ENERGY EFFICIENCY OF HYDRONIC SPACE-HEATING DISTRIBUTION SYSTEMS IN SUPER-INSULATED RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS

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Abstract
In space-heating (SH) dominated climates, super-insulated building envelopes, such as passive houses (PH), are often promoted to drastically reduce SH needs. Using hydronic SH distribution in PH, thermal losses from pipes become a relatively large source of internal gains. Nevertheless, buildings with super-insulated envelopes have high utilization factors of heat gains so that the resulting SH distribution efficiency is currently unknown. The article investigates this energy efficiency with dynamic simulations (here using IDA-ICE) and a detailed modelling of the SH distribution system. Such detailed studies are rarely found in the scientific literature where generally the physics is modelled in an oversimplified way. The performance of standard and simplified SH distribution loops are compared and discussed. It is confirmed that the fraction of uncontrolled thermal losses from the SH distribution system is large (up to 50% of the heat delivered to the system can be emitted by pipes), but that the distribution efficiency is nonetheless kept high (above 90%). Compared to other forms of energy losses in super-insulated buildings, the present work suggests that the increase of energy use caused by thermal losses from the hydronic SH distribution remains a secondary problem.

Introduction
In space-heating (SH) dominated climates, such as Scandinavia, building regulations and standards promote highly-insulated buildings to drastically reduce SH needs. A good example is the passive house (PH) standard, which requires for so-called super-insulated building envelopes. This standard has been adapted to many locations, such as Norway with the NS3700 standard (Standard Norge, 2010). Most existing concepts and pilot buildings for Norwegian Zero Emission Buildings (ZEB) are also based on super-insulated building envelopes (Dokka et al., 2013; Houlihan Wiberg et al., 2014).

Compared to older buildings with a significantly lower insulation level, super-insulated building envelopes introduce new challenges and opportunities for the SH distribution system:

- Firstly, internal gains play a major role to counterbalance the limited amount of thermal losses of the building envelope. Thermal losses from the water-based distribution system become relatively more important so that their contribution as internal gains should be properly evaluated.

- Secondly, the SH distribution system can in principle be simplified in PH (Feist et al., 2005). As the building is super-insulated, it is indeed not necessary to place a heat emitter in front of each window to prevent cold draft, or even in each room. This simplification of the SH distribution forms the basis of the German definition of the PH standard (Feist et al., 2005), where the initial motivation for the simplification is reduction of investment costs. Typically, this can be done by reducing the number of heat emitters inside the building. In the present study, the case of one radiator per floor is investigated while the cases of air-heating or wood stoves have been already studied in other Norwegian research works (Georges, Berner, et al., 2014; Georges, Skreiberg, et al., 2014).

- Thirdly, super-insulated building envelopes are better heat storages, characterized by longer time constants and thus higher utilization factors of gains (CEN, 2008a).

Combining these three elements, calculating the resulting energy efficiency becomes less evident. Keeping the SH distribution network unchanged, heat losses from the distribution system are relatively more important in super-insulated buildings but these buildings have a better capability of utilizing these losses for SH. In addition, the SH distribution loop can be simplified to reduce the heat losses for the SH distribution system. The objective of the present work is to investigate the influence of the distribution system design on the energy efficiency in the context of super-insulated buildings. To the authors’ knowledge, this question has never been addressed from the perspective of super-insulated buildings in previous works.
In general, few studies investigating SH distribution efficiency in detail have been conducted. The reason might be the complicated dynamic phenomena of distribution losses. Until now, building performance simulation (BPS) tools typically have not supported the detailed modelling of the heating system with pipework, thermostatic valves and radiators, which have continuously changing flow rates and temperatures. The work of Maivel et al. (Maivel & Kurnitski, 2014) is an exception, where the emission and distribution efficiency of low-temperature radiators has been investigated for nearly zero-energy buildings using detailed dynamic simulations (IDA-ICE). In practice, SH distribution losses are generally evaluated in a simplified way, typically using tabulated distribution efficiencies. In Europe, these tabulated values are usually given in national standards, see e.g. NS3031 (Standard Norge, 2014), while the overarching EN 15316 standard (CEN, 2007) provides guidelines to establish these tabulated distribution efficiencies. Detailed evaluation methods are nonetheless already introduced in standards, each of them having different levels of modelling simplification, such as the EN 15316 (CEN, 2007; Olesen & de Carli, 2011), prEN 15316 (CEN, 2014) or prNS3031 (Standard Norge, 2014). These detailed evaluations are most often not applied, or not supported by default, in BPS packages.

