

Introduction of a New Dynamic Simulation Screening Tool to Support Early-Stage Building Design

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Abstract

The paper introduces a newly designed dynamic building energy simulation screening tool to help integrate the use of advanced simulation techniques to early stage building design and feasibility studies. The tool will help the design process to move toward an integrated design approach, including energy analyses and expertise from the first stages of design when time constraints and information requirements are still a hindrance for the use of other existing simulation tools. The paper focuses on the integration of the user input and output interfaces and automatic model generation algorithms while referring to previously existing papers in term of model definition, case studies and validation. The tool is able to simulate building energy performances starting from a limited number of inputs received through a specifically designed user interface supported by databases and suggested values. Based on those inputs, a simplified building model is generated and simulated in EnergyPlus and results are post processed and visualized on the user interface. The tool is fully web based and can be used through any web-enabled device as only the input and output interfaces are managed by the user device, with all other components being allocated to the server. The tool is able to run building performance simulations based on a simplified building model description with a limited number of inputs and in a short span of time, ranging from minutes to less than an hour. Nonetheless, the simulations are still returning results with an acceptable margin of accuracy compared to a detailed simulation, considered to generate useful information during early stage design and still higher compared to the use of traditional stationary models. The proposed tool will help the design process evolve toward an integrated approach and adapt to the foreseeable changes in regulations and market demand of low- and zero-carbon buildings.

1. Introduction

Buildings have been identified as one of the major targets for the reduction of energy use and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions for many years. Studies show how buildings are responsible for around 40 % to 50 % of the global GHG emissions (Chen, 2009; Economidou, 2011).

Consequently, a strong push toward more efficient buildings is currently ongoing on a world scale, with the aim of Zero Carbon (ZCB) or Zero Energy (ZEB) Buildings. Private initiatives such as LEED or BREEAM are already targeting those high goals, while national and supranational regulations are quickly settling for slightly less ambitious goals, such as Net Zero (NZEB) and Nearly Zero (nZEB) Energy Buildings to be mandatory in the next few years (Executive Order No. 13514, 2009; European Parliament, 2010).

Design processes of buildings need to adapt to reach those standards, they have to become more attentive to energy and performance problems and move toward an integrated approach, such as IDP. Building performance simulation can greatly help the design process by fuelling it with essential information on the building expected behaviour (Hensen, 2004), as well as feasibility studies, and it is in fact already used in high calibre projects and design validation.

The constant push toward a new standard of highly efficient buildings such as nZEBs requires the creation of energy models during the early design phases (Utzinger and Bradley, 2009; Ferrero et al., 2015). However, such analyses require a high level of expertise and significant time commitment, in addition to a significant amount of information, all

usually unavailable during the first stages of the building design or the feasibility study.

The proposed simulation tool tries to solve this dilemma by providing a quick and easy way to perform simplified energy simulation with a limited number of essential user input, to be used as a screening tool to evaluate different design options. At the same time, the simulations need to deliver an adequate level of accuracy in order to provide useful information to fuel the decision process. This need is strongly related to the time and information requirement previously cited and therefore the accuracy of the simulation can be still acceptable even if lower compared to more traditionally detailed ones. This is granted by the tool through the use of specifically developed simplified models as seen below.

2. The Simulation Tool

2.1 The Idea

Research in the direction of a simplified simulation and screening tool stems from the need to overtake those well known barriers that are currently pre-

The tool allows the dynamic simulation of buildings in a timeframe compatible with the needs of the design process, while at the same time it achieves an acceptable level of accuracy. Additionally, the tool is designed to be used on any web-enabled device, without the need of installing any specific simulation software by the user, although it requires an Internet connection. Instead, the user will have access to the web interface and obtain the results as a service, in what could be considered an automated consultancy delivery.

Through the use of this tool, the user only needs to input a limited number of details through the input interface on his device. Those details are then sent to the server where the simulation model is created and the simulation performed, output from the simulation is then post-processed, and relevant information on the performance of the building is sent to the user through the user result interface.

An explanatory infographic summarizing the structure of the proposed tool can be seen in Fig. 1, highlighting each component that is needed for the process to work from when the user inputs the data on his device to the moment the results are visualized under the form of readily usable information.

