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US Cities Lead Fight Against Graffiti

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Abstract
Transit authorities in Philadelphia and New York have proved that the insidious wave of graffiti now menacing European metros can be beaten by a comprehensive program embracing cleaning, policing and community education.

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Transit authorities in Philadelphia and New York have proved that the insidious wave of graffiti now menacing European metros can be beaten by a comprehensive programme embracing cleaning, policing and community education.

Vukan R Vuchic
Andrew Bata*

When US transit experts in the early 1970s asked their European colleagues how they protected their meticulously clean systems against graffiti, they were told, confidently, 'that is prohibited here'. But now, in the late 1980s, Paris, Hamburg, München, London, and even the Scandinavian metros are being seriously damaged by the graffiti plague which US metros have mostly conquered. SEPTA in Philadelphia and NYCTA in New York, which both suffered terrible graffiti problems a few years ago, have largely won the battle.

It is surprising that many European transit experts fail to understand the seriousness of the graffiti problem and its consequences, and seem unaware of the North American successes in curbing this destructive phenomenon. Although the graffiti epidemic in Europe is approximately equal to that in New York 10 to 15 years ago, there is little willingness to learn from US experience.

Graffiti is spreading to other parts of the world, too. San Francisco, Los Angeles, Rio de Janeiro and Sydney see the problem intensifying. They still call it the 'New York fashion', despite the fact that graffiti and car murals are passing into history in New York, where the current fashion is for clean cars and newly painted stations. Truly, the situation has been reversed.

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The recovery of SEPTA and NYCTA from near total defacement by graffiti, dirt and ugliness to clean and decent systems is so remarkable that their story deserves careful attention from cities menaced by increasing problems of graffiti and vandalism.

Graffiti arrives

Around 1970, the introduction of spray paint cans coincided with a period of rebellious youth and the advent of the permissive society to allow the development of graffiti scribbling, particularly in East Coast cities such as Philadelphia and New York. Transit facilities, initially subway stations and then trains, were among the first targets. Operators attempted to clean their trains and stations from time to time, but were gradually losing the battle. Finding chemicals and tools for effective cleaning received low priority as frequent financial crises squeezed resources.

In desperation and helplessness as the entire urban environment slid towards increasing ugliness, led by the transit systems whose strong image penetrated throughout the city, an interesting form of escapism and fake consolation arose. Opinions were voiced that graffiti was not important 'because it did no structural damage'. Media reports even gave these vandals and criminals who were destroying public property the complimentary name 'graffiti artists'.

Anarchy, not art

Frustration with the worsening deterioration of transit systems could not be covered by escapist explanations of the phenomenon as a 'symbol of our times'. Transit agencies eventually realised that the direct cost of partial cleaning was growing, ridership losses were becoming noticeable, and there was no way of offering the public an attractive system if everything was covered in scribbles. The reason was clear: trains operating with graffiti indicate that something is wrong with the system, and that nobody cares. But attempts to clean cars and stations, and to

By the end of last year, 94 per cent of the 6,200 cars in NYCTA's fleet were being kept completely free of graffiti on an hour-by-hour basis.
Problem: Graffiti prevention

As New York alone represents over half the total North American metro mileage, NYCTA's experience and successful strategy obviously deserves attention. David Gunn believes the first and most fundamental step in the fight to reclaim a vandalised system and put it under control is a decision by the top management that graffiti is unacceptable. Scribbles are indicative of problems in the organisation and must therefore be removed and prevented in the future. And absolute priority must be given to the task.

At the same time, funds must be released for the work, justified not only by visible improvements, but economically by the future increase in ridership and the long-term savings in maintenance costs. Once the system is cleaned up, the cost of keeping the fleet and stations clean is considerably less than the cost of an ineffective partial cleaning strategy when vandals continue to wreak damage.

The basic strategy in eliminating graffiti is to start with a small unit — a group of buses, a batch of trains, a handful of stations. These are completely cleaned and put in a 'clean car programme'; from that day on, every scribble or other obvious vandalism must be removed the same day it occurs. If a vehicle is not clean, quality inspection in the depot does not let the train go on the line next morning. But to cope with this stress on the maintenance depot, cleaning efforts must be increased during the initial stages.

Clean cars must never be mixed with vandalised ones in the same train, since experience shows them to be much more vulnerable to new attacks than completely clean trains. There is a clear psychological element in this. Firstly, clean trains give a definite impression that they are under full control (which they are), and secondly one of the basic stimuli for vandals to scribble is to observe their symbols travelling through the city day after day; they learn quickly that their imprints will disappear overnight. The main drive for committing such vandalism has thus been taken away.

In the early days, the numbers of cleaners, inspectors, supervisors and police must be increased to protect the cleaned cars from recurring attacks. Later, as substantial portions of the network are cleaned, the incidence of vandalism usually drops significantly, so that the effort and personnel can be reduced again.

Implementation and support

A round table on vandalism held early in 1988 and a UIIT study now being compiled agree with other observers of the phenomenon that simply throwing money at the problem will not solve it. A co-ordinated and comprehensive effort is needed, involving some or all of these interested parties: schools and youth organisations, neighbourhood groups (particularly for station cleaning), police, courts, politicians, and media.