Following the work of Maivel et al., the present contribution also investigates distribution losses using dynamic simulations (IDA-ICE) with a detailed modelling of the SH distribution system. Compared to this previous work, the present article rather focuses on the influence of the building insulation level and on the design of the SH distribution system. The need for BPS tools that model in detail the SH distribution system in super-insulated buildings is questioned. The paper focuses on the energy efficiency of the SH distribution. The ability of a simplified SH loop to provide for the required thermal comfort in each zone is not covered here (see e.g. Georges et al. (2016), Håheim (2016)).

Methodology

Building test case

The test case is a terraced house from the Miljøbyen Granåsen project located in Trondheim, which is currently the largest PH construction project in Nordic countries. Miljøbyen Granåsen is developed by Heimdal Bolig and is also part of the EBLE, Concerto and Eco-city research projects. The terraced house with heated area of 142.5 m² consists of three storeys as shown in Figure 1. It is a timber frame construction except for the basement, which was built with concrete. In that respect, the building thermal mass is characterized as light (CEN, 2008a). The balanced mechanical ventilation has a heat recovery unit and provides for an air change rate (ach) of 0.52/h. The electric resistance further preheats ventilation air with a set-point temperature of 16°C. Thermal properties of the PH building are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Thermal properties of the three building cases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>PH</th>
<th>TEK10</th>
<th>TEK87</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extern. wall U-value [W/m².K]</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roof U-value [W/m².K]</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basement U-value [W/m².K]</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infiltration n50 [1/h]</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windows U-value [W/m².K]</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>2.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doors U-value [W/m².K]</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norm. cold bridges [W/m².K]</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heat recovery rated temperature efficiency (EN 308)</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SH needs [kWh/m².year] *</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>87.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*According NS3031 using the entire building block (4 dwellings) and intermittent SH (i.e. temperature setback during nighttime).

To investigate the influence of the building thermal insulation on the performance of the SH distribution system, two alternative cases are considered. One corresponds to the minimal requirements of the current Norwegian building regulation, TEK10 (KRD, 2010), and the second to the requirements of 1985, TEK87 (KRD, 1984). Typically, natural ventilation was used in TEK87 buildings. For the sake of the simplicity, it was modelled as balanced mechanical ventilation with a heat recovery efficiency of 0% and no air pre-heating. Standard internal gains for persons, lighting and
The mass flow through each radiator depends on the building environment. The smallest pipe diameter for minimal pressure drop is selected, including linear and singular pressure losses. Taking into account that the pipe should have a minimal internal diameter of 8 mm, the influence of pipe thermal insulation is investigated by comparing cases without insulation and with 19 mm Armaflex® insulation (thermal conductivity $\lambda = 0.037$ W/m.K).

### Modelling of the building and the SH distribution

Multi-zone building simulations have been performed using the BPS software IDA-ICE version 4.7.1 (EQUA, 2016). Parameters for the building envelope and ventilation system have been defined in IDA-ICE using as-built documents. The discharge coefficient ($C_d$) for the bidirectional airflow in open doorways is taken at 0.65. SH needs have been validated against the value computed using SIMIEN (ProgramByggerne, 2012). SIMIEN is the BPS software that has been used during construction to prove that the building complies with the Norwegian building regulation. Comparison with measurements has shown that this IDA-ICE model is able to well reproduce the temperature differences between rooms during the SH season (Håheim, 2016). Even though this comparison has not been done using standard calibration indexes, such as the NMBE and RMSE (Claridge, 2011), the building model is considered validated enough for the purpose of the study.