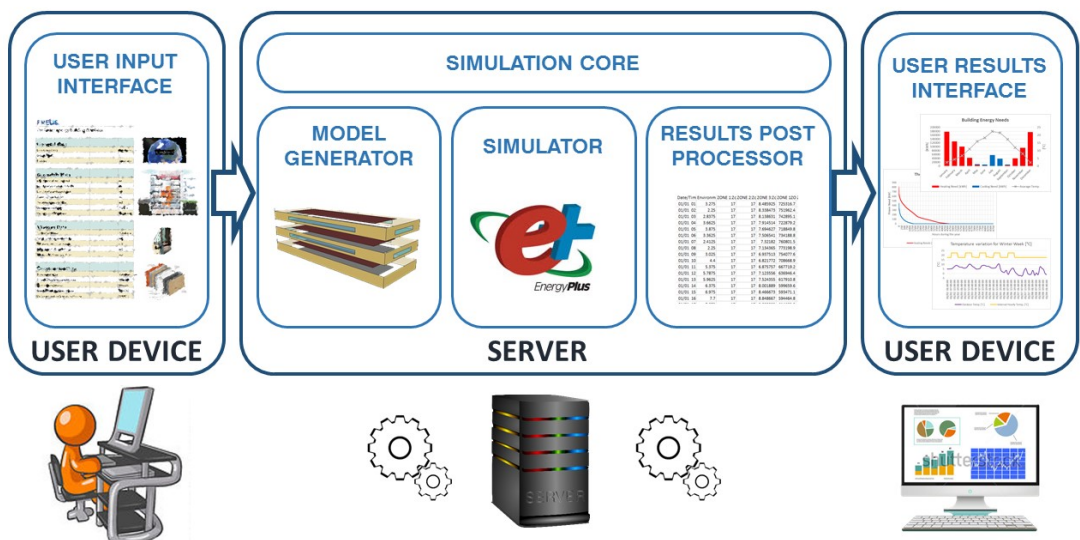


Fig. 1 – Structure of the proposed Simulation Tool

venting or limiting the diffusion of advanced building performance analysis during the first steps of the integrated building design process or feasibility study of renovations.

The tool is structured in three different blocks:

- the simulation Core,
- the user input interface,
- the user results interface.

Each part is discussed more in detail in the following paragraphs. Although the graphical aspect of the interfaces is currently under work and is not finalised, each element has already been defined and implemented in the tool.

2.2 The Simulation Core

The simulation core is composed by all the elements the user does not have direct contact with, and is subsequently hosted on a server, only exchanging data with the user device through an Internet connection.

The simulation core can be decomposed into three different elements:

- the simulator,
- the model generator,
- the results post processor.

The simulator is, in fact, the simulation code that runs the dynamic performance simulation of the building, based on the model received in input. For this application, the research team decided to use an already existing and reliable simulation code developed by the US Department of Energy named EnergyPlus (Crawley et al., 2004; Henninger and Witte, 2010). This allows to maintain the complexity and versatility of an advanced simulation code, while at the same time it lets the research team focus on the other aspects of the tool, as highlighted previously, and discussed in the following paragraphs. Not only this, but the reliance on an already existing calculation code will allow the final user to export the simulation model to EnergyPlus at any point, if needed, to extend the range of accessible features, if necessary, and it easily allows for future expansions of the tool itself.

The authors focused most of the research on the model generator. To be able to perform dynamic simulations, EnergyPlus requires a complex and specific input file containing the building model. As mentioned, this is one of the barriers for the extensive application of building simulation, as such models are usually time-consuming, and require a significant amount of information.

By applying the knowledge gathered during past research work and integrating the previously developed simplified building description model (Picco et. al, 2014), this pre-processor is able to collect the

limited number of details provided by the user and automatically generate a fully functional, although simplified, building model that EnergyPlus can use to perform dynamic simulations.

The last element of the simulation core is the results post-processor that automatically reads the output .csv file obtained by EnergyPlus, and processes the contained data in usable information for the user in the form of tables and graphs, ready to be sent to the user interface, an example of such results can be seen in Chapter 4 of this paper.

2.3 The Input Interface

The input interface is a web-based application that will be accessible to the user from a web-browser of any web-enabled device. Here, the user will be able to input the essential data required by the tool through a series of intuitive fields varying from value fields to database selection.

In its current state, a total of 25 inputs are required from the user, divided in 20 values and 5 database selections, once all the fields are filled the user will be able to send the data to the server to start the simulation process.

The input interface is divided into 5 categories:

- General Data: Contains general information on the building, for a total of 1 value and 2 database selections;
- Geometric Data: containing details on the shape and size of the building for a total of 6 values and 1 database selection;
- Windows Data: containing details related to the transparent surfaces, for a total of 4 values and 1 database selection;
- Construction Data: containing details on the materials and structure type used within the building, for a total of 1 database selection and 4 values;
- HVAC Data: giving basic details on the HVAC configuration and HR for the simulation, for a total of 5 values.

