

More than just a paintbrush needed to beat graffiti

Paul Nicolaou



We are losing the battle against graffiti vandalism in Sydney as it becomes endemic in parts of the metropolitan area.

Businesses and private property owners could do more to help combat it instead of leaving it to governments, councils and community service organisations to fight the anti-social trend.

The solution, in part, is as easy as property owners acting quickly armed with a can of paint and a roller to cover the offending displays.

At the same time, it does appear that government and council authorities are losing the battle in public spaces and infrastructure.

Drive on any government-owned motorway or travel by train on most suburban rail corridors and the work of the graffiti "artists" is in your face.

Sadly, it's the first thing international visitors see of Sydney in travelling to the city from Sydney Airport via Southern Cross Drive. Even the backs of metres-high traffic signs haven't escaped attention.

Take a suburban train from the city and you'll see large sections of the inner west rail corridor blighted by graffiti on abutments, the sides of houses, blocks of flats and commercial premises.

It's not much better on the northside with buildings alongside the railway at St Leonards having

received an ugly graffiti makeover.

The worrying thing is the sheer number of businesses and privately-owned properties that have been given the 'treatment'. But the question also arises, why aren't these business and private property owners taking their own steps to cover the graffiti, which might not be visible from the street but is still a visual problem. A can of paint and a roller would work wonders in denying the graffiti vandals the visual sugar hit they crave.

For years, train commuters have observed the efforts of one North Shore homeowner to rid his house of unwanted graffiti.

His home has a bare painted brick wall overlooking the railway line. It would regularly come under graffiti attack and, just as regularly, the homeowner would take to it with a

paint roller to eliminate the bizarre tags and designs.

It must have been frustrating for the "artists" to see their work quickly disappear. At last sighting, the homeowner's wall was again pristine showing a cream-painted face to the world. A win for the homeowner.

The state government has also had its victories — the Devonshire Street pedestrian tunnel from Central Station to Railway Square is a good example. Once one of Sydney's most blighted locations, this dark, smelly and forbidding thoroughfare was seedy by day and positively dangerous by night. Today, it is testament to what bright lighting and colourful imagery can do. The tunnel walls are clean and enhanced by images of the state's railway history.

Few Sydneysiders would now be too frightened to use it and the

historic images have deterred the graffiti aficionados. Lest we become complacent, we must never forget that graffiti is a crime.

As the NSW Department of Justice says, graffiti vandalism affects individuals and the community and its removal costs millions of dollars of taxpayers' money that could be better spent on health and education.

Its presence also makes people feel unsafe. The department cites Australian Bureau of Statistics data that 21 per cent of NSW people surveyed regarded graffiti as a social disorder in their areas.

Unfortunately, the job just keeps getting bigger. It is certainly bigger than the heroic efforts of community service organisations that are doing their best in graffiti eradication.

Paul Nicolaou is the executive director of Business Sydney