



# Guarding Against Graffiti

## Best Practices to Safeguard Commercial Properties

By Edward Owens

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**GRAFFITI AND VANDALISM HAVE BECOME INCREASINGLY COMMON THREATS TO COMMERCIAL PROPERTIES ACROSS THE UNITED STATES.** FOR INSTANCE, IN THE SECOND HALF OF 2023 ALONE, THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA RECORDED MORE THAN 10,000 INSTANCES OF GRAFFITI ON COMMERCIAL PROPERTIES.<sup>1</sup> DESPITE A SIGNIFICANT 74 PERCENT INCREASE IN CLEANUP REQUESTS, THE RESPONSE RATE FROM PUBLIC WORKS DROPPED TO A CONCERNING 14 PERCENT. AND THIS IS JUST IN SAN FRANCISCO—IMAGINE THE COSTS AND DAMAGE ACROSS OTHER

MAJOR METROS SUCH AS NEW YORK CITY, CHICAGO, AND LOS ANGELES.

This growing problem underscores the need for specifiers to take proactive measures to protect building exteriors during the design and construction phases and beyond. By implementing suitable materials and design strategies, specifiers can help their clients maintain pristine business fronts and ensure the longevity of the building designs.

A good starting point to combat graffiti effectively is understanding the available protective solution options and learning about design strategies that can deter graffiti. Let's begin by exploring the primary



Top: Unlawful defacing costs an estimated \$12 billion annually in the United States. In some states, business owners may incur fines if graffiti is not cleaned up promptly, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.  
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Top right: Reminding clients that a proactive approach is necessary even after installing anti-graffiti solutions—swift graffiti removal can disrupt the cycle of vandalism, making properties less appealing targets.  
Photo ©Andy777/courtesy Bigstockphoto.com



Right: Thoughtful exterior designs such as murals and decorative wraps beautify commercial spaces and deter vandalism in the first place.  
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types of anti-graffiti coatings and the key considerations for selecting the best materials for different surface textures and conditions.

### Specifying anti-graffiti coatings and materials

There are various types of anti-graffiti solutions, and they all work a little bit differently. Each offers different levels of protection and maintenance requirements, and selection depends on the exterior materials and the budget. Here is a breakdown of the different offerings available that can protect exteriors:

- Clear coatings—Designed for rough surfaces such as brick and concrete blocks, clear coatings are applied like paint. Once cured, they create a surface that causes the paint to run and bead up, deterring graffiti artists who seek clean surfaces for their tags. These coatings can be power-washed, restoring the surface without damaging the underlying material.
- Anti-graffiti laminates—Often used over printed vinyl, these laminates prevent paint from adhering, making it easy to clean off any attempts at graffiti. Anti-graffiti laminates are particularly effective on

smooth surfaces and are favored for their durability and ease of maintenance.

- Sacrificial coatings—These coatings, typically vinyl, are applied over a wall and can be removed and replaced if tagged. While extremely effective, this method can get expensive if it needs to be replaced often, making it a good option for exteriors subject to graffiti but in a lower-risk area.
- Cast vinyl versus calendared vinyl—Cast vinyl is thinner and can mold around shapes and retain its form, making it ideal for curved or textured surfaces. In contrast, calendared vinyl is less flexible and better suited for flat surfaces. Cast vinyl also offers better long-term durability, particularly in environments with high sun exposure or temperature fluctuations. Both options can be paired with an anti-graffiti laminate.
- Vinyl wraps and films—These materials offer a practical solution for covering large areas and can be tailored to different surface types. Vinyl wraps provide a seamless appearance while protecting the underlying structure. Specifiers should consider factors such as thickness and adhesive

strength, which influence the material's resistance to environmental conditions and vandalism.

- Security films—Primarily used for glass-breaking prevention, transparent security films can also deter graffiti on windows and glass doors, offering protection without compromising visibility.

Additionally, anti-graffiti materials typically have a lifespan of five to seven years on vertical surfaces. Regular maintenance, including prompt graffiti removal, is essential to reduce the likelihood of repeat incidents and maintain the material's protective qualities.

### Evaluating anti-graffiti solutions

When evaluating anti-graffiti solutions, it is crucial to conduct thorough research and understand each solution's suitability for the intended surface, its resistance to environmental factors, and its ease of application.

Understanding the differences between products, such as the variations in vinyl types or the protective qualities of different laminates, can help specifiers make informed decisions that align with the project's goals and budget. Here are two ways to evaluate what will work best for a project:

- Surface and material compatibility—The effectiveness of anti-graffiti materials depends mainly on their compatibility with the surface to which they are applied. For instance, highly textured surfaces such as brick may require more expensive materials (e.g. cast vinyl) to ensure adequate coverage and protection.
- Cost versus effectiveness—There is a direct correlation between the cost of anti-graffiti materials and their performance. Higher-end materials are more effective on complex surfaces, while lower-cost options may suffice for simpler, flat surfaces. Specifiers should weigh the initial investment against the long-term benefits, considering factors such as durability, ease of maintenance, and the frequency of graffiti incidents in the area.

The effectiveness of anti-graffiti measures is closely tied to how quickly graffiti is removed. Specifiers should advise clients to clean up graffiti within a few days to prevent re-tagging. This swift response disrupts the gratification vandals seek from their work, often discouraging them from targeting the property again.



Community engagement is key. Involving local artists in commercial property design can foster community pride and discourage graffiti.

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Anti-graffiti materials are designed to be durable, with most solutions offering protection for several years. However, the longevity of these materials is influenced by factors such as exposure to sunlight, temperature fluctuations, and pollution. Ensuring proper installation and regular maintenance can extend the life of these materials, reducing the need for frequent replacements and minimizing overall costs.

