Study on the optimum PCM melting temperature for energy savings in residential buildings worldwide

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Abstract. To maintain comfort conditions in residential buildings along a full year period, the use of active systems is generally required to either supply heating or cooling. The heating and cooling demands strongly depend on the climatic conditions, type of building and occupants’ behaviour. The overall annual energy consumption of the building can be reduced by the use of renewable energy sources and/or passive systems. The use of phase change materials (PCM) as passive systems in buildings enhances the thermal mass of the envelope, and reduces the indoor temperature fluctuations. As a consequence, the overall energy consumption of the building is generally lower as compared to the case when no PCM systems are used. The selection of the PCM melting temperature is a key issue to reduce the energy consumption of the buildings. The main focus of this study is to determine the optimum PCM melting temperature for passive heating and cooling according to different weather conditions. To achieve that, numerical simulations were carried out using EnergyPlus v8.4 coupled with GenOpt® v3.1.1 (a generic optimization software). A multi-family residential apartment was selected from ASHRAE Standard 90.1-2013 prototype building model, and different climate conditions were considered to determine the optimum melting temperature (in the range from 20°C to 26°C) of the PCM contained in gypsum panels. The results confirm that the optimum melting temperature of the PCM strongly depends on the climatic conditions. In general, in cooling dominant climates the optimum PCM temperature is around 26°C, while in heating dominant climates it is around 20°C. Furthermore, the results show that an adequate selection of the PCM as passive system in building envelope can provide important energy savings for both heating dominant and cooling dominant regions.

1. Introduction

More than one-third of the overall annual energy consumption of a building is attributed to space heating and cooling, especially in cold climate regions where it may account for more than a half of the overall annual energy consumption [[11]]. Phase change materials (PCM) [[2]] can be used for passive design applications in buildings, since they present high energy density and no volume expansion problems. The use of PCM technology for thermal regulation of buildings has been considered by many researchers [[3],[4]].
The main goal of this innovative system is to reduce the HVAC demand in buildings by enhancing the thermal mass of the envelope, which leads to a decrease in the indoor temperature fluctuations and a higher comfort for occupants [[5]].

The thermal behaviour of buildings is associated with complex physical phenomena, and building simulation tools are very useful to analyse and evaluate the energy performance and comfort conditions, specifically in buildings with renewable and innovative integrated passive technology, such as the integration of PCM.

Parametric studies can be useful in the early stages of building design. However, they may lead to deviations from the actual results due to non-linear interactions of input variables on simulated results, and they could be very time-consuming and computationally expensive [[6]]. Simulation-based optimization methods may be more appropriate for building performance analysis [[6]]. Currently, little discussion can be found in available literature on energy optimization of PCM-enhanced passive buildings addressing the appropriate PCM melting point temperature taking into account various climate conditions.

In the present study, a single-objective optimization method coupled with an innovative PCM enthalpy-temperature (h-T) function will be presented to find out the optimum PCM melting temperature according to the outdoor boundary conditions. The aim is to show that the use of PCM passive system in the building envelopes with optimized melting temperature in each climate can lead to energy savings, in both heating dominant and cooling dominant climates.

2. Methodology

Simulation-based optimizations were carried out using EnergyPlus whole-building energy simulation coupled with a generic optimization program (GenOpt). Computations were performed on a cluster with 32×6 core Intel(R) Xeon(R) processors at 2.00GHz with 48 Gigabyte memory running EnergyPlus 8.4.0 under CentOS release 6.3 - 2.6.32 x86_64 GNU/Linux.