As the amount of input is extremely limited, and the tool could be used by professionals with limited expertise on the topic, it is particularly important that every field is clearly defined and accompanied by an acceptable amount of details allowing the user to correctly utilize the tool.

For this reason, in the final version of the tool, every field will feature a comprehensive explanatory tag, and will include both visual help and recommended values for different situations.

At the same time, the databases cover the important role of delivering all the information required to the model that is usually not available at the required level of detail during the stages in which the tool is potentially being used.

For this reason, a significant level of thought has been and will be devoted to the definition of comprehensive and suitable database entries able to effectively cover most, if not all the possible cases with limited assumption and approximation.

2.4 The Output Interface

Lastly, the output interface is constituted by a webpage where the results from the simulation are visualized after being elaborated into readily usable information. The data containing relevant graphs and tables is sent directly by the server and visualized on the user device.

Although this could be considered the least research-intensive part of the tool, it is still essential to identify and convey the useful information in a comprehensive and clear way for the final user to understand it. At the same time the information needs to be concise and specific to avoid the risk of less expert users to lose themselves in an unmanageable amount of data.

The authors identified a list of useful information that was included in the interface and is directly visualized on the user device in the form of tables and graphs. An example of those results is shown in Chapter 4 and can be summarized in 3 groups:

- Monthly Energy Needs for Heating and cooling: useful to immediately understand the performance of the building in terms of consumption and to compare different design options;
- Thermal power curves for heating and cooling needs: essential as a starting point for plant design and feasibility analysis of different plant options;
- Hourly temperature variation for a Winter and Summer Typical week: useful to form a qualitative idea of the internal comfort conditions and

to compare different design choices in term of user comfort.

Lastly, both the output .csv file obtained from the EnergyPlus simulation and the .idf file containing the model used for the simulation, are given to the user as an optional download. The user is therefore able to perform more detailed analysis either by post-processing the already generated output from the simulation or, for more expert users, to add elements to the simulation itself to perform a more detailed analysis, e.g., by following the development of the building design while new information becomes available. The option of generating an automated report including all the results in a readily presentable form is currently under evaluation. The option to visualize an internal comfort chart for the building is currently under discussion as the simplified nature of the tool can only allow for a qualitative evaluation of comfort conditions and cannot consider localized effects that could greatly influence it. Nonetheless even a qualitative information on comfort condition could be of great use while comparing different design choices to identify the best option not only in terms of energy use but in terms of the building performance in general.

3. Validation and Case Studies

As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, one of the most important aspects of this research has been the focus on accuracy, although limited by the necessity of using simplified models. As mentioned, a simplified screening tool such as the one proposed here, still needs to ensure an adequate level of accuracy, although lower when compared to a detailed building simulation due both to its nature and its purpose, being used when a detailed simulation is not possible or feasible due to time and information constraints.

Validation was therefore approached in two different phases: validation of the simplified model and validation of the simplified tool. A third phase associated with the validation of the simulation code is deemed unnecessary thanks to the use of EnergyPlus, a well-known and reliable simulation code (Crawley et al., 2004; Henninger and Witte, 2010).

The validation of the simplified model has been performed following its definition and extensively discussed in previous publications (Picco et al., 2015). During this study, three different buildings were selected and modelled, both through the use of the simplified model and a detailed model using all available information. The detailed model was calibrated thanks to the use of historic data and for each analysed case, the difference in results in terms of heating and cooling energy needs and heating and cooling peak power was verified to be below the threshold of 20 %. This threshold was derived by the authors based on market expectations and, although not directly related, the recommended acceptable value of mean bias error for detailed and calibrated simulation models as presented in the Measurement and Verification guidelines from DOE (DOE, 2008) equal to 10 %.

Following the initial validation, the simplified model was applied to a number of other buildings to evaluate their energy performances. When suitable, a detailed model was also simulated, for validation and research purposes. For each case, the difference between simplified and detailed model, in terms of heating and cooling energy needs and peak power needs always resulted under the aforementioned 20 % margin; a further confirmation of the validity of the simplified model.

The second part of the validation process focuses instead on the tool itself, verifying that the automatic model generator is able to correctly recreate the simplified model of a building starting from the data of the input interface, and at the same time the output post-processor is able to correctly recreate useful information both in numerical and graphical form.

This phase of the validation process is currently undergoing, in parallel with the finalizing and improvement of the user interface, although initial results can be seen in the following chapter through an example of application of the tool, proving that both the model generator and output post-processor work correctly, as expected.

4. Example of Application

As an example of the application of the presented tool in its current form, the Castelli clinic building was selected. The building is one of the case studies used during the definition of the simplified model; we are therefore able to verify the tool is correctly creating the simplified model and compare the obtained results to the ones of the detailed model, developed for the validation of the simplified model results.

