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Sensing a Historic Low-CO₂ Future

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1. Introduction

The title of this chapter is intended not only to flag up the longstanding role of carbon dioxide (CO₂) as an indicator of air quality inside buildings, but also to imply an altogether different need to curb its presence, this time in our upper atmosphere and with a shorter history of awareness of the global warming phenomenon. The first word also suggests a role for human perception. In relation to air quality, we sense humidity and odour, and often have a fairly accurate idea as to causes. For example, our washing hanging out in a room can make it feel too humid, and fabric softener can emit an identifiable chemical smell. But CO₂ itself is odourless and its concentration above a certain level is normally an indicator of the 'bad company' that it keeps when air is changed too infrequently. This means that we can wrongly interpret a perception of stuffiness as being due to an inadequate supply of fresh air, when the actual cause might be that the room has become warmer than necessary in the quest for comfort. In this case, the incorrect diagnosis could lead to throwing open a window, rather than adjusting a thermostatic heating control. When direct or indirect burning of a fossil fuel provides the heating, repeated 'corrective' responses of this kind will add to global CO₂ emissions. In short, our sensing, valuable though it is, may lead us to take an expeditious action, but one that adds to both the energy and carbon emissions burden. On the other hand, if the temperature of a space is appropriate to a particular activity, we can sense freshness or stuffiness quite correctly. It is also true to say that the early, and valuable, research into control of air quality in buildings predates the means to measure CO₂. In other words it was largely reliant on perception and observation, and even after the ability to measure CO₂ was achieved, the values had to be systematically cross-checked with perceptual responses from volunteer cohorts.

This is where history is relevant to the future, all the more so at this temporal watershed when increasing demands to make buildings more airtight raise the stakes relative to the risk of poor air quality. Although we have approximately 175 years of developmental experience of mechanical control of ventilation, and the same length of scientific awareness regarding natural thermo-circulation, we have yet to fully resolve the ideal interface between electronic automation and manual intervention. The focus on air quality has a new urgency, embraced by the broader area of inquiry into 'sick building syndrome', in parallel with, and meshing with, wider research in the field of public health, particularly in the area of microbiology. Recent specialisations into health psychology and environmental psychology again spring from the public health concerns, but aligned with the specific strand of work on the human senses with its origins in the late Georgian period in the first part of the 19th C. By the mid-20th

C, architectural interest in perception psychology by Sven Hesselgren was realised in his 1954 doctoral thesis in Sweden, subsequently published in English in a more concise form (Hesselgren, 1975). The same period saw a substantial body of architecturally oriented work on the environmental forces that shape buildings (Fitch, 1972). In parallel, that in the field of human comfort (Fanger, 1970) presaged his introduction of units to measure air quality (Fanger, 1988). A strand into 'adaptive opportunity' then follows, which layers a psychological understanding of comfort on to the established physiological one (Baker & Standeven, 1994). Thereafter, the present author adopts the term 'adaptive control' (Porteous & MacGregor, 2005), to be applied to environmental comfort in a less serendipitous manner, and with more pre-emptive, design-led consequences, than 'adaptive opportunity'. This then sets the scene for a historical recapping as part of the process of establishing where we are, and where we should go, with air quality.

2. Holistic review of modern 'air quality' history – early 19th C to present

Architects of today, with their team of specialist consultants, owe a particular debt to the discipline of medicine with regard to the pioneering work on air quality. As indicated above, this started in the 19th century based on a combination of consequences, ranging from perceived discomfort to transmission of disease, and scientific advance. In the UK, the fire of 1834 that consumed a large part of the Houses of Parliament at Westminster in London, presented a rare opportunity for a Scot, Dr David Boswell Reid. He was appointed by a select committee as a consultant to use temporary accommodation as a test bed with respect to heating, ventilation, lighting and acoustics. This led to the 1836 refurbishment of the former House of Peers, described by Reid in 1837 (Sturrock & Lawson-Smith, 2006). This had been less badly damaged by the fire than other parts of the complex, and, as the temporary and experimental Commons, it was then monitored over a considerable number of years (Reid, 1844). Reid's book includes as examples tables incorporating key environmental data for two days – one on May 22nd 1837, when the population in the House varied from 40-800; and the other on May 12th 1843, when the population varied between 130-640 (Tables 1 and 2).

