Stretchable Semiconductor Technologies with High Areal Coverages and Strain-Limiting Behavior: Demonstration in High-Efficiency Dual-Junction GaInP/GaAs Photovoltaics

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Recent research has uncovered ways to build mechanically flexible or even stretchable electronic/optoelectronic systems with inorganic materials, including those, such as monocrystalline silicon and gallium arsenide, whose electrical performance and reliability characteristics in devices and circuits are well established, due to decades of work in the semiconductor industry[1–9]. The resulting classes of flexible/stretchable technologies exploit heterogeneous integration of high- and low-modulus inorganic and organic materials, respectively, to overcome design constraints set by the platforms used for traditional semiconductor components, i.e., planar, rigid and brittle semiconductor wafers.[10–17] Several concepts are now available for integrating micro- and nanoscale inorganic devices, often based on active materials in micro-/nanomembrane formats.[18] onto stretchable supports, to create opportunities in flexible display,[19–21] curvilinear digital cameras,[22–24] bio-integrated electronic monitors and therapeutic devices,[25–27] and many others. Mechanical designs that isolate strains associated with applied deformations away from brittle, inorganic constituent materials, to other components of the system are critically important. Most schemes involve some means to trade out-of-plane displacements of mechanically buckled structures, for in-plane relative motions of constituent devices.[28]

One advanced approach that builds on this idea exploits geometrically structured substrates, in configurations where the devices mount on raised islands and the interconnects between them buckle downward into separating trenches.[29] Here, the trench regions absorb most of the externally applied strains, whereas the top surfaces of the islands barely deform, resulting in minimal interfacial stresses transmitted to devices mounted on top. A key advantage, compared to other schemes, is the ability to maintain high areal coverages in active devices, for areas of application, such as photodetection and photovoltaics, where such layouts are important. Here, we present an elaboration on this scheme that not only further increases the degree of stretchability and the areal coverage, but also provides a natural form of strain-limiting behavior, to help avoid destructive effects of extreme deformations. Experimental and theoretical studies describe the underlying mechanics. Epitaxially grown, dual-junction GaInP/GaAs solar cells with microscale dimensions and ultrathin forms enable demonstrations in integrated stretchable photovoltaic modules with high power conversion efficiencies. The high performance enabled by dual-junction GaInP/GaAs micromeshes improves the chances for realistic use of these modules, compared to the previously reported single-junction counterparts.[29] In addition, the results demonstrate the versatility of the reported mechanics designs, by illustrating their compatibility with thick, brittle semiconductor devices.

Advanced designs in structured elastomeric substrates, as shown in Figure 1, involve relief in the form of raised islands with rectangular notches in the central regions of the four edges, to provide a surface for mounting interconnected arrays of microscale solar cells (micromeshes) in a manner that yields...
both strain isolation and strain-limiting behavior. Figure 1a presents a representative case of a poly(dimethylsiloxane) (PDMS) substrate formed by soft lithographic molding against a corresponding master defined by photolithography. For this example, the lateral dimensions of the islands are $\sim 500 \times 500 \, \mu m$, separated by trenches with widths $\sim 76 \, \mu m$. The notches $\sim 120 \times 60 \, \mu m$ accommodate the interconnects, in a way that maximizes their lengths (for large stretchability) while sacrificing minimal areal coverage and retaining space between islands, even at extreme levels of deformation. b) SEM image of this substrate in a biaxially stretched state. The relatively thin base layers in the regions of the trenches, compared to those in the islands regions, localize strain to the trenches. Furthermore, the strain in the islands decreases from bottom to top. These two effects result in minimal strains on the top surfaces of the islands, where the microcells are mounted. c,d) Optical microscopy images of the substrate in relaxed (c) and stretched (d) states. The latter image shows that stretching (in this case, overall applied strain of 54%) induces dimensional changes at the top surfaces of the islands (approximately $\sim 2\%$) that are much smaller than those at the trenches ($\sim 405\%$). e) FEM results of the distribution of maximum principal strain and the two components of the strain tensor at the top surfaces of adjacent islands. The computed elongations are $\sim 1.7\%$ and $416\%$ at the top surfaces and the trenches, respectively, for an overall applied strain of 54%. These results match well with the experiments.
substrate improves the overall stretch-ability by nearly three times compared to previous results, at similar levels of areal coverages of island regions. As shown in Figure 1c and d, such a substrate subjected to an overall tensile strain of –54% undergoes elongations (–40.5%) in the trenches that are much higher (>200 times) than those at the islands (approximately –2%). The corresponding elongations obtained by the finite element method (FEM) are 416% and 1.7%, which compare well with the experimental results. We expect that the small negative strain could be reduced to zero through appropriate selection of the heights of islands.