The building, located in Bergamo, is considered a medium-large building with an approximate floor area of 5000 m² on a total of five floors. Built before the second Great War, and currently used as a hospital, the building is characterized by poor thermal performances of the envelope and old plants.

The building data summarized in Table 1 is input in the simulation tool's user interface through relevant database selections and the direct input of values. Names of the specific inputs are coded in the table based on their category as the authors decided to not divulge them prior to the official launch of the tool.

The simulation is then launched from the same interface. Following this, as previously detailed, the information is sent to the simulation core, where the pre-processor generates the EnergyPlus input file and performs the simulation. Results from EnergyPlus are then loaded by the post-processor and elaborated to generate readily usable information.

Although the amount of data that could be obtained from EnergyPlus is extremely large in size and variety, a series of essential details were identified as the most important to be directly shown to the user through the output interface.

Table 11 – Input data for application example

| Entry | Value | Unit |
|---------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| GENERAL_DATA_1 | Bergamo [IT] | - |
| GENERAL_DATA_2 | -70.8 | ° |
| GENERAL_DATA_3 | Hospital | - |
| GEOMETRIC_DATA_1 | 4 | - |
| GEOMETRIC_DATA_2 | 53.4 | m |
| GEOMETRIC_DATA_3 | 83.5 | m |
| GEOMETRIC_DATA_4 | 3.5 | m |
| GEOMETRIC_DATA_5 | 1124 | m ² |
| GEOMETRIC_DATA_6 | Yes | - |
| GEOMETRIC_DATA_7 | Hospital | - |
| WINDOW_DATA_1 | Double Clear | - |
| WINDOW_DATA_2 | 59.1 | m ² |
| WINDOW_DATA_3 | 230.4 | m ² |
| WINDOW_DATA_4 | 130.3 | m ² |
| WINDOW_DATA_5 | 125.0 | m ² |
| CONSTRUCTION_DATA_1 | Masonry | - |
| CONSTRUCTION_DATA_2 | 1.60 | W/m ² K |
| CONSTRUCTION_DATA_3 | 1.65 | W/m ² K |
| CONSTRUCTION_DATA_4 | 1.21 | W/m ² K |
| CONSTRUCTION_DATA_5 | 1.65 | W/m ² K |
| HVAC_DATA_1 | 22.5 | °C |
| HVAC_DATA_2 | 28.0 | °C |
| HVAC_DATA_3 | 18.0 | °C |
| HVAC_DATA_4 | 28.0 | °C |
| HVAC_DATA_5 | 0.0 | % |

Fig.s 3 to 6, shown below, exemplify the current visual output obtained by the user through the output interface following the execution of the simulation. Fig. 2 shows a monthly summary of heating and cooling energy needs of the building through stacked bars, coupled with the monthly average outdoor

temperature as a reference. This graph, coupled with optional tabular data gives a good representation of the energy performances of the simulated building.

Fig. 3 shows the Thermal power curves of the system, for both heating and cooling, this is useful information to select the optimal plant configuration and size, and to estimate the annual hours of activity of a different plant equipment.