Each original table gives hourly values for air temperature outside, in the supply chamber and the exhaust shaft, and in three different inside locations, as well as the extent to which a valve is open, the number present, and brief comments as to weather. The 1837 readings confirm an external range of some 8 K from a high of 12.8°C at 4.0 p.m. to a low of 4.9°C at 3.0 a.m. Equivalent readings internally at the Chair (T2 below) range slowly up from 16.9°C at 4.0 p.m. to 18.9°C at 3 a.m. This modest rise of 2K reflects the increase of the population in the chamber from a rather low start, and indicates that the increasing aperture of the open valve kept the air from becoming over-warm. We may also note that clothing at this time would have provided greater personal insulation than is the case today. In the 1843 set of data the internal temperature at the Chair does get as high as 20°C in the early hours of the morning, but here the outdoor range from 16.1-11.7°C is significantly greater than the 1837 set. Despite the maximum opening being adjusted 2' 3" (69 cm) wider in 1843, and despite the average hourly population of the chamber being lower (370 cf. 443), the warmer ambient conditions proved dominant. Even so, 20-22°C when the chamber has been subjected to some 480 kWh of incidental heat gain from the people inside, without taking account of that from the new gas lighting, signifies rather effective environmental control for such an early experiment. Moreover, Reid's description of the filtering and washing before heating,

including a secondary lime-charged phase to remove small particulates, provides a degree of confidence that the air entering the chamber was a much healthier and less malodorous than the ambient air in early Victorian London.

State of the Atmosphere	Hour	To	T1	T2	T3	Valve opening	Members+Strangers
Very dull	1600	12.8	15.8	16.9	16.4	380 mm	120
	1700	12.2	17.5	17.5	17.5	380 mm	280
	1800	11.5	18.1	18.1	17.8	305 mm	330
	1900	10.6	17.8	18.1	17.5	305 mm	200
Clear starlight	2000	10.0	18.3	18.3	18.3	460 mm	270
	2100	8.9	18.6	18.6	18.9	610 mm	348
	2200	7.2	18.6	18.6	18.9	760 mm	678
	2300	6.7	18.9	18.9	18.9	840 mm	720
	2400	6.1	18.9	18.9	18.9	840 mm	760
	0100	5.6	18.9	18.9	18.9	840 mm	760
	0200	5.0	18.9	18.9	18.9	530 mm	800
	0300	4.9	18.6	18.9	18.6	305 mm	40

Table 1. Dr D B Reid’s readings for 22nd May 1837, translated to SI units, and with temperatures in supply chamber and exhaust shaft omitted. To = temperature outside; T1 = temperature East Gallery; T2 = temperature Chair; T3 = temperature West Gallery (all air temperature)

State of the Atmosphere	Hour	To	T1	T2	T3	Valve opening	Members+ Strangers
Clear & fine	1600	16.1	17.8	17.2	16.7	305 mm	130
	1700	15.6	18.9	18.3	18.3	915 mm	350
Rather dull	1800	15.0	19.4	18.9	18.9	915 mm	431
Rain	1900	13.9	19.4	18.3	18.9	760 mm	160
	2000	13.3	19.4	18.3	18.9	760 mm	170
	2100	12.8	20.0	18.3	18.9	760 mm	200
Showery	2200	11.7	20.0	18.3	19.4	1070 mm	320
	2300	11.7	20.0	18.9	20.0	1370 mm	520
	2400	11.7	20.6	19.4	20.6	1525 mm	600
	0100	11.7	21.7	20.0	21.1	1525 mm	640
	0200	11.7	22.2	20.0	21.1	1525 mm	600
	0300	11.7	21.7	19.4	20.6	1525 mm	450
	0400	11.7	20.6	18.9	20.0	1070 mm	450

Table 2. Dr D B Reid’s readings for 12th May 1843, translated to SI units, and with temperatures in supply chamber and exhaust shaft omitted. To = temperature outside; T1 = temperature East Gallery; T2 = temperature Chair; T3 = temperature West Gallery (all air temperature)

The system also addressed the exhaust of combustion gases from new gas lighting, which assisted natural thermal buoyancy. It is possible that the low-level mode of delivery,

inactivating airborne bacterial spores and mycobacteria in full-scale studies, *Atmospheric Environment*, Vol.37, pp 405-419.

Zarr, R. R. (2001). A History of Testing Heat Insulators at the National Institute of Standards and Technology, *ASHRAE Transactions 2001*, Vol.107, Pt 2.

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