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Chudpooti, N, Savvides, G, Duangrit, N et al. (2022) Harmonized Rapid Prototyping of Millimeter-Wave Components using Additive and Subtractive Manufacturing. IEEE Transactions on Components, Packaging and Manufacturing Technology, 12 (7). pp. 1241-1248. ISSN: 2156-3950

<https://doi.org/10.1109/TCPMT.2022.3181886>

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Harmonized Rapid Prototyping of Millimeter-Wave Components using Additive and Subtractive Manufacturing

Journal:	<i>Transactions on Components, Packaging and Manufacturing Technology</i>
Manuscript ID	TCPMT-2022-041
Manuscript topic:	ELECTRONICS MANUFACTURING
Date Submitted by the Author:	28-Jan-2022
Complete List of Authors:	Chudpooti, Nonchanutt; King Mongkut's University of Technology North Bangkok, Faculty of Applied Science Savvides, Giorgos; University of Leeds, School of Electronic and Electrical Engineering Duangrit, Nattapong; Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna, Faculty of Engineering; Akkaraekthalin, Prayoot; King Mongkut's University of Technology North Bangkok, Electrical and Computer Engineering; Robertson, Ian; University of Leeds, School of Electronic and Electrical Engineering Somjit, Nutapong; University of Leeds, Institute of Microwaves and Photonics
Keywords:	Millimeter-wave technology, substrate integrated waveguide, additive and subtractive manufacturing

Harmonized Rapid Prototyping of Millimeter-Wave Components using Additive and Subtractive Manufacturing

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Abstract— In this paper, a harmonized fabrication and assembly process combining additive and subtractive manufacturing is introduced for the rapid manufacture of millimeter-wave components, especially those using hollow substrate integrated waveguide (HSIW). HSIW has been shown to have some significant advantages for millimeter-wave communications, radar and sensing systems, but its fabrication can be challenging. To pattern the metallic layers that form the top and bottom HSIW walls, as well as other structures such as microstrip lines and landing pads for integrated circuits and passive components, a subtractive fabrication process using a water-jet laser cutter was employed. To fabricate the dielectric substrate using low-cost Acrylonitrile Butadiene Styrene (ABS), with cavities for the waveguides, a Stratasys PolyJet 3D printer (Objet1000) was used. The HSIW components were then assembled using commercially-available through-substrate copper transitions, completely eliminating the process of through-substrate via-hole formation and metallization. The manufacturing techniques conventionally used for these vias are generally expensive and intricate at millimeter-wave frequencies. Therefore, the proposed fabrication and assembly process in this paper decreases the overall fabrication cost and complexity, and it is shown that this is achieved without compromising the performance of the millimeter-wave HSIW components. The measurement results show that a propagation loss of 13.55 dB/m (0.01355 dB/mm) is achieved for the first HSIW prototype, which is believed to be among the lowest propagation losses ever reported at these frequencies. The proposed harmonized fabrication and assembly technique has also a strong potential, by combining the advantages of additive and subtractive manufacturing techniques, to realize a new class of millimeter-wave components with the possibility of manufacturing conformal and flexible component shapes, based on the materials used.

Index Terms— Millimeter wave technology, substrate integrated waveguide, additive manufacturing, subtractive manufacturing.

This work was supported in part by the King Mongkut's University of Technology North Bangkok under contract KMUTNB-64-KNOW-44, and in part by the Engineering and Physical Science Research Council under Grant EP/S016813/1 and Grant EP/N010523/1.