A suitable building model was selected to carry out the simulation in different weather conditions. On this basis, a multi-family residential apartment was selected from ASHRAE Standard 90.1-2013 prototype building models and slightly modified [[7]]. These building prototypes are simulated in different climate zones and maybe mapped to other climate locations for international use [[8]]. The mid-rise apartment building is a 3100 m$^2$ four-story building (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Reference building (mid-rise apartment).](image)

To integrate the PCM into the building, the building envelope is slightly modified and PCM gypsum boards were installed on the inner surface of the exterior walls and roof. Table 1 and Table 2 show external vertical walls and roof construction properties with inclusion of PCM. Further information regarding the baseline building simulated in EnergyPlus, including building envelope components, building internal loads and infiltration could be found in references [[8]] and [[9]].
Table 1. Exterior walls construction.

| Material        | d [m] | $\lambda$ [W/m·K] | $\rho$ [kg/m$^3$] | $C_p$ [J/kg·K] | $R$ [W/m$^2$·K] |
|-----------------|-------|--------------------|-------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Stucco          | 0.0254| 0.72               | 1856              | 840            | -               |
| Gypsum board    | 0.0159| 0.16               | 800               | 1090           | -               |
| Insulation      | -     | -                  | -                 | -              | 1.036           |
| PCM             | 0.0125| 0.20               | 800               | 1200           | -               |
| Gypsum board    | 0.0159| 0.16               | 800               | 1090           | -               |

Table 2. Roof construction.

| Material                   | d [m] | $\lambda$ [W/m·K] | $\rho$ [kg/m$^3$] | $C_p$ [J/kg·K] | $R$ [W/m$^2$·K] |
|----------------------------|-------|--------------------|-------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Built-up roofing           | 0.0095| 0.16               | 1120              | 1460           | -               |
| Insulation                 | -     | -                  | -                 | -              | 4.318           |
| PCM                        | 0.0125| 0.20               | 800               | 1200           | -               |
| Metal surface              | 0.0008| 45.28              | 7824              | 500            | -               |

Commercially available plasterboard, suitable for drywall construction applications with about 30 wt.% of microencapsulated paraffinic PCM was selected. The latent heat capacity of 12-mm-thick of such product is around 90 Wh/m$^2$, which is available in two different melting points: 23°C and 26°C ([10]). In order to simulate the PCM impact on the building energy consumption, the $h$-$T$ curve of the selected PCM was introduced to EnergyPlus. Accordingly, the enthalpy method was used based on an equation proposed by Feustel (see eq.1) ([11],[12]) to construct the $h$-$T$ curve of the PCM, introducing physical properties of Knauf® smartboard (Table 3).

\[
h(T) = C_{p,\text{const}} T + \frac{h_2 - h_1}{2} \times \left[ 1 + \tanh \left( \frac{2 \beta}{\tau} (T - T_m) \right) \right]
\]

where $C_p$ is specific heat [kJ/kg·K], $T$ is temperature [°C], $h_1$ is specific enthalpy at melting temperature [kJ/kg], $h_2$ is specific enthalpy at solidification temperature [kJ/kg], $\beta$ is inclination [−], $\tau$ is width of the melting zone [K], and $T_m$ is melting temperature [°C]. In the eq.1 $\beta$ was set to 1.4 according to reference [12], and $\tau$ was set to 4.

Table 3. Physical properties of the Knauf® smartboard containing PCM ([10]).

| Physical property          | Value            |
|----------------------------|------------------|
| Specific heat              | 1.2 kJ/kg·K      |
| Thermal conductivity at 20°C| 0.20 W/m·K       |
| Thermal conductivity at 35°C| 0.19 W/m·K       |
| Melting point              | 23°C             |
| Enthalpy of fusion of the PCM | 110 J/g         |
| Latent heat capacity $\Delta H$ | 330 kJ/m$^2$    |
To study a wider range of PCM melting temperature, hypothetical PCM melting temperatures were considered from 20°C to 26°C with reference temperature at -20°C and melting range of 4°C. Density change due to phase change was negligible. In current literature, for optimizing the PCM melting point temperature, different PCM h-T curves are created and introduced to the simulation software each time a new temperature is analysed. In the present study, a new methodology is used to iteratively select PCM h-T curve, which reduces the time-consuming process of h-T curve selection at the beginning of each simulation with different PCM melting points.

A packaged terminal heat pump (PTHP) with constant volume fan control, direct expansion (DX) cooling coil and electric heat pump according to baseline building HVAC system types recommendations of ANSI/ASHRAE/IES Standard 90.1-2013 [[13]] was selected. The thermostat control was set to 20°C for heating and 26°C for cooling, as recommended for residential buildings and living spaces.

