# Future Memory Technology Development

National Semiconductor
Thomas Klein*
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**ABSTRACT:** Semiconductor integrated circuit based memory devices became the dominant Random Access Memory technology in less than 8 years. They were able to achieve this because their batch manufacturing process allowed a very rapid reduction of cost per bit of storage through technological changes to increase batch density. Continued progress in density improvement at essentially unchanged rates is still feasible. It will, however, require major changes in manufacturing, device and material technology.

Since the beginning of the 70's, semiconductor integrated circuits used as digital storage elements have become a very significant factor in the total spectrum of information storage technology. They became the dominant technology for random access memories and are beginning to make inroads into the slower serial access memory market, presently dominated by magnetic discs and drums.

The ability of integrated circuit technology to continue to offer digital data storage at very rapidly decreasing cost per bit of storage is a consequence of the batch manufacturing process. It allows introductions of new products which are cost effective even at very low manufacturing efficiency level, obtain very steep cost reduction during product life by rapid increase of manufacturing efficiency and continue to stay on the steep cost reduction curve by going to a higher level of integration when cost improvements through improved manufacturing efficiencies are starting to flatten out.

However, to go to a higher level of integration, which in case of Random Access Memory circuits, usually means a four-fold increase in number of bits on the chip, a significant improvement in batch density is required, otherwise no benefit is derived *(Figure 1)*.

This batch density (i.e., number of potentially good storage elements processed together as a single unit (i.e., a silicon wafer) has shown an even higher rate of growth than the much more visible increase in the number storage bits/memory circuit.

During the past eight years the number of potentially good storage elements contained on a single silicon wafer has risen from about 50,000 to over 6 million, with the cost of processing a wafer rising only very slowly and manufacturing efficiency expressed as the percentage of good units staying level or improving slightly.

Future progress in memory technology can be examined in terms of this single variable common to all present and future solid state memory technologies.

There are several technological trends that are unfolding right now which are likely to impact future memory technology developments.

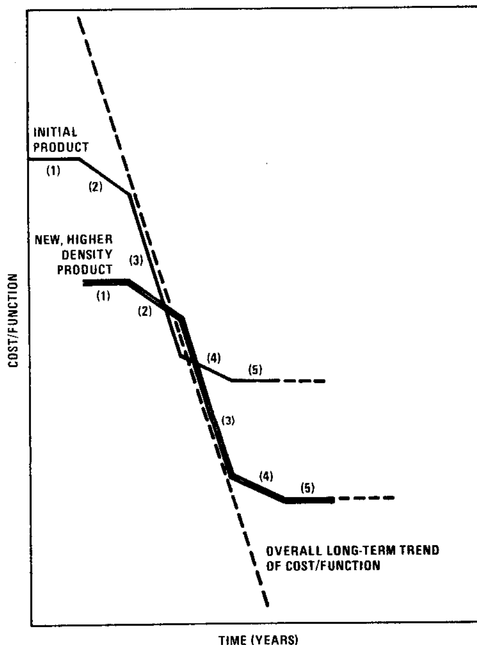
*Refer to Introduction. This paper presented at COMPCON 1977

These trends can be classified under the following categories:

a. Continued evolutionary process of memory cost reduction through more advanced circuit and device design techniques and improved process and manufacturing efficiencies.

b. A significant change in device and circuit sizes through major changes in pattern definition technology and an electrical scaling of devices to take advantage of the size reduction.

c. Charge Coupled Device and Magnetic Bubble Domain device based memory technologies.




**NOTES:**

**(1)** Product is introduced, very little or no competition.

**(2)** Product is multiple sourced but prices still hold up as production is limited.

**(3)** Production expands dramatically as yields improve, competition is fierce, prices tumble, marginal suppliers are beginning to drop out.

**(4)** Significant yield improvements are no longer available, new product is beginning to compete for the same market, competition is still intense, suppliers still drop out.

**(5)** Major market share is taken by new generation of product, market shrinks but prices hold up as competition is minimal.