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I. INTRODUCTION

THE 3D printing technology, also known as additive manufacturing (AM), is defined as the development of an arbitrary 3D shape, by building layer upon layer [1]. Specifically, material jetting [2]-[3] offers the best printing accuracy and resolutions when compared with fused deposition modelling (FDM). This technique uses a nozzle head to drop the liquid photopolymer onto a plate. The photopolymer materials are cured by UV light to create 3D parts from CAD models with a fully automated process. Advancements in 3D printing technology have offered the benefit to develop fast and low-cost prototypes. It has replaced the time consuming and costly methods of production and manufacturing, like the computer numerical control (CNC), molding or casting. In the case of rapid prototyping and medium volume production, the 3D printing technology is an excellent alternative [4]. According to [5], it is a printing process widely used to produce mechanical and electronic devices, even for high-frequency electronics ranging from a few MHz to optical regimes [6]-[10]. More specifically, it is being used in many sectors like medical, personal healthcare, dentistry, consumer goods and wireless communications [11], [13]-[16]. AM processes have been extensively used recently in the development of microwave, millimeter-wave, and even terahertz devices. Some examples include the design and prototyping of antennas, waveguides, filters and many other functional RF devices [6]-[8], [11], [17]-[22]. The authors in [17] have designed and fabricated a microwave rectangular waveguide (RWG), operating in the Ku-band, by using a FDM 3D printing process with Polylactic Acid (PLA) filament. The internal part of the waveguide is metal liquid filled. The authors achieved an attenuation constant better than 1.29 dB/m and demonstrated a low cost and high performance RWG. The authors in [16], fabricated a 3D printed dielectric lens for a slot antenna, that enhances the total radiated power. In [23], a 3D printed flexible antenna is demonstrated that combines Acrylonitrile Butadiene Styrene (ABS) and PLA filaments and is compact in size and light weight. The 3D printing process gave the added benefit of building flexible devices since many different materials can be mixed and used by 3D printing machines.

In contrast to additive manufacturing, subtractive manufacturing (SM) is the process of cutting material away, using methods of grinding, cutting, or drilling, to form a 3D

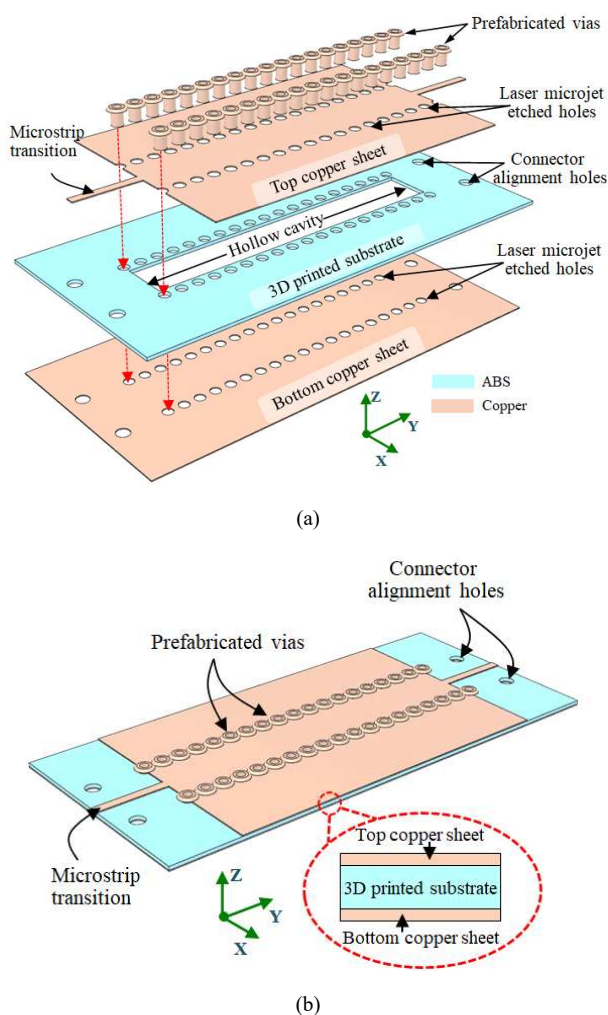


Fig. 1. 3D geometry of HSIW : (a) before assembly and (b) after assembly.

shape. The process could be performed manually or by computer numerical control (CNC). In an automated CNC process, the machine can perform fabrication based on data from CAD, with minimal human assistance, or in many cases without user interaction. The user may need to consider the feeding rate and the cutting speed of the material to set the fabrication settings on the machine before starting the process. In general, SM process are used typically in prototyping where traditional manufacturing methods like molding and casting are not able to provide the required precision and fabrication tolerance. Newer methods of laser and water laser cutting methods are more efficient and able to process harder materials. The SM manufacturing processes have been also widely used in manufacturing many high-frequency components from RF to even some millimeter-wave devices [12], [24]-[29]. The authors in [26], [29] have built microwave sensors by using subtractive manufacturing with a LPKF ProtoLaser machine. The designed microwave sensors achieved high accuracy and can be integrated to industrial and biomedical systems. In [29], instead of building an SIW by using traditional PCB methods, the authors used milling and drilling to cut smooth and precise copper sheets to form an empty SIW, eliminating all dielectric losses. In general, the subtractive manufacturing methods used

in these devices, have provided a precise and accurate cutting that enhance the performance of millimeter-wave and THz devices.