The standard IDA-ICE interface already includes a detailed radiator model, which considers both thermal and hydraulic aspects. As emission efficiency is not the subject of the work, thermostatic valves (TRV) are modelled using a PI control directly adapting the mass flow through the radiator (which is in practice equivalent to a perfect control with a valve authority of 1.0). Consequently, the mass flow through each radiator changes continuously during simulation as a function of the room instantaneous SH needs. The radiator geometry is embedded in the 3D virtual model of the building. This enables the radiator model to account for the enhanced thermal losses through the wall at the back of the radiator. Stratification losses are not modelled.

Each pipe segment of the distribution network was created manually in the advanced interface of IDA-ICE (so-called “schematic”) where users can combine components into a system in an equation-based environment, see Figure 2. Each time a distribution pipe crosses another zone or connects a pipe junction, a new

![Figure 2. Example of IDA-ICE macro developed to model the simplified SH distribution system: a first layer combines a supply and a return pipe segment (right), the second layer (left) combines these two-pipe components into a network.](image-url)
The performance of SH distribution systems is mainly compared using two monthly (or yearly) indicators:

1. The fraction of thermal losses ($\xi$) is the ratio between monthly (yearly) thermal losses emitted from the distribution system ($Q_{\text{out}}$) and the monthly (yearly) energy delivered to the distribution loop by the heat generation system ($Q_\text{d}$). $Q_\text{d}$ will be here termed “energy use”, a terminology that is only correct if the generation efficiency is assumed to be 100% (CEN, 2008b).

2. The distribution efficiency ($\eta_\text{d}$) is by definition the ratio between $Q_\text{d}$ computed without pipe losses and $Q_\text{d}$ computed with pipe losses. This last indicator also translates the amount of thermal losses that has been usefully recovered for SH.

For the sake of the simplicity, a constant indoor temperature set-point of 21°C is applied for all cases. This assumption is not expected to have a major influence on results and conclusions.

Analysis and discussion of results

The performance of the different SH distribution systems is firstly compared in terms of distribution efficiency ($\eta_\text{d}$), using a same set-point temperature for each radiator. In that case, the temperature in rooms without radiator is different between SH distribution systems. Therefore, this effect is accounted for in a second step where a minimal temperature is imposed in all rooms.

Distribution efficiency

The distribution efficiency is investigated in successive steps. Firstly, the case of the 60°C/40°C standard loop without pipe insulation is shown in Figure 3 for the three performance levels of the building envelope.