**FIGURE 1. Typical Decrease of Memory Products' Prices/Costs During Product Life**

## a. EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

This approach has so far been the most successful and continued improvements may still be expected. In fact, as long as this is a viable path for future development, it is likely to be the most vigorously pursued approach.

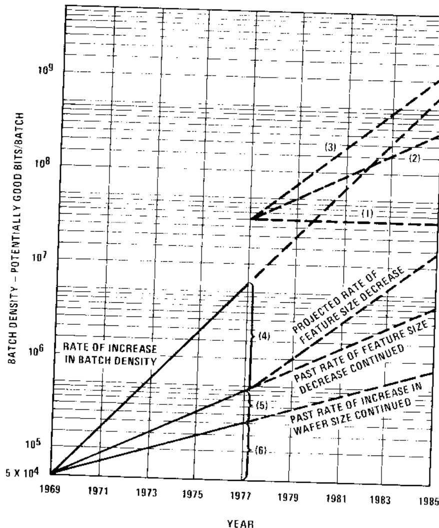
In terms of its future potential, we might examine past contributions to batch density improvements.

The total batch density improvement of 120-fold in eight years was contributed by:

1. Higher bit density through design and process innovation: 13.5x
2. Larger wafer area: 4x
3. Smaller feature sizes and tighter alignment tolerances: 2.2x

Continued improvement based on comparable contributions from the same sources is no longer feasible for the following reasons:

Design and process improvements, the most profitable source of past batch density improvement, is getting sufficiently close to its theoretical limits so that progress in it is likely to slow down *(Figure 2)*. It is clear that regardless of whatever technique we use to design or build a memory cell, it must have at least 2 features in both x and y directions, one to store the information and one to separate it from the adjacent cell. This




NOTES:
(1) Theoretical limit, current wafer and feature sizes.
(2) Theoretical limit, assuming continued improvements in wafer size increase and feature size reduction.
(3) Theoretical limit, assuming constant rate of wafer size increase and an *increasing* rate of feature size reduction.
(4) Increase due to design and process innovations.
(5) Increase due to feature size improvement.
(6) Increase due to wafer size.

**FIGURE 2. Past and Projected Contributions to Batch Density Improvements**

defines a theoretical minimum cell size of 4 $f^2$ where f is the minimum feature size determined by the limits of pattern definition technology.

Cell size eight years ago was a rich 200 $f^2$ leaving plenty of room for improvement. Today's cell size of 20 $f^2$ or less is sufficiently close to the theoretical limit of 4 $f^2$ that we can no longer project a rate of improvement comparable to past norms. We will do extremely well if we can extract a further 3-fold improvement.

Wafer size improvement will continue at an essentially constant rate. Wafer size increases are important not only for increased productivity, but wafer size is strongly correlated to maximum economically manufacturable die size *(Figure 3)*. Wafer diameter has been increasing at a rate of about 1.4 times every four years. This rate of increase is tied not only to the rate at which equipment manufacturers can develop new tooling to handle the larger wafer size, but also to the rate at which capital is invested in the semiconductor industry.

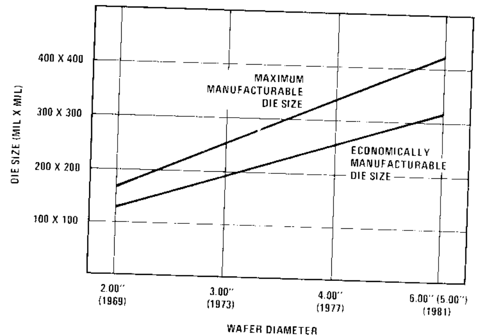



**FIGURE 3. Maximum and Economic Die Size as a Function of Wafer Diameter (Time)**

Feature size reduction. While we expect significant progress in this area, little of it can be considered evolutionary. In the past, progress in this area was completely evolutionary; contributing relatively little to density improvement. In the next 5 to 10 years we expect major changes in the technology and we will discuss those changes in detail later.

We also expect that manufacturing yields will increase in the next 5 to 10 years. This will be a factor in cost reduction but not in density.

The reason for yield improvement is the expected reduction in the rate of density improvement due to design and process improvements. Present manufacturing yields which include losses in wafer manufacturing, die sort, assembly and final test vary from under 5% for a leading edge product to about 25% for a mature product.