These previous research works are generally based on only either additive or subtractive manufacturing. In this paper, a harmonized fabrication technique combining both AM and SM to fabricate high performance microwave and millimeter-wave components is introduced. To demonstrate the coordinated fabrication process, a HSIW transmission line operating from 21-31 GHz was fabricated and characterized, with a primary interest in signal transmission losses. The proposed harmonized fabrication technique combines the advantages from both additive and subtractive manufacturing, i.e., rapid device prototyping and ease of fabrication with fully automated processes. The harmonized fabrication also completely removes the need for the chemical processes generally required for conventional material etching and metallization, such as photolithography and electroplating, which require toxic chemicals and experienced users to operate the process. Moreover, the commercially-available vertical through-substrate copper transitions were used during the assembly process as electrical connections of the patterned metallic layers on top and bottom of the 3D-printed substrate. This process completely eliminates the traditional through-substrate etching and via hole metallization processes, introducing superior cost effectiveness, ease of fabrication and fabrication reliability.

II. DESIGN AND GEOMETRY

The geometrical structure of the HSIW consist of four parts. These are, a top and a bottom copper sheet, a dielectric substrate and prefabricated copper rivets, all shown in Fig. 1. The top and bottom copper sheets represent the waveguide horizontal walls. The copper sheets have a height of 0.15 mm and are supplied by Goodfellow [30]. Between the copper sheets, there is a dielectric ABS substrate, that is hollow in the middle; the hollow dielectric substrate minimizes the dielectric losses and so contributes to a lower propagation loss. Some commercially available copper rivets from Fortex [31], are used to attach the aforementioned layers together and these represent the vertical metallic walls of the waveguide. The prefabricated copper rivets are pressed with a mechanical PCB through hole plating (THP) method also supplied by Fortex [31], in order to bind the three layers (copper sheets and dielectric) together.

It should be noted that this assembly step can be performed using a lamination technique, such as those used for large area multilayer PCBs in the mass production of consumer products. Frequencies in the 26-40 GHz range are already widely used in 5G systems, employing quite conventional transmission-line components fabricated on these traditional laminate materials. For 6G systems, it is likely that so-called Terahertz frequencies will be used (over 100 GHz) and then the dielectric losses become much more of a problem and the HSIW can offer significant advantages. The designed HSIW has been simulated in the commercially available Electromagnetic (EM) solver CST Studio [32]. For measurement purposes, the HSIW is matched to 50- Ω microstrip feed lines, as shown by the geometry in Fig. 1.