In New York, where the problem has been the greatest, NYCTA set up a special task force, known as CAST (Car Appearance & Security Taskforce), with the clear goal of developing strategies, reviewing problems and conducting the fight against vandalism and graffiti. CAST included senior managers from NYCTA's Car Equipment, Engineering, Rapid Transit Operations, System Safety, Operations Planning, Track & Structures, Public Affairs, Transit Police, and Property Protection departments. Its work focused on generating ideas and implementing immediate measures to eliminate graffiti from subway cars. The programme demanded a range of measures:

- Increased security at terminals and storage depots, including well organised police patrol and surveillance forces, roving Property Protection agents. Breaches of security fencing (now installed at all critical locations) are quickly reported and repaired immediately.
- Cars are placed into a graffiti-free programme by logical groups, so that the depots assigned for their cleaning can keep up with removing all graffiti within 24 h; if not achieved, the car is not allowed back into traffic. As more terminals are equipped with graffiti cleaning forces, larger numbers of cars are introduced into the graffiti-free programme.
- Assignment of cars to various routes is carefully co-ordinated so that cleaned cars are stored in secure locations.
- Since 1983, the Car Equipment department has increased its workforce for car cleaning from 825 to a target of 1,725 in 1988. At present, all terminals have crew which thoroughly clean trains every trip and immediately report 'graffiti hits' for appropriate action.
- Graffiti vandalism is carefully monitored and reported to the Transit Police, who are equipped to evaluate incidents and identify trends so as to implement preventative measures.
- CAST has also searched for improved security equipment and cleaning materials which do not harm interior or exterior car finishes and are safe for employees to handle.
- A Transit Adjudication Bureau was created, with sole responsibility for conducting hearings into violations of NYCTA regulations on subways and buses. The Bureau permits more effective enforcement and collection of fines than was possible through the overburdened criminal courts.
- NYCTA has implemented various community outreach programmes to educate youth that graffiti and vandalism are not 'cool' and only hurt fellow citizens. These included a contest for schoolchildren on 'Why I don't like graffiti', a year-long Wipe Out Graffiti exhibition in the Transit Museum, and a team of Graffiti Busters set up to work with children and youth centres.
up in a New York City high school to remove graffiti on a voluntary basis.

Controlling vandalism in stations

The spread of graffiti has not spared stations. As the car problems were tackled, the vandals moved on to deface the stations. In a similar fashion to the car programme, a package was put together to eliminate station graffiti systematically.

With 466 stations on the NYCTA network, it is quite a challenge. Until recently, the only systematic approach was the Station Modernisation Programme, which provides for complete reconstruction of stations. Once completed, these are given special anti-vandal surveillance, but because of the work involved only a handful of stations can be tackled in this way.

A Graffiti Free programme covering 274 stations has had considerable success. This ensures that any graffiti is removed within 72 h, with special cleaning forces assigned to monitor and repair damage. A new technique for removing graffiti from cement was introduced in 1997, and this is contributing to intensified station cleaning efforts. Six vans equipped with powerful pressurised hot water jets circulate throughout the city, washing hard-to-remove graffiti off station walls and other porous surfaces.

In addition to making the stations more inviting, NYCTA instituted Station Restoration and Station Upgrade programmes during 1987. The restoration programme is designed to return stations to near-original condition without extensive modernisation. The upgrade scheme covers 25 graffiti-free stations a year, and is aimed at improving the general environment by better security and signage, and by removal of clutter.

To maintain the improved appearance after restoration, upgrading or modernisation, painting cycles are being shortened. Subway stations will be painted every three years and elevated stations every five; previously, all were painted every 20 years!

An intensive cleaning programme has also been implemented for the 101 stations in Manhattan south of 86th Street, which are used by about 85 per cent of subway passengers. And for all stations that have had any form of improvement and graffiti removal, the Transit Police vigorously enforces the rules and regulations to ensure the improved conditions remain. By 1996, virtually all the 466 stations will have benefited from these initiatives, assuming that sufficient funds continue to be made available.

Lessons to be learned

Graffiti and other vandalism still present a serious problem in Philadelphia, New York, and many other cities in the developed world. But the successes of SEPTA and NYCTA show the problem can be tackled and overcome in even the worst cases. While the negative impact of such vandalism on cities cannot be easily quantified, curbing of transit graffiti does show a positive impact on ridership. For example, passenger volumes on NYCTA Line 1 showed a clear increase following the cleaning of the trains and stations (Fig 1). The experiences of SEPTA and NYCTA are highly relevant to cities in Western Europe, Latin America and even California which are currently facing a rise in vandalism:

- Graffiti vandalism must not be underestimated. It is a problem which inflicts serious damage on a transit system's economics, image, and usage, and can block progress on modernisation.
- The sooner a serious commitment of management effort and funds to fighting graffiti is made, the easier the problem is to contain. The commitment must be maintained to keep control and prevent any recurrence of the phenomenon.
- Instead of psychological studies that attempt to understand ‘expressions of our age’, graffiti vandalism must be treated as criminal and destructive behaviour against public property.
- Random cleaning of individual vehicles or stations rarely succeeds. Cleaning and maintenance must be done in a systematic and persistent way; it should be a routine procedure incorporated into the regular maintenance programme.
- Because of the role of transit as an image maker in the city, a vandalised system can have a very negative impact on the entire community; conversely, cleaning up the system gives a major stimulus to other public services and raises the city's overall image in the eyes of its population and visitors.

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