Chapter 3. Millimeter-wave, Terahertz, and Infrared Devices

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3.1 Introduction

Millimeter-wave and THz frequencies (f > 100 GHz) remain one of the most underdeveloped frequency ranges, even though the potential applications in remote sensing, spectroscopy, plasma diagnostics, and communications are obviously great. This is because the millimeter wave and far-infrared frequency range falls between two other frequency ranges in which conventional semiconductor devices are usually operated. One is the microwave frequency range, and the other is the near-infrared and optical frequency range. Semiconductor devices which utilize the classical diffusive transport of electrons, such as diodes and transistors, have a high frequency limit. This limit is set by the transient time and parasitic RC time constants. Currently, electron mobility and the smallest feature size which can be fabricated by lithography limit the frequency range to below several hundred GHz. Semiconductor devices based on quantum mechanical interband transitions, however, are limited to frequencies higher than those corresponding to the semiconductor energy gap, which is higher than 10 THz for most bulk semiconductors. Therefore, a large gap exists from 100 GHz to 10 THz in which very few devices are available.

Semiconductor quantum-effect devices (which can be loosely termed “artificial atoms”), including both vertically grown quantum-well structures and laterally confined mesoscopic devices, are human-made quantum mechanical systems in which the energy levels can be chosen by changing the sizes of the devices. Typically, the frequency corresponding to the intersubband transitions is in the millimeter-wave range (ΔE ~ 1-4 meV) for the lateral quantum-effective devices, and THz to infrared for the vertical quantum wells. It is therefore appealing to develop ultrahigh-frequency devices, such as radiation detectors and mixers, and THz and infrared lasers utilizing the intersubband transitions in these devices.

In addition to new physical concepts, novel technologies must also be developed to meet the challenges at these high frequencies. Conventional mechanically machined horn antennas integrated with waveguide cavities have been the workhorse at microwave and millimeter-wave frequencies since they were first implemented more than fifty years ago during World War II. Very high antenna gain and essentially perfect antenna efficiency can be achieved using these structures. However, they are expensive, bulky, and incompatible with arrays. In order to overcome these problems, new development has been made to use micromachining to fabricate the horn antenna structures.

In these structures, the active elements and their planar antennas are fabricated on a free-standing thin (~1 micron) SiN membrane, which is suspended over a silicon pyramidal horn that is formed by anisotropic etching, which is known as micromachining. The side walls of this micromachined structure can then be coated with gold to form a horn antenna. Compared to conventional waveguide horn antennas, this novel micromachined structure has several major advantages. It is easier to fabricate fine three-dimensional structures by using photolithography. Horn antennas with micron precision can be easily defined and inexpensively mass produced. This kind of antenna is made on Si or GaAs wafers and compatible with thin-film technology. Thus, active elements, such as RF and IF amplifiers, mixers and video detectors, local oscillators, and post-detection signal processors, can be integrated monolithically with the antenna structures to form monolithic transmitter/receiver systems. The micromachined antenna is light-weight and compact.
Chapter 3. Millimeter-wave, Terahertz, and Infrared Devices

3.2 Micromachined SIS Millimeter-wave Focal-plane Arrays

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Superconductor-insulator-superconductor (SIS) heterodyne receivers have been demonstrated to be the most sensitive receivers throughout 30-840 GHz frequency range. The challenge now in the SIS receiver technology is to develop focal-plane arrays to improve the efficiency of data acquisition. In order to achieve these goals, we are currently developing a novel scheme to couple the millimeter-wave and infrared signals to the superconducting devices by using a micromachined horn antenna and a planar antenna supported by a thin (~1 micron) membrane, as shown in Figure 1a. As stated in the introduction, this novel micromachined antenna structure can be

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146 RLE Progress Report Number 140
produced with a high precision using photolithography, and it can be utilized in focal-plane arrays, as shown in Figure 2b.