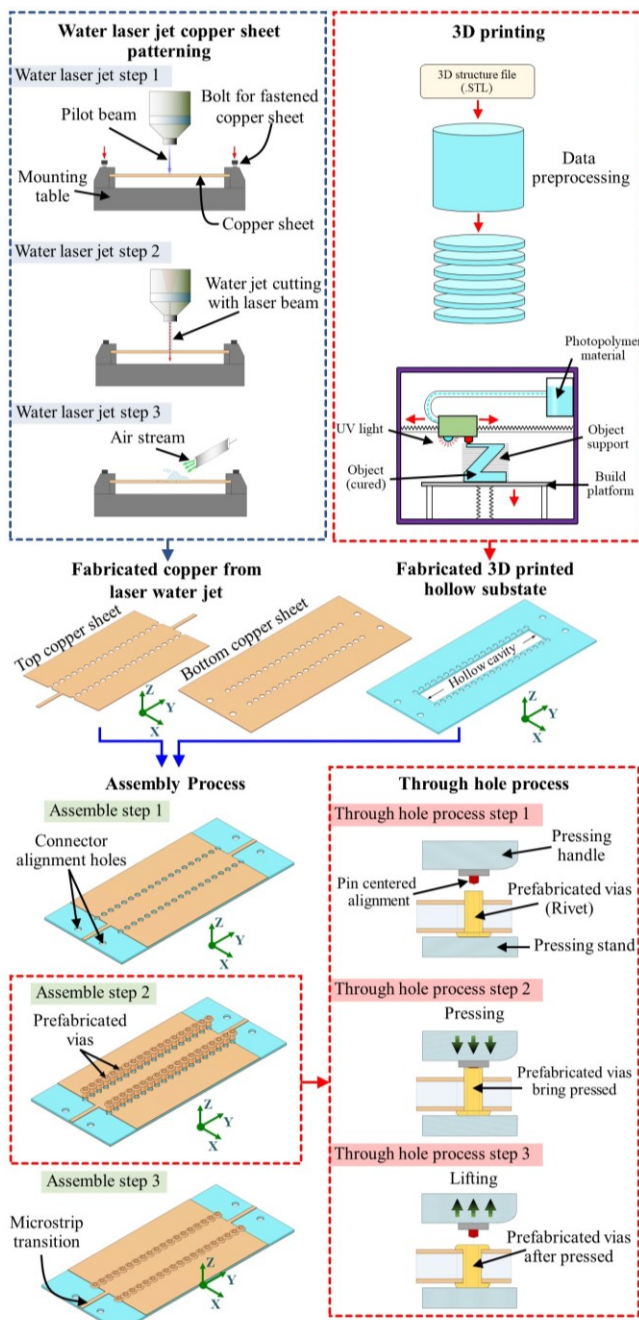


Fig. 2. Process flow for 3D printed substrate, top and bottom copper sheet patterning and HSIW integration process.

III. FABRICATION AND ASSEMBLY

All the HSIW parts were fabricated in-house at the University of Leeds National Facility for Innovative Robotics, using a Synova MCS 300 Laser MicroJet® Cutter [33] and a Stratasys Objet 1000 PolyJet 3D printer. The processing of the copper sheets and dielectric substrate fabrication are now described.

A. Copper Sheet Fabrication

The copper sheets, supplied by Goodfellow [30], were patterned using the laser cutter. The Synova MCS 300 has an

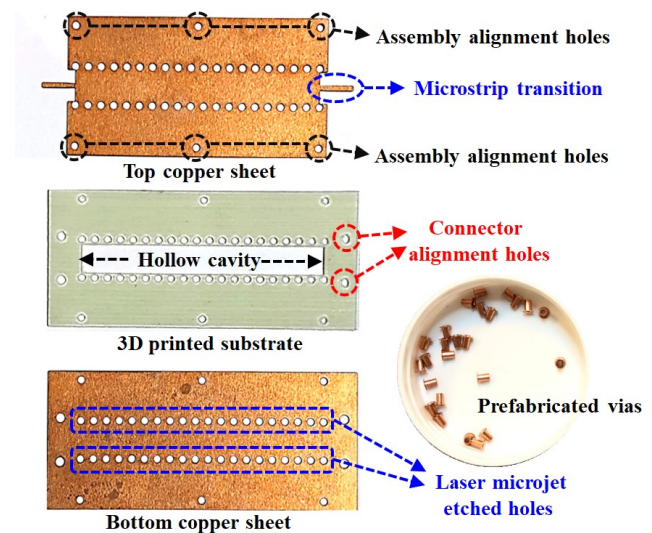


Fig. 3. Fabricated HSIW prototype before assembly, which consists of the top copper sheet, 3D printed substrate, the bottom copper sheet and prefabricated vias.

emitted power up to 100 W and water pressure up to 500 bar and is powerful enough to process metals like super alloys, aluminum, copper, stainless steel, nickel, titanium, etc. It also provides high precision cutting, with a beam diameter up to 30 μm . The accuracy of the machine is ± 1 micron with repeatability ± 1 micron. The laser cutter operates by using a jet of deionized and filtered water to guide the laser beam via total internal reflection, helping to cool the sample and remove debris. With the laser beam having minimum losses, it is possible to keep the material sample further from the emitted laser beam. According to Synova [33], the beam can be placed at up to 10 cm range, as opposed to a conventional laser beam cutter that has a limited working distance.

The copper fabrication process starts by placing and fastening the copper sheet sample on the mounting table as shown in Fig. 2, step I. A pilot beam is emitted by the laser cutter to analyze the material and its dimensions. In step II, the water-jet laser cutter starts emitting the water laser beam that is cutting the copper sheet to the required shape, and finally, in step III, the air stream is activated to remove the remaining water on the surface of the copper sheet. The water-jet laser cutter has offered a very precise cut to the thin copper sheets. The fabricated copper sheets can be seen in Fig. 3(a) and these forms the enclosing top and bottom walls of the HSIW structure.