A set of numerical simulation were performed using EnergyPlus v8.4. The numerical model was coupled to a generic optimization program (GenOpt v3.1.1) [[14]], which was chosen because of its capabilities in solving optimization problems corresponding to the building energy performance, where parametric analysis is not feasible or efficient. The algorithm is able to perform optimization of a user-defined cost function such as annual energy consumption, thermal comfort, etc., using various numerical optimization algorithms that could be chosen by the user. In the case of this study the optimization algorithm minimizes annual energy consumption for heating and cooling.

In the present study, the updated Köppen-Geiger [[15]] main climates classification is used to reference different climate zones (Figure 2). Three different cities of each climate were selected and analyzed in this study.

Figure 2. World Map of Köppen–Geiger climate classification [[15]].
Table 4 presents the optimization results of PCM melting temperature for the annual total heating and cooling energy consumption. It can be seen that the optimum melting temperature of the PCM highly depends on the climate conditions and the altitude of the region. In general, in cooling dominant climates (Köppen-Geiger classifications A and B) the optimum PCM melting temperature is closer to the maximum of 26°C (melting range of 24°C-28°C), whereas in heating dominant climates (C and D) the optimum PCM melting is closer to the minimum of 20°C (melting range of 18°C-22°C), with some exceptions such as Johannesburg (25°C) and Seville (26°C), which could be because of elevation, solar radiation, and wind profile as explained by Saffari et al. [16].

Table 4. Optimum PCM melting for total annual cooling and heating energy consumption.