The share of pipe losses ($\xi$) has a moderate value of 20% for the TEK87 house. This value increases progressively to 30% for the TEK10 house. When the building performance is further improved to PH, $\xi$ increases to 50%. As the utilization factor of gains is high in PH, a significant amount of these losses is recovered usefully.
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and open doors, regardless of the insulation level or
found between
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conclusion than stan
may reach
losses. Combining both effects,
the pipe insulation has a more drastic influence on
distribution efficiency using
without insulation, t
Compared to the baseline
distribution loop. It also gives an idea about the
and internal gains, such as the pipe insulation or the reduction of the
distribution temperature. Results are reported in Table 2.
A distinction is made between closed and internal doors.
With open internal doors, internal gains, such as pipe
losses, will lead to a lower temperature increase in
rooms than with closed doors due to the large
duct diffusion and bidirectional flow in open doorways. The resulting
distribution efficiency (ɳ\text{d}) is then higher. This effect is
more important with a higher share of
\( \xi \). In Figure 4, a good correlation is
found between \( \xi \) and the change of ɳ\text{d} between closed
and open doors, regardless of the insulation level or
distribution loop. It also gives an idea about the
sensitivity of ɳ\text{d} to the user behaviour.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>House</th>
<th>Loop type</th>
<th>Temperature</th>
<th>Pipe insulation</th>
<th>ɳ\text{d} (closed)</th>
<th>ɳ\text{d} (open)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TEK87</td>
<td>Standard</td>
<td>60°C/40°C</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0.205</td>
<td>0.967</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0.064</td>
<td>0.989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>60°C/40°C</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0.303</td>
<td>0.940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0.105</td>
<td>0.980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>40°C/30°C</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0.193</td>
<td>0.957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0.067</td>
<td>0.986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEK10</td>
<td>Standard</td>
<td>60°C/40°C</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0.514</td>
<td>0.887</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0.213</td>
<td>0.957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>40°C/30°C</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0.330</td>
<td>0.929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0.123</td>
<td>0.975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PH</td>
<td>Simplified (Type 1)</td>
<td>60°C/40°C</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0.311</td>
<td>0.906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0.124</td>
<td>0.968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>40°C/30°C</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0.200</td>
<td>0.941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0.083</td>
<td>0.980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PH</td>
<td>Simplified (Type 2)</td>
<td>60°C/40°C</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0.382</td>
<td>0.992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0.137</td>
<td>0.999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>40°C/30°C</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0.237</td>
<td>0.992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0.088</td>
<td>0.999</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nevertheless, from the TEK87 to the PH building, the
distribution efficiency (ɳ\text{d}) is decreased from 97% to
88%. This decrease is significant but rather limited
compared to the increased share of pipe losses (ξ).
Secondly, some measures can be taken to improve ɳ\text{d}, such as the pipe insulation or the reduction of the
distribution temperature. Results are reported in Table 2.
A distinction is made between closed and internal doors.
With open internal doors, internal gains, such as pipe
losses, will lead to a lower temperature increase in
rooms than with closed doors due to the large
bidirectional flow in open doorways. The resulting
distribution efficiency (ɳ\text{d}) is then higher. This effect is
more important with a higher share of internal gains, typically with high ξ. In Figure 4, a good correlation is
found between ξ and the change of ɳ\text{d} between closed
and open doors, regardless of the insulation level or
distribution loop. It also gives an idea about the
sensitivity of ɳ\text{d} to the user behaviour.

Compared to the baseline case with a 60°C/40°C loop
without insulation, the standard loop has a better
distribution efficiency using 40°C/30°C. Nonetheless,
the pipe insulation has a more drastic influence on
losses. Combining both effects, the ɳ\text{d} of a standard loop
may reach 97-99% in a PH. This leads to the original
conclusion than standard distribution loops can still be
implemented in PH if measures are taken to limit losses from pipes.

Regarding the performance of the simplified distribution
loops, cases with distribution pipes crossing non-heated zones (Type 1) and only crossing heated zones should be
distinguished (Type 2). It is here assumed that the set-
temperature of 21°C is only applied to the zones
without radiator. The temperature in the rooms
without radiator is free-floating. With loop of Type 1,
the share of losses (ξ) is reduced compared to the
standard loop and kept at a level equivalent to the
TEK10 building. In the PH case, the distribution
efficiency (ɳ\text{d}) of the Type 1 loop is only slightly better
than the standard loop because it is here considered that
the temperature increase generated by losses emitted in
non-heated zones does not add any value. This effect is
obviously reduced if internal doors are open. Regarding
the loop of Type 2, thermal losses from pipes are emitted
in heated zones, a solution that gives very high
efficiency (> 99%) whatever the distribution temperature
level, the opening of internal doors, or the pipe
insulation level. In other words, the simplified loop has a
very high distribution efficiency and is more robust to
design parameters than the standard loop, if location of
pipes is selected carefully.
Figure 4. Correlation between the fraction of losses (ξ) and the variation of distribution efficiency (ɳ_d) between open and closed doors.

Simplified versus detailed modelling

Two common simplified approaches to account for the SH distribution losses are now introduced and compared to the detailed model: tabulated data of NS3031 and using a fixed fraction of thermal losses (ξ).