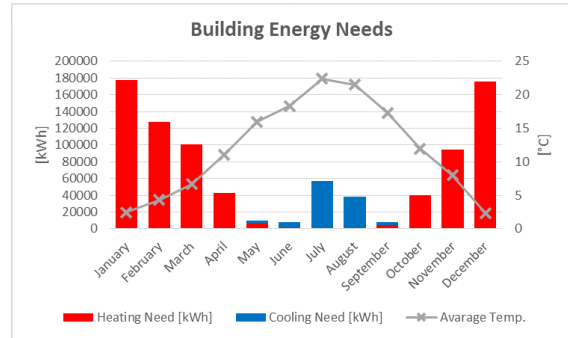


Fig. 2 – Output: Monthly Energy Needs

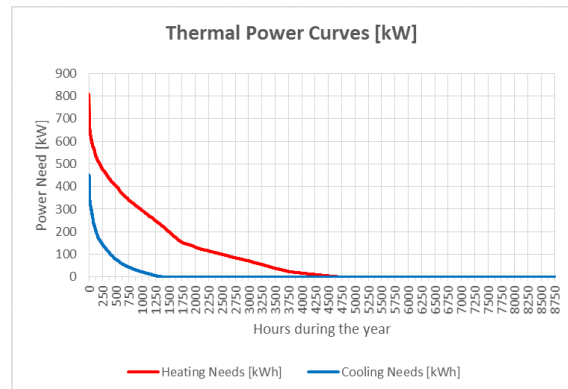


Fig. 3 – Output: Thermal Power Curves

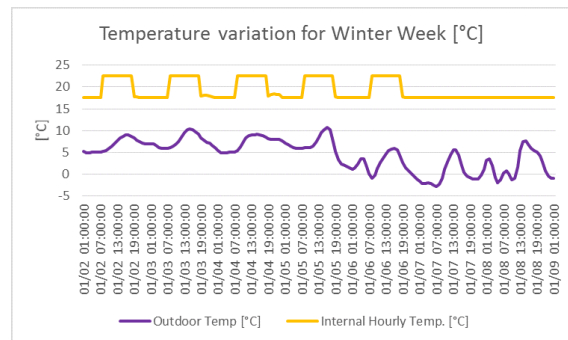


Fig. 4 – Output: Hourly Temperature Variation for Winter Week

Fig.s 4 and 5, respectively, show the hourly temperature variation for a zone within the building for a typical winter and summer week, coupled with

the outdoor temperature. Those graphs are useful for the user to immediately have an idea of the thermal conditions within the building and the operation of the systems.

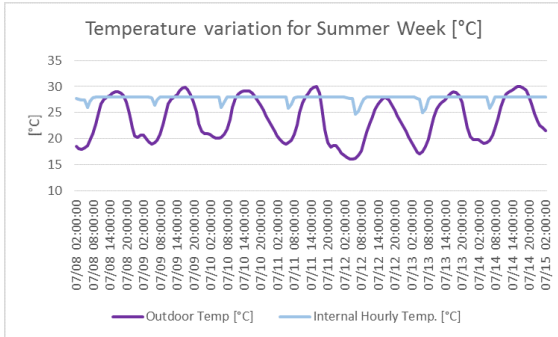


Fig. 5 – Output: Hourly Temperature Variation for Summer Week

Finally, the results in terms of total heating and cooling needs, are reported in Table 2 below to compare results obtained by the tool with the ones obtained from the simplified and detailed model previously developed and discussed in previous papers.

Table 12 – Comparisons between models

| Model | Heating [kWh] | Cooling [kWh] |
|------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Tool | 769473 | 110219 |
| Simplified Model | 774493 | 126788 |
| Detailed Model | 791075 | 128102 |

As evident by the table, the tool delivers the same results as the simplified model, which confirms that the model generation and post-processing algorithms have been implemented correctly in the tool; and starting from the input data, the generated model is equivalent to the manually created simplified model.

5. Conclusions

As we are moving toward a carbon free future, our buildings are becoming increasingly more complex, due to the constantly increasing performance requirements and new surfacing technologies. As a consequence, the design of the building is becoming

an increasingly complex process, that requires additional expertise and attention to energy and performance issues.

Building performance simulation could be considered a possible solution, however, a gap is still present between the available tools and the needs of the design process during the first stages of the building design, due to the lack of available time and information.

The proposed screening tool aims to fill this gap by providing a quick and simple way to perform simplified dynamic performance simulations with minimum time commitment and information required to identify preferable design choices during the early stage design and feasibility studies. Thanks to the use of a validated simulation code EnergyPlus and a purposely developed simplified description model, the tool is able to deliver results within an acceptable margin of difference compared to the detailed simulations, within the 20 % difference on all evaluated case studies.

The tool is currently being delivered in its initial form and it focuses on the most essential design parameters such as the envelope, materials, and basic HVAC parameters. Once the first version is fully operational, various possible developments are under evaluation, such as the inclusion of specific building features, the expansion of the plant side of the model, and the inclusion of renewable technologies. The inclusion of optimization techniques such as genetic algorithms is under evaluation, too. Meanwhile databases will be constantly expanded to cover for a larger range of options.

The authors believe, based on the obtained results, their personal experience in the field of building performance simulation, and the market expectations, that the proposed tool will have a significant impact on the integration of computer simulation during the early-stage design and feasibility study, providing useful information and fuelling the constant improvement in building performance.

Nomenclature

Symbols

| | |
|------|---|
| GHG | Greenhouse Gas |
| ZCB | Zero Carbon Buildings |
| ZEB | Zero Energy Buildings |
| NZEB | Net Zero Energy Buildings |
| nZEB | Nearly Zero Energy Buildings |
| EPBD | European Performance of Buildings Directive |
| IDP | Integrated Design Process |
| BPS | Building Performance Simulation |
| HR | Heat Recovery |
| SGHC | Solar Heat Gain Coefficient |
| CSV | Comma Separated Value |
| IDF | EnergyPlus input data files |

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