The notches offer another, and qualitatively distinct, advantage: they provide space for the interconnects even when the substrate is deformed to an extent that brings the top surface edges of adjacent islands into physical contact. This type of strain-limiting behavior avoids damage that would occur to the interconnects in otherwise similar designs that do not include the notches. Figure 2a shows, for example, bending of a structured substrate by wrapping on a cylinder with radius of 3.6 mm. The image clearly illustrates that the outer edges of the islands in this case touch each other but the edges of notches do not, thus securing spaces for interconnects. The FEM results in Figure 2b indicate that the top surfaces of the islands are relatively flat and experience low strain (approximately –0.5%). The other frames of Figure 2 show SEM images and FEM results for various other states of deformation. A substrate under uniaxial strain of 18% appears in Figure 2c. The trenches elongate by 139% along the direction of stretching, then they contract by 71% in the orthogonal direction due to the Poisson effect. As with the case of Figure 2a, even though the width of the trenches reduces to very small dimensions (~22 µm), the lateral space for interconnects is still relatively large (~142 µm) due to the presence of the notches, thereby preventing breakage from excessive strain. The FEM results as shown in Figure 2d for this case indicate strains of 154% and –64% in the trenches along and perpendicular to the stretching direction. Figure 2e and f show an SEM image and FEM results for outward bending by wrapping on a cylinder with a radius of 1.5 mm. The base of the substrate and region near the bottom of the islands absorb the bending strains, while keeping the top surface of islands flat with minimal strain. Here, the strain computed by FEM is ~1.7% at the top surface of the islands, which is much smaller than that at the trenches (214%).

Figure 2. SEM images and FEM results for PDMS substrates with surface relief in the form of notched microcells. a) SEM image and b) FEM results for a substrate bent inward by wrapping on a cylinder with radius of 3.6 mm. c) Uniaxial stretching (18%) results in narrowing of the widths of the trenches (~71%) in the direction perpendicular to the stretching, due to the Poisson effect. d) FEM results of the distribution of strain at the top surface of the PDMS, for uniaxial stretching. These computations show 154% elongation and 64% narrowing in the trenches along and perpendicular to the direction of applied strain of 18%, respectively. e) SEM image and f) FEM results for a substrate bent outward by wrapping onto a cylinder with a radius of 1.5 mm. The strain at the top surface of the island (~1.7%) is much smaller than that (~214%) at the trenches. g) SEM image and h) FEM results for a substrate twisted by 60° over a length of 3.46 mm. The effects of strain isolation are apparent.

As a module demonstration, we exploited these optimized substrates as supports for interconnected arrays of dual-junction GaInP/GaAs microcells (total thickness ~6.14 µm). The fabrication begins with defining lateral dimensions of notched microcells (size: ~460 µm × 460 µm, notch: ~160 µm × 60 µm) from epitaxially layers grown on GaAs wafers, and...
then etching them to expose n and p contacts. Releasing the cells by eliminating an underlying sacrificial layer in the epitaxial stack, and then transfer-printing arrays of the microcells onto a plastic substrate prepares them for electrical and mechanical interconnection into open mesh geometries. (See details in the Experimental Section) Aligned transfer printing delivers the resulting open mesh structure onto a prestrained structural PDMS and relaxing the prestrain completes the process. Figure 3a and b present top and side views of each unit cell, showing a notched dual-junction GaInP/GaAs microcell mounted on a PDMS island. The areal coverage of the devices is 67% in the relaxed state. Figure 3c and d show optical microscopy images of the completed module from top and side views, respectively. The module is stretchable up to 60% biaxially as shown in Figure 3e. The arc-shaped interconnects, which buckle down into the recessed trenches upon relaxation of the pre-strain applied to the PDMS during the fabrication, c,d) Optical microscopy image of a corresponding region of a module viewed from top (c) and side (d) in the as-fabricated state. The areal coverage of the microcells is 67%. e) Similar region of the same device, in a state of 60% overall biaxial strain. The interconnects move to accommodate fractions of strains of up to 45% and 46% at the top and bottom surfaces, respectively. The neutral mechanical plane configures the interconnects helps to ensure that these strains are low, in both cases, j,k) The profiles of buckled interconnect in experiments and analytical model, which agree very well.

