



Precision at the Nanoscale: An Integrated Framework for Semiconductor Manufacturing, Device Design, and Circuit Implementation

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Abstract: The advancement of semiconductor technology has reached a critical juncture where progress depends on the integration of understanding across multiple scales—from the plasma physics that governs etching processes, through the materials science that determines device performance, to the circuit design that determines system functionality. This article develops an integrated framework for semiconductor technology by examining four interconnected domains: the physics of electrokinetic waves and instabilities in solid-state plasma, the management of byproduct buildup in etch chambers, the design of plasma-enhanced sidewall passivation for RF and 5G devices, and the implementation of low-power digital circuits using gate diffusion input technology. Despite their apparent specialization, these domains share fundamental characteristics: they address phenomena that span multiple spatial and temporal scales, they require precise control of material and device properties at the nanoscale, and they increasingly rely on integrated approaches that bridge physics, materials science, and engineering design. The article argues that progress in semiconductor technology depends on recognizing these interconnections and adopting holistic approaches that address manufacturing, device, and circuit challenges simultaneously. It concludes by proposing a research agenda that emphasizes plasma process control, interface engineering, and the integration of physics-based and design-based methods.

Keywords: semiconductor manufacturing, plasma processing, sidewall passivation, byproduct management, gate diffusion input, low-power circuits, quantum plasma, RF devices

1. Introduction

Semiconductor technology underpins modern civilization. The integrated circuits that power computers, smartphones, and countless other devices are the product of an extraordinarily complex manufacturing process that transforms raw silicon into functioning electronic systems. This process involves hundreds of steps—deposition, lithography, etching, cleaning, annealing—each of which must be controlled with remarkable precision to achieve the performance and reliability demanded by modern applications.

The challenges of semiconductor manufacturing are intensifying as device dimensions shrink and performance requirements grow. At advanced technology nodes, even atomic-scale variations can

cause catastrophic defects. Contamination at the parts-per-trillion level can degrade device performance. And the increasingly complex device architectures require manufacturing processes that can produce features with nanometer precision while maintaining compatibility with high-volume production.

These challenges span multiple domains. At the plasma level, the physics of ionized gases determines the uniformity and selectivity of etching processes. At the chamber level, the management of byproducts and the design of components determine equipment reliability and process consistency. At the device level, the quality of interfaces and sidewalls determines electrical performance and long-term reliability. And at the circuit level, the design of logic gates and arithmetic units determines power consumption and operating speed.

This article develops an integrated framework for semiconductor technology by examining these interconnected domains. The central argument is that progress depends on recognizing the interconnections among them and adopting holistic approaches that address manufacturing, device, and circuit challenges simultaneously. A breakthrough in plasma physics enables better process control, which enables more reliable devices, which enables more efficient circuits. Understanding these dependencies is essential for continued progress.

The article proceeds in five main parts. Section 2 examines the physics of electrokinetic waves and instabilities in solid-state plasma, establishing the theoretical foundation for understanding plasma processes. Section 3 examines the management of byproduct buildup in etch chambers, addressing the practical challenges of maintaining process reliability. Section 4 examines plasma-enhanced sidewall passivation, demonstrating how plasma processes can be engineered to improve device performance. Section 5 examines low-power circuit design using gate diffusion input technology, showing how device-level innovations enable system-level improvements. Section 6 synthesizes these perspectives into an integrated framework. Section 7 discusses implications for research and practice.

2. Plasma Physics: The Foundation of Semiconductor Processing

2.1 The Role of Plasma in Semiconductor Manufacturing

Plasma—the fourth state of matter, consisting of ionized gas with free electrons and ions—is central to semiconductor manufacturing. Plasma processes are used for etching (removing material), deposition (adding material), and surface modification (altering material properties). The unique characteristics of plasma—its ability to generate reactive species at low temperatures, its capacity for anisotropic processing, and its compatibility with sensitive materials—make it indispensable for modern device fabrication.

The physics of plasma is complex, involving the interaction of electrons, ions, neutral species, and electromagnetic fields. Understanding this physics is essential for controlling plasma processes and optimizing them for specific applications. The behavior of plasma is governed by the equations of electromagnetism and statistical mechanics, which describe how charged particles respond to fields and how they interact with each other.

