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ACCURACY OF SINGLE-TRACER GAS MEASUREMENTS FOR ESTIMATING AIR FLOWS BETWEEN TWO ZONES.

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SUMMARY

This paper examines the accuracy of various theoretical methods for the analysis of experimental data on interzone air movement obtained using a single tracer gas technique. Two types of data were examined; i) well-conditioned data obtained in the laboratory from measurements of air movement between two chambers and ii) less well-conditioned measurements made in houses. Errors in calculated flow rates were found to be in the range -33 to +8% for well-conditioned measurements. For less well-conditioned data the estimated values of air flow rates were spread over a wide range and it was not possible to establish the errors in these values as the real flow rates were unknown.

1 INTRODUCTION

The study of interzone air movement in buildings has recently received considerable attention since it has important consequences for energy conservation, thermal comfort and air quality control. Measurements of air movement have been accomplished using both single and multiple tracer gas techniques[1]. Inaccuracies in estimating air flows arise as a result of both experimental errors (dependent upon the measuring system used and extent of tracer gas mixing) and errors arising from assumptions made in the mathematical analysis of experimental results. To establish errors in the calculated values of air flow rates the "real values" must be known. The use of an environmental chamber in which the interzone air flows can be set to known values would be useful for assessing the accuracy of various techniques and analysis methods. Error analysis has been carried out by Irwin and Edwards[2] on multi-tracer gas measurements. This paper discusses various analysis methods and evaluates the errors in estimating air flow rates for measurement made using a single tracer gas technique.

2 ANALYSIS METHODS FOR ESTIMATING AIR FLOWS

The analysis of multi-zone air movement within a building is based upon mass conservation of the tracer gases as first used by Sinden[3]:

$$V_j \, dC_j/dt = \sum_{i=1}^{N} F_{ij} \, C_i - \sum_{i=0}^{N} F_{ji} \, C_j \qquad (1)$$

$$(\text{for } 1 \leq j \geq N)$$

where V_j is the volume of the jth chamber, C_j is the tracer gas concentration in the same chamber, dC_j/dt is its derivative with respect to time, F_{ij} is the air flow rate from the ith to the jth chamber, F_{ji} is the flow rate from the jth to the ith chamber and F_{ii} is equal to zero.

The discussion centers upon air flow measurements between two zones as shown in Figure 1. The single-tracer decay method can be applied to each zone in order to determine the infiltration, exfiltration and interzone air flow rates. Assuming that the air and tracer gas are perfectly mixed and the concentration of tracer gas in the outside air is zero, equation 1 can be then solved using one of various analysis methods, such as that adopted by Penman and Rashid[4], Perera and Walker[5], Wortman and Burch[6], Littler et.al[7] and I'Anson et.al[8].

The method used by Penman is based upon numerical integration of equation 1 between a time step t_1 and t_2. Applying equation 1 to a two-zone system ($N = 2$) allows the following equations to be obtained:

$$V_1 \, [C_{1(t2)} - C_{1(t1)}] = -F_{01} \int_{t1}^{t2} C_1 \, dt + F_{21} \int_{t1}^{t2} (C_2 - C_1) \, dt \qquad (2)$$

$$V_2 [C_{2(t2)} - C_{2(t1)}] = -F_{02}\int_{t1}^{t2} C_2 \, dt + F_{12}\int_{t1}^{t2} (C_1 - C_2) \, dt \tag{3}$$

The curve describing the decay of tracer gas is divided into several time intervals. Air flows are then calculated using a least squares approximation[9].

