A BREATH OF FRESH AIR: TOWARDS OPTIMAL INDOOR AIR QUALITY

INVESTIGATING INTERVENTION STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING OCCUPANTS AWARENESS, COMFORT AND HEALTH

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SCIENCE

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Submitted on 30.06.2024

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ABSTRACT

Suboptimal Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) have been identified to pose health risks and affect the cognitive performance of occupants within indoor environments. The study investigates occupants' awareness and perceptions of IAQ, facilitating occupants adoption of preventive measures. Employing a user-centered mixed-methods approach, the research employs Post-Occupancy Evaluation (POE) methods to elicit occupants' understanding of indoor air quality and utilizes sensory monitors to collect and measure common pollutants in specific indoor environments. These insights guide the development of 'Phair', an interactive data physicalization that visualizes real-time air quality data which was subsequently evaluated and usability-tested with occupants. The results of the user study reveal a lack of awareness among users regarding indoor air quality, while evaluations of the prototype demonstrate that physical hardware displaying real-time data can effectively increase occupants' awareness.

KEYWORDS

Human-Building interaction, Indoor air quality, Living Lab, Data physicalization, Smart buildings, User-centered design.

1 INTRODUCTION

Globally, it is estimated that people spend approximately 90% of their time indoors [19, 32] and breathe 11.000 liters of air per day [8]. Suboptimal indoor air quality (IAQ) conditions affect building occupants' experiences of comfort and insufficient ventilation in indoor environments is proven to play significant roles in occupants' well-being, health, and cognitive functions [17, 38].

The perceived comfort of occupants is influenced by the overall Indoor Environmental Quality (IEQ) consisting of several key metrics (e.g. mechanical ventilation, temperature regulation, natural lighting) to create a combined IEQ index for a specific indoor space [20]. Among these metrics, indoor air quality stands out as a crucial factor deserving special attention due to its invisibility to occupants [34], polluted air often goes undetected by smell or sight, underscoring the importance of monitoring and maintaining optimal indoor air quality.

Furthermore, mechanical ventilation systems in buildings operate discreetly and are often insufficient for ventilation in densely populated small rooms like meeting rooms, laboratory offices, or hot-desking work areas [33], which contributes to occupants' perceived lack of control. Since these systems are typically automated [25] and cannot be directly regulated or controlled by occupants themselves [16].

This creates an interplay between occupants' effects on comfort, built environments, and computing technologies (see Figure 1) researched in an overarching interdisciplinary field of study, known as Human-Building Interaction (HBI) [1]. This research specifically focuses on understanding occupants' needs through in-the-wild [29] studies gaining insight into occupants' awareness, collecting indoor air quality data in designated spaces, prototyping data physicalization devices to visualize indoor air quality, and using these designs as data probing tool [41] evaluating their effectiveness with the overarching objective of obtaining insights into occupants' comfort levels and facilitating their adoption of preventive measures against poor indoor air quality [40].

While research on defining comfort within indoor buildings [2], gathering and analyzing sensory air quality data [8], and the effects of poor air quality are prevalent [19], there remains a research gap in understanding occupants' behavior and their subjective needs, along with limited research on how design solutions that visualize environmental data and computing installations can empower occupants, particularly within the field of physically visualizing data to convey IAQ to building occupants in real-time.

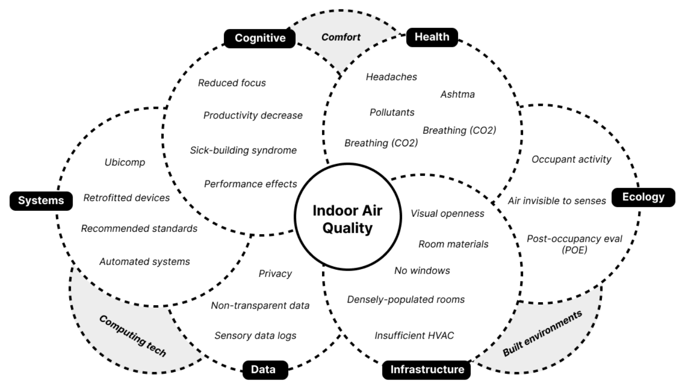

Figure 1: Complexity diagram providing an overview of the effects of IAQ and needs of occupants [2, 8, 17, 19, 32, 38]

