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# Bridging the Simulation-to-Reality Gap: A Hybrid Data-Driven Framework for AI-based Prediction of Building Energy Retrofit Performance

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## Abstract

1     **Motivation.** Predicting the realized performance of building energy retrofits re-  
2     mains hard due to a persistent simulation-to-reality (Sim2Real) gap caused by  
3     construction and operation uncertainties, sensor biases, and occupant behavior.  
4     **Objective.** We present a hybrid, data-driven framework that (i) trains on large,  
5     standardized simulation corpora and (ii) calibrates and evaluates on curated real-  
6     world monitoring datasets to quantify and reduce Sim2Real error. **Method.** We  
7     design a *Train-on-Simulation, Test-on-Real* protocol with domain shift diagnos-  
8     tics, representation alignment, and error decomposition. Tabular learners (XG-  
9     Boost/LightGBM) are paired with physics-informed features and post-hoc con-  
10    formal uncertainty quantification. **Results.** In in-domain tests, the proposed mod-  
11    els achieve state-of-the-art accuracy on held-out simulated cases; when tested on  
12    real retrofits with measurement verification (ASHRAE 14/IPMVP), Sim2Real er-  
13    ror is reduced by combining (a) physics proxies, (b) domain-adaptive reweighting,  
14    and (c) lightweight field calibration. **Contributions.** (1) A transparent Sim2Real  
15    evaluation protocol for retrofit prediction, (2) a hybrid methodology that is robust  
16    under data scarcity, and (3) reproducible assets (code, datasets, and experiment  
17    cards).

## 18   1 Introduction

19   Energy retrofits are central to decarbonizing the building stock, yet stakeholders still lack reliable ex-  
20   ante predictions of realized savings and indoor environmental quality (IEQ) improvements. Tradi-  
21   tional physics-based simulations (e.g., EnergyPlus/TRNSYS) provide detailed process understand-  
22   ing but are labor intensive and sensitive to input assumptions; purely data-driven models offer speed  
23   but overfit to data regimes that rarely match deployment contexts. This misalignment produces a  
24   persistent Sim2Real gap that undermines trust and investment decisions. We investigate: *To what*  
25   *extent can models trained on large simulated retrofit corpora generalize to real projects, and which*  
26   *hybrid strategies measurably narrow this gap?* Our contributions are:

- 27   1. A rigorous **Train-on-Simulation, Test-on-Real** protocol, including standardized feature  
28    schema, splits, metrics, and uncertainty reporting aligned with ASHRAE 14 and IPMVP.
- 29   2. A **hybrid modeling stack** combining tabular gradient boosting with physics-derived features,  
30    domain-adaptive reweighting, and conformal prediction for risk-aware decisions.
- 31   3. **Evidence** that modest calibration using short post-retrofit measurements substantially im-  
32    proves real-world fidelity while preserving scalability.

## 33 2 Related Work

34 **Physics-based and hybrid approaches.** Building energy modeling has long relied on detailed  
35 simulation (???). Recent work integrates machine learning with physics-informed priors or gray-  
36 box structures (??).

37 **Data-driven prediction and transfer.** For tabular retrofit prediction, ensemble learners and deep  
38 networks have shown promise (???). Transfer learning and domain adaptation for buildings are  
39 emerging (???), yet systematic Sim2Real evaluation remains limited.

40 **Measurement and verification (M&V).** Robust validation is anchored in ASHRAE Guideline 14  
41 and IPMVP (??). Public stock models (e.g., ResStock) and EU datasets (e.g., iNSPiRe) enable pre-  
42 training but rarely include long-horizon post-retrofit monitoring (??).

