

Property

Brussels is a grand place for graffiti

By Patricia Kelly

10.01.2008 / 00:00 CET

Patricia Kelly looks at efforts by Brussels's authorities to thwart vandals wielding paint-spray who deface the city.

It is all over Brussels and flourishing – on doors, walls, windows, pavements, parking meters, rubbish bins, statues – you name it. If an object cannot be moved it has more than likely been daubed with meaningless scribble applied – and these words are chosen with care – by mindless morons. Little of the graffiti that plagues the buildings of Brussels could be described as aerosol art, as practised by the pseudonymous British street artist Banksy, by any stretch of the imagination. Banksy reportedly counts Angelina Jolie and Christina Aguilera among his fans and his works are sold at auction for tens of thousands of pounds (although local authorities in both Bethlehem and the London borough of Hackney have ignored the art critics and painted over Banksy murals).

In Brussels the authorities have decided that graffiti painters are not artists but vandals and are attempting to get to grips with the problem. A 'tag' – a spray-can squiggle that serves as a signature – can take all of 20 seconds to apply but more than an hour to remove. But the Brussels city authorities have come to the conclusion that if it is not removed immediately, it is likely to quickly attract more taggers armed with cans of acrylic spray paint.

By law it is the house-owners' responsibility to maintain the facades of their properties and failure to remove graffiti can, in theory, invite fines from the police. In the past, in practice, this rule has rarely been enforced and from the look of much of the city centre many property-owners appear to have given up trying to clean up after the taggers, who tend to view a freshly painted wall or door as a blank canvas.

With an annual budget of €200,000 the city of Brussels has now launched a graffiti removal service. The money pays for a contract with a specialist cleaning firm. For the past five years the city has also employed two people on a full-time basis who can remove on average two or three graffiti per day.

Houseowners are encouraged to give city authorities the right to remove graffiti from their property as and when necessary. The permanent removal service is free of charge the first time and remains free or is charged at cost depending on whether the building has been treated with an anti-graffiti protection system – a transparent coating which helps protect brickwork from the effects of graffiti removal – within the previous two years. The alternative is calling for the graffiti-brigade every time a building is defaced, which could be problematic for absentee landlords and attract fines if the call is not made.

At the request of a Brussels retail association, a part-time worker has been taken on by the city to do a tour of shops and restaurants. Each business keeps a pot of paint the same colour as their frontage on the premises and any graffiti is painted over, daily if necessary.

Sandblasting is carried out by specialists and can prove expensive, so the city's offer is worth investigation if a building is vulnerable to graffiti. But the Ville de

Related articles

- [European Voice ten years ago](#)
- [Greece calls for border action](#)
- [Bringing Africa up to speed on science](#)
- [Between a rock and a hard place](#)
- [European Voice ten years ago](#)
- [European Voice ten years ago](#)
- [Luxury flats on parade in central Brussels](#)
- [European Voice ten years ago](#)
- [European Voice ten years ago](#)
- [A car when you need one, the bus when you don't](#)

Bruxelles is only offering to clean up private property and buildings owned by the commune of Brussels. The owners of federal and regional government buildings do not qualify for assistance – but risk being fined if they do not clean up.

A word about the taggers: according to the gravity of the offence, they can be fined €150 per tag, which could get expensive if they have squirted their names 50 times during a spree. If they are caught – and the authorities admit that it is difficult to catch them in action – they risk a prison sentence. But there is no word yet on what to do about shops that sell cans of spray paint to potential vandals. One such establishment situated between the Sablon and the Grand'Place, imaginatively called 'Graffiti Shop', displays row upon row of aerosol cans of acrylic paint in all colours. Printed on the window – in English – is the admonishment "Use cans for art not for vandalism". Judging by the state of the buildings and pavements in the immediate vicinity of this shop, some of its customers either cannot read or they speak another language.

Report graffiti and get it removed by calling freephone 0800 901 07.

Patricia Kelly is a freelance journalist based in Brussels.

© 2008 European Voice. All rights reserved.