Perera and Wortman employed an analysis method which used more than one tracer gas. Mass-balance equations for the two tracer gases (a and b) are solved by matrix methods as follows:

$$[F] = [C]^{-1} [V \, dC/dt] \tag{4}$$

where

$$[F] = \begin{bmatrix} F_{10} \\ F_{12} \\ F_{21} \\ F_{20} \end{bmatrix} \tag{4a}$$

$$[C] = \begin{bmatrix} -C_{1a} & -C_{1a} & C_{2a} & 0 \\ -C_{1b} & -C_{1b} & C_{2b} & 0 \\ 0 & C_{1a} & -C_{2a} & -C_{2a} \\ 0 & C_{1b} & -C_{2b} & -C_{2b} \end{bmatrix} \tag{4b}$$

$$[V \, dC/dt] = \begin{bmatrix} V_1 \, dC_{1a}/dt \\ V_1 \, dC_{1b}/dt \\ V_2 \, dC_{2a}/dt \\ V_2 \, dC_{2b}/dt \end{bmatrix} \tag{4c}$$

This approach introduces a source of error as the term dC/dt cannot be measured directly but is estimated by interpolation between two adjacent data points. Perera relied on one pair of tracer gas concentration/time points to calculate the flow rates while Wortman used a series of concentration/time intervals and the calculated values were then averaged over the entire measurement period to give the mean flow rates.

Littler adopted a numerical technique for analysing experimental data from multi-zone, multi-gas experiments. The technique was based on the Sinden model and considered the multi-zone system to be a serious of cells of known and constant volumes. These were assumed to be coupled to another cell of infinitely large volume, i.e., the outside space. The zone mass-balance equations were expressed in matrix form with the addition of the discrete time model as follows :

Introducing the notation $G_{j,i} = F_{j,i}/V_i$, equation 4 can be re-written:

$$[dC/dt] = [G][C] \qquad (5)$$

where

$$C = [C_1 \quad \ldots . \quad C_N]^T \qquad (5a)$$

and,

$$[G] = \begin{bmatrix} G_{1,1} & G_{2,1} & \ldots\ldots & G_{N,1} \\ G_{1,2} & G_{2,2} & \ldots\ldots & G_{N,2} \\ & & \vdots & \\ & & \vdots & \\ G_{1,N} & G_{2,N} & \ldots\ldots & G_{N,N} \end{bmatrix} \quad (5b)$$

The discrete time model is written:

$$\begin{aligned} C_1\ (t+1) &= D_{1,1}\ C_1\ (t) + D_{2,1}\ C_2\ (t)\ \ldots\ldots\ + D_{N,1}\ C_N \\ C_2\ (t+1) &= D_{1,2}\ C_1\ (t) + D_{2,2}\ C_2\ (t)\ \ldots\ldots\ + D_{N,2}\ C_N \\ &\vdots \\ &\vdots \\ C_N\ (t+1) &= D_{1,N}\ C_1\ (t) + D_{2,N}\ C_2\ (t)\ \ldots\ldots\ + D_{N,N}\ C_N \end{aligned} \quad (6)$$

or, in matrix form:

$$[C(t+1)] = [D]\ [C(t)] \quad (6a)$$

where: $[D] = \exp G$ (6b)

The exponential of the square matrix G is most conveniently defined by the power series:

$$\exp G = I + G + G^2/2! + G^3/3! + \ldots\ldots\ldots \quad (6c)$$

This technique minimises the errors introduced by the uncertainties in tracer gas measurements and estimation of the gradient dC/dt since the variable t is restricted to the values of 1, 2, 3, ..S-1, where S denotes the number of samples taken in each zone.

I'Anson adopted a different approach to the previous researchers. The mass-balance equations for zone 1 and 2 were written in the form of second order differential equations:

$$\frac{V_1 V_2}{F_{21}} \frac{d^2C1}{dt^2} + \frac{V_1 V_2}{F_{21}} (N_1 + N_2) \frac{dC1}{dt} + \left[\frac{N_1 V_1 N_2 V_2}{F_{21}} - F_{12}\right] C1 = 0 \qquad (7)$$

$$\frac{V_1 V_2}{F_{12}} \frac{d^2C2}{dt^2} + \frac{V_1 V_2}{F_{12}} (N_1 + N_2) \frac{dC2}{dt} + \left[\frac{N_1 V_1 N_2 V_2}{F_{12}} - F_{21}\right] C2 = 0 \qquad (8)$$

Equations 7 and 8 were solved by the application of an auxiliary equation and Prony's approximation method[9] was used to estimate the flow rates.