1.1 Research questions

In order to research intervention strategies for improving indoor air quality, the following main research question is formulated:

RQ: *How can real-time sensory measurements and future predictions of air quality be physically visualised in specific indoor spaces integrating both environmental information and elements that increase awareness among occupants facilitating their adoption of preventive measures against poor air quality?*

To effectively answer this main research question, this research is guided by the following supporting sub-questions that also serve as objectives to delineate the necessary knowledge:

- **SRQ1:** *How can environmental information related to air quality, such as pollutant concentrations and ventilation rates, be incorporated into the visual representations?*
- **SRQ2:** *How do different types of physical visualizations impact occupants' understanding of air quality and their willingness to adopt preventive measures?*
- **SRQ3:** *How do occupants' perceptions and behaviors regarding indoor air quality change over time, from pre to post-installation of the physical representation of poor air quality?*

2 RELATED WORK

This section provides an overview of studies conducted on the involvement of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) in studying Built Environments. It begins by introducing the overarching concept of Human-Building Interaction (HBI) and subsequently narrows its focus to Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) and Post-occupancy Evaluation (POE) for the scope of this research. Finally, it presents key findings from previous approaches to mapping and encoding sensory data in a new area of research called Data Physicalization.

2.1 Human-Building Interaction

Buildings increasingly incorporate new forms of digital interaction [22, 26], which means new inherent connections between 'people', 'built environments', and 'computing' research in an area called Human-Building Interaction (HBI) [1, 36]. This research area is dedicated to exploring the design of built environments that may incorporate computing to varying degrees [35]. A logical extension where indoor spaces are increasingly retrofitted with sensing devices [26]. Understanding how people use different spaces in a building through computing can inform design interventions aimed at improving the utility of the space and the well-being of occupants. [37].

Current research into architecture and built environments indicates that a significant portion of the data collected by these computing devices is not necessarily transparent or comprehensible to occupants [31], and indoor spaces are designed without much thought of placing computing devices integrated within the environment [15, 18] leaving users with a perceived lack of control over their indoor comfort.

2.2 Comfort within buildings

Indoor occupant comfort is achieved in interaction with the environment and is represented in four respective dimensions; thermal, respiratory, visual, and acoustic [2]. Indoor Environmental Quality (IEQ) [20] indexes serve as metrics for assessing the aforementioned properties of comfort within indoor environments with Post-Occupancy Evaluation (POE) [10] and Perceived Environmental Qualities (PEQ) [34] methods being employed to gauge occupants' perceived comfort [7].

Studies on indoor environments focus on 'static' IEQ conditions using sensors to sense environmental conditions based on the buildings' physical characteristics to meet various recommended standards such as ASHREA 62.1 [1], ISO 16814 [2]. Discrepancies between measured IEQ conditions and occupants' perceptions have also been reported in studies. For instance, research indicates that occupants generally have a low awareness of Indoor Environmental Quality (IEQ). While occupants perceive the environment as 'satisfactory', actual sensory measurements within the environment reveal quality levels below recommended standards. [34]. Recent studies have shifted their focus towards the active role occupants play within the built environment, viewing their behavior within a building as akin to a 'living ecology' [21] rather than perceiving comfort solely as 'static' properties of the building itself.

[1] https://www.ashrae.org/technical-resources/bookstore/standards-62-1-62-2
[2] https://www.iso.org/standard/42720.html

2.3 Indoor Air Quality

A suboptimal indoor environment has reportedly been associated with health-related problems such as headaches, throat irritation, and asthma [19] as well as a decrease in cognitive functions such as tiredness, effects on performance and productivity and a lack of focus [38] [9]. A phenomenon often referred to as the Sick Building Syndrome (SBS) [12, 24]. Many of these symptoms are primarily associated with respiratory comfort and are closely tied to Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) concerns [17]. Effective ventilation strategies have been shown to significantly alleviate SBS symptoms [12].