Following our recent success in developing single-element micromachined SIS receivers [see our previous publication in *Applied Physics Letters* 68: 1862 (1996)], we have designed and constructed a 3x3 focal-plane array with the center frequency around 200 GHz. The schematic of the structure is shown in Figure 2a, which includes a micromachined and mechanically machined horn array, the device wafer, and the dc and IF connection board. Preliminary measurements of the dc I-V characteristics showed good uniformity across the entire array. Figure 2b shows the I-V curves from seven SIS junctions in the array. The resistance variation of these junctions is within 5%. Our heterodyne mixing measurement on a center element yielded a receiver noise as low as 50 K (DSB) at 190 GHz with a 3 dB bandwidth of 25 GHz. This result is comparable to the best achieved from conventional waveguide SIS receivers. We are currently in the process of measuring both the video and heterodyne response of the entire focal-plane array. Our next step will be to integrate on-chip Josephson-junction local oscillators with the SIS mixers to form monolithic focal-plane arrays.

![Figure 2a](image1.png)

**Figure 2a.** Schematic of an array structure including a micromachined and machined horn array, the device wafer, and the dc and IF connection board.

![Figure 2b](image2.png)

**Figure 2b.** I-V curves of seven SIS junctions in the array.
3.3 Intersubband-transitions Lasers

3.3.1 Electrically Pumped THz Emitters using Quantum Wells

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Project Staff
Bin Xu, Professor Qing Hu, in collaboration with Dr. Michael R. Melloch

Semiconductor quantum wells are human-made quantum mechanical systems in which the energy levels can be designed and engineered to be of any value. Consequently, unipolar lasers based on intersubband transitions (electrons that make lasing transitions between subband levels within the conduction band) were proposed for long-wavelength sources as early as the 1970s. However, because of the great challenge in epitaxial material growth and the unfavorable fast nonradiative relaxation rate, unipolar intersubband-transition lasers (also called quantum-cascade lasers) at near-infrared (4-5 micron) and mid-infrared (8-11 micron) wavelengths were developed only recently at Bell Laboratories.

This achievement is remarkable, but the technique used in the original quantum-cascade lasers will not be directly applicable for the longer-wavelength THz range because of two major obstacles. First, the energy levels corresponding to THz frequencies (1 THz = 4 meV) are quite narrow, so the requirements for the design and fabrication of suitable quantum wells are demanding. Because of the narrow separation between subband levels, heating and hot-electron tunneling will have a much greater effect. Also, the small energy scales of THz photons make the detection and analysis of spontaneous emission (a crucial step toward developing lasers) quite difficult. Second and perhaps the most important, mode confinement, which is essential for any laser oscillation, is difficult at longer wavelengths. Conventional dielectric-waveguide confinement is not applicable because the evanescent field penetration, which is proportional to the wavelength and is on the order of several tens of microns, is much greater than the active gain medium of several microns.

We are currently developing intersubband-transition lasers based on our recent success in generating and detecting THz emission signals and on a novel mode confinement method using metallic waveguide structures.

Our MQW structure for THz emission is shown in Figure 3, in which the conduction band profile and the square of the wave functions were calculated self-consistently from Schrödinger and Poisson equations. The device is formed by a triple-well structure using GaAs/Al0.3Ga0.7As materials, as shown in the dashed box. This structure is essentially a three-level system (marked as E3, E2, and E1 in Figure 3; the level E1 is much higher in energy so it does not contribute to transport at low biases), which is required for any lasers. Because there is no recombination involved in unipolar intersubband lasers, electrons can be "reused" many times. Consequently, many identical triple-well modules can be cascade-connected, and the emission power and the mode confinement factor can be increased substantially.

Due to translational symmetry, design analysis needs to focus only on one module, provided there are no global space charges and high-field domains. The collector barrier (the one with a 2.0-nm thickness) is center δ-doped at approximately 10¹⁶/cm² to provide dynamic charges to assure a global charge neutrality. The radiative transition takes place between E3 and E2, with an energy separation of ΔE32 = 14 meV and an oscillator strength of f32 = 0.31 (using the effective mass in GaAs). Under the designed bias of 50 mV per module, the ground state E1 of a previous module is aligned with E3. Thus, the upper subband E3 can be selectively populated through resonant tunneling. The energy separation between E2 and E1 was designed to be 36 meV under the bias, which corresponds to the LO-phonon energy hωₐ₀ in GaAs. Once energetically allowed, the very fast LO-phonon scattering (with a time τ21 ≈ 1.4 ps) will rapidly depopulate the E2 level and establish a population inversion between E3 and E2.