3 EXPERIMENTAL

The air flow measurements were carried out using two portable microcomputer systems. The two systems are identical in construction and are described in detail by Riffat et.al[10]. In essence, each consists of the following major components: a sampling and injection unit, a column, a chromatograph oven, an electron capture detector and a microcomputer and interface.

The sampling unit consists of a 2-position, 6-port valve, connected to a 0.5 cm^3 sampling loop. The valve can be rotated to position 1 or 2 using a small motor. The separation column was made by packing a 1.5 m length x 4.3 mm internal diameter nylon tube with 60-80 mesh aluminium oxide. The column was held at 35 °C in a thermostatically controlled electric oven. The electron capture detector, which uses Ni-63 radioactive cell, was made by Pye Unicom Ltd.

To evaluate the analysis errors in single tracer gas measurements, air flows tests were carried out under controlled conditions. For this purpose a small-scale test rig was built. This simply consisted of two chambers, a pump, a flow meter and a fan, Figure 2.

The experimental procedure was as follows. At the beginning of each test SF_6 tracer gas was injected into chamber 1 in which a fan was used to mix tracer gas and air. The concentration of SF_6 was then measured at different heights in the chamber. A mixing period of about one hour was found to be sufficient to achieve a uniform concentration. Following tracer gas mixing, the two chambers were connected and the pump was turned on. SF_6/air samples were taken from the two chambers for analysis.

4 SPECIMEN RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tests were carried out at various air flows rates using the two-zone test rig. Figure 3 shows a typical tracer gas concentration decay curve for the well-conditioned data. The decay curve in chamber 1 was found to be a simple exponential function of time. This indicates that the tracer gas in the chamber was fully mixed. The flow rate was 124 l/h as measured using a calibrated flow meter. Table 1 gives the estimated values of flow rate as obtained using various analysis methods.

Table 1 Comparison of Various Analysis Methods for Estimating Air Flows Using Well-Conditioned Data

Method	Flow Rate (l/h)	Error (%)
Penman	144	-16
Perera	165	-33
Wortman	146	-18
Littler	114	+8
I'Anson	161	-30

Table 1 shows that the errors between measured and calculated air flow rates are in the range -33 to +8%. Perera's method produced the largest error as one pair of data points were used to estimate the concentration gradients. The use of concentration gradients at a number of data points (used by Wortman) was found to improve the accuracy of estimating air flows rates. Even so, the estimation of dC/dt is still subject to potentially large errors particularly during the transient period, i.e., the first 15-30 minutes of the measurements. Penman's analysis under-estimates air flow rate by about 16% .The reason for this error is that the areas under the concentration curves are estimated by numerical integration using Simpson's rule[9]. Unlike other analysis methods the numerical method adopted by Littler was found to over-estimate the flow rate by about 8%. A considerable improvement in accuracy has been achieved by the use of this method but errors have arisen due to the sensitivity of the analysis to measurement noise associated with incomplete mixing of tracer gas in the zone. I'Anson's method produced a similar error to that of Perera. The major disadvantage of I'Anson's method is that it relies on Prony's approximation technique. This technique may be applied successfully to well-conditioned data but cannot be applied to less well-conditioned measurements as it produces complex roots for the mass-balance equations.

Measurements of air flow between the lower and upper floors of a two-storey house were carried under a variety of test conditions[11]. Figure 4 shows the variation of tracer gas concentration with time for both the downstairs and upstairs. The experimental scatter of the data points is greater than that observed for data obtained from well-conditioned measurements. This scatter may result from incomplete mixing of the tracer gas and air in the measurement zone (ill-conditioned data). The use of the gradient of the decay curve for the transient period (i.e., early part of the decay) could lead to an over-estimation of the air change rate in zone. Use of the gradient for the dominant period (i.e.,later part of the decay) could result in an under-estimation. Table 2 shows a comparison of different analysis methods using the ill-conditioned SF_6 decay curve. From this table, it is clear that there is a wide range in the calculated values of flow rates. The large variation in flow rates have arisen due to the way in which each analysis treats the data and the approximations involved. Since the real values of flow rates are unknown it is not possible to establish the errors for ill-conditioned data. This problem could be investigated by the use of known air flow rates in well-sealed houses, such as superinsulated houses, which provide an independant check on air flow rates.