The Norwegian standard NS3031 (Standard Norge, 2014) evaluates the energy use of buildings and resorts to tabulated distribution efficiencies. They are given as a function of the building type, the insulation level of pipes, as well as the distribution temperature, but regardless of the insulation level of the building, see Table 3. These tabulated efficiencies are very close to the TEK10 values computed using the detailed model, with a maximum difference of 0.02. Nevertheless, these values are not representative for the other cases (TEK87 and PH) as well as for the simplified distributions.

Table 3: Tabulated distribution efficiency of NS3031

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temperature</th>
<th>Pipe insulation</th>
<th>ɳ_d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60°C/40°C</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40°C/30°C</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By default, IDA-ICE enables to account for the SH distribution losses by introducing the yearly fraction of thermal losses (ξ) as an input parameter. The instantaneous heat delivered to radiators is then increased by this factor to calculate the instantaneous energy use. The corresponding losses are introduced as internal gains distributed uniformly in all zones. Assuming ξ known, this method is here compared to the detailed evaluation. For the case of the standard distribution loop with a weather-compensated distribution temperature, the distribution efficiency (ɳ_d) computed by both approaches shows a good agreement, even on a monthly basis, see e.g. Figure 5. In that case, the knowledge of the yearly fraction of thermal losses (ξ) is enough to determine the ɳ_d. As ξ is rather constant throughout the SH season, its value could be pre-evaluated with a dedicated software in a decoupled way. Alternatively, a sensitivity analysis to the input parameter ξ could be done in IDA-ICE.

Figure 5. Monthly performance of the 60°C/40°C standard distribution loop in the PH without pipe insulation, detailed modelling versus default IDA-ICE modelling (with internal doors closed).

Nevertheless, the accuracy of the simplified method decreases when the hypotheses behind the simplification are no longer valid. For instance, a constant water distribution temperature would lead to larger variations of ξ during the SH season, or the simplified distribution generates by definition thermal losses that are not distributed uniformly inside the building, see Table 4.

Table 4: Default IDA-ICE model compared to the detailed model for the 60°C/40°C distribution loop without pipe insulation in the PH.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Loop type</th>
<th>Temperature</th>
<th>ɳ_d (detailed)</th>
<th>ɳ_d (default)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standard</td>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplified (Type 1)</td>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplified (Type 2)</td>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall energy efficiency

The previous section only focused on the distribution efficiency (ɳ_d), by applying a constant set-point of 21°C in rooms equipped with radiators. Nevertheless, standard and simplified loops lead to different temperatures between rooms inside the building. To investigate the overall energy efficiency, the energy use of the different distribution systems should be compared for a same thermal comfort. One should distinguish between two scenarios:

1. Firstly, the user wants 21°C in each room, equipped with radiator or not. With a simplified SH distribution, the set-point temperature in rooms

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San Francisco, CA, USA, Aug. 7-9, 2017

1581
equipped with radiator should be increased above 21°C in order to ensure 21°C in rooms not equipped with radiator. With simplified distribution, users should accept to open internal doors. This requirement may lead to privacy problems and is a major limitation of the simplified SH distribution. The increase of set-point temperatures above 21°C leads to higher SH needs, which should theoretically be considered as a type of SH emission losses. This first scenario complies with standards as they compare the energy use of different SH systems for a uniform set-point temperature in all rooms.

2. Secondly, users are satisfied with the lower temperature in rooms not equipped with radiator. This situation may arise when users want lower temperatures in specific rooms. Recent studies have indeed confirmed that many Norwegians desire lower temperatures in bedrooms, typically ~16°C or below (M. Berge & Mathisen, 2016; Magnar Berge et al., 2016; Georges, et al., 2016). People that would like colder bedrooms should typically keep internal doors closed. The set-point temperature for radiators is kept at 21°C only in the basement, the living room and the corridor of the first floor, for both the simplified and the standard loops (i.e. the thermostatic valve in other rooms are fully closed).