| Climate zones | Cities         | Melting point for heating & cooling [ºC] | Total heating & cooling savings [kWh] | [%] | Climate zones | Cities         | Melting point for heating & cooling [ºC] | Total heating & cooling savings [kWh] | [%] |
|---------------|----------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------|---------------|----------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------|
| Am            | Manaus         | 26.00                                    | -3984                                 | -9.0 % | Csb           | Antofagasta     | 20.00                                    | 133                                  | 5.1 % |
|               | Freetown       | 26.00                                    | -1924                                 | -4.3 % | Ankara        | 20.00                                    | 1813                                  | 2.0 % |
|               | Colombo        | 22.44                                    | -32                                   | -0.1 % | San Francisco | 20.06                                    | 760                                   | 3.8 % |
| Aw            | Brasilia       | 25.88                                    | 1376                                  | 17.5 % | Csa           | Tehran         | 20.00                                    | 922                                  | 2.0 % |
|               | Bangui         | 25.94                                    | 589                                   | 1.5 %  | Seville       | 26.00                                    | 811                                   | 3.5 % |
|               | Kolkata        | 26.00                                    | 685                                   | 1.4 %  | Cagliari      | 24.44                                    | 450                                   | 1.7 % |
| As            | Fortaleza      | 24.13                                    | 113                                   | 0.2 %  | Rangpur       | 25.50                                    | 554                                   | 1.4 % |
|               | Indore         | 26.00                                    | 1023                                  | 3.3 %  | Hong Kong     | 20.13                                    | 343                                   | 1.3 % |
|               | Malindi        | 25.81                                    | 157                                   | 0.4 %  | Ankang        | 25.19                                    | 1013                                  | 2.3 % |
| Af            | Kuala Lampur   | 25.38                                    | 171                                   | 0.4 %  | Huilh         | 20.00                                    | 836                                   | 4.3 % |
|               | Singapore      | 25.50                                    | 213                                   | 0.4 %  | Jiulong       | 20.00                                    | 1705                                  | 2.2 % |
|               | Puerto Barrios | 25.63                                    | 3054                                  | 8.0 %  | Addis Ababa   | 26.00                                    | 166                                   | 12.0 %|
| Bsk           | Albuquerque    | 20.00                                    | 1381                                  | 2.5 %  | Chicago       | 25.13                                    | 1704                                  | 1.4 % |
|               | Midland        | 20.00                                    | 1300                                  | 3.0 %  | Omaha         | 26.00                                    | 1952                                  | 1.5 % |
|               | Ceduna         | 25.06                                    | 987                                   | 7.3 %  | Cleveland     | 25.63                                    | 3492                                  | 2.8 % |
| Bsh           | New Delhi      | 25.38                                    | 619                                   | 1.4 %  | Montreal      | 25.44                                    | 3565                                  | 1.9 % |
|               | Dakar          | 25.50                                    | 561                                   | 1.9 %  | Moscow        | 24.31                                    | 2117                                  | 1.2 % |
|               | Del Rio        | 25.63                                    | 825                                   | 2.4 %  | Stockholm     | 21.50                                    | 5741                                  | 3.3 % |
| Bwh           | Abu Dhabi      | 26.00                                    | 975                                   | 1.8 %  | Beijing       | 25.63                                    | 3099                                  | 3.3 % |
|               | Jaisalmer      | 25.94                                    | 770                                   | 1.4 %  | Incheon       | 20.00                                    | 883                                   | 1.0 % |
|               | Phoenix        | 26.00                                    | 1018                                  | 2.7 %  | Pyongyang     | 25.63                                    | 2892                                  | 2.6 % |
| BwK           | Calama         | 25.63                                    | 317                                   | 7.5 %  | Yellowknife   | 23.75                                    | 5537                                  | 1.3 % |
|               | Las Vegas      | 26.00                                    | 1018                                  | 2.6 %  | Anchorage     | 23.94                                    | 5709                                  | 2.5 % |
|               | Yumenzhen      | 26.00                                    | 5213                                  | 3.3 %  | Kiruna        | 20.19                                    | 3045                                  | 1.0 % |
| Cfa           | Brisbane       | 25.19                                    | 656                                   | 6.9 %  | Linjiang      | 25.00                                    | 1848                                  | 1.0 % |
|               | Madrid         | 20.00                                    | 1093                                  | 2.6 %  | Linxi         | 26.00                                    | 3865                                  | 1.9 % |
|               | Tokyo          | 20.00                                    | 791                                   | 1.2 %  | Pingliang     | 20.00                                    | 2292                                  | 2.1 % |
| Cfb           | Berlin         | 24.38                                    | 2054                                  | 1.7 %  | --           | --                                       | --                                     | --   |
|               | Johannesburg  | 25.56                                    | 4000                                  | 22.7 % | --           | --                                       | --                                     | --   |
|               | Paris          | 24.06                                    | 1564                                  | 1.9 %  | --           | --                                       | --                                     | --   |
In general, there are interesting correlations between the energy consumption and the optimum PCM melting temperature depending on the climatic conditions. The numerical results demonstrated that the use of passive PCM in building envelopes has high potential for annual energy savings for both heating and cooling. Figure 3 shows the worldwide distribution of optimum PCM melting temperature in different climates according to Köppen-Geiger classification. For example, in Madrid and Seville, despite of being located in a warm temperate climate (C), have different optimum PCM melting temperatures for annual total heating and cooling energy savings. This could be explained by the influence of other factors such as the altitude and the humidity ratio of these regions.

Figure 3. Global energy savings due to use of PCM passive system in building envelopes.

4. Conclusions
In this study, a simulation-based single-objective numerical optimization is presented to determine the optimum PCM melting temperature of a wallboard integrated into a residential building envelope under a wide-range climate zone classifications based on Köppen-Geiger. An innovative h-T function was integrated to the optimization pre-processing step to find out the optimum PCM melting temperature iteratively.

The results show that the proper selection of PCM-enhanced gypsum technology as integrated passive system into the building envelopes can lead to considerable energy savings in many regions in the world, both heating dominant and cooling dominant climates. In cooling dominant climates PCM melting temperature of about 26°C leads to higher energy savings, while in heating dominant climates the best melting point for the PCM is close to 20°C. In climates with both heating and cooling energy demands, the optimum PCM melting point could be anywhere in between 20°C and 26°C. In addition, the results of the present study show that in almost all high-altitude lands substantial energy savings could be obtained utilizing the passive PCM technology. Also, it should be highlighted that other
geographical and climatic factors such as elevation from sea level, solar irradiance, and wind profile notably influence the passive PCM-based design.

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