



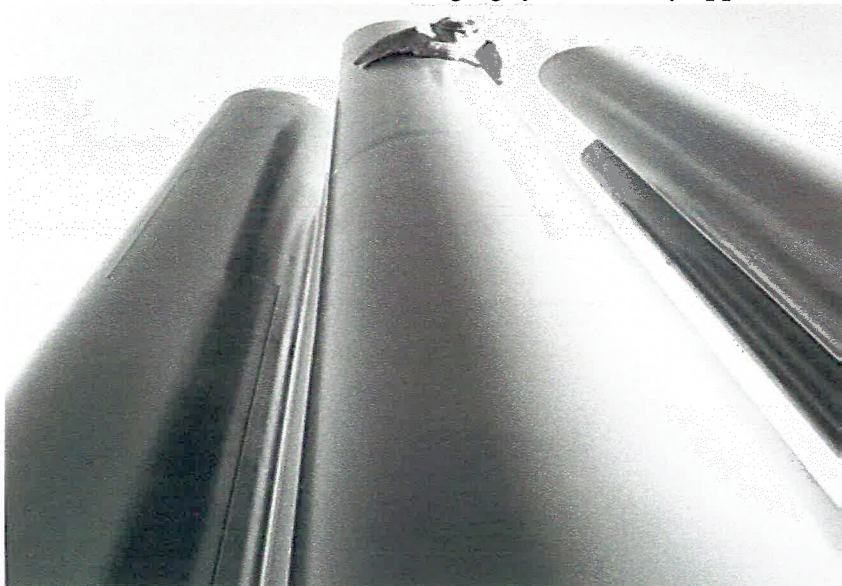
## **The SRI Gargoyle: Have You Seen Spot Lately?**

*By Don Nielson*

Sometime in mid-October 1980, a few members of the Bioengineering Research Center were returning from the Cafeteria to their offices in Building E. Their path took them by a new and unusual feature of the P Building, then under construction: a set of pipes, perhaps 35 to 40 feet tall, that were to send into the atmosphere the “scrubbed” effluents from the exhaust hoods that sat

### ***B BUILDING-VIEWED FROM PB PLAZA.***

over the chemistry benches in the various labs of the new building. A member of the group—Dave Wilson—looked up at the stacks and for some reason thought they needed a gargoyle. Dave swears that thought was his main and perhaps only contribution to the effort, the design of which would immediately commence in the minds of the engineers present. What followed became part of SRI lore, secured by both its whimsical nature and the indefinite secrecy that participants swore. But “indefinite” is a long time, and the time has come for the truth to finally be revealed. So, following a lunch last April, arranged by Phil Green with Dave and Jamie Buxton, we can now reveal how a gargoyle suddenly appeared.



*Figure 1. The gargoyle viewed*

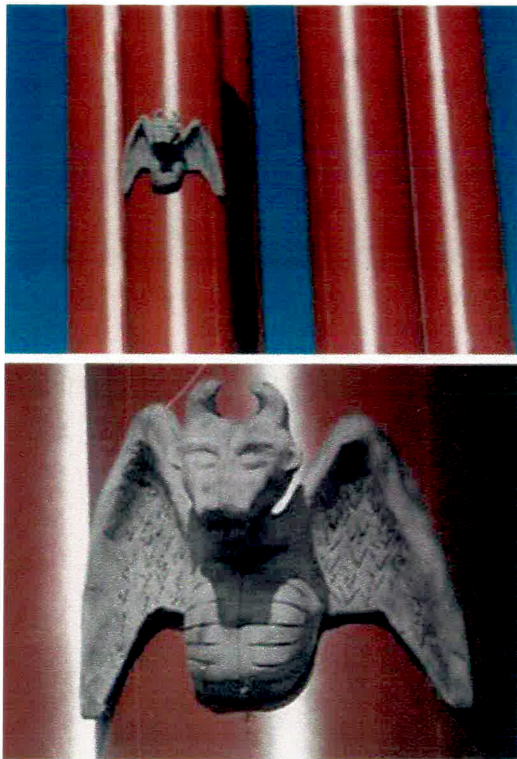
*from ground level (late 1980)*

So, the setting was the six pipes in Figure 1. They stood on top of a large underground room where equipment for air movement and treatment would eventually reside. At the time, however, the room was empty and accessible. Furthermore, the pipes were open to the room below, so the “project” could proceed with access to both the outside and the inside of the pipes, the latter via the underground room. To create the intended surprise, design and construction proceeded under cloistered wraps in the lab and installation under the cover of darkness. A half-moon that night helped reduce the need for flashlights.

Jamie Buxton designed and built the gargoyle from a small piece of plywood and a lot of Styrofoam. Its rather classic form and detail are better shown in Figure 2. Most of us associate gargoyles with grotesque architectural embellishments intended to ward off evil in Middle Ages European architecture. But they