In the past, as long as significant density improvements were available from design and process innovations, engineering effort and talent was better utilized in trying to improve a new high density product's yield from 5% to 25%. Trying to extract the yield improvement available between 25% and 50%–60% which is

probably the practical upper limit for any semiconductor product, was both harder and less rewarding. With less potential improvement available from design and process innovations, we can probably expect higher overall yields for mature products.

In summary, the evolutionary trend, while it will still contribute significantly to future cost reductions, its contribution will be proportionately less than it has been in the past.

### b. FEATURE SIZE IMPROVEMENT

Minimum feature size has been remarkably stable over the past 20 years of integrated circuit technology development. This was probably due to the fact that there was very little change in pattern definition technology. Up to 1975 the pattern definition technology, at least at wafer level, was basically unchanged from what it was in the late 50's and progress was obtained by better engineering, controlling and understanding the process and using improved photochemical materials.

Maskmaking technology made much more consistent progress, converting from an essentially manual drafting to a completely computerized pattern definition process.

Since the mid-70's, very significant changes are beginning to occur at wafer level too. Availability and acceptance of *projection aligners* is the first and probably the most significant of these changes.

Their introduction did not lead to an immediate reduction in feature size, but the control, reproducibility and accuracy of mask dimensions that they allow, makes feature size reduction a much more realistic task.

*Improved high resolution photoresists* are also becoming available.

*Dry etching techniques* are important technological achievements and will also be contributing to feature size reduction.

*Electron beam and X-ray lithography* are the most frequently mentioned technologies to achieve significant reductions in feature size.

There is undoubtedly significant progress being made in these areas and some of the results are impressive. However, they have to overcome some very significant technical and economic hurdles before they can make an impact on memorv technology *(Figure 4)*.

Electron beam writing techniques are already available for maskmaking purposes where they offer some very real advantages. For direct writing on wafers, however, they still have to improve significantly and come down in price before they can make an impact on memory technology. Presently, projected machine costs and throughput times are such that processing wafers with electron beam writing instead of conventional masking—assuming no other technical problems—would raise wafer processing cost by a factor of 5. This cost increase would take care of all cost reduction achieved by the smaller feature size at *equal yield*. Since the smaller feature size means more densely built circuits sensitive to much smaller defect sizes the most immediate consequence of feature size reduction is yield reduction.

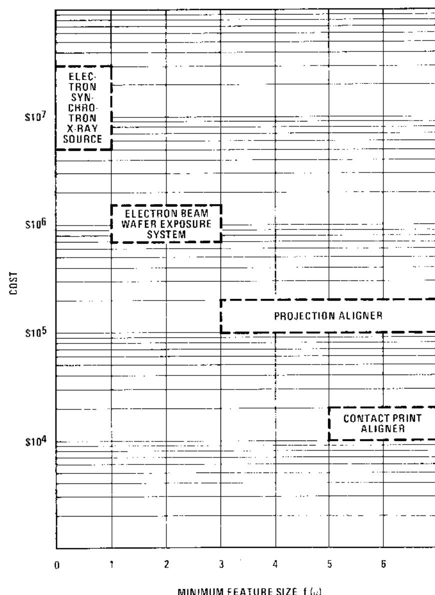



**FIGURE 4. Cost of Key Equipment for Various Pattern Definition Technologies and Minimum Feature Sizes**

*X-ray lithography* techniques have still to resolve three basic problems.

a. Maskmaking technology
b. Sufficiently intensive X-ray sources
c. Pattern registration

If they can solve these problems, they can be potentially very powerful as they can use a fixed mask and do not have to regenerate the entire pattern at every exposure.

Summarizing present status of pattern definition technologies, we can project improvements in optical pattern definition technology to yield a 5 to 8-fold increase in batch density over the next 5 to 8 years. This will represent a 2.5 to 4-fold increase in the rate of progress compared to past experience. Even higher rates of progress are possible if electron beam and/or X-ray lithography matures sufficiently to become cost effective, over the next 5 to 8 years.