Table 2 Comparison of Various Analysis Methods for Estimating Air Flows Using Less Well-Conditioned Data

Flow Method	F_{01}	F_{10}	F_{12}	F_{02}	F_{20}	F_{21}
Penman	9	62	106	37	108	35
Perera	49	17	94	184	216	62
Wortman	68	108	14	106	66	54
Littler	67	59	105	34	42	97
I'Anson	*	*	*	*	*	*

* No solution possible as the roots of the quadratic equations are complex.

5 CONCLUSIONS

A number of analysis methods have been examined. The method adopted by Littler was found to be the most reliable for estimating air flow rates for well-conditioned measurements. For ill-conditioned data, the estimated values of air flow rates were spread over a wide range and it was not possible to establish the errors in these values as the real flow rates were unkown. Errors in the ill-conditioned measurements could be reduced by improving both sampling and mixing methods.

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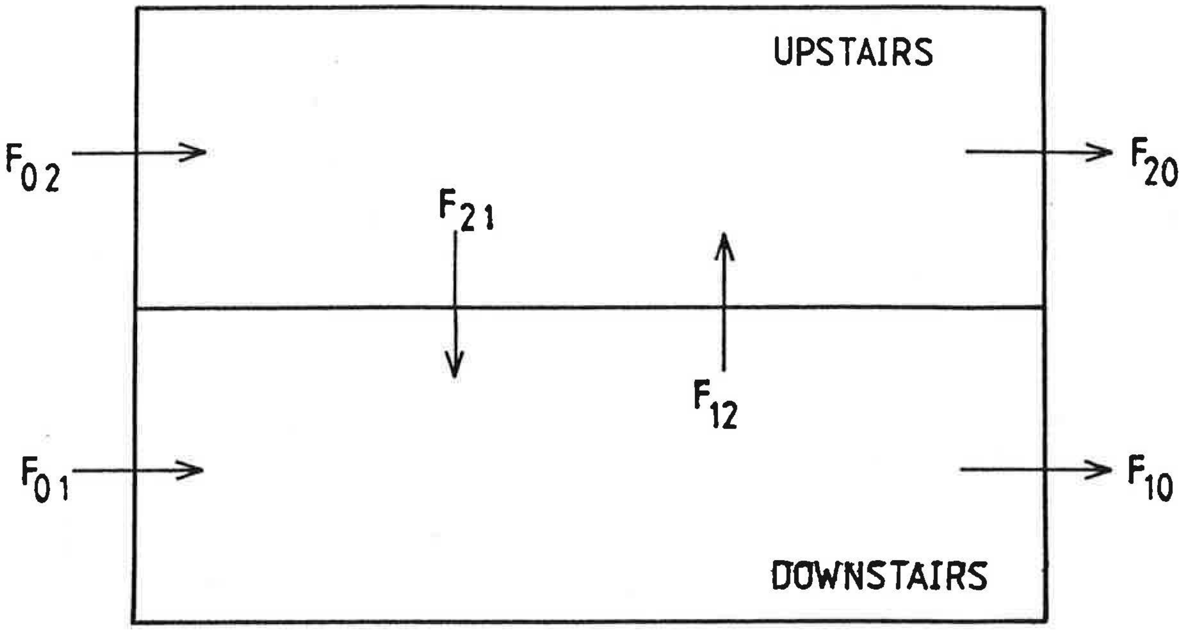
FIGURES

Figure 1 Air movement between two zones.

Figure 2 Test rig for validation of the single-tracer gas measuring technique.

Figure 3 Tracer gas concentration decay curve for the well-conditioned data.