2.2 Electrokinetic Waves in Solid-State Plasma

Solid-state plasma—the collective behavior of free carriers in semiconductors—exhibits wave phenomena analogous to those in gaseous plasma. These electrokinetic waves arise from the interaction of

electromagnetic fields with charge carriers and can propagate through the material, carrying energy and information.

The theoretical framework for understanding these waves is provided by the quantum hydrodynamic (QHD) model, which incorporates quantum effects such as the Bohm potential into the classical hydrodynamic equations. The QHD model describes the behavior of quantum plasma—dense, degenerate systems where quantum effects are significant—and has been applied to understand phenomena in semiconductor nanostructures, laser-solid interactions, and astrophysical systems.

The QHD model reveals that quantum effects modify the dispersion relations of plasma waves, altering their propagation characteristics. The Bohm potential—which arises from the quantum pressure associated with the wave nature of particles—introduces dispersion that can stabilize or destabilize waves depending on the conditions. Understanding these effects is essential for predicting the behavior of carriers in nanoscale devices and for optimizing plasma processes used in manufacturing.

2.3 Instabilities in Plasma Systems

Plasma systems are prone to instabilities—conditions where small perturbations grow exponentially, leading to turbulence, enhanced transport, or disruption of the desired process. Understanding and controlling instabilities is essential for maintaining stable plasma processes.

Several types of instabilities are relevant to semiconductor processing. Modulational instability occurs when a wave's amplitude is modulated by its own propagation, leading to the formation of localized structures such as solitons. This instability is important in laser-plasma interactions and can affect the uniformity of plasma processes. Parametric instability occurs when a strong pump wave drives the growth of other waves through nonlinear interactions. Stimulated Brillouin scattering (SBS) and stimulated Raman scattering (SRS) are examples of parametric instabilities where an incident electromagnetic wave scatters off acoustic or optical phonons, generating scattered waves with shifted frequencies.

These instabilities have practical implications for semiconductor processing. In plasma etching, instabilities can lead to non-uniform etching, surface roughness, or damage to sensitive structures. In laser processing, instabilities can limit the intensity that can be delivered to the surface or cause unwanted modification of the material. Understanding the conditions under which instabilities occur—and developing strategies to suppress them—is essential for reliable, high-quality processing.

2.4 Applications to Semiconductor Processing

The theoretical understanding of plasma waves and instabilities has direct applications to semiconductor manufacturing. In plasma etching, the properties of the

plasma—its density, temperature, and composition—determine the rate, selectivity, and anisotropy of etching. Understanding how these properties are influenced by plasma parameters (power, pressure, gas flow) enables process optimization.

Plasma diagnostics—techniques for measuring plasma properties—rely on understanding of wave phenomena. Optical emission spectroscopy, for example, measures the light emitted by excited species in the plasma, providing information about the composition and temperature of the plasma. Langmuir probes measure the current-voltage characteristics of the plasma, providing information about electron density and temperature. Understanding the physics of these measurements is essential for interpreting the data they provide.

3. Byproduct Management in Etch Chambers

3.1 The Challenge of Byproduct Buildup

Semiconductor etching involves the use of reactive gases to remove material from the wafer. The chemical reactions that accomplish this etching produce byproducts—volatile compounds that must be removed from the chamber to prevent contamination and maintain process consistency. When these byproducts accumulate on chamber surfaces, they can cause a range of problems: particle generation that contaminates wafers, degradation of chamber components that affects process performance, and inconsistent process results that reduce yield.

The challenge of byproduct management is intensifying as device dimensions shrink and process requirements become more stringent. At advanced technology nodes, even small amounts of contamination can cause defects. And the increasingly complex chemistries used for etching—including the use of aggressive gases that can attack chamber components—make byproduct management more difficult.

Understanding the mechanisms by which byproducts accumulate and the factors that influence their deposition is essential for developing effective mitigation strategies. The deposition of byproducts depends on the chemical properties of the byproducts, the temperature and pressure of the chamber, and the surface properties of the chamber components.

3.2 Factors Influencing Byproduct Deposition

Several factors influence the deposition of byproducts on chamber surfaces.