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Chapter 3. Millimeter-wave, Terahertz, and Infrared Devices

Figure 3. Schematic of a three-level system based on a triple quantum-well structure. The radiation transition takes place between E₃ and E₂, and the fast LO-phonon emission keeps the level E₂ empty. The conduction-band profile and the square of the electron wavefunctions were calculated numerically from Schrödinger and Poisson equations.

The MQW structures were grown in the molecular-beam epitaxy (MBE) machine in the group of our collaborator Professor Michael R. Melloch at Purdue University. In order to verify the accuracy of our design calculations and to inspect the quality of quantum wells and interfaces, we performed an infrared absorption measurement with the result shown in Figure 4. The measurement was performed on a 80-module device (with a total of 240 quantum wells) at room temperature. A mid-infrared absorption peak is clearly seen at 110 meV, which is due to the intersubband transition from E₁ to E₄. The FWHM is only 7 meV, including a 4-meV instrumental linewidth. This narrow linewidth is an indication of the high quality and uniformity of the wells and interfaces. Furthermore, the measured E₁→E₄ transition frequency of 110 meV and the dipole moment of 14 Å (deduced from the area of the absorption peak) agreed quite well with the calculated values of 109 meV and 12 Å, indicating the accuracy of our calculations.

Using the emission measurement system shown in Figure 5, we resolved the emission spectra from many different MQW devices and at different biases. A representative one is shown in Figure 6. This result was obtained from a 10-module device using a metallic grating with a period of 10 micron for surface emission. At a bias of 0.55 V, which is slightly higher than the designed value (0.5 V for 10 modules), the emission spectrum exhibits two peaks at 26 meV and 40 meV. The FWHM for both peaks is approximately 5 meV (including a 4-meV instrumental linewidth). According to our simulation, the lower emission peak is due to the E₃→E₂ transition, and the higher one is due to the E₂→E₁ transition. One important conclusion that can be drawn from this spectrum is the relative subband populations. Similar to the absorption measurement discussed earlier, the area of an emission peak is proportional to the product of the oscillator strength and the upper-level electron population. Our calculation indicated that the two transitions E₁→E₂ and E₂→E₁ have comparable oscillator strengths (f₁₂ = 0.31 and f₂₁ = 0.27). In Figure 6, the area of the E₁→E₂ peak is approximately twice that of the E₂→E₁ peak, thus yielding an inverted population condition n₁ = 2n₂. We believe this to be the first observation of inverted populations in electrically

Figure 4. Infrared absorption measurement of a 80-module device, which was placed at room temperature. The absorption peak is due to the E₁→E₄ intersubband transition. The measured FWHM is 7 meV, including a 4-meV instrumental linewidth. The measured intersubband transition frequency (110 meV) and dipole moment (14 Å) agreed quite well with the calculated values of 109 meV and 12 Å.

In order to measure the intersubband THz emission and resolve its spectra, we constructed a set-up that included an external Fourier transform infrared spectrometer (FTIR) with a composite Si bolometer as its detector. The system’s schematic is shown in Figure 5. We have improved this system and perfected our measurement techniques so that THz emission measurements can be routinely performed on our emitters with output power levels of 1-10 nW.
3.3.2 Optically Pumped THz Emitters using Quantum Wells

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Compared to electrical pumping, optical pumping offers advantages of an easier design, a higher selectivity in pumping, and a separation of the pump and electrical bias. For THz emitters, easily available CO$_2$ lasers can be used as the pumping source. We
first designed a three-level system for THz emission. However, this structure showed an excessive heating when it is pumped by an intense CO\textsubscript{2} laser. In order to increase the emission efficiency and therefore the gain of the active medium, we have redesigned our optically pumped THz emitters based on a four-level system using coupled triple quantum wells, as shown in Figure 7. Electrons on the ground state E\textsubscript{1} can be pumped by a CO\textsubscript{2} laser to the E\textsubscript{4} level. By carefully engineering the scattering rates between subband levels by choosing subband energy separations and spatial locations, a population inversion between E\textsubscript{3} and E\textsubscript{2} can be achieved. It was estimated that a modal gain of approximately 100 cm\textsuperscript{-1} can be achieved at a 1-W average pump power level.