The advancements of real-time IAQ monitoring systems leveraging Internet of Things (IoT) sensor technology have facilitated progress in both the measurement of IAQ and the implementation of interventions aimed at enhancing it [23]. Indications of poor air quality are gathered by measuring common pollutants with a focus on molds and allergens (humidity), volatile organic compounds (VOC), and carbon dioxide (CO2) [19] where occupant behavior and the number of occupants within indoor space have a specific negative effect on CO2 levels [11]. These indoor climate factors are related to the building occupants' behaviors and need special attention to be considered in assessing the IEQ conditions and determining if adequate ventilation is present [9]. It is crucial to recognize that when occupants experience symptoms, it signifies that a suboptimal air quality situation has already occurred.

The existing literature on IAQ offers quantifiable and validated methods for measuring IAQ through sensory data. It underscores the complexities associated with IAQ and emphasizes the significance of developing solutions to ensure occupants receive adequate ventilation.

2.4 Data Physicalization

The research domain known as data physicalization [3] has emerged as a notable area of study, emphasizing the creation of physical data visualizations making the invisible tangible and interactible by encoding data in physical artifacts [27]. This shift from focusing on individual artifacts to a broader environmental context facilitates the physical embodiment of computing. Data physicalization has the potential to positively influence the perception and exploration of data [14], presenting distinct advantages over traditional 'screen-focused' data representations, such as 2D canvas displays (dashboards) [13], particularly in the context of Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) where a 'physical data visualization' serves as a fitting metaphor for rendering 'invisible' indoor air.

These tangible artifacts usually come in the form of ubiquitous computing (ubicomp) [6] device that seamlessly blends into the environment, essentially making the computing devices 'disappear' [39]. These devices are frequently employed as persuasive technology, strategically designed to gently nudge individuals towards behavior change leveraging the emerging notion of pervasive sensing to subtly enhance users' awareness regarding the impacts of their decisions [4, 28]. This method of persuasive design serves as a powerful tool in calmly extending users' awareness, helping users understand gathered data, and the consequences of their actions, and gaining insight into their behavior [5]. Numerous approaches to studying computing devices within indoor spaces and interactivity with occupants have been explored in prior research [30] to nudge occupants to a desired behavior but limited design solutions have been developed and explored to focus specifically on IAQ awareness.

This framework of data physicalization and persuasive technology establishes the theoretical foundation for the creation (prototyping) and the evaluation (usability testing) of the design solution within this research.

3 METHODOLOGY

Write about your methodology here. Focus on your own contribution. Indicate exactly how you will assess your work in terms of evaluation.

The goal of the prototype is to recognize the role of humans as active users of a indoor environment and helping them prevent these situations before they occur with minimal interruption cost.

4 RESULTS

Write about your results here. Good captions to tables and/or figures are key.

5 DISCUSSION

Write your discussion here. Do not forget to use sub-sections. Normally, the discussion starts with comparing your results to other studies as precisely as possible. The limitations should be reflected upon in terms such as reproducibility, scalability, generalizability, reliability and validity. It is also important to mention ethical concerns.

6 CONCLUSION

Write your conclusion here. Be sure that the relation between the research gap and your contribution is clear. Be honest about how limitations in the study qualify the answer on the research question.

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Appendix A ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere gratitude to all the participants who generously contributed to this study by dedicating their time to respond to the surveys and questionnaires voluntarily, as well as those who willingly tested and interacted with the prototype. Special appreciation goes to everyone who supported me in data analysis, provided hardware for the prototypes, and reviewed and tested the code for the hardware devices.

A thank you to supervisor, Dr. H. Seiied Alavi (University of Amsterdam), for his invaluable guidance, though-provoking questions, and overall assistance throughout the project and Dr. Shruti Rao (University of Amsterdam) for her constructive feedback and suggestions, which further expanded this research. Also, my sincere appreciation to all the reviewers of this research for their insightful comments and contributions.

Appendix B ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Before user studies were conducted, an application to the Ethics Committee for Information Sciences (ECIS) [3] about the methodology of this research, how data is being gathered and stored was made. Advice from the committee is still pending.

Prior to conducting the questionnaire survey and evaluation procedure, a domain expert from the Informatics Institute at the University of Amsterdam reviewed the methodologies involved. All individuals participating in the survey and evaluation process were obliged to confirm their voluntary involvement by carefully reading and signing a letter of consent, with the assurance that they retained the right to withdraw from participation at any point without the need for explanation. To uphold confidentiality and privacy, survey participation occurred anonymously, and all evaluation data underwent anonymization following the conclusion of the evaluation sessions.

