


New York Landmarks
Conservancy

Technical Tips



Removing
Graffiti

Introduction

The New York Landmarks Conservancy presents the following information on graffiti removal as part of a continuing effort to assist in the maintenance and preservation of historic buildings. By knowing these facts, you can reduce your current graffiti problem and combat future attacks.

How To Begin

Act quickly. A prompt response discourages future vandalism and allows for easier graffiti removal. The first three steps for any cleaning project include:

- ★ Determining if you or a contractor should do the job
- ★ Identifying the vandalized building material
- ★ Identifying the graffiti-marking material

In addition, consult the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) to determine if the building is designated as either an individual landmark or part of an historic district. Small-scale projects, under a few square feet, are considered "normal maintenance" by the LPC and do not require permits.

If the amount of graffiti covers a larger area and your building is designated, check with the LPC to determine whether you need a permit. If one is required, you should consider hiring an experienced cleaning contractor to perform the work. Whether the project is small or large, contractors typically use methods and cleaners that achieve better results than those you may try yourself.

Helpful Advice for Graffiti Removal Projects

Call the Conservancy's Technical Preservation Services Center at 212-995-5260 for information regarding building material and graffiti identification, product literature, cleaning methods, and contractor referrals.

What You Need To Consider

Job Size

Small incidents of graffiti, one to two days old, can often be cleaned by using off-the-shelf products available at local hardware stores. Performing the work yourself requires a commitment of time and effort. Cleaners must be tested, requiring a good deal of "elbow grease." Large jobs, including those with many layers of graffiti or stains in hard to reach areas, may require more complex removal techniques, as well as approvals from municipal agencies. For these types of projects, it is best to consult an experienced cleaning contractor.

Identification of Materials

Identifying the vandalized building material is important. Common building materials easily damaged by graffiti are masonry, metal, glass, and wood. It is easier to remove graffiti from non-porous materials such as metal and glass than from porous materials such as brick, concrete, limestone, and brownstone. Materials such as glass and metal, often adjacent to areas being cleaned, should be protected to avoid damage. It is equally important to identify the graffiti-marking material. The most widely-used materials are spray paints and felt-tip markers.



Removal attempts often leave ghost images of graffiti. A ghost image remains on the bottom stone panel.

Overpainting

Painting over graffiti on previously unpainted masonry should be avoided since it may damage the masonry, attract additional graffiti, and change the appearance of the building. In some instances, where materials such as metal, masonry, or wood have an existing painted finish, it may be acceptable to cover the graffiti with paint of the same color. If the building is a designated landmark or in an historic district, consult the LPC before painting.

Expectations

While some removal methods will clean a substantial portion of the graffiti, they will not always leave the surface completely graffiti-free. You may see a faint image of the graffiti stain called a "ghost." By testing the methods and cleaners, you can determine what to expect from the cleaning job.

Doing The Job Yourself

Once you have decided that you can proceed on your own, identify the vandalized building material and the graffiti-marking material.

All projects should start with the gentlest cleaning methods. *Never use wire brushes, steel wool, disk sanders, or sandblasting equipment, as they can irreparably damage building materials.*

Your first attempt to remove the graffiti should be with clean water and a plastic- or fiber-bristle brush. If this is not effective, select an off-the-shelf cleaning product. Carefully consider the cleaning product since each one has a different rate of success depending on the surface to be cleaned and the graffiti-marking material. Be aware that a cleaner appropriate for one material may damage another material. The manufacturer will list the types of surfaces for which the product is formulated.

Cleaning Procedures and Safety

When undertaking the cleaning process, be aware of safety and environmental issues, making sure to follow the manufacturer's instructions. Individuals

performing the work should wear protective clothing and eyewear, gloves, and face masks. Cover such areas as foliage and wood trim, which may be adversely affected by the cleaner's chemical ingredients. After the job, make sure to follow the manufacturer's directions when cleaning up and disposing of materials.

Testing

After selecting a product, it is essential to test the cleaner on a small, inconspicuous area that contains the graffiti. Testing will allow you to determine how long the cleaner needs to remain on the stain in order to be effective. This is called the "dwell time." Temperature variations, humidity levels, and the age of the graffiti may affect the cleaner's performance. Testing will ensure that you do not severely damage a large portion of the building material.

When examining the test area, ask the following questions:

- ★ Is there a ghost? If so, increase the dwell time.
- ★ Did the product "over-clean" by etching or bleaching the surface? If so, decrease the dwell time.
- ★ Did the product cause a secondary stain? If so, stop. For example, some limestones, marbles, and sandstones may turn orange, or a white residue may appear.
- ★ Did the stain begin to "bleed?" Some products dissolve, redeposit, and widen the stain, forcing it deeper into the surface and making it more difficult to remove. Try a longer dwell time, but be careful not to over-clean.

If you are not satisfied with the results of the test patch you may want to try a different product on a new test area or consider hiring a cleaning contractor.

Hiring A Contractor

Hiring a cleaning contractor will not only save time, but will most likely result in a better cleaning job.

Contractors typically use a combination of pressure washing equipment and a variety of cleaning solutions. *Abrasive methods should not be used under any circumstances.*

Choosing an experienced contractor will ensure that the job is done properly. It is advisable to check a contractor's references and visit previously completed cleaning projects. Contractors should test the cleaning method to determine what results you can reasonably expect. Testing will also safeguard against wide-scale building damage.

Contractors should follow safety procedures regarding the use of equipment and chemicals, including the protection of pedestrian thoroughfares. In addition, the contractor should obtain all necessary municipal approvals before work begins.

Protective Coatings

The removal of graffiti from masonry surfaces can be made easier in some instances with the application of protective coatings. In general, these colorless coatings act as a barrier and prevent the graffiti from penetrating into the masonry. For example, some coatings are designed so that painted graffiti will not adhere well to the building surface allowing for easy removal with pressure washing equipment and detergent.

Current information on protective coatings is quickly changing and should be investigated before any are applied to a masonry surface. While there are many effective coatings available, some have caused long-term damage to masonry. In general, coatings should:

- ★ allow moisture to pass through the coating itself. If moisture becomes trapped behind the coating, the masonry surface may crack or be severely damaged during freeze-thaw cycles.
- ★ allow for long-term exposure to the sun without yellowing, cracking, or chipping.
- ★ not darken the building surface or give it a glossy appearance.

Protective coatings are generally applied to masonry surfaces with spray equipment. This allows for better penetration into the building material ensuring effective and long-lasting product performance. Since the application of protective coatings should be considered carefully, it is best to consult an experienced and knowledgeable architect, building conservator, or contractor.



National Park Service

After testing (see two patches at left), experienced cleaning contractors often use pressure washing equipment and chemical cleaners for effective graffiti removal.

Further Information

For additional information regarding graffiti removal, call the Conservancy's Technical Preservation Services Center at 212-995-5260. The Center offers advice on the care and preservation of older buildings through its consulting services, publications, and workshops. The Center's Preservation Hotline provides technical information, contractor referrals, and product literature for all aspects of building maintenance.

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