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Spellchecked using ChatGPT

Photos were taken in and around the  
University of Texas at Austin campus

Primary Typeface: Obvia, Designed by  
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Graffiti  
Artists

are

# Type Designers

By Daniel Colcock

**Graffiti is a paradox.**

It's both rebellion and structure. It's individuality and collective expression. Since graffiti's beginnings in 1960s New York, it has become a global phenomenon. It has evolved from a simple competition to see who could get their name up the most, to a complex, stylistic form of self-expression.

But at its core, graffiti is authorship. It's about claiming space, telling a story, and leaving a mark. The more you dig into graffiti, the more you see its ties to design—especially type design. Both rely on creating meaning through form and style, but graffiti takes it further, challenging the rules while thriving in the tension between chaos and control.



# Elements of Graffiti

## **Fast Styling**

Graffiti is rooted in speed—fast strokes create bold, impactful designs while embracing the urgency of the streets.



## **Handstyle**

### **Minimal Cap Presses**

Precision comes from control. Minimal bursts of paint keep lines clean and efficient, embodying the balance between chaos and skill.

### **Simple + Fast**

Graffiti thrives on simplicity under pressure—clean, bold shapes that demand attention in the blink of an eye.

## **Overlap**

Layering letters and colors isn't just design—it's storytelling. Overlap creates depth, connection, and a rhythm that pulls the eye in.

## **Drip + Splatter**

Drips are graffiti's fingerprint—uncontrolled yet intentional, they represent the rawness and imperfection that defines the medium.



## **Throw-Up**

### **Gradients**

Gradients bring motion and depth to graffiti, blending colors to create vibrant transitions that amplify the energy of a piece.

**Breaking Rules, Following Process**

AIGA writer *Anthony Acock* makes an important distinction: “**real**” graffiti is illegal and antisocial, prioritizing the artist’s vision over societal norms. That’s the opposite of traditional design, which centers around guidelines and serving a client. Yet, graffiti and design share more than it seems at first glance. Every graffiti piece involves a design process. Writers refine their handstyle—essentially their “**font**”—through **repetition** and **experimentation**, stripping down forms to their essentials while adding flair. Longtime designer and graffiti artist *Andy Yagar* nails it when he writes,

**“Every time you draw a graffiti piece, you are subconsciously going through the design process and execution of that piece.”**

But here’s where it gets interesting: graffiti pushes those design elements to their limits. Writer and Graffiti Artist *Nil Thyriou* puts it perfectly, “**If graffiti is mainly about breaking rules, visual design seems to be about creating them.**” Graffiti is a rulebreaker, sure, but the best graffiti respects some internal structure. Controlled exaggeration, balance, and legibility are crucial—