B. Dielectric Substrate Fabrication

Stratasys's Digital ABS Plus material [34] was chosen for the design and fabrication of the 3D printed substrate, which forms the core of the HSIW. This ABS material provides high flexural strength of 65-75 MPa and tensile strength of 55-60 MPa that these offer a new degree of design freedom for applications benefitting from the use of conformal and flexible structures in the future. The ABS material has a dielectric constant of $\epsilon_r = 2.75$ and a loss tangent of $\tan \delta = 0.025$ [1], [35]-[37]. The dielectric component was fabricated using the Objet 1000 3D printer [38], which uses poly-jet printing technology. The lateral dimensional accuracy of the machine is up to 600 microns and the smallest

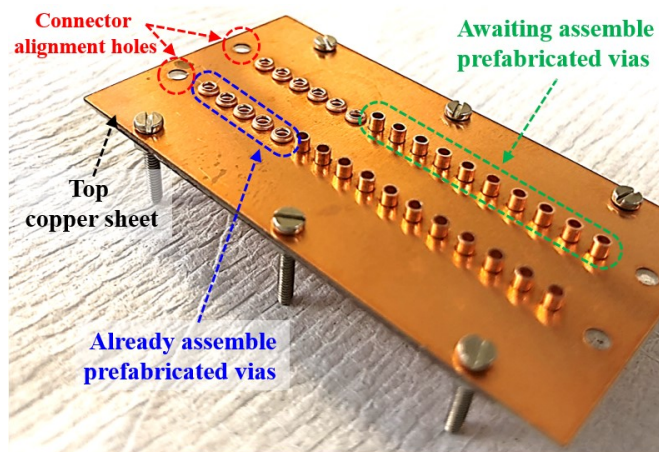


Fig. 4. Fabricated HSIW with prefabricated vias inserted through the via holes.

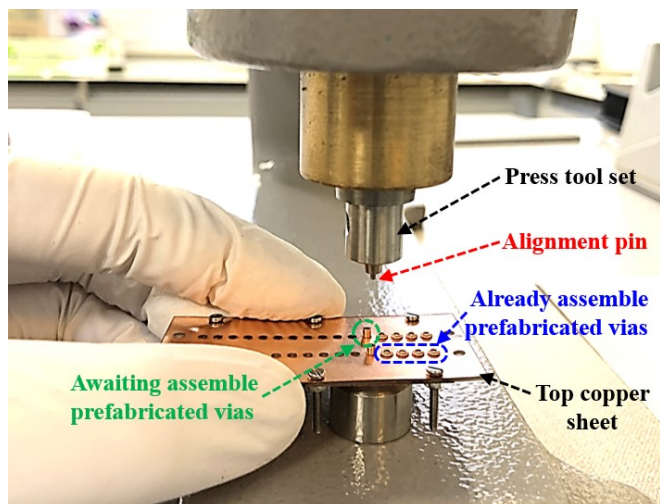


Fig. 5. Assembly process of the proposed HSIW, by using the Mechanical Through Hole Plating method.

thickness in each deposited layer is 16 microns. The geometry of the HSIW, after being designed and analyzed in the electromagnetic solver CST Studio [32], is exported in Stereolithographic (STL) format for the Objet Studio software which comes with the Objet 1000 Plus 3D printer. In this software, the user assigns materials to the assembly's components and the build file are sent to the printer. The model material container of the 3D printer is filled with the photopolymer resin, that is ABS material for this work, and the support material container is filled with water soluble polymer. The print heads can then start jetting the model and the support materials onto the build tray. The machine carries on jetting droplets until it builds the complete 3D layer and the UV light on top of the platform is emitted to cure the layer into a solid and strong material. The process is repeated until all the layers overlap to form the final 3D structure. At the end, the water-soluble material is washed away, leaving behind the 3D printed part. The fabricated dielectric substrate of the HSIW is shown in Fig. 3.

C. Assembly

To construct the HSIW, the fabricated structures of the dielectric ABS and copper sheets are integrated. The three

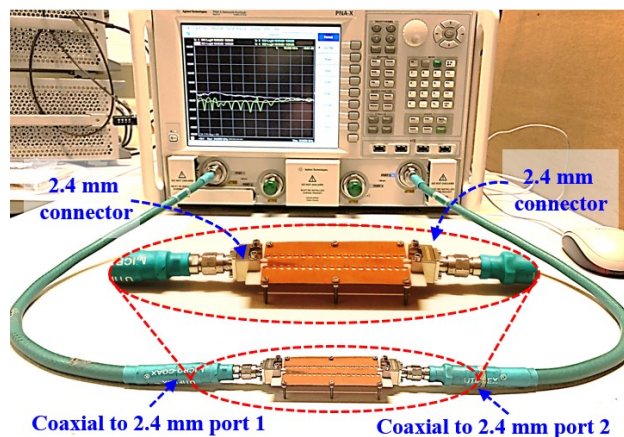


Fig. 6. Measurement of Scattering parameters on Agilent E8361A PNA.