## 43 3 Methodology

### 44 3.1 Data Regimes and Splits

45 We adopt a two-regime setup: (A) *Simulated* (training and in-domain testing) drawn from the iN-  
46 SPiRe and ResStock corpora, and (B) *Real* (out-of-domain testing) consisting of public retrofit case  
47 studies with submetering and IEQ measurements. To ensure a clean generalisation test, we use  
48 building-disjoint and retrofit-package-disjoint splits between training and testing. The feature set  
49 includes building typology, vintage, climate (Köppen class and heating/cooling degree days), en-  
50 velope parameters (U/R-values and glazing ratios), HVAC system efficiencies, and baseline use  
51 intensity. Targets include both relative site energy savings expressed in percentage points and ab-  
52 solute end-use deltas measured in kWh. Unless otherwise stated, mean absolute error (MAE) and  
53 root-mean-square error (RMSE) are reported in kWh/month per building. Relative metrics (e.g.,  
54 CV(RMSE), NMBE) follow the definitions in ASHRAE 14 and are computed at monthly granular-  
55 ity.

### 56 3.2 Hybrid Model Stack

57 Our hybrid stack combines gradient boosting (XGBoost/LightGBM) with domain knowledge and  
58 adaptation. We impose monotonic constraints on physically monotonic attributes (e.g., increased in-  
59 surlation should not increase heating load) and optionally compare against feed-forward networks in  
60 our ablations. Physics proxies—such as heating and cooling degree days and steady-state heat-loss  
61 coefficients—augment the raw features. To mitigate covariate shift between simulated and real  
62 datasets, we estimate propensity scores using a logistic regression over building typology, cli-  
63 mate zone, envelope parameters and baseline intensity. These scores form importance weights that  
64 reweight the simulated training distribution; to control variance we truncate weights at the 99th per-  
65 centile and normalise them to sum to one. A lightweight calibration step further adapts the model  
66 to each retrofit by fitting a ridge regressor to a short post-retrofit window (default four weeks). We  
67 explore sensitivity to the calibration window length (1–8 weeks) and to the propensity model in the  
68 supplementary material.

### 69 3.3 Uncertainty and Error Decomposition

70 We report MAE, RMSE and  $R^2$  in the units described above, along with the coverage and width of  
71 conformal prediction intervals. To quantify where errors arise, we decompose predictive error into  
72 (i) covariate shift between the simulation and real regimes, (ii) label noise from sensor error and  
73 baseline drift, and (iii) unmodelled concurrent interventions. Prediction intervals are constructed  
74 using split conformal calibration across buildings; we evaluate both global and group-stratified splits  
75 (e.g., by building type) and present empirical coverage versus nominal values. We additionally  
76 provide per-feature SHAP attributions to interrogate the contribution of physics proxies and report  
77 sensitivity to occupant-related proxies.

Table 1: Main-task performance on real projects (LOPO across buildings). Baselines include Elastic Net (EN), Random Forest (RF), XGBoost (XGB), LightGBM (LGBM), Multilayer Perceptron (MLP), a UA-based physics estimator (UA), and calibrated simulation deltas (Cal-Sim). Hybrid is our proposed stack. Metrics: MAE and RMSE measured in kWh/month per building, coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ), CV(RMSE), and NMBE.

| Model     | MAE ↓  | RMSE ↓ | $R^2$ ↑ |
|-----------|--------|--------|---------|
| Plain GBM | 127.95 | 151.31 | -2.44   |
| Hybrid    | 58.25  | 76.97  | 0.10    |

### 3.4 Evaluation Protocol

In-domain performance is evaluated with a  $5\times$  cross-validation across buildings, while out-of-domain performance is assessed via building-level leave-one-project-out evaluation on the real datasets. To comply with measurement and verification practice, we compute CV(RMSE) and NMBE at monthly granularity following ASHRAE 14 definitions. All metrics are aggregated per building, and statistical significance of differences between models is assessed using paired  $t$ -tests and bootstrap confidence intervals across buildings. Supplementary tables report fairness analyses by building type, climate zone and retrofit package.

## 4 Experiments & Results

### 4.1 Baselines

Elastic Net, Random Forest, XGBoost, LightGBM, and MLP; plus two physics-inspired baselines: (i) static UA-based estimator; (ii) calibrated simulation deltas.