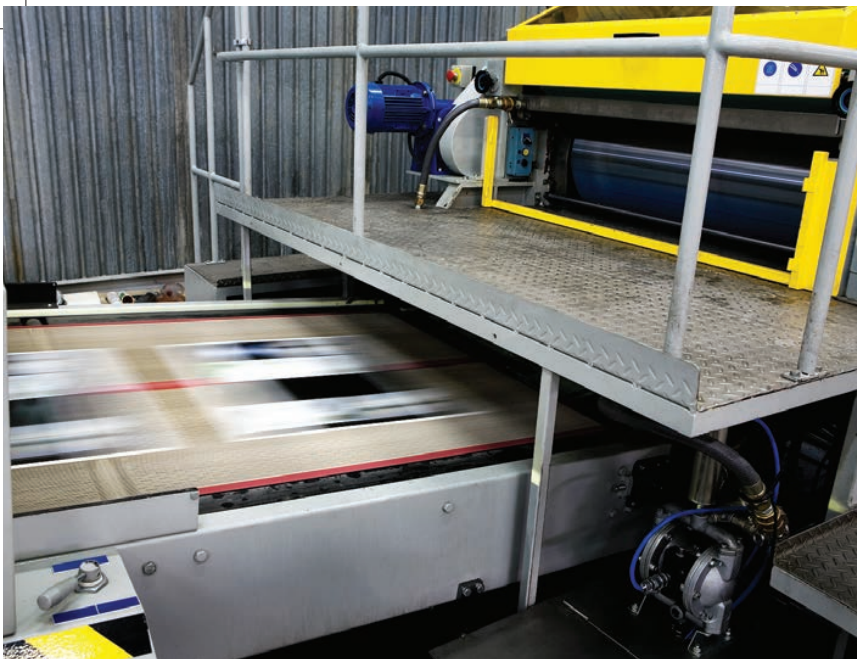
### Design strategies to deter graffiti

Preventing graffiti is not just about applying the right materials—it also involves strategic design choices that can discourage vandalism before it happens. While choosing the proper anti-graffiti coatings and materials can be a good option to protect building exteriors, the design also plays a role in preventing vandalism.

By integrating thoughtful design strategies, such as incorporating art or architectural barriers, specifiers can further reduce the risk of graffiti. These proactive design measures deter vandals and enhance the visual appeal of commercial properties. Let's explore some of the most effective design strategies to help keep graffiti at bay.

Beyond coatings and protective films, building aesthetics and community engagement can also keep properties graffiti-free. By considering how a building's design interacts with its surroundings, specifiers can implement solutions that make surfaces less attractive to vandals while enhancing the overall environment.

Integrating artistic elements such as murals or decorative wraps can enhance the building's aesthetic while preventing graffiti. Graffiti artists are less likely to tag over existing art, especially if it reflects the local community's culture and values. For example,



From clear coatings to security films, various anti-graffiti materials are available to protect commercial properties and can be printed in-house by specialty printing shops.

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murals celebrating Hispanic-American heritage in San Francisco's Mission District have significantly reduced graffiti incidents.

By involving residents and local artists in creating public art, specifiers can build a sense of ownership and pride in the community, making it less likely for individuals to deface the property. By commissioning murals and other artworks that resonate, property owners can reduce the likelihood of vandalism and contribute to the cultural enrichment of the area.

In addition to art, physical barriers can make it more challenging for vandals to access vulnerable surfaces. Strategically placed plants, hedges, or

architectural elements can serve as deterrents, making it difficult for graffiti artists to reach and deface building exteriors. These barriers protect the property and also enhance the building's aesthetic appeal.

### Conclusion

Protecting commercial properties against graffiti requires a combination of strategic material selection, thoughtful design, and proactive maintenance. By understanding the available options and implementing best practices, specifiers can help their clients preserve the integrity and appearance of their buildings for years to come. As graffiti continues to pose a challenge in urban environments, specifiers play a crucial role in safeguarding the visual and structural integrity, ensuring these spaces remain welcoming and vibrant parts of the community.

Future advancements in anti-graffiti materials will likely focus on enhancing their durability, ease of application, and environmental sustainability. Specifiers should stay informed about these developments to offer clients the most effective solutions for safeguarding commercial properties. **CS**

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Read the full article at <https://nypost.com/2023/09/28/just-3-of-san-francisco-restaurants-have-not-been-vandalized-survey/>.

## ▶▶ ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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Edward Owens is the president of SpeedPro East Bay, bringing more than 30 years of diverse experience in construction, carpentry, photography, and engineering. He offers clients creative, customized solutions for their signage and branding needs. His broad skill set, developed throughout his career, has enabled him to quickly adapt to the large-format printing business. Owens utilizes the latest advanced printing technology to deliver impactful visual solutions for industries ranging from retail and cultural centers to events. He works closely with businesses to help them achieve their goals through innovative large-format graphics and custom displays.

### Key Takeaways

With graffiti incidents rising, commercial property specifiers can protect building exteriors through anti-graffiti coatings, materials, and thoughtful design strategies. Available solutions include clear coatings, anti-graffiti laminates, sacrificial coatings, and vinyl wraps, each offering different

levels of durability and maintenance requirements based on surface types and budgets. Quick graffiti removal and regular maintenance help maintain these solutions' protective qualities. Design strategies, such as incorporating murals, plants, or architectural barriers, can discourage vandalism while enhancing aesthetics. By combining these approaches, specifiers can help clients preserve their properties' appearance, reduce cleanup costs, and contribute to the community's visual appeal.

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