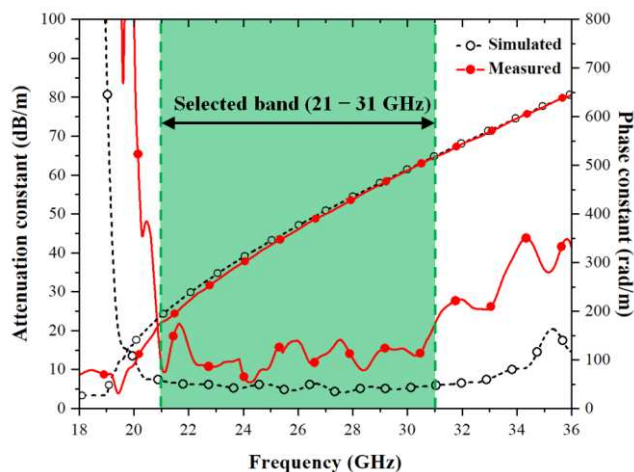
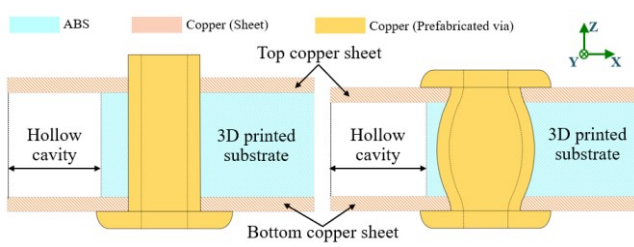


Fig. 7. Simulated and measured propagation loss.

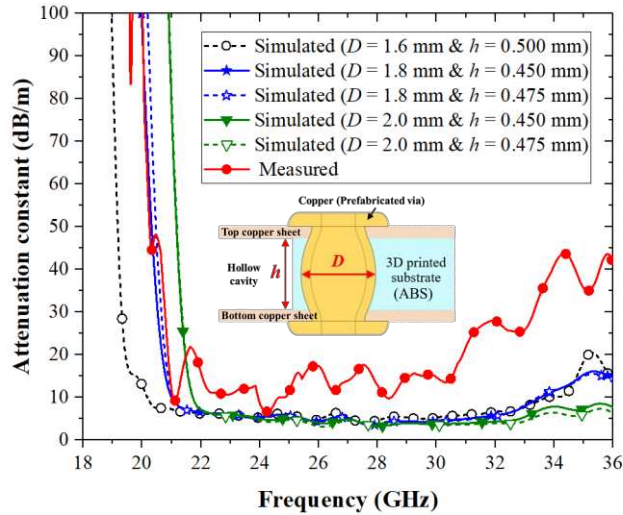
layers with sequence of top copper sheet, 3D printed substrate and bottom copper sheet, are attached using the Fortex Mechanical PCB THP machine and copper rivets [31]. First, the copper rivets, which are the outer diameter of 1.6 mm, are inserted through the via holes of the three layers as shown in Fig. 2. This is done for all via holes as shown in Fig. 4. After that, the THP is pressing the copper rivets until they shrink to permanently fix the three surfaces together as shown in steps at Fig. 2. The assembly process as performed in the University of Leeds laboratory can be seen in Fig. 5. After all the copper rivets are pressed and fixed, at each end of the structure a SOUTHWEST 2.4 mm connector is attached for connection to the measurement system.