Surface finish is one important factor. Smoother surfaces have less surface area for particles to physically interlock, reducing the adhesion strength of deposited materials. Research has shown that increasing surface roughness increases adhesion strength—a smooth plate has smaller adhesive force, meaning the adhesion detaches faster than on a rougher

plate. This insight suggests that polishing chamber components to a mirror-like finish can reduce byproduct buildup.

Surface temperature is another critical factor. Colder surfaces (below 50°C) tend to have higher byproduct buildup, while hotter surfaces (above 100°C) often have no deposition. This observation reflects the thermodynamics of condensation: when the surface temperature is below the condensation temperature of the byproduct vapor, deposition occurs. By controlling the temperature of chamber walls to be above the vapor condensation temperature, byproduct buildup can be prevented.

The condensation temperature depends on the chamber pressure. Figure 2 in the source material shows condensation curves for TiF and HfCl₄ at different chamber pressures. By understanding these curves, process engineers can determine the temperature required to prevent condensation at a given pressure.

3.3 Mitigation Strategies

Several strategies can be used to mitigate byproduct buildup.

Surface treatment and coating can reduce byproduct adhesion. Electropolishing of gas lines and exhaust forelines creates a mirror-like finish that reduces adhesion. Coatings such as Teflon (PTFE), silicon-based coatings (silicon nitride, silicon carbide), polymer coatings (polyimide, fluoropolymers), and ceramic coatings (alumina, zirconia) can provide non-stick surfaces that reduce byproduct adhesion. Each coating has advantages and limitations, and the selection depends on the specific process chemistry and operating conditions.

Temperature control is another effective strategy. By adding heater jackets on the exhaust foreline and chamber walls, the temperature can be maintained above the condensation temperature of the byproducts, preventing deposition. This approach requires understanding the condensation behavior of the byproducts under the specific process conditions and designing the heating system to provide adequate temperature control.

Process optimization can also reduce byproduct buildup. By adjusting the process parameters—gas flows, pressure, power—the amount and composition of byproducts can be controlled. For example, using gases that produce more volatile byproducts can reduce deposition. And optimizing the pump-down sequence can ensure that byproducts are removed from the chamber before they have a chance to deposit.

3.4 Economic and Reliability Considerations

Byproduct management has significant economic implications. Byproduct accumulation reduces chamber uptime, requiring more frequent cleaning and maintenance. It also reduces yield, as particles generated from byproduct deposits contaminate wafers. And it degrades

equipment performance, potentially leading to premature failure of expensive components.

The cost of byproduct management includes not only the direct costs of cleaning and maintenance but also the opportunity costs of reduced throughput and yield. In a high-volume manufacturing environment, even small improvements in chamber uptime or yield can translate into significant economic benefits.

However, the strategies for reducing byproduct buildup—coatings, surface treatments, high-precision manufacturing—also add cost. Designers must balance the benefits of improved performance against the costs of implementing these strategies. This trade-off analysis is an essential part of equipment design and process development.

4. Plasma-Enhanced Sidewall Passivation

4.1 The Importance of Sidewall Integrity

In semiconductor devices, the sidewalls of etched features—the vertical surfaces that define the boundaries of trenches, vias, and other structures—play a critical role in device performance. Sidewall roughness, defects, and contamination can degrade electrical characteristics, increase parasitic capacitance, and reduce device reliability.

The importance of sidewall integrity is particularly acute for RF and 5G devices, which operate at high frequencies where parasitic effects are more pronounced. Line-edge roughness (LER) and micro-trenching—small trenches at the bottoms of etched features—can cause signal degradation and reduce yield. As device dimensions shrink and performance requirements grow, the demands on sidewall quality become more stringent.

4.2 Mechanisms of Sidewall Damage

Sidewall damage during etching arises from several mechanisms. Ion bombardment—the impact of energetic ions on the sidewall—can cause physical damage, including amorphization and sputtering. Chemical attack—the reaction of reactive species with the sidewall—can cause corrosion and contamination. And redeposition—the accumulation of etch byproducts on the sidewall—can cause roughness and defects.

