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Taggers welcome: Merchants unite to provide walls for graffiti artists

By Wayne Risher (Contact), Memphis Commercial Appeal
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IS SETTING ASIDE PIECES OF URBAN LANDSCAPE FOR GRAFFITI TAGGING A GOOD IDEA?

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A Downtown business district best known for [Sun Studio](#) is crafting a fresh approach to guerrilla painters.

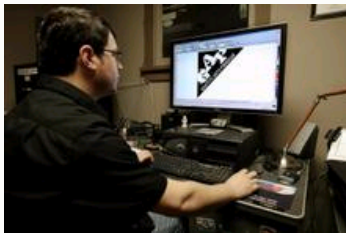
Merchants in [the Edge neighborhood](#) east of AutoZone Park are banding together to provide literal and figurative structure for graffiti artists.



Mike Todd (left) and Dave Nelson discuss the Graffiti Arts Program designed to give taggers a place to showcase their work.

The Graffiti Arts Program will provide blank walls for artists to paint and low-cost help to businesses that want graffiti painted over, said Mike Todd, owner of Premiere Contractors and buildings in the Edge.

A prime display space is the western wall of [Signdelivery Inc. and Vanwraps.com](#), which occupy a former auto dealership at Monroe and Danny Thomas Boulevard. The graffiti-splashed brick wall is clearly visible from the Redbirds' stadium.



Justin Baker with Signdelivery, 340 Monroe, works on a logo for the Graffiti Arts Program.

Signdelivery owner Dave Nelson isn't particularly bothered by the unauthorized spray paint.

"I hired my graphic designer because he was painting a wall," he said.

Nelson and others see GAP as a way of promoting the artsy vibe of an area that is also home to [St. Blues Guitars](#), [Strings & Things](#) and Marshall Arts.

"That's why we came down here in the first place, because the arts were underlying everything in the Edge district. It's already one of the most graffitied areas of town," said Nelson, who is donating graphic-design services to the effort.

Sam Rudd, owner of Tracy's Foreign Car Service, let street artists paint murals on the back of his shop after they asked permission and showed him what they would do.

Rudd said the outdoor art was an improvement, something to add visual interest and perhaps even draw traffic to the neighborhood.

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Graffiti walls have been officially sanctioned elsewhere, notably in Venice Beach, Calif., but Downtown Memphis has focused on eradication.

Graffiti has been virtually eliminated from public buildings in the core of Downtown by the city Division of Community Enhancement, officials said. Now, they are nudging private owners to call in cleanup crews.

A big part of the success has been a product called [World's Best Graffiti Removal System](#), which removes paint without damaging underlying surfaces, said [Center](#)

[City Commission](#) president and CEO Jeff Sanford.

Sanford said officials intend to go east, to areas such as the Edge, after erasing graffiti in Downtown's core.

Of the GAP approach, he said, "I'm somewhat skeptical. Most urban tagging takes place in the dead of night. The thrill of it is not being caught."

Todd said GAP would make it possible to quickly cover unwanted graffiti while channeling artists to sanctioned spaces. Organizers are working on basic rules, he said: "It couldn't be gang-related. It couldn't be profane."

After 90 days, organizers propose to paint over the artwork and give someone else a chance.

Will McGown, president of the Edge Community Association, has been hit by graffiti and thinks GAP can help.

Maybe the people who painted a side of his woodworking business would have used a graffiti wall instead.

"My building was tagged, a 160-foot-long section of it. I went ahead and painted over it. Now the side of my building says 'McGow.'"

Graffiti Arts Program

Provides for quick eradication of unwanted graffiti for property owners who want it covered up.

Designates spaces on privately owned buildings where graffiti artists can paint if they abide by ground rules.

Is a collaborative effort among property owners and businesspeople in the Edge neighborhood on the eastern fringe of Downtown Memphis.

– *Wayne Risher: 529-2874*



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