IV. RESULTS

An Agilent (now Keysight) Technologies E8361A PNA 67 GHz vector network analyzer was used to measure the samples, as shown in the set-up in Fig. 6. By following the multi-line calibration method as described in [39], it is possible to extract the propagation constant by manipulating the scattering parameters of two HSIW devices of different lengths. A two-port coaxial Short-Open-Load-Through (SOLT) calibration was used to set the reference planes at the ends of the cables and remove as many errors as possible. The frequency range of 15- 40 GHz was



(a) (b)

Fig. 8. Cross section drawing XZ plane (a) before assembly and (b) after assembly.Fig. 9. Simulated results of the bending effect by varying the diameter of the vias, D , and height of the hollow substrate, h .

chosen, with 3200 points, for the S -parameter measurements. The measured propagation losses were calculated from the two S -parameter files and are plotted in Fig. 7, along with the results from the CST Studio simulation. There is some deviation of the measurement against the simulated attenuation constant. This difference is caused by the fabrication tolerances like surface roughness of the dielectric. Also, the assembly process caused some variations since the process was implemented manually; the use of PCB mechanical through-hole-press method has meant the manual force was variable and the three layers were not attached precisely. The deviation can be up to ~ 9 dB/m for some frequencies. Beyond 31 GHz, there is a significant increase in the attenuation constant and so the HSIW is presented as have an operating range of 21-31 GHz. Overall, the designed HSIW achieves for the selected band of operation with an exceptionally low propagation loss of 13.55 dB/m (0.01355 dB/mm), which is one of the lowest values reported among other state-of-the-art designs, as summarized in reference [11].

V. DISCUSSION

Figure 8(a) shows the cross-sectional drawing in the XZ plane before assembly. After pressing the prefabricated vias to fix the three surfaces, Fig. 8(b) shows the cross-sectional drawing in the XZ plane after assembly, including the bending effect from over pressing force of THP machine. Figure 9 shows the attenuation constant versus frequency when varying the diameter of the vias,

D , from 1.6 mm to 2.0 mm in step of 0.2 mm and height of the hollow substrate, h , from 0.50 mm to 0.45 mm in step of 0.025 mm. The results show that the diameter of via does affect the cut-off frequency. The bigger diameter gives a higher cut-off frequency, which is to be expected. On the other hand, the variation in hollow substrate height has only a small effect on propagation loss.

For SIW design, the frequency limit is dictated by design limitations and fabrication limitations. The main design limitation relates to the diameter of the vias and the distance between them [40]. In the practical case, the selected diameter of prefabricated vias depends on available diameter sizes that are available in the market [41]. In this paper, the HSIW is designed and fabricated for operating at 21 – 31 GHz. We choose the via diameter of 1.6 mm which satisfactory for use in this band. However, at higher frequencies the required diameter of vias is very small. We can change the technique for creating the via as reported in [42].

VI. FUTURE WORK

The method of rapid prototyping HSIW-based millimeter-wave components using a combination of additive and subtractive manufacturing processes has proved effective. The proposed technique has advantages in the ease of design, low fabrication and material cost, requires no chemical processing, and can be used to realize a new class of microwave and millimeter-wave components with the possibility of conformal and flexible structures [43]. However, this method was necessary for fabricating the prototype components for testing the performance before considering mass production. This work has proved the concept, but further work is required to further automate the process to reduce the tolerance of the assembly processes. For example, controlling the pressed force of the mechanical head during assembly and using automatic stepping motors to align the center of the prefabricated vias before pressing. When comparing with a PCB process, fabrication of through substrate vias in the PCB process is very problematic since the via diameter is very small and thus the metallization process of filling or covering sidewall of the via with copper are very difficult, unreliable and very costly and require very sophisticated machines to achieve the task.

VII. CONCLUSION

In this paper, a new method for fabricating a HSIW waveguide at millimeter-wave frequencies has been demonstrated, using a combination of additive and subtractive manufacturing techniques. These methods provide fast development and assembly and low-cost fabrication, compared to other methods, which can be extremely costly and require specialist facilities. The method obviates the need to use any chemical processing, which is particularly advantageous as health, safety and environmental legislation rightly imposes ever greater requirements on laboratory management.

The additive manufacturing process provides enhanced flexibility in choosing the dielectric material to be used as the hollow substrate. It has advantages of stability, ease of design, low-cost, lightweight, and the possibility for mechanical flexibility. It offers a new degree of design freedom for

applications benefitting from the use of conformal and flexible structures. Specifically, the material jetting 3D printing technology provides the opportunity to choose from hundreds of materials and they can be mixed to produce composite 3D materials for a number of important new millimeter-wave components.

Finally, the propagation constant results show an average 12.5% difference between simulations and measurements over the operating frequency range. A very low attenuation constant of 13.55 dB/m (0.01355 dB/mm) is achieved for the whole operating frequency range of 21-31 GHz.

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