In this second scenario, the increase of temperature due to pipe losses in non-heated zones is assumed to have no value.

Both scenarios have been simulated in IDA-ICE for the three types of loops. Other possible scenarios can be seen as intermediate cases between these two extreme scenarios. The scenario (1) of a minimum temperature of 21°C in each room is shown in Figure 6. Starting with the idealized case without pipe losses, the simplified loops need a higher temperature in the rooms equipped with radiator (see e.g. Figure 6) leading to a higher energy use by ~1 kWh. Again, it translates a loss of emission efficiency. Taking pipe losses into account, the higher distribution efficiency (η_d) of simplified loops does not compensate for the initial increase of ~1 kWh (due to emission efficiency). For instance, the standard loop at 60°C/40°C without insulation has an energy use of 15.1 kWh/m².year while the equivalent simplified loop (Type 2) uses 15.5 kWh/m².year. The simplified distribution is thus less energy-efficient than the standard distribution.

The scenario (2) with a set-point temperature of 21°C only applied in the basement, living room and corridor of the first floor, is shown in Figure 8. Starting with cases without pipe losses, the energy delivered to the distribution system (Q_w) is equal for each case. The temperature zoning (i.e. lower temperature in bedrooms such as in Figure 7) reduces the yearly energy to ~2 kWh compared to the previous scenario (1). Including pipes losses, results for the three distribution layouts are mixed. The simplified loop with pipes crossing non-heated zones (Type 1) does not outperform the standard loop. In fact, the fraction of losses (ζ) is comparable for both cases. The simplified loop has fewer pipes but with higher mass flows than the standard loop. On the contrary, the simplified loop with pipes only crossing

Figure 6. Energy use (Q_w) for the different loops with a minimum temperature of 21°C in each room (with open internal doors).

Figure 7. Duration curve of the corridor temperature in the first floor using scenario 1 and the double bedroom temperature in scenario 2 (case with 60°C/40°C distribution without insulation).

Figure 8. Energy use (Q_w) for different loops with a temperature of 21°C only imposed in the basement, living room and hall (with closed internal doors).
heated zones (Type 2) always has higher distribution efficiency leading to yearly energy uses 0.25 to 1 kWh lower than the standard loop.

Discussion
Both temperature levels (60°C/40°C and 40°C/30°C) are used in practice, but pipe insulation inside the building protected volume is almost never applied. In this context, it can be concluded that the energy performance of the standard loop compared to the simplified loop (Type 2) depends on the desired temperature differences between rooms (e.g. desire for cold bedrooms or not), with a difference of 0.5-1.0 kWh between both scenarios. These variations are non negligible for super-insulated buildings with SH needs of ~15 kWh/m².year. Nevertheless, they are small compared to the influence of users over the SH energy use, for instance by adjusting the set-point SH temperature, by opening the windows frequently during winter time, or the user influence over the domestic hot water (DHW) needs (Dar et al., 2015; Georges, et al., 2016). For these cases, variations higher than ~5 kWh/m².year are frequently reported. In general, it is well known that users have relatively more influence over the energy use for heating when the building is more insulated. It can then be concluded that the question of the SH distribution efficiency is secondary. This confirms that the first reason for simplification of the SH distribution is the reduction of investment costs (Feist, et al., 2005). To the authors' opinion, the reduction in embodied energy and CO₂ emissions from a lifecycle perspective (LCA) resulting from the reduced amount of pipes and radiators has not been investigated yet in the scientific literature.

Figure 9. Yearly performance of the 60°C/40°C standard distribution loop without pipe insulation for the three buildings, with and without weather-compensated heating curve (with internal doors closed).

