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A New Blueprint for Tackling Graffiti; To Combat Rampant Vandalism, San Francisco Is Enlisting Artists to Create Murals; Critics Lament Limited Impact

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SAN FRANCISCO—This city has for years taken a tough stance on graffiti, doling out stiff fines and sometimes jail time to discourage spray-painting vandals. While the effort has had some success, graffiti remains rampant across the city.

Now city officials are trying something different. San Francisco is partnering with street artists—who ply their wall-painting skills legally—paying them to paint buildings.

The program, called StreetSmARTS, commissions well-regarded street artists in San Francisco to create large-scale murals for private property owners struggling with graffiti. Program coordinators say the artists' credibility within the street-art community operates as a deterrent to graffiti vandals. The higher the artists' profile is, the theory goes, the less likely vandals will deface their murals.

"The opportunists, the guys who want to slap their names up almost anywhere, leave our walls alone out of respect for the artists that create the murals," says Luis Cancel, director of Cultural Affairs for the San Francisco Arts Commission, who helped put the program together.

One mural the program commissioned, at the Rose Food Mart at the corner of Potrero Avenue and 22nd Street, depicts an Aztec dancer in full headdress alongside the Mexican coat of arms. The images are imposed over the green, white and red colors of the Mexican flag. The mural, painted by arts consultant and former architect Max Ehrman, stands about 15 feet tall and 38 feet wide.

StreetSmARTS, begun as a pilot in January, was created by the Department of Public Works and the San Francisco Arts Commission. Last month, coordinators decided to expand the program, tripling funding to \$150,000.

The program is patterned after similar efforts in New York, Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia. Philadelphia's program, for example, began as an anti-graffiti campaign in 1984 and has created about 3,000 murals. "We have been able to profoundly change what was seen as a social epidemic in Philadelphia," says Jane Golden, executive director of Philadelphia's Mural Arts program.

Mr. Cancel says that, so far, the San Francisco program's artists have painted 10 murals and the city expects to add about 15 more in coming months. He says the cost of paint materials and stipends are split between the city and the property owners; after the murals are completed, the artist is responsible for keeping the mural graffiti free.

Despite the program's early achievements, law-enforcement officials say it is too limited to conquer the city's vast graffiti problem.

"It's a step, but not the solution," says Christopher Putz, who heads San Francisco Police Department's Graffiti Task Force. Mr. Putz says vandals target such a diverse array of public and private property, including parking signs, fire hydrants, park benches and monuments—that commissioned murals can only make a small dent. Some legally painted murals, he notes, have had to be taken down after being tagged with graffiti.

Still, for some San Francisco property owners, StreetSmARTS is a vital element in fighting blight.

Filipe Riley, a Port of Oakland longshoreman, says he signed up for the program to stop the escalating graffiti on buildings his family owns in the Bayview neighborhood.

The new mural at Mr. Riley's building, at the corner of 3rd Street and Palou Avenue, depicts a woman holding a basket of fruit, vegetables and flowers, standing before a large green hill with a child in the background watering the grassy hill. It was painted by Bryana Fleming, a resident of the Mission District.

"It's a real pain to have to go out over and over again and paint over the ugly scribbling some of the guys put up," says Mr. Riley. "It's just a lot easier to have a mural up. That way people will leave your building alone."

While official estimates aren't available, city administrators often cite a 2002 San Francisco grand-jury report that estimates annual graffiti-cleanup costs at \$22 million. Mohammed Nuru, deputy director of the Department of Public Works, says the number is low and doesn't include cleanup costs for private companies, residents and Bay Area Rapid Transit. Nathaniel Ford, executive director of San Francisco MUNI Transportation Agency, says the agency spends about \$11 million annually on graffiti cleanup.

Residents' graffiti complaints rose 136% to about 30,000 in 2009 from 2006, according to the Department of Public Works. "This city is spending millions of dollars to fight this problem, and we all know that money could be put to better use," says Mr. Nuru.

Mr. Nuru says most StreetSmARTS murals are in designated graffiti hot spots in neighborhoods such as the Mission District, Chinatown and Bayview. Mr. Nuru says the new funding will let the program expand to more of the about 100 hot spots.

Francisco Aquino, a well-known graffiti painter who has turned to legal painting and goes by the name Twick One, says StreetSmARTS has helped draw a more defined line between vandals and artists in the street-art community. Many graffiti vandals are teenagers and prefer to mark up buildings illegally, he says, while older, more-established street artists view graffiti as art and want to persuade the younger artists to join their ranks and create legal murals.

"When you are young you don't think about how much damage you are causing. All you really care about is street cred, putting your name on as many walls as you can find," says Mr. Aquino, a San Francisco native.

"But as you get older you realize this is art and it deserves to be treated that way."

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