Interacting with occupants within the building and interacting with participants of the usability tests of the prototype adhered to the the principles outlined in the UvA code of conduct [4].

Appendix C DATA STORAGE AND ARCHIVAL

Take some parts of the ethical application to describe data storage and archival of the devices etc.

Appendix D SOURCE CODE

In the spirit of open research, to support reproducibility and enable future work in this problem space the datasets, research notebooks, and prototypes in this work are publicly available on a GitHub organization with the working title 'viszlab' [5] using the MIT License. Several code repositories for different parts of the research can be accessed. The readme.md of the repository described the contents and how to perform the technical set-up:

(1) **Prototype**. Code and models for the physical prototype.
https://github.com/viszlab/prototype
(2) **Datasets**. Code and models for the physical prototype.
https://github.com/viszlab/prototype

A one-page website was created for shareability of this research. It's an online website which gives an overview of the research, allows for viewing the source coded of the prototype and allows for downloading of this paper. A live version is deployed on:

(1) **One-pager**. Code and models for the physical prototype.
https://viszlab.github.io/

[3] https://ivi.uva.nl/research/ethical-code/ethical-code.html
[4] https://www.uva.nl/en/about-the-uva/policy-and-regulations/
[5] https://github.com/viszlab

Appendix E FLOORPLAN AND LAB SET-UP

A diagram indicating where the sensors where installed. This shows the lab set-up in the two meeting rooms.

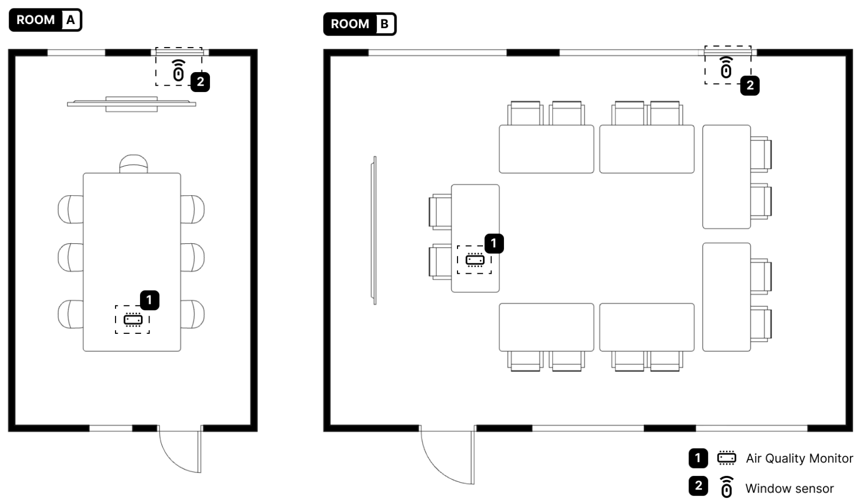

Figure 2: Diagram of the floorplan with sensors installed

Appendix F IOT ARCHITECTURE OF THE PROTOTYPE

System diagram which shows the IoT architecture of the prototype.