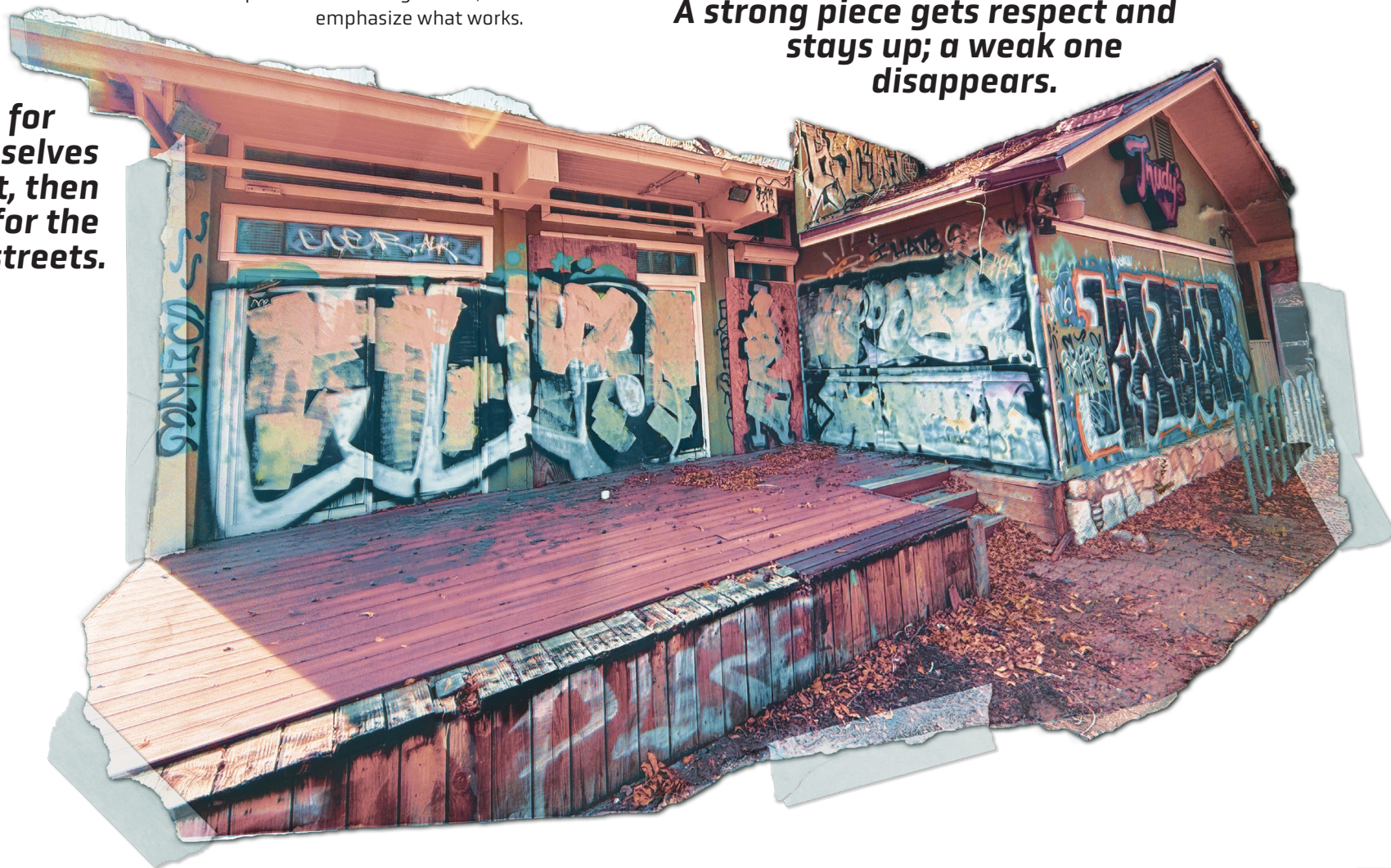
after all, what’s the point of a tag if no one can read it? Writers take something as basic as a letter and push it to the edge, making it **bold**, **expressive**, and unmistakably **their own**.



## **A Public Artform with Scathing Critique**

Graffiti is public, but the process behind it is surprisingly personal. Before their work hits a wall, most writers spend hours sketching in black books, planning their compositions and refining their style. This quiet, methodical practice is the unseen side of graffiti. It's about iteration, much like design. Writers test different forms, strip out unnecessary details, and emphasize what works.

**They  
create for  
themselves  
first, then  
for the  
streets.**



But graffiti is also a collaborative critique in the wildest sense. There's no formal feedback loop, no polite suggestions. Instead, a poorly executed tag might be painted over or, worse, marked with the word "toy" as a sign of disrespect. Space is limited, and the stakes are high—writers are competing not just for visibility but for validation.

**A strong piece gets respect and  
stays up; a weak one  
disappears.**

**Graffiti is a History Book** Graffiti doesn't just live in the present—it's a record of its time. Each tag, throw-up, and piece reflects the energy, culture, and struggles of the moment. In a way, graffiti writers are the historians of the streets, documenting the vibe of their community in a way that's raw and unfiltered. But just like art and design, the meaning of graffiti isn't static ...

**“The function of art in society and culture has changed over time. We also need to be honest and admit that how we understand art can change depending on who we are,”**

...critic Ron Tinsley writes. Graffiti forces us to confront that change, asking us to consider why some marks on a wall are celebrated and others are erased.

**More Than Marks on a Wall** Graffiti isn't just an artistic act; it's a cultural one. Architect *Lindsay Bates* argues that graffiti serves as creative placemaking, reclaiming public spaces and reflecting the identity of the communities it inhabits. For many writers, graffiti is more than self-expression—it's about resisting the erasure of their culture and stories. The problem is that graffiti created by marginalized groups is often misunderstood. It gets dismissed as vandalism or

appropriated without regard for its roots. *Bates* points out that people of color, who are disproportionately responsible for graffiti's cultural innovations, don't have the social or economic power to fight back against these misinterpretations. So, what gets labeled as “graffiti” is often a shorthand for something deeper—identity, pride, and the desire to leave a mark on a world that overlooks them.







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**Rethinking Graffiti's Value**

At first glance, graffiti and type design seem worlds apart—one about defiance, the other about order. But both are rooted in the same desire: to communicate meaning through form. Graffiti writers, like designers, are authors. They experiment, iterate, and refine, working to create something that speaks loudly and clearly.

So maybe it's time we stopped dismissing graffiti as vandalism and started looking at it for what it really is: a complex, creative, and deeply human art form that deserves a place in the conversation about art, history, and design.

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