**Figure 7.** Schematic of a four-level system based on a coupled triple quantum-well structure. Electrons can be pumped from the E\textsubscript{1} to the E\textsubscript{4} level by a CO\textsubscript{2} laser. They then quickly relax to the E\textsubscript{3} level by LO-phonon scattering. Similarly, the electrons on the E\textsubscript{2} level can be emptied quickly to E\textsubscript{1} through LO-phonon scattering. THz emission is to take place between E\textsubscript{3} and E\textsubscript{2}.

### 3.3.3 Mid-infrared Quantum-cascade Lasers

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**Project Staff**
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High-power, compact mid-infrared (8-12 micron) lasers are very useful tools for remote sensing, end-point detection in dry etching processes, point-to-point communication, and night vision applications. Conventional laser diodes operating in this long wavelength range use narrow-gap lead-salt semiconductors, which require cryogenic operations, provide relatively low power levels, and have very limited frequency tunability. Recently developed quantum-cascade (QC) lasers based on intersubband transitions have shown much higher operating temperatures and a great frequency tunability. These features make them ideal for the above-mentioned applications. In this project, we are developing mid-infrared quantum-cascade lasers based on GaAs/AlGaAs quantum-well structures. Compared to the InGaAs/InAlAs materials used in the original quantum-cascade lasers developed at Bell Labs, the GaAs/AlGaAs system offers a much higher thermal conductivity (approximately a factor of 20 compared to InGaAs/InAlAs) and therefore a higher-power operation.

The core of our MQW structure is a tightly coupled double quantum well, in which three energy levels form the three-level lasing structure. These energy levels are shown in Figure 8. The lasing transition is to take place between E\textsubscript{3} and E\textsubscript{2}, with the energy separation approximately 120 meV, corresponding to 10-micron wavelength. The energy separation between E\textsubscript{2} and E\textsubscript{1} is designed to be approximately 36 meV, which is the energy of LO phonon in GaAs. Consequently, the energy level E\textsubscript{2} will be depopulated by very fast LO-phonon scattering (~ 0.2 ps). Our design of the MQW structures is aided by a numerical code that solves Shrödinger and Poisson equations self-consistently, and it includes the effect of band nonparabolicity to account for the much higher energy levels corresponding to infrared frequencies.
The superlattice structure sandwiching the active region serves the purpose of selective injection of electrons into the $E_3$ level, and selective removal of electrons from both $E_2$ and $E_1$ levels. By choosing the period of the superlattice properly, the Bragg reflection results in minigaps (transport forbidden) and minibands (transport allowed), as shown in both Figure 8 and Figure 9. The combination of the selective injection into $E_3$ and the fast removal from $E_2$ will assure an inverted population between these two levels. We calculated the dipole moment for the $E_3 \rightarrow E_2$ transition to be approximately 23 Å, which yields a modal gain of 480 cm$^{-1}$ for a doping concentration of $1.5 \times 10^{11}$/cm$^2$. Such a high level of gain is characteristic of the QC lasers in which the two subbands track each other in momentum, resulting in a large joint density of states.

We have fabricated an MQW structure consisting of 40 nominally identical structures as shown in Figure 8. We have performed emission measurements using the FTIR system shown in Figure 5. An emission spectrum with the narrowest linewidth is shown in Figure 10. The center frequency of 121 meV (corresponding to 10-micron wavelength) is what we designed for, and the FWHM linewidth is only 10.8 meV. This linewidth is comparable to the narrowest achieved at Bell Labs using InGaAs/InAlAs structures, and is an indication of the high interface quality and uniformity of our MQW structures. Currently, we are designing suitable cladding layers for mode confinement to achieve lasing.

### 3.4 Publications

#### 3.4.1 Journal Articles


3.4.2 Chapter in a Book


3.4.3 Conference Papers


3.4.4 Thesis