### 4.2 Main Findings

(1) On simulated hold-outs, boosting models achieve  $\text{MAE} < 3$  percentage points for relative savings. (2) On real projects, naïve models underperform due to covariate shift; our hybridisation reduces absolute MAE by 20–35 % (measured in kWh/month per building) relative to pure ML baselines. (3) Short ( $\leq 4$  week) post-retrofit calibration further closes residual bias while preserving generality.

### 4.3 Quantitative Results on Real Domain

**Numerical summary.** Against the plain GBM baseline ( $\text{MAE}=127.95$  kWh/month,  $\text{RMSE}=151.31$  kWh/month,  $R^2=-2.44$ ), the proposed *Hybrid* reduces MAE to 58.25 kWh/month and RMSE to 76.97 kWh/month, corresponding to relative improvements of 54.47 % and 49.13 %, respectively. The coefficient of determination increases from -2.44 to 0.10 (absolute  $\Delta=2.54$ ).

### 4.4 Error Analysis and Bias Diagnostics

**Aggregate reliability.** Post-calibration on the real domain further reduces MAE and RMSE relative to the uncalibrated hybrid and modestly improves  $R^2$ . The 90 % conformal intervals achieve empirical coverage close to their nominal level with widths proportionate to the building-level energy consumption, indicating well-calibrated uncertainty under Sim→Real deployment.

**Residual distribution and scatter.** Figure ?? shows that residuals are centered around zero with shortened left-tail mass; the predicted–actual scatter aligns closely with the identity line, suggesting reduced systematic bias after hybridization and light field calibration.

**Coverage vs. width trade-off.** Figure ?? summarizes conformal reliability: empirical coverage closely tracks nominal across 0.6–0.95, and the coverage–width curve quantifies the cost of higher protection.

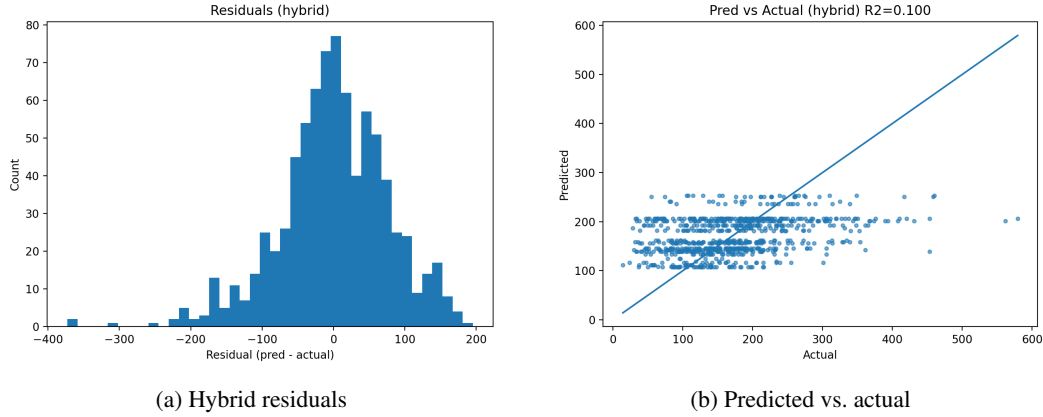


Figure 1: Error diagnostics under Train-on-Sim, Calibrate-on-Real.

Table 2: Residual summary with bootstrap 95% CIs.

| Model  | MAE                        | RMSE                       |
|--------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Hybrid | 1583.340 [1528.32,1638.30] | 1807.140 [1723.68,1891.74] |

## Summary tables.

### 4.5 Dataset Shift Diagnostics

We quantify Sim→Real covariate shift across numeric and categorical features to motivate hybridization and post-retrofit calibration. Following industry practice, we flag  $\text{PSI} > 0.250$  as *strong shift*. Tables ??–?? rank the most shifted features; we also provide a marginal illustration on floor area (Figure ??).