Figure 4 Tracer gas concentration decay curve for the ill-conditioned data.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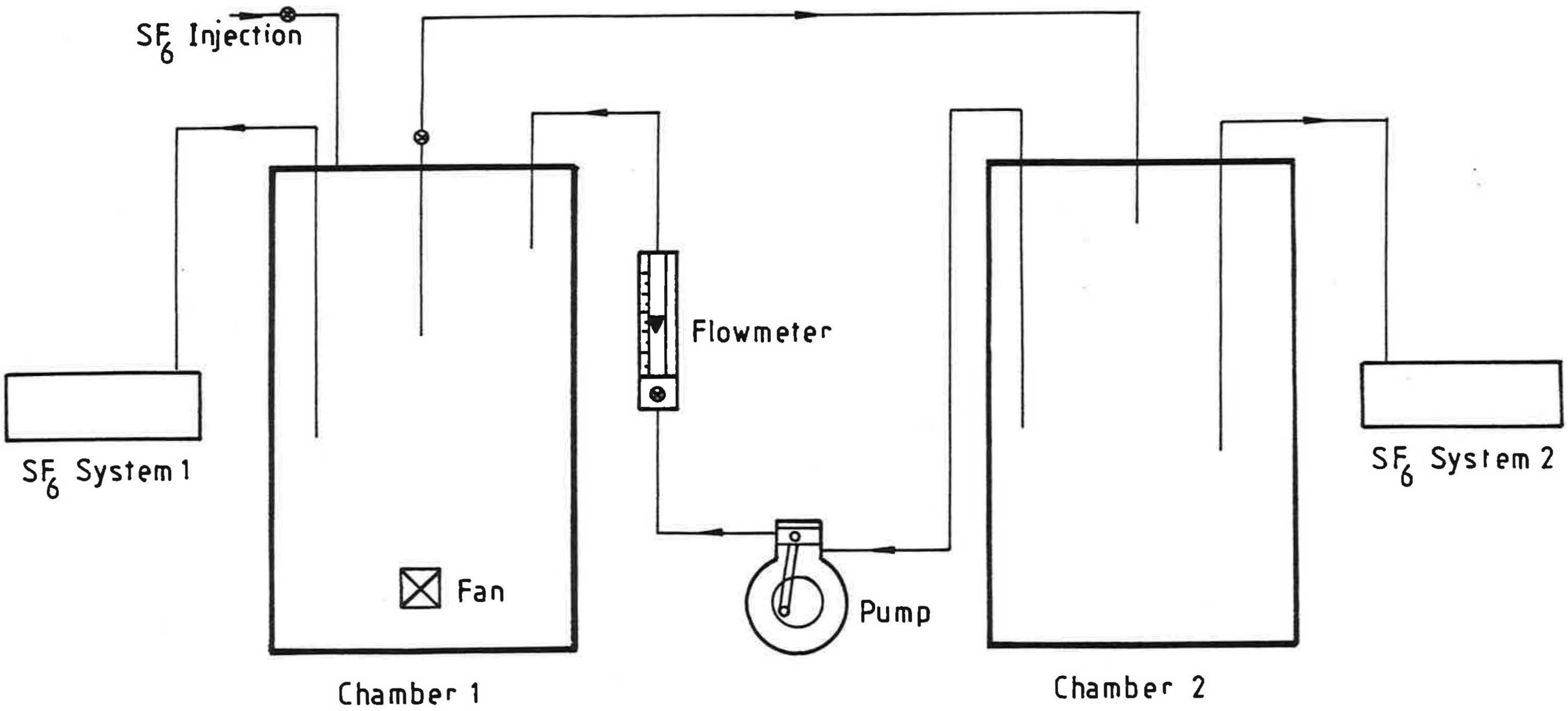
F_{20}
F_{21}
F_{12}
F_{01}