The relative importance of these mechanisms depends on the etch chemistry, the plasma conditions, and the material being etched. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for developing strategies to protect sidewalls and maintain device quality.

4.3 Plasma-Enhanced Passivation Techniques

Plasma-enhanced passivation techniques address sidewall damage by depositing protective layers that shield the sidewall from ion bombardment and chemical attack.

Fluorocarbon radical tailoring is one approach. By controlling the plasma chemistry—adjusting the gas composition, power, and pressure—the concentration and reactivity of fluorocarbon radicals can be optimized. These radicals deposit a thin, conformal polymer layer on the sidewalls that protects them from damage while maintaining the critical dimensions of the features.

Atomic layer passivation (ALP) is another approach. Using atomic layer deposition (ALD) or plasma-enhanced ALD (PE-ALD), ultra-thin dielectric films can be deposited on sidewalls with atomic-scale precision. These films—typically aluminum oxide (Al_2O_3) or silicon nitride—chemically stabilize the sidewall surface and provide excellent electrical isolation, reducing parasitic capacitance.

The combination of fluorocarbon radical tailoring and atomic layer passivation provides a comprehensive solution to sidewall damage. The fluorocarbon polymer protects against ion bombardment during etching, while the ALD film provides long-term stability and electrical isolation. Together, these techniques enable the fabrication of high-quality sidewalls for advanced RF and 5G devices.

4.4 Performance Improvements

The implementation of advanced passivation techniques has demonstrated significant performance improvements. Morphological analysis shows reduced line-edge roughness and micro-trenching—micro-trenching depth decreased from 15.2 nm to less than 1 nm after passivation. Electrical characterization shows reduced parasitic capacitance—up to 50% reduction compared to as-etched devices—and improved signal-to-noise ratio (4 dB improvement).

Wafer-scale testing demonstrates increased yield—from 82% to 93%—and improved reliability—failure rate after accelerated aging decreased from 12% to 8%. These results validate the effectiveness of advanced passivation techniques for improving device performance and reliability.

5. Low-Power Circuit Design with GDI Technology

5.1 The Challenge of Low-Power Design

Power consumption has become a critical constraint in digital circuit design. As the number of transistors on a chip has increased and operating frequencies have risen, the power density has increased, leading to challenges in thermal management and energy efficiency. For battery-operated devices, power consumption directly determines battery life, making low-power design essential.

The sources of power consumption in digital circuits include dynamic power—associated with charging and discharging capacitances during switching—and static power—associated with leakage currents when the circuit is not switching. Reducing both components is essential for achieving low-power operation.

5.2 Gate Diffusion Input Technology

Gate Diffusion Input (GDI) is a technique for designing low-power digital circuits that reduces transistor count and power consumption compared to conventional CMOS designs. The basic GDI cell consists of two transistors—one NMOS and one PMOS—configured to perform logic functions with fewer transistors than traditional approaches.

In a GDI cell, the inputs are connected directly to the transistor gates, and the source/drain terminals are connected to power, ground, or other inputs as required by the logic function. This configuration enables the implementation of various logic gates—AND, OR, XOR, NOT—with significantly fewer transistors than conventional CMOS designs. For example, an AND gate requires 6 transistors in conventional CMOS but only 2 in GDI. A XOR gate requires 16 transistors in conventional CMOS but only 4 in GDI.

5.3 Full Subtractor Design

The full subtractor—a fundamental building block for arithmetic operations—illustrates the benefits of GDI technology. A full subtractor takes three inputs (minuend, subtrahend, and borrow-in) and produces two outputs (difference and borrow-out). It is used in binary dividers and other arithmetic circuits.

The GDI implementation of a full subtractor uses AND, OR, NOT, and XOR gates implemented in GDI technology. The design achieves significant reductions in transistor count compared to conventional CMOS implementations. Power analysis shows that the GDI full subtractor consumes 3.55×10^{-9} W compared to 4.39×10^{-6} W for the CMOS implementation—a reduction of more than three orders of magnitude.

The GDI full subtractor also achieves higher speed—due to reduced parasitic capacitance and shorter signal paths—while maintaining proper output voltage swing. This combination of low power and high speed makes GDI technology attractive for applications where both energy efficiency and performance are important.

