Magazine

Heat wave in windy city. (ASHRAE convention in Chicago) (column)

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Heat Wave in The Windy City

CHICAGO-- The Windy City was unseasonably warm when the thousands descended upon it for the Ashrae/ARI exposition. The traffic coming into O'Hare on Sunday was even starting to scare the cabbies, who thrive on the convention business.

I talked to a lot of cabbies that afternoon, checking on the hotel distribution of EUN. The drivers each brought up the topic of the day--the "air conditioning convention."

Walking through the late Roman Bacchanalia that was the Hyatt lobby on Sunday--baseball caps and blue suits, drinking beer right out of the bottle around the Olympic-size reflecting pool-- I thought how in recent years Ashrae really did boil down to something like an air conditioning convention.

I thought of most of my sources last year in Dallas saying things like, "Yeah, Ashrae. It's mostly the sheet metal guys. We come to laugh at the Halstead Robot and get an autographed calendar from Miss Rigid." EUN had to "make the news" last year, in fact, with panel discussions on temperature controls and thermal storage. We had no panel planned for this year, however. I was counting on news as a natural occurrence.

As I beat my way back to the Hotel Nikko that evening, words spoken last year by Asim Gul, president of Mamac Systems, Minneapolis, came to mind. "1988," he said, "marks the true beginning of the electronic controls market."

The significance of some of the show product introductions covered in the latest issue of EUN-- new system architectures, front end graphics and unitary controls-- suggested he might be right. I hoped so. Asim and I had a lot riding on his cryptic observation because he had actually made it with my note pad in plain sight, and I actually quoted him on the front page (Feb. 8, 1988 EUN).

Monday Morning

The first good sign was that all the hotels had delivered the papers. The cab drivers were far less talkative, however, because they had me pegged as an airport fare when they got caught up in my 5:00 a.m. tour of the downtown hotels.

Next stop, a press breakfast hosted by Staefa Control System, San Diego. They introduced the new Integral control architecture, which will replace the Lantrol (see February EUN, page 15.) Part of their presentation covered a product they introduced over a year ago, their StaefaVision front-end graphics package.

The news fell into trend lines quickly from there:

Ashrae Controls Trend No. 1: No less than three vendors unveiled front-end systems similar to StaefaVision at the show that morning-- Honeywell's Commercial Buildings Group, Minneapolis; American Auto-Matrix Inc., Export, Pa.; and Novar Controls Corp., Barberton, Ohio. These joined the handful of others that upgraded the front end in 1988.

Ashrae Controls Trend No. 2: One of these firms, Honeywell, was among the six that introduced new or upgraded unitary DDC controls.

Ashrae Controls Trend No. 3: Try to squeeze yourself into the average controls booth any time after 10:30 a.m. Monday. A heightened interest in controls this year paralleled the vendors' interest in marching out products at Ashrae.

These trends, pegged mostly to new products, shed light on the overall controls story for 1989. As vendors bring system programming to the accessible level of the personal computer and DDC intelligence to the incremental unitary level, users are taking an invigorating interest in understanding their systems. Many want to cut an important cost, service and maintenance, by selecting PC-based networks of local DDC controls.

Others are going to require regular staff training and very specific, if curtailed, service agreements.

Of course, highlights on unitary controls and front-end PC workstations-- the two extreme ends of the EMS-- prompted discussion of intersystem compatibility--the EMS protocol. Here's where the mixed signals come in.

Tuesday Morning

At the Honeywell press breakfast, various executives and I discussed the protocol, and the topic turned to the relative advances of the Intelligent Buildings Institute and Ashrae.

I suggested that the technical sessions and open meetings of Ashrae group have resulted in some tangible progress. Their response was similar to Staefa's on Monday: Ashrae is too hung up on the OSI model. They are trying to establish a protocol on the wrong end of the system-- inputs and outputs rather than the PC host. A host-based solution is inevitable, they said.

By the way, they added, Ashrae doesn't have very much user input, while IBI has hosted two seminars for users. Honeywell, of course, is an IBI regular.

Moving on to the Q&A segment of the Honeywell breakfast:

Q: Is the similarity between Staefa Vision, Andover's Nucleus software, Honeywell's Graphic Central, Auto-Matrix's SpectraMouse and the other new mouse-driven graphics the beginning of a de facto standardization at the front end?

A: What similarity?

So much for an evolution from the proprietary approach to the front end. I am, by the way, still in search of real significant differences between these new front ends. The vendors are no help, because they are unfamiliar with each other's systems.

There is, however, no longer a legitimate claim that system graphics are just bells and whistles. Programmable front-end graphics have become the proverbial "man-machine interface."

What about this "you take the low road, I'll take the high road," view of the Ashrae standards committee on EMS protocol? I asked a committee member, Lawrence Gelburd, director of national accounts for American Auto-Matrix.

His response was that anyone making such a claim is unfamiliar with the committee and its findings. They have studied MAP and OSI and are working on a protocol that translates evenly throughout the system, top to bottom, he said.

What about user input, and what about important people being unfamiliar with the activity of the Ashrae panel? Are we talking about an ivory tower?

David Fisher, senior vice president of research and development with Auto-Matrix, debunked both views with the rulebook. For Ashrae to recognize a standards committee, there must be a 30 percent user membership. IBI, basically a vendor trade association, actually has far fewer user members. Also, the Ashrae review process makes all its proceedings accessible and requires, in fact, a long period of review from all sectors, he said.

The strongest point that emerges is that the community of users as a whole is not responding with any unity and not consistently providing input to what is still largely a vendor-driven exercise. No one can correct this but the growing number of users expressing frustration with the proprietary nature of control systems. I agree with Richard Panke, senior mechanical engineering specialist with the University of Wisconsin System, who suggested in his January essay in EUN that users get involved with the Ashrae committee unless they are willing to accept a protocol developed by vendors and the most technically astute and ultimately atypical users.

Tuesday Afternoon

After spending Monday morning taking cabs from the front of the line at Hotel A to the back of the line at Hotel B, I thought it safest to take a shuttle bus to O'Hare. The drivers might remember me.

Ashrae was a news event as I'd hoped it would be. The big items were, as it turns out, the same as the ones covered in last year's EUN panels-- controls and thermal storage.

With apologies to Trane, Carrier and York-- and despite the heat wave I left in on Tuesday afternoon-- Ashrae was not an "air conditioning convention." My departure, by the way, was not a minute too soon. By Wednesday morning, my sources tell me, the snow was falling at a 45-degree angle.