F_{10}
DOWNSTAIRS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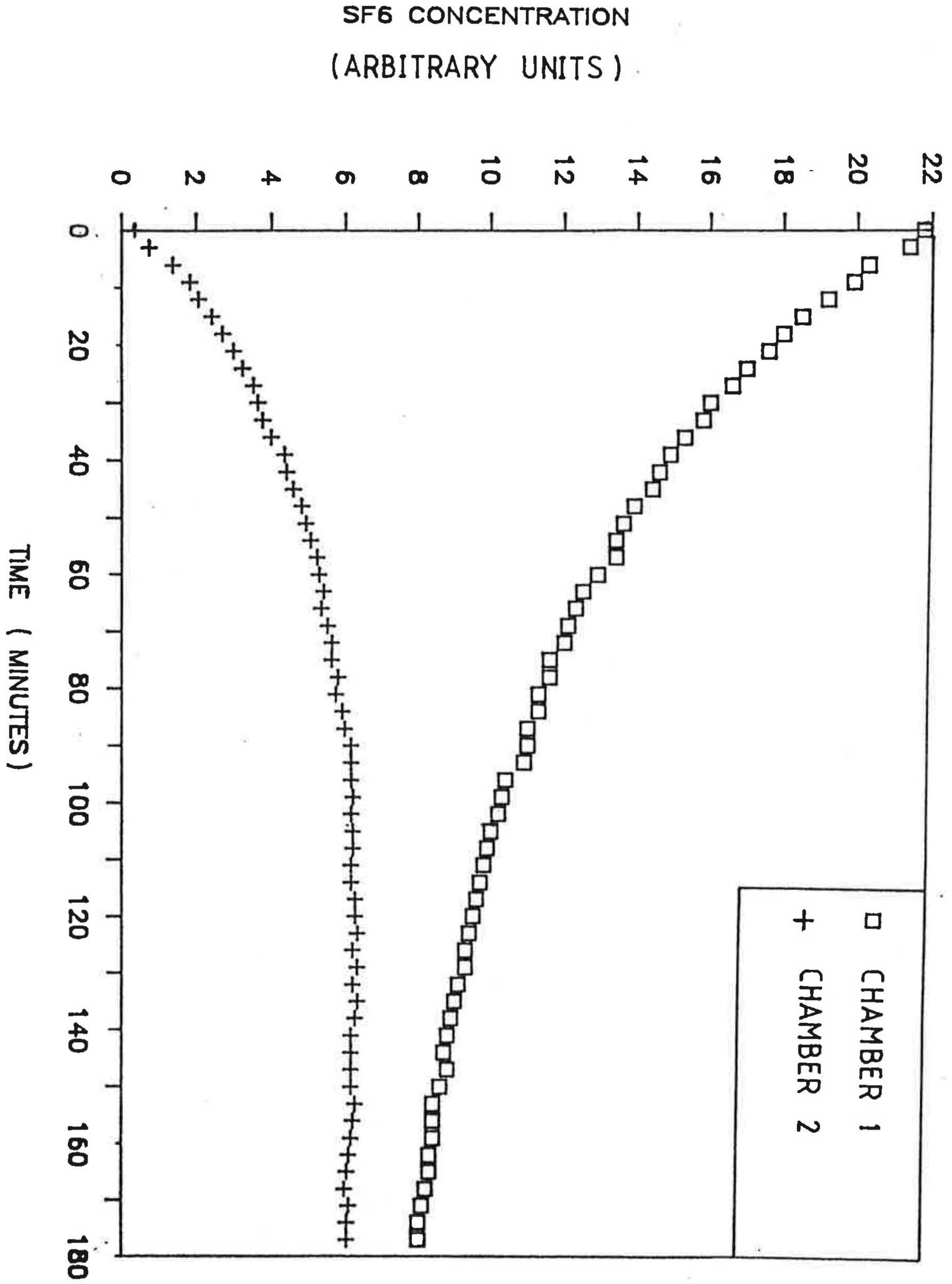
Flowmeter
SF_6 System 1
SF_6 System 2
Fan
Pump
Chamber 1
