

## ANTI-GRAFFITI COATINGS

Graffiti is a persistent maintenance challenge for building owners, municipalities, and facility managers. Unwanted markings on building surfaces not only affect appearance but can also contribute to perceptions of neglect and increase long-term maintenance costs. In response, many cities have adopted regulations that require property owners to remove graffiti promptly or incorporate anti-graffiti coatings into the building design.



Anti-graffiti coatings have therefore become an important component of exterior building protection, particularly for structures located in urban environments or areas with high pedestrian traffic. In some jurisdictions, these coatings are not only recommended but may also be required as part of building codes, zoning approvals, or development conditions. Understanding the regulatory landscape, coating types, and compatibility with common architectural coatings helps ensure effective long-term protection of building surfaces.

### Graffiti Regulations

Unlike many other building performance requirements, anti-graffiti coatings are generally not mandated by national model building codes, such as the International Building Code (IBC). Instead, requirements are typically established through local municipal ordinances, zoning regulations, or development approvals adopted by individual cities.

Many municipalities classify graffiti as a public nuisance and require property owners to remove it within a specified timeframe, often within 24 hours to seven days after discovery or notification. Failure to remove graffiti may result in fines, municipal abatement actions, or liens placed on the property.

Some cities go further by requiring graffiti-resistant building surfaces or coatings for certain types of construction. These requirements are most commonly found in cities with persistent graffiti activity or dense urban environments. One of the most well-known regulatory examples is the Los Angeles Municipal Code (LAMC), which requires certain exterior building surfaces to incorporate graffiti-resistant materials or coatings. The most commonly cited provision is found in the Los Angeles Building Code under Section 91.6306 Graffiti-Resistant Surfaces. Under this section of the code, the first nine feet above grade of exterior surfaces must be protected with a graffiti-resistant surface or coating. This requirement applies to exterior walls and doors that are accessible from public areas. The code allows several types of solutions to meet the requirement, including:

- Hard, smooth materials such as ceramic tile or baked enamel finishes
- Impermeable architectural surfaces that prevent graffiti from penetrating

- Renewable or permanent anti-graffiti coatings applied to the substrate

As an alternative to applying an anti-graffiti coating, property owners may enter into an agreement with the city committing to remove graffiti within a defined period, typically within seven days.

Because of these requirements, many construction specifications in Los Angeles and similar jurisdictions include anti-graffiti protection as part of the exterior coating system for substrates such as concrete tilt-up panels, stucco, concrete masonry units (CMU), metal panels, and other exterior cladding.

Beyond Los Angeles, numerous cities incorporate graffiti prevention requirements through development approvals, property maintenance ordinances, or design guidelines. These regulations may require anti-graffiti coatings or graffiti-resistant materials on surfaces visible from public areas.

Cities frequently adopting these measures include San Jose, Long Beach, Santa Ana, Westminster, and other municipalities throughout California, though similar approaches can be found in other states. In many cases, the requirement is triggered during new construction, major building renovations, and conditional use permits or site plan approvals.

## Anti-Graffiti Coatings Explained

Anti-graffiti coatings are specialized clear or pigmented coatings designed to prevent graffiti materials such as spray paint, markers, or inks from permanently adhering to a surface. These coatings create a barrier layer that allows graffiti to be removed without damaging the underlying substrate or architectural finish. By reducing staining and simplifying cleaning, anti-graffiti coatings help extend the service life of building finishes while minimizing maintenance costs and labor associated with graffiti removal.

Anti-graffiti coatings generally fall into two primary categories: sacrificial coatings and non-sacrificial (permanent) coatings.

Sacrificial coatings are designed to be removed during the graffiti cleaning process. The surface can usually be cleaned with hot water or mild pressure washing, which removes both the graffiti and the sacrificial coating layer (Figure 1). Once cleaned, the coating must be reapplied to restore protection. These coatings are typically wax-based and generally have a lower initial cost than non-sacrificial systems, but they require reapplication after each cleaning cycle. Sacrificial coatings are often used on porous substrates such as brick, concrete, and historic masonry, where maintaining vapor permeability may be important.



Figure 1

Non-sacrificial coatings are designed to remain in place through multiple graffiti removal cycles. They form a durable barrier that helps prevent graffiti from penetrating or bonding to the surface. Graffiti can typically be removed using solvents, manufacturer-recommended graffiti removers, or pressure washing without removing the coating itself. These products are commonly based on silicone, polyurethane, or fluoropolymer technologies. Although they generally have a higher initial cost than

sacrificial systems, they offer longer service life and better resistance to repeated cleaning, which can help reduce long-term maintenance. Non-sacrificial coatings are used on many of the same substrates as sacrificial coatings and are often specified for commercial buildings, transit facilities, and infrastructure where graffiti removal is expected to be frequent.

## Compatibility with Conventional Architectural Coatings

Anti-graffiti coatings are often applied as clear protective topcoats over conventional architectural coatings. When properly selected, they can protect painted surfaces while allowing graffiti to be removed without damaging the underlying coating.

Compatibility should still be evaluated carefully before application. Important considerations include adhesion between the anti-graffiti coating and the underlying paint, possible changes in gloss or appearance since some clear coatings may alter sheen or deepen color, vapor permeability especially on masonry substrates where trapped moisture can contribute to coating failure, and recoatability because some permanent systems may make future repainting more difficult without additional surface preparation. For these reasons, manufacturers typically recommend applying anti-graffiti coatings over fully cured architectural coatings and conducting adhesion testing when used over existing painted surfaces.

## Common Uses

Even where anti-graffiti coatings are not required by code, they are often specified for projects where graffiti exposure is more likely. Common applications include commercial buildings, retail centers, schools and universities, parking structures, transit stations and other transportation infrastructure, public buildings, government facilities, as well as sound walls and highway structures.

Including these coatings as part of new construction or repainting projects can help reduce maintenance costs and make graffiti removal faster and easier.

## Key Takeaways

Graffiti prevention and removal have become important considerations in building design and long-term maintenance. Anti-graffiti coatings offer an effective way to help protect exterior finishes and simplify cleanup when graffiti occurs. By understanding the differences between sacrificial and non-sacrificial systems and evaluating their compatibility with conventional architectural coatings, building owners and specifiers can choose solutions that support appearance, durability, and long-term maintenance objectives. When properly specified and applied, these coatings can help preserve the appearance and service life of building exteriors in areas where graffiti is an ongoing concern.

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