\[ \varepsilon = \frac{8y \sin \frac{\alpha}{2} K(\sin \frac{\alpha}{2})}{E w_{\text{trench}} + (1 + \varepsilon) w_{\text{trench}} + 2w_{\text{notch}}} \]

where \( y \) is the distance to the neutral mechanical plane of interconnect, \( w_{\text{notch}}, \) \( w_{\text{trench}}, \) and \( w_{\text{island}} \) are the widths of notch, trench, and island, respectively, and \( K(k) = \frac{1}{b} \int_{0}^{\pi/2} \frac{d\phi}{\sqrt{1 - k^2 \sin^2 \phi}} \) is the complete elliptic integral of the first kind, where \( \alpha \) is the maximum rotation angle of interconnect determined by

\[ 2 E \left( \sin \frac{\alpha}{2} \right) K \left( \sin \frac{\alpha}{2} \right) = 1 + \frac{w_{\text{trench}} + 2w_{\text{notch}}}{E w_{\text{island}} + (1 + \varepsilon) w_{\text{trench}} + 2w_{\text{notch}}} \]

and \( E(k) = \int_{0}^{\pi/2} \sqrt{1 - k^2 \sin^2 \phi} d\phi \) is the complete elliptic integral of the second kind. For \( w_{\text{notch}} = 60 \mu m, w_{\text{trench}} = 76 \mu m, w_{\text{island}} = 500 \mu m, \) and \( \varepsilon = 60\%, \) the maximum strain in the Au layer of interconnect is 0.36%. For the corresponding case of square islands without notches, at the same areal coverage and level of stretchability, \( w_{\text{trench}} = 111 \mu m, w_{\text{island}} = 500 \mu m, \) and \( \varepsilon = 60\%, \) the maximum strain in the Au layer of interconnect is 0.46%. These results are consistent with corresponding outcomes from FEM in Figure 3f-i (i.e., 0.36% and 0.47% for notched and square island designs, respectively).

A notable feature of the mechanics is that, unlike classical Euler-type buckling, the interconnect takes on a non-sinusoidal shape due to extremely large levels of compression. The modified buckling profile can be obtained analytically, according to the parametric equation

\[ x = \mathcal{X}(\psi), \quad y = \mathcal{Y}(\psi). \]
characteristics of a completed dual-junction GaInP/GaAs microcells in a notched geometry. The short-circuit current density ($J_{sc}$) and open-circuit voltage ($V_{oc}$) are 9.8 mA/cm$^2$ and 2.28 V, respectively. The energy conversion efficiency ($\eta$) and fill factor (FF) are 19% and 0.85, respectively. Since the reflectance is ~28% of the incident light, we expect that the efficiency can be improved to ~25% with an optimized ARC. The notched island design implemented with 2 J solar microcells offers considerably higher conversion efficiency, in addition to improved degrees of stretchability, compared to single-junction microcell systems reported previously.$^{[29,30]}$

The concepts reported here have the potential to be useful for a range of other applications, due to their applicability to many classes of semiconductor devices, from light emitting diode displays/lighting systems to digital imagers, integrated circuits and others.

