assigned to the graffiti beat, "I closed a lot of cases just driving around to other police departments, asking questions and sharing information," Campbell said, adding that prolific taggers tend to cover a lot of territory.

In Boise, with both the police and parks departments squarely behind the mayor's zero-tolerance policy for graffiti, it's understood that "when we apprehend offenders, we really need to stick it to 'em," Conner said.

Campbell is of the same mind: "If a vandal goes out and does thousands of dollars in damage, does it make sense to get a hundred-dollar fine and community service? No."

Work with law officials to ensure that anti-graffiti laws are enforced and that there's follow-through, including strict penalties, in the court system.

Ideally, police departments should have a full-time officer working graffiti and vandalism cases, Campbell said.

Campbell recommends the use of GPS-enabled surveillance equipment to catch criminals red-handed. There are covert "tripwire" camera systems on the market that notify you by cell phone when a crime is going down and provide you with photos of the criminal act in progress. This allows for immediate apprehension of offenders.

There are Web-based services that compile graffiti intelligence, from data collection to analysis. One company uses GPS technology and satellite imaging to track the work of graffiti vandals and provide intelligence reports to law enforcement agencies.

Fast Facts about Graffiti

There are several types, including gang, hate and generic (nonthreatening messages like "Josh loves Janie" or "Class of 2012").

About 80 percent is smaller-scale, quick-hit "tagger" graffiti, while 5 percent are "pieces," or large visuals. Gang graffiti makes up about 10 percent nationwide.

The majority of taggers are males between ages 12 and 21.

Motivating factors for graffiti vandalism are fame or notoriety, rebellion, self-expression and power.

Prevention Starts With Pretty

Caring for and keeping up the neighborhood goes a long way toward preventing graffiti and vandalism. Remove litter, tend to landscaping and ensure all lighting is working properly.

The Boise parks department holds volunteer days such as Paint the Parks, Rake the Parks, and Sweep the River (for litter removal along the river walk), which gives citizens "a sense of ownership and pride" with regard to public spaces, Conner said.

"Our goal is picture-perfect parks—raking up leaves, freshening the paint, making it look like somebody cares," he said.

That in itself has deterred vandals and decreased the amount of graffiti in Boise, but the volunteer efforts also effectively put citizens on patrol. "Any park beautification volunteer program helps with vandalism because if people invest their time and energy, if they see tagging, they're more likely to do something about it," said Conner, emphasizing citizens should report rather than confront offenders caught in the act.

From a design perspective, cities can eliminate or reduce the allure of blank canvases by using textured surfaces, dark-colored or colorful construction materials and paints, and natural deterrents such as vines and thorny shrubbery to restrict access, Campbell suggested.

Over the past decade, the Boise parks department has been standardizing its building colors (gray with blue or green trim), which cuts costs whenever paint matching is required and also projects a more professional appearance and a recognizable "brand."

In that same time frame, restrooms have been retrofitted with stainless steel toilets and special partitions to prevent "classic restroom and graffiti vandalism, especially with the toilets around the Fourth of July," Conner said. "Ten years ago, we started to replace the porcelain fixtures with the same kind of toilets used in correctional facilities, and vandalism has gone down to zero. Essentially, you can't blow these things up."

Caring for and keeping up the neighborhood goes a long way toward preventing graffiti and vandalism.

Fabricated in-house, the metal partitions are coated with automotive paint, and maintenance crews use an anti-graffiti wipe to quickly and easily remove all the potty poetry and declarations of love that tend to spring up in bathroom stalls.

Conner recommends anchoring park furnishings like bleachers and benches, if not to deter thieves then to prevent "musical chairs" types of mischief; in Boise, a group of skateboarders once moved a set of bleachers over a 5-foot wall just to prove they could.

In contrast, Biederman believes movable seating is partly to thank for Bryant Park's high usage and low crime rate. A popular lunchtime destination, the park's expansive lawn is dotted with movable round tables and chairs—thousands of them. Their movability has "many virtues," Biederman said, including the ability to form "conversational groupings" or break away for a solitary activity like reading; to define your personal space and decide how near you want to sit to others; and to control sun exposure.

Biederman referenced the work of William H. Whyte, an author of several scholarly books on "street life" and public spaces. Keenly interested in seating arrangements, Whyte determined that the freedom to choose where to sit in a public space is more important to a person than the comfort and aesthetics of the seat, and that benches force people into awkward, too-close-for-comfort situations.

But another advantage to movable chairs is the pact of trust it forges with the public: Their mere presence implies a high degree of trust in park users, while at the same time sending a signal that the park is safe since the chairs "are just left there all night," said Biederman, adding that chairs are "counted constantly" and there's virtually no theft.

An Off-the-Wall Idea

Involving youth in the creation of a paint-brush (not spray paint) mural can give them a sense of community pride and ownership, while at the same time permanently obliterating blank walls that are chronically hit with graffiti.

In Houston, youth groups were paired with professional artists to create a mural series.

"There are places where murals have worked," Campbell said, "but you have to remember, vandals don't respect property."

In the event that a mural is badly defaced, it's harder to restore as opposed to simply "wiping out" tags with a paint roller.

Time and again, cities around the globe decide to "dedicate" a wall to graffiti artists; often, parks and recreation departments have art program directors to whom this type of solution appeals. These whitewashed "free walls" invite people to express themselves openly rather than making their mark on street signs and underpasses. Some cities report that the scheme works at least in the short-term, with greater respect shown to other surfaces.

But dozens of cities have found them to be ineffective over the long run, and they might even do more harm than good. They invite the criminal element to come and practice, tagging property en route, Campbell said. After a period of time, the areas surrounding the free wall also become covered with graffiti.

Also, when graffiti is celebrated as art and governments and businesses are asked to get behind and essentially sponsor it, all in an effort to get rid of graffiti everywhere else, it sends a mixed message.

Communities that nevertheless are considering a free wall need to think about who will monitor it for appropriate content; who will take responsibility for repainting it regularly to provide a fresh canvas; and who will pay for removal if the graffiti migrates to adjacent or nearby surfaces.

For a less ambiguous way to involve youth in anti-graffiti efforts, consider Milwaukee's grant-sponsored public service announcement contest in which kids were invited to write a 30-second radio spot to deter youth involvement in graffiti. Winners voiced their own ads, which aired throughout an integrated six-month campaign.