Present investigations applied state-of-the-art control techniques, meaning a weather-compensated heating curve and a shutdown of the SH distribution outside the heating season. Due to higher shares of losses (ξ), super-insulated buildings are more vulnerable to distribution losses if these control techniques are not applied, or if pipes are located outside the heated volume. Example is given in Figures 9 and 10 for a constant distribution temperature (T_din) compared to a weather-compensated distribution temperature. Figure 9 shows that the fraction of losses (ξ) increases by ~10% for each insulation level. While it only decreases the yearly distribution efficiency (η_d) by 2% for the TEK87 house, it decreases this efficiency by 10% for the PH case. Figure 10 only focuses on the PH case and shows how the monthly η_d is lower during the shoulder months of the SH season. These months are characterized by lower SH needs so that the utilization factor of internal gains is lower (CEN, 2008a).

Figure 10. Monthly performance of the 60°C/40°C standard distribution loop in the PH without pipe insulation, with and without weather-compensated heating curve (with internal doors closed).

A limitation of the present study is the constant heat transfer coefficient of pipes U_w. The thermal inertia of pipes is also not accounted for. This is inherent to the current implementation of the pipe model available in IDA-ICE. This is nonetheless not specific to IDA-ICE. For instance, the pipe model of TRNSYS (Type 31) also presents a same limitation (Klein et al., 2010). These models should be extended to variable U_w and include thermal inertia. Finally, the thermostatic valve control has been assumed perfect.

Conclusion
To date, the energy efficiency of hydronic SH distribution in super-insulated buildings has not been investigated in detail. Compared to less insulated buildings, the fraction of losses from the SH distribution system (ξ) is expected to increase significantly. Nevertheless, super-insulated building envelopes are better heat storages, so that the utilization factor of internal gains is higher. The resulting energy efficiency of the SH distribution is unknown. In addition, simplifying the SH distribution could be an option to reduce these losses, essentially by reducing the piping length.

Detailed dynamic simulations (here using IDA-ICE) are ideal to investigate this problem as instantaneous mass flow and temperature of pipes are evaluated at each time step, but it requires the detailed modeling of the SH
distribution network. By default, this detailed modeling is not implemented in building simulation packages where simplified approaches are rather proposed. Simulations showed that uncontrolled thermal losses from pipes can cover up to <50% of the annual SH energy use (i.e. \( \xi < 50\% \)). Nevertheless, the study showed that the super-insulated building can recover most of these losses usefully, and keep the distribution efficiency (\( \eta_d \)) above \( \sim 90\% \), for all the distribution loops investigated. In super-insulated buildings, high \( \xi \) would advocate that the SH distribution system should be properly taken into account during design and modelled in detail. It is a “false alert”, the present study suggests on the contrary that the error is limited if the SH distribution system is not analysed in detail (as \( \eta_d \) remains high). This is also an important conclusion for developers of BPS software.

The simplified distribution system showed better distribution efficiency (\( \eta_d \)) than the standard distribution loop. It is especially true if the distribution pipes of the simplified loop cross heated zones only. Then the \( \eta_d \) is almost perfect (\( \sim 99\% \)). Nevertheless, for users that would like a same temperature in all rooms, the set-point temperature in rooms equipped with radiator should be increased to ensure the minimal temperature in rooms without heat emitter. This effect can be considered as SH emission losses. Simulations show that the resulting increase in SH energy use would prevail over the improved \( \eta_d \) using simplified SH distribution. In the end, the relative energy performance between the simplified and standard SH distribution systems depends on the desired temperature differences between rooms (e.g. desire for cold bedrooms or not). The computed differences in annual energy use have been here evaluated to be between 0.5-1.0 kWh/year. These differences are not negligible for super-insulated building (with typical SH needs of \( \sim 15 \) kWh/m².year). Nevertheless, these numbers are small compared to variations in energy use generated by occupant behavior, such as a change of the indoor set-point temperature, frequent opening of windows during the SH season or the variability of DHW energy use. Consequently, present investigations suggest that the energy efficiency of SH distribution system in super-insulated buildings is a secondary problem (if the SH distribution temperature is controlled in a proper way). The main motivation for the simplification of SH distribution system thus remains the reduction of investment costs.

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