**Experimental Section**

**Structured PDMS:** The structured PDMS substrates were formed by casting and curing prepolymer to a silicone elastomer (10:1 mixture of base and curing agent, Sylgard 184, Dow Corning) against a photolithographically defined pattern of SU8 (~350 μm) on a silicon wafer.$^{[31]}$ Release of the cured PDMS yielded structured substrates with rectangle notches (each ~120 μm × 60 μm) on each sidewall. The notched islands have dimensions of ~500 μm × 500 μm, separated by recessed trenches with widths ~76 μm and depths ~350 μm. The thickness of the underlying base is ~160 μm, defined by weighing the amount of prepolymer applied to the patterned SU8.

**Fabricating Solar Microcells:** Fabrication of dual-junction, GaInP/GaAs solar microcells began with sequential chemical wet etching of the GaInP and GaAs layers of a specialized epitaxial stack on a GaAs wafer with hydrochloric acid (HCl, 37%, Fisher Scientific) and phosphoric acid (H$_3$PO$_4$, 85%, Fisher Scientific), respectively. Details of the epitaxial stack layout appear in the SI. Sequential electron beam deposition of Ti (20 nm) and Au (60 nm) on the n- and p-regions of the microcells formed Ohmic contacts. Spin-cast positive photoresist encapsulated the defined microcells completely. Photolithography defined holes around the periphery of the microcells to expose the underlying sacrificial layer. Chemical etching removed the sacrificial layer; the photoresist protected the microcells from unwanted etching during this process.

**Transfer Printing and Interconnection:** Transfer printing with a PDMS stamp (Sylgard 184, Dow Corning) delivered the microcells onto a layer of epoxy (0.5 μm, SU8, Microchem) spin cast on a film of poly(methylmethacrylate) (1 μm, PMMA) on a carrier wafer. A bilayer of Ti (20 nm) and Au (300 nm) patterned on a film of SU8 (0.5 μm) with openings in the n- and p-contact regions provided series interconnects between the microcells. Spin casting another layer of SU8 (1 μm) on top as an encapsulant located the Ti/Au near the neutral mechanical plane. See the SI for more detailed discussion of the configurations of the interconnects. Reactive ion etching (CS-1701, March, 150 mTorr, 150 W, O$_2$ –20 sccm, 50 min) of the SU8 layer through a patterned etch mask of SiO$_2$ formed an open mesh structure of islands and bridges on the carrier wafer. Another transfer printing step lifted the interconnected mesh of GaInP/GaAs solar microcells after dissolving the underlying layer of SU8.

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**Figure 4.** Electrical characteristics of a stretchable photovoltaic module consisting of notched GaInP/GaAs dual-junction microcells on a PDMS substrate with similarly notched relief designs. a) Internal quantum efficiency (IQE), external quantum efficiency (EQE), and reflectance of a representative cell, without anti-reflection coating (ARC). The EQE and reflectance are ~68% and ~28%, respectively. The IQE is ~95%, for both top (GaInP) and bottom (GaAs) junctions, indicating that the structure makes efficient use of absorbed light. b) Current–voltage characteristics. The short circuit current density ($J_{sc}$), open circuit voltage ($V_{oc}$), fill factor (FF), and conversion efficiency ($\eta$) are 9.8 mA/cm$^2$, 2.28 V, 0.85, and 19%, respectively. Improvements the short-circuit current and conversion efficiency are possible with the addition of an ARC up to estimated values of ~12 mA/cm$^2$ and ~25%, respectively.
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PMMA in acetone. Depositing layers of Ti (5 nm) and SiO$_2$ (30 nm) on the back surface of the mesh prepared the system for bonding onto a prestrained, structured substrate of PDMS, treated with UV ozone to create –OH groups for the required surface chemistry. An assembly of translation and rotation stages, and an optical microscope enabled accurate alignment.

Electrical Characteristics: The EQE and IQE were measured with an automated spectroradiometric measurement system (OL 750 Optronic Laboratories) by exposing a solar cell (~2 mm × 2 mm) to monochromatic light. The I–V data from the solar microcells were evaluated under a 1000 W full spectrum solar simulator (Oriel, 91192) using a DC sourcemeter (model 2400, Keithley).

Supporting Information

Supporting Information is available from the Wiley Online Library or from the author.

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