are much older than that and, in addition, served a very practical use: as downspouts to carry roof water away from the masonry walls below. SRI's gargoyle had no such spout, but it did have magnets embedded in its backside that attached it to the pipe at elevation. Jamie built all of it over a weekend. It had a 4- to 5-foot wingspan and weighed perhaps 15 to 20 pounds. Mounting it was the interesting next step. At about 2 a.m. one mid-week night, the SRI team began the placement. Part of the team went inside the underground concrete box with a very long but light rope and a helium filled balloon. (It may have been a surgical glove, but they can't remember.) They attached the long rope to the balloon, and near the point of attachment Jamie built a clever and simple device to pop the balloon: He bent a nail, sharpened at the point, and attached it to the rope just below where it connected to the balloon. The point of the nail was upward toward the balloon, such that a sharp downward tug on the rope would cause the nail to pop the balloon. They then raised the small rope up through the pipe to an altitude over twice its height. That end fell to the ground outside the pipe after the balloon popped. Outside, other members then attached the small rope to both ends of a larger rope that had first been threaded through an eyebolt at the top backside of the gargoyle. Those inside could then draw the larger rope over the top of the stack and down to where they could grasp it. They then hoisted the gargoyle up the outside of the chosen pipe. To keep the gargoyle's magnets from adhering to the pipe on the way up, they attached an inflatable bag to its back so that the bag lay between the pipe and the gargoyle. Accompanying this air sack was a small twine attached to a plug that could be pulled to let its air out. Thus, the team pulled the gargoyle up the stack; at the height that the picture shows, the team pulled the plug on the air sack, and the magnets moved toward and clung to the pipe. Then team members inside and under the pipe pulled one side of the doubled lifting rope out of the eyebolt on the gargoyle, and they all left with barely a trace. The exception was the small twine or rope visible in Figure 2 taken shortly after its installation. When recently showed the image, Jamie couldn't recall the reason the small twine was left there. The other members of the near-perfect caper crew were Dave Ramsey, John Holzemer, Gerry Russell, and Jon Taenzer.



They swore each other to secrecy and purposely didn't tell their boss, Phil Green, so as to keep him immune to any repercussions. With normal SRI efficiency, the "project" lasted but two weeks from concept to implementation and at most one hour that night for its installation. Coincidental or not, the gargoyle appeared the day before Halloween, 1980! There were a couple of wrinkles in the story of the gargoyle's emplacement. According to Jamie, they carried this project out just like any other SRI project—except that they gave absolutely no thought to how anyone might take the gargoyle down. Their creativity stopped with the installation. When asked whether the possibility of negative repercussions added to the allure of the event, the answer was no. They wanted only to pull it off! At some point during that installation night, a security guard came by. Team members on the outside jumped behind a nearby dumpster to avoid being seen! So, the gargoyle was in place and apparently captured the fancy of the staff. After it was in place for some months, the staff had a Gargoyle Appreciation Day! According to the *SRI Journal*, a crowd of 200 came to support the gargoyle in any eviction threat it might face. As it turned out, the President at the time, Bill Miller, fancied the imagination of the new addition and

even encouraged that celebratory recognition of it. A Dixieland Band was there, and a look-alike contest and a naming contest were held for both the gargoyle and its perch. According to the results in an *SRI Highlights* article of 23 January 1981, the name for the pipes with 46 percent of the vote was "Institubes" followed by "Gargoyle Heights." For reasons a bit elusive, the gargoyle's name became "Spot," because—according to another article in an *SRI Journal* of 1984—it was the "least relevant" of the suggested names. Methinks given the gargoyle motif, the name should have been "Spout!" After some months or maybe much longer, someone decided the gargoyle should come down. And here remains part

of the mystery. Whether it was Facilities, with the aid of a crane or cherry picker, or, as indicated in the 1984 *SRI Journal*, another mysterious, staff-centered kidnapping ploy we don't know. That same article quotes a self-styled highly informed source named "Deep Gargle" that it was done by a band of "gargoyle guerrillas." So, as of now we don't know where it went into hiding and, along with what follows next, that part of the mystery lingers. On 30 June 1984, SRI decided to hold a Family Day at which the families of staff could become a bit more acquainted with the place. In honor of the occasion, the reincarnated gargoyle made a surprise appearance, even to the event's leaders. There it was, on the north wall of Building B, overlooking the proceedings. And there it remained for some time. Eventually, presumably the installers returned it to its undisclosed storage place. But the story goes on. About seven years later—about 1991—Roy Kornbluh was visiting Sandy Hinzmann when they both stumbled on it, *Figure 2. Photos of the gargoyle taken by Bob Schwaar (November-December 1980).*

Roy recalls, perhaps somewhere in the 200 series of buildings. Having heard of its legacy, he decided to resurrect it. So, visiting this saga again for the first time, he and Eric Shrader planned to restore it to its old home: the pipes. Some refurbishing of the gargoyle was necessary, including adding some new magnets to its back. But this second installation had to be different, for the pipes were now connected to machinery and in continuous operation. Thus, the reinstallation had to occur completely from the outside. The plan was simple: to hoist it using two helium-filled balloons with two ropes to guide its ascent, keeping it centered and away from the stack lest the magnets take over prematurely. At 3 a.m. on a Sunday morning, the two engineers guided the gargoyle upward. But then the unexpected happened. The target pipe was in use, with a strong stream of air exiting its top. When the helium balloons reached that point, they were drawn into the air stream (Bernoulli's fault), and the whole contraption began to dance wildly around. Here Fate—perhaps Lady Luck—took over. Just as the helium support rope broke in the turbulence, the gargoyle slammed against the pipe and the magnets secured it—almost as if the whole arrangement had worked perfectly. The helium balloons flew off to who knows where. The two staffers then withdrew the guiding ropes and went home. Although in the first installation the team hid from the security guard, in this case, according to Roy, the guards didn't bother them even though they saw what was going on! Again, the cohorts had no plan for how to remove it. Again, it stayed in place for a while. But this time there was no "appreciation day." Fewer people fancied its presence, and it soon came down. Tom Little reminded me that this time was also testy for the institute—perhaps one of the more precarious in recent history. But Roy's recollection is that the wind blew it down. In any case the gargoyle, now recovered, came to its present and presumably final resting place on the south wall inside Building R. (See Figure 3.)



*Figure 3. The gargoyle participating in a planning group in July 1991. Sandy Hinzmann is conveying some instructions by Frieda Tomlin and John Cassie.*