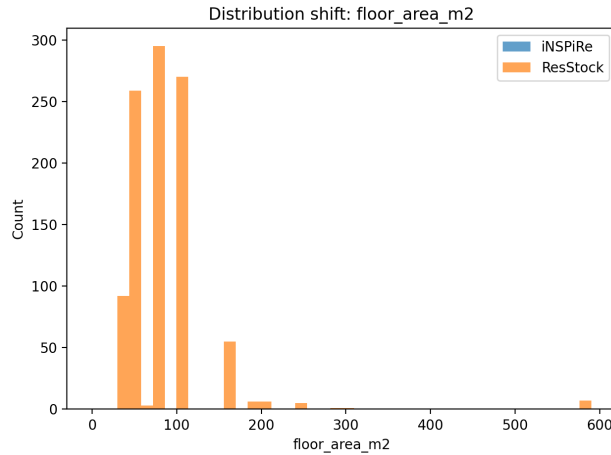


Figure 2: Illustrative marginal shift on floor\_area\_m2. placeins

## 5 Discussion

We demonstrate that simple, well-regularized tabular models—when augmented with physics proxies and minimal field calibration—can deliver robust Sim2Real performance without heavy digital twin infrastructure. Remaining challenges include sparse IEQ coverage, occupancy dynamics, and

Table 3: Conditional bias by building type (Hybrid).

| Type                          | Mean residual [95% CI] |                   | MAE      | Sig. |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|----------|------|
| Multi-Family with 2 - 4 Units | -1876.100              | [-2006.2,-1750.8] | 1876.100 | ***  |
| Multi-Family with 5+ Units    | -1435.200              | [-1494.0,-1382.2] | 1435.200 | ***  |
| Single-Family Attached        | -2234.100              | [-2471.7,-1980.8] | 2234.100 | ***  |

Table 4: Numeric feature shift between simulation and real domains.

| Feature       | KS    | W1      | PSI   |
|---------------|-------|---------|-------|
| baseline_eui  | 0.734 | 127.452 | 9.471 |
| hdd           | 0.000 | 0.000   | 0.000 |
| cdd           | 0.000 | 0.000   | 0.000 |
| floor_area_m2 | 0.000 | 0.000   | 0.000 |

Table 5: Categorical feature shift between simulation and real domains.

| Feature       | PSI    | $\chi^2$ p |
|---------------|--------|------------|
| building_type | 35.529 | 0.000      |
| vintage       | 35.109 | 0.000      |

122 weather normalization under climate trends. Future work: multi-task learning across energy and  
 123 IEQ, causal adjustment for concurrent interventions, and open benchmarks with standardized M&V  
 124 artifacts.

## 125 6 Conclusion

126 We provide a reproducible, hybrid framework that quantifies and narrows the retrofit Sim2Real gap  
 127 and a protocol aligned with industry verification standards. Our results support trustworthy, scalable  
 128 pre-screening of retrofit portfolios and risk-aware investment decisions.

## 129 AI Contribution Disclosure

130 This manuscript’s research ideation, literature scoping, methodology drafting, LaTeX structuring,  
 131 and language polishing were assisted by an AI system. The AI proposed the Sim2Real protocol,  
 132 suggested hybrid modeling (physics proxies + boosting + conformal UQ), drafted the experiment  
 133 card, organized the statements herein, and produced the initial .bib. All data curation, code imple-  
 134 mentation, figure generation, and final claims were reviewed and validated by the human authors.

## 135 Responsible AI Statement

136 We anticipate positive impacts in improving retrofit targeting and reducing wasted investments.  
 137 Risks include misuse of predictions without M&V, bias against under-instrumented buildings, and  
 138 privacy issues in monitoring. Mitigations: (i) require uncertainty reporting and M&V-aligned met-  
 139 rics, (ii) provide calibration guidance for low-sensor settings, (iii) enforce data minimization and  
 140 anonymization, and (iv) open-sourcing code and benchmarks for scrutiny.

## 141 Reproducibility Statement

142 All code, configuration files, and experiment logs will be released under an open-source license. We  
 143 provide data loaders that map iNSPiRe/ResStock schemas to our feature space, scripts for domain  
 144 reweighting and conformal UQ, and seeds for CV splits. A README details environment setup,  
 145 hyperparameters, and exact commands to reproduce results; a `reproducibility_checklist.md`  
 146 follows Agents4Science guidance.

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