Chamber 2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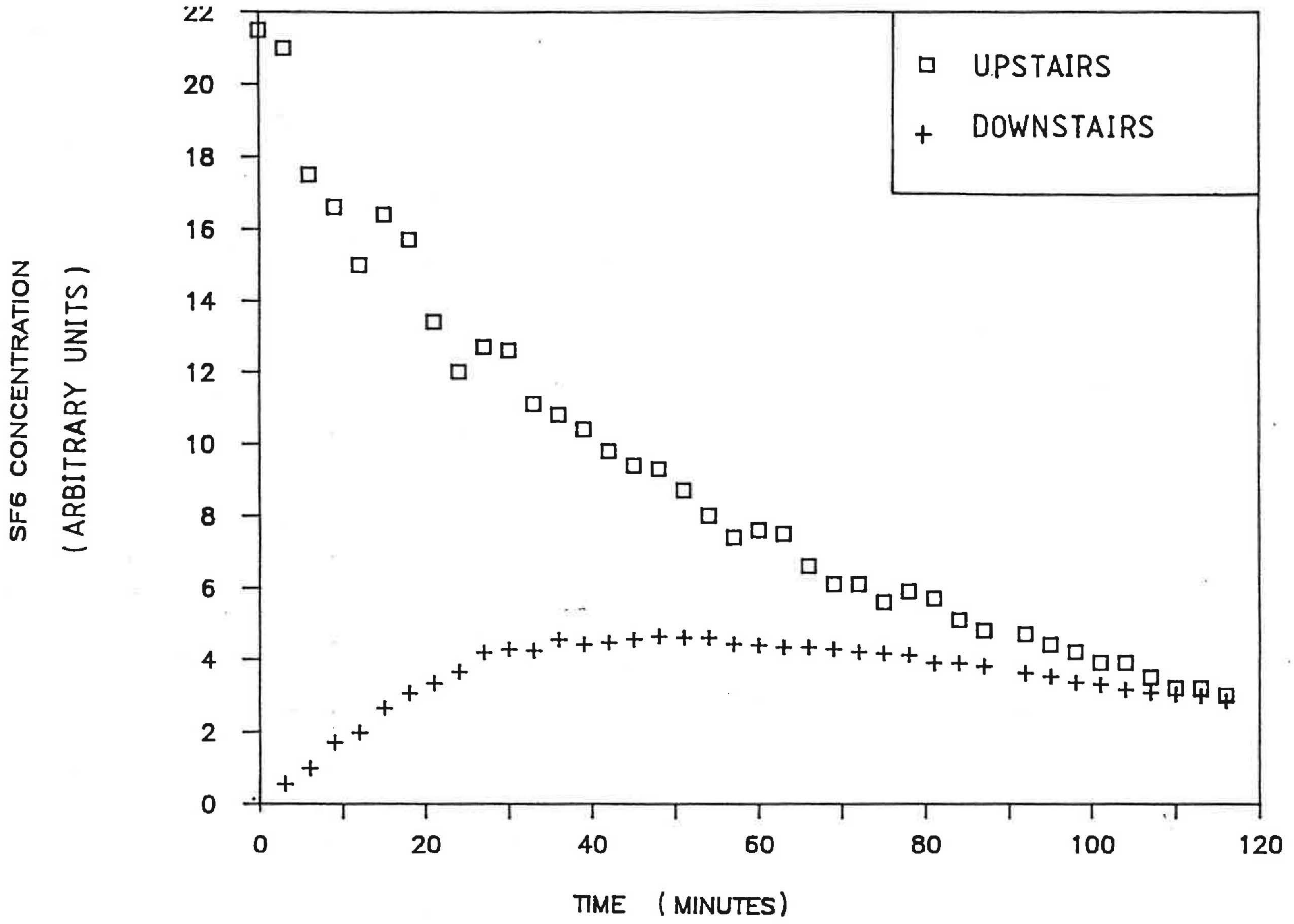

SF6 CONCENTRATION
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120
TIME (MINUTES)
□ UPSTAIRS
+ DOWNSTAIRS