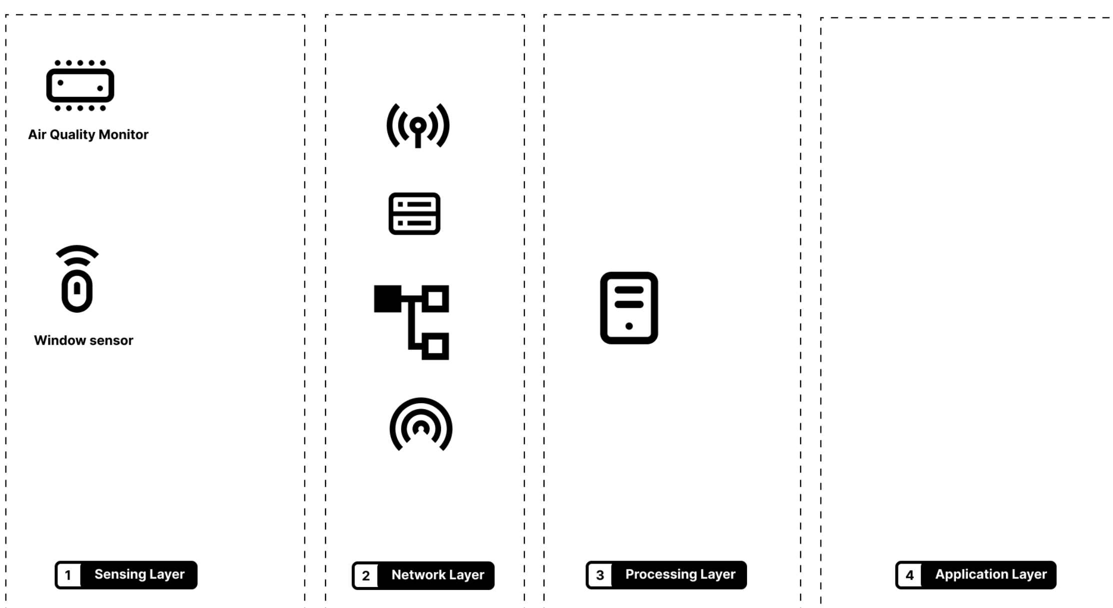

Figure 3: System diagram that shows the technical set-up of the prototype

Appendix G MEETING ROOM IMPRESSIONS

Figure 4: System diagram that shows the

Figure 5: System diagram that shows the

Appendix H LAB SETTING IMPRESSIONS

(a) first

(b) second

(c) third

(d) fourth

Figure 6: caption

Figure 7: System diagram that shows the

Appendix I PROTOTYPE IMPRESSIONS

Figure 8: System diagram that shows the

(a) first

(b) second

(c) third

(d) fourth

Figure 9: caption

Appendix J WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Horizontal boxplot that indicates an average week of booking in the meeting rooms scheduled.

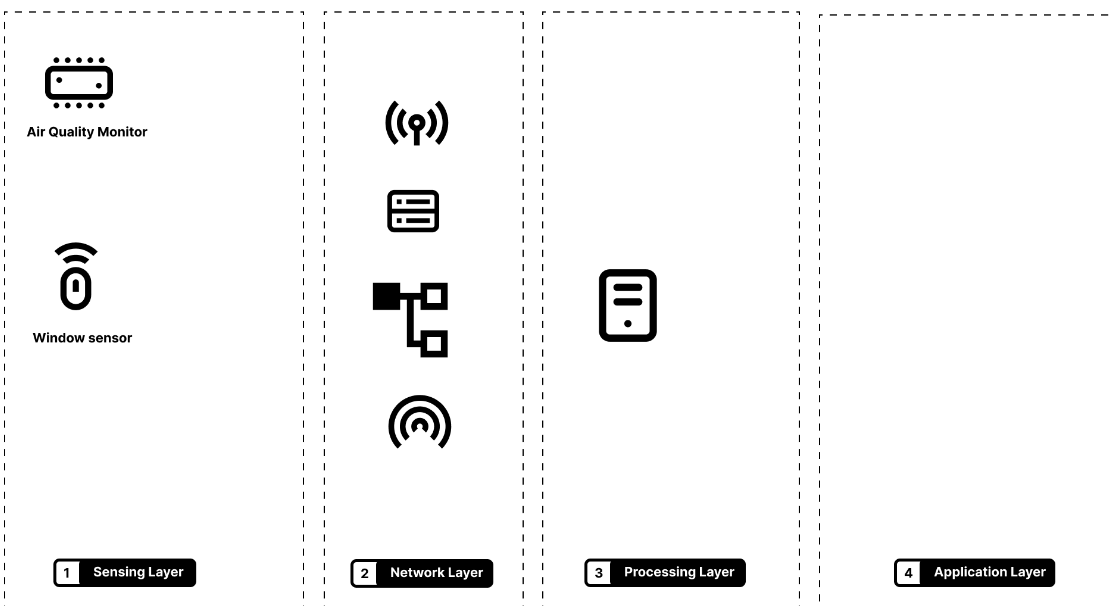

Figure 10: System diagram that shows the technical set-up of the prototype

Appendix K AIR QUALITY MONITORS SAMPLE DATA