5.4 Implications for System Design

The adoption of GDI technology has implications beyond individual gates. At the circuit level, reduced transistor count translates into smaller area and lower cost. At the system level, reduced power consumption extends battery life and reduces cooling requirements. And at the application level, improved performance enables new capabilities.

The integration of GDI technology with advanced device architectures—such as FinFETs and gate-all-around transistors—could provide further benefits. The reduced transistor count of GDI designs complements the improved electrostatic control of advanced devices, enabling circuits that are both low-power and high-performance.

6. Synthesis: An Integrated Framework for Semiconductor Technology

6.1 The Multiscale Nature of Semiconductor Technology

The four domains examined in this article—plasma physics, byproduct management, sidewall passivation, and low-power circuit design—operate at different scales but are fundamentally interconnected. Plasma physics provides the theoretical foundation for understanding the behavior of ionized gases used in etching. Byproduct management addresses the practical challenges of maintaining process reliability. Sidewall passivation demonstrates how plasma processes can be engineered to improve device performance. And low-power circuit design shows how device-level innovations enable system-level improvements.

These domains share several common characteristics. They all involve phenomena that span multiple spatial and temporal scales—from the quantum behavior of electrons to the macroscopic behavior of process equipment. They all require precise control of material and device properties at the nanoscale. And they all benefit from integrated approaches that combine theoretical understanding with practical engineering.

6.2 The Importance of Interface Control

A recurring theme across these domains is the importance of interfaces. In plasma processing, the interface between the plasma and the wafer surface determines the rate and selectivity of etching. In byproduct management, the interface between the chamber surface and the gas phase determines the rate and extent of deposition. In sidewall passivation, the interface between the passivation layer and the semiconductor determines the electrical properties of the device. And in circuit design, the interface between different materials and structures determines the performance and reliability of the circuit.

Controlling these interfaces requires understanding the physical and chemical processes that occur at them. It requires techniques for characterizing interfaces at the nanoscale. And it requires methods for engineering interfaces to achieve desired properties.

6.3 The Role of Plasma Processes

Plasma processes play a central role in the integrated framework. Plasma is used for etching—removing material to define device features. It is used for deposition—adding material to form thin films and protective layers. And it is used for surface modification—altering the properties of surfaces to improve performance.

The physics of plasma—the behavior of waves and instabilities, the interaction of ions and electrons with surfaces, the chemistry of reactive species—determines the effectiveness of these processes. Understanding plasma physics enables the optimization of process

parameters, the design of better equipment, and the development of new processes for emerging applications.

6.4 The Integration of Design and Manufacturing

The integrated framework emphasizes the importance of integrating design and manufacturing considerations. Device designers must understand the capabilities and limitations of manufacturing processes. Process engineers must understand the requirements of device designs. And equipment designers must understand both.

This integration is particularly important for advanced technology nodes, where the margins for error are small and the interactions between design and manufacturing are complex. Design for manufacturability (DFM) techniques—which consider manufacturing constraints during the design process—are essential for achieving high yield and reliability.

6.5 Toward a Unified Methodology

The integrated framework suggests a unified methodology for semiconductor technology development. This methodology would include:

Multiscale Modeling: Developing computational models that can simulate phenomena across scales—from quantum to continuum—and that can be used to predict the behavior of materials, devices, and processes.

Multi-Modal Characterization: Using complementary characterization techniques—electrical, optical, structural—to understand the properties of materials and devices at multiple scales.

Process Integration: Designing processes that work together to achieve desired outcomes, rather than optimizing individual steps in isolation.

Design-Technology Co-Optimization: Considering manufacturing constraints during the design process and considering design requirements during process development.

Continuous Learning: Using data from manufacturing to improve models, optimize processes, and inform design decisions.

