



## Spirits in Stone:

### Eye to Eye with Texas Gargoyles

*As you approach some of Texas' most treasured buildings, you may get the eerie feeling you're being watched. Look up, and you'll see the stony stares of frightful, fanciful, and whimsical creatures carved in walls and rooflines. Though the mythical beliefs that spawned them have faded, our fascination with gargoyles is alive and well--and Texas buildings are home to a medley of these imaginative life forms.*

Gargoyles first appeared on ancient Grecian buildings, but they proliferated on Western European cathedrals in the 12th and 13th centuries. Initially they served as drainage spouts, directing rainwater from the roof away from the building's walls and foundations. The artful sculpting of these life forms grew and spread to other parts of buildings strictly as ornamentation. These grotesques (contorted, non-water-directing figures), visages (human faces), and acroterions (sculpted figures on roof peaks or lower gable corners), became commonly referred to as "gargoyles." (the word comes from the Old French *gargouille*, meaning "throat.")

Historians have no single explanation for gargoyles' frightful appearance, but some speculate that medieval architects and stonecarvers created the creepy creatures to ward off evil spirits, or human mischief-makers who might bring harm to the buildings or those inside. Whatever their intended purpose, these Gothic apparitions crossed the Atlantic with early Texas settlers, who emulated the European tradition in their prominent buildings.

In many Texas cities, the county courthouse held a



community prominence akin to that of the medieval European cathedral. One courthouse that faithfully upholds the European custom of elaborate rooftop ornamentation is Dallas' 1892 Dallas County Courthouse,

Seemingly in defiance of the sleek reflective glass high-rises that look down on them, four acroterions with serpentine bodies, bat-like wings, and the head and legs of a lion, perch on each corner of the courthouse's slate roof.

David Shulz occasionally peers out the courthouse's attic windows to check on the chimerical red stone creatures whom he fondly refers to as, "Fred and Ethel, and George and Gracie" (after the famous early-TV comedy couples). David is executive director of the foundation that is restoring the courthouse's upper stories for a Dallas County history museum.

Less imposing, but equally intriguing are the two grimacing acroterions on La Grange's 1891 Fayette County Courthouse, their beady-eyed charm gracing the structure's side entrance gables.

This year, work begins to restore the courthouse to its original floorplan. Since the county records, clerk, and staff offices occupy an enclosure built over the building's original open-air courtyard, they'll have to move into a refurbished building across the street.



Fayette County Judge Ed Janecka thought the annex should echo some element of the old courthouse. But the clerks weren't enthusiastic about his suggestion to include gargoyles in the annex's ornamentation "They're creepy," says one clerk's staffer, "they're not appropriate for every public building," says another. The judge says, "I just think they bring an element of interest and imagination that you don't find in buildings today."

That element of interest and imagination made its way from 19th-century courthouses into the new cathedrals of the 20th century's industrial age--skyscrapers.

Embodying this transition is San Antonio's distinctive, hexagonal *Smith-Young Tower*, now the *Tower Life building*. Built in 1929 and soaring 30 stories over San Antonio's downtown skyline and riverwalk, it boasted every technological wonder of its time--including high speed elevators and air conditioning. Yet the facade is filled with Gothic-spirited detailing, including human-like visages that look down from the second story and draw your gaze upward to the 26th and 29th floors, where gargoyles like pouncing dragons appear to leap out of the walls, ready to become airborne. "I've never seen them take flight," says Lupe Hernandez, who runs the city's last manually-operated elevator from the building's lobby. Lupe adds with a chuckle, "But if they watch over this building, they've done a good job. I've been here since 1953, and I still have my health and a lot of wonderful memories."

After World War II, the Gothic-revival style went the way of rumble seats. But, in 1991, gargoyles' fantastical imagery reemerged in Austin, where the Zachary Scott Theater Company was expanding its facility.

Austin architect Girard Kinney designed a contemporary building on Toomey Lane just South of Town Lake for the theater company, but he decided the structure needed a unique feature to express the creative activities within. He commissioned local multimedia artist Stephen Ray to make gargoyles to cover 13 "scuppers" (holes where rainwater drains from the flat roof into downspouts). Each gargoyle, most of them easily spotted from the grounds, represents a theater community member. These include: a playwright with quill pen and sheaves of paper; a set builder climbing up the downspout in coveralls and holding a hammer; a bespectacled, pinched-nosed drama coach with script, stopwatch and wistle. To Girard, "They're the soul of the building."

"I chose not to model them after real people," says Stephen, "with one exception." Tucked away on the theater's rooftop is a gargoyle in the likeness of Girard Kinney.

Soon after the Zach Scott theater addition, renewed national interest in gargoyles found its way into other Texas buildings.



In 1998 developer Randall Davis built the five-story "Metropolis," condominium building in Houston's River Oaks area. Randall gave the contemporary structure a couple of classical features including ten six-foot tall serpentine gargoyles that glare menacingly down from above the top floor balconies. The concept, Randall says, was "to make it look like old New York," adding, mirthfully, "The idea of the gargoyles is to be very eerie and cool and scare small children." To enhance this effect, Randall illuminated the sculptures with green lights, often drawing crowds at night, particularly around Halloween.

To create the Metropolis's winged grotesques, Randall called on Dallas craftsman Mario Garnica , owner of Architectural Decorating Service Company, Ltd.

At his enchantingly cluttered workshop in West Dallas' warehouse district, Mario cast each sculpture in concrete, poured in latex molds he made from original models his artists carved out of large chunks of Styrofoam.



Mario assembled each Metropolis figure from several molded pieces. And though each figure is hollow, with a pounds. "I like the design and engineering challenges,"

says Mario, who designed the Metropolis monsters' wings to be aerodynamic, so Gulf winds won't blow them from their perches.

While Mario was mounting the massive acroterions atop the Metropolis, a neighbor, architect Joe Carroll Williams, watched with interest. He showed Mario a drawing he'd made of a gargoyle for his two-story, corrugated-metal office building and commissioned Garnica to create it.

Joe says the hideously grinning bat-winged creature, "looks out for the neighborhood," and is "my drinking buddy." Indeed, Joe often sits on the small rooftop balcony of his building, sipping a beverage beside his eerily-staring sentinel.)

Joe Carroll Williams--like David Shulz, Judge Janecka, Girard Kinney, Randall Davis, Mario Garnica, and Lupe Hernandez--are all touched by gargoyles in a personal yet universal way. That touch is perhaps the gargoyle's timeless purpose: to loose the free flight of imagination. So, when we look up at those stone figures in Texas buildings, do we sense some wild spirit from a world beyond--or one inside us just waiting to be released?

*--Cory Walton*