Editorial

Is less more?

What if the way to progress lay not in adding layers of complexity, or in using the newest, most sophisticated piece of technology? What if the best results did not arise from implementing cutting-edge equipment?

What if, rather, the way to achieving more was to do less, but to do it better? Minimise the elements, maximise the clarity.

Consider the examples of the deceptively simple Mini Cooper, the pared-back elegance of designer Tom Ford’s creations and the impressive authority of an apple IMac.

But of course these slickly designed offerings very frequently conceal the latest in high-functioning technology. We’re talking about the technology itself, here – the fabrics, the engine, the motherboards.

You wouldn’t want your new laptop to have 1990s workings in it, or else what are you paying for?

Yet we’ve been hearing a few rumblings at Ecolibrium about what some voices are perceiving as a technology fetish.

Some building services and ESD professionals are suggesting that while exemplar buildings are great, for the majority of projects, “cheap and cheerful”, or “simple and effective” is the way to go. Innovative projects can be risky if not done well, leading to buildings that don’t perform as expected – an all-too-common occurrence.

Blackwater recycling, tri-generation, phase-change material and the like are fine and dandy, they say, but get the basics right first.

And so we put the question to a panel of experts (all of whom are AIRAH members) asking them what was better: innovation – this being our innovation issue and all – or simplicity?

The answers were not straightforward.

“From experience, making systems and controls more complex increases the chances of failure or sub-par performance,” says Nathan Groenhout, M.AIRAH, buildings group leader (Queensland) for AECOM and an AIRAH director.

“There is a certain elegance in simplicity that leads to improved maintainability, greater resilience and generally energy-efficient outcomes.”

Yet there are other considerations, such as the difference between “complex” and “complicated”, the need to mitigate climate change using the best tools – one of which is technology, the disconnect between design and operation, the perceived belief that conventional systems are incapable of delivering high-performance results, and the insistence on traditional building fabric design.

“It is unfortunate the green building movement, in Australia, at least, has developed an almost unhealthy reliance on complex HVAC systems,” says Fin Robertson, M.AIRAH. “While I believe the industry should continue to drive new technologies, materials and explore new methodologies to suit, the technological fix can be the crutch the industry turns to too easily to cover up such indulgences as floor-to-floor glazing.”

“The quest for beautiful simplicity”, which begins on p.21, covers considerable ground in the discussions the industry is having about the issues confronting it.

And yes, our panellists argue elegantly (if not simply). ▶