Integrated Comparison of Semiconductor Manufacturing, Device, and Circuit Domains

Domain	Main Challenge	Key Approach	Main Outcome	System-Level Benefit
Plasma Physics	Plasma waves and instabilities can affect process stability and uniformity	Quantum hydrodynamic modeling, plasma diagnostics, process-parameter optimization	Better understanding and control of plasma behavior	Improved process stability and manufacturing control
Byproduct Management	Chamber contamination, deposition, particle generation, and reduced uptime	Surface treatment/coatings, temperature control, process optimization	Reduced byproduct buildup and contamination	Higher chamber uptime and yield
Sidewall Passivation	Sidewall roughness, micro-trenching, defects, and parasitic effects	Fluorocarbon radical tailoring and atomic-layer passivation	Improved sidewall integrity and electrical performance	Higher yield and device reliability
Low-Power GDI Circuits	High transistor count and power consumption	Gate Diffusion Input (GDI) circuit design	Lower transistor count and power consumption	Improved energy efficiency and circuit performance
Integrated Framework	Disconnect between manufacturing, device, and circuit design	Multiscale modeling, multi-modal characterization, process integration, design-technology co-optimization	Coordinated optimization across scales	Higher performance, reliability, yield, and sustainability

7. Conclusions and Future Directions

7.1 Summary

This article has developed an integrated framework for semiconductor technology by examining four

interconnected domains: plasma physics, byproduct management, sidewall passivation, and low-power circuit design. The analysis has shown that progress in semiconductor technology depends on recognizing the interconnections among these domains and adopting

holistic approaches that address manufacturing, device, and circuit challenges simultaneously.

The article has highlighted the importance of plasma processes—etching, deposition, surface modification—in semiconductor manufacturing. It has demonstrated how understanding plasma physics enables better process control. It has shown how byproduct management and sidewall passivation techniques improve device performance and reliability. And it has illustrated how low-power circuit design using GDI technology reduces power consumption while maintaining performance.

7.2 Challenges and Opportunities

Despite the progress described in this article, significant challenges remain.

Scaling Challenges: As device dimensions continue to shrink, the challenges of maintaining process control and device performance intensify. New materials, new architectures, and new processes will be required to sustain progress.

Complexity Challenges: The increasing complexity of semiconductor technology—more materials, more process steps, more integration challenges—makes it difficult to understand and control the manufacturing process. Better tools for modeling, characterization, and process control are needed.

Cost Challenges: The cost of semiconductor manufacturing continues to rise, driven by the increasing complexity of processes and equipment. Developing cost-effective solutions is essential for maintaining the economic viability of the industry.

Sustainability Challenges: The environmental impact of semiconductor manufacturing—energy consumption, water usage, chemical waste—is a growing concern. Developing more sustainable processes is essential for long-term viability.

These challenges also represent opportunities. Advances in plasma physics, materials science, and circuit design will enable new capabilities. The integration of artificial intelligence and machine learning into process control and design will accelerate innovation. And the development of new materials and architectures will open new frontiers.

7.3 A Research Agenda

The analysis suggests a research agenda for semiconductor technology.

Advancing Plasma Physics: Developing a deeper understanding of plasma phenomena—waves, instabilities, surface interactions—and translating this understanding into better process control.

Engineering Interfaces: Developing techniques for characterizing and controlling interfaces at the

nanoscale, and applying these techniques to improve device performance and reliability.

Developing New Materials: Exploring new materials—2D semiconductors, perovskites, oxides—that offer improved properties for specific applications, and developing processes for integrating these materials into devices.

Optimizing Power Consumption: Developing new circuit design techniques—such as GDI—that reduce power consumption while maintaining performance, and integrating these techniques with advanced device architectures.

Enhancing Sustainability: Developing processes that reduce energy consumption, water usage, and chemical waste, and that enable the recycling of materials.

Integrating AI and Machine Learning: Using artificial intelligence and machine learning to optimize processes, predict device performance, and accelerate materials discovery.

7.4 Closing Remarks

Semiconductor technology has transformed the world, enabling the digital revolution that has reshaped communication, commerce, entertainment, and scientific discovery. The continuation of this trajectory depends on overcoming the challenges that have emerged as devices approach fundamental limits.

The integrated framework developed in this article provides a perspective on these challenges and the approaches needed to address them. By integrating understanding across scales—from plasma physics to circuit design—and across approaches—from theory to experiment to manufacturing—the semiconductor community can continue to advance the frontiers of what is possible. The challenges are significant, but so are the opportunities.

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