#### Electrical Scaling of Devices

In the previous discussion, we have made the implicit assumption that feature size reduction is equivalent to circuit area reduction.

This is most certainly not the case. Feature size reduction will merely define limits to circuit size reduction. The actual reduction available will be determined by how closely the electrical device and circuit characteristics allow us to approach the limits imposed by pattern definition technology.

All three presently used major memory technologies (i.e., MOS dynamic, MOS static and bipolar static) are more limited by device and circuit design considerations, rather than optical pattern resolution.

In case of MOS devices, their performance is a function of the operating voltages and their ability to handle high operating voltages decreases very rapidly with reduced device sizes. Consequently, if denser memory circuits were to be built by taking advantage of feature size reduction, the operating voltages will have to be reduced. The resulting device and circuit performance reduction can be regained by re-engineering the entire device, reducing oxide thickness, junction depth and increasing substrate doping to make the device deliver an equivalent performance at lower operating voltages.

This total re-engineering of device structure, processing and manufacturing technology is called "scaling" and it is obviously a major engineering and manufacturing task, involving all aspects of wafer technology.

Bipolar memory circuits do not appear to suffer from this limitation; their's is, however, a different one. Device sizes can be reduced but their density cannot be significantly increased, because current drain of a bipolar device does not scale with size. Consequently, any attempt to take advantage of reduced device size by increasing number of bits/chip will run into severe power dissipation limits. Again the problem is technically solvable at an expense of major circuit design/process re-engineering efforts to "current scale" bipolar device/ process technology.

$I^2L$ technology appears technically attractive from this point of view (i.e., it would be able to take advantage of feature size reduction with the least amount of device and/or process engineering changes). Its problem is that it has so far not been able to establish a sufficiently attractive price/performance combination to gain a significant position in the memory market.

Feature size reduction and the required electrical scaling of devices will have some very important consequences in terms of relative impact on various memory technologies. When we scale devices, we adjust some basic device parameters and operating voltages so as to obtain as nearly identical device and circuit characteristics as possible. This can be achieved quite successfully for the type of circuits whose design is by and large based on the device characteristics that we have scaled (i.e., MOS static devices). For these devices, reduction of supply voltage also brings about a reduction in power dissipation, so one limitation to higher density, characteristic of static devices has also been removed.

MOS dynamic circuits which have traditionally enjoyed a 4:1 density advantage over static devices, rely more on second order effects like leakage currents, subthreshold conduction and signal to noise ratio in their sense amplifier designs, do not benefit quite as readily from scaling.

Leakage current, whose relation to stored charge is vitally important to the successful operation of MOS dynamic random access memory circuits, does not scale proportionately with voltage, due the point defect nature of the leakage current. Typically any junction's leakage current represents a spatial averaging over a relatively large number of defects. Reducing junction area will increase fluctuation in number of defect sites from one storage area to the next. Since dynamic RAM design imposes requirement that *all* storage areas have less than certain pre-determined amount of leakage current, scaling will typically reduce ratio of stored charge to leakage current. Since the signal available is already reduced by both scaling and the resulting increase in density, designers of future generation of dynamic RAM's face some formidable challenges. It is possible that the only way they will be able to overcome these challenges is to impose very strict environmental limitations on the finished product, namely cooling or even refrigeration of memory systems.

Feature size reduction and electrical scaling will impose some very stringent demands on process engineering in terms of both control and the degree of perfection required for good yields from the scaled structures. We are assuming that these problems are solvable by evolutionary improvements in processing techniques. We should not be surprised, however, if progress in those areas from time to time fails to keep up with the more visible improvements available from pattern definition technology.

### c. NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Success in semiconductor integrated circuit based random access memory technology prompted considerable interest in solid state replacements for serial memories. The two most often considered candidates are Charge Coupled Devices and Bubble Domain Memory devices.

*Charge Coupled Devices* represent the densest silicon based technology we know. However, their speed and ease of use is considerably inferior to random access memories and as long as random access memories can be made with comparable circuit density, C.C.D. is hard pressed to carve out a market position. Typically, for a C.C.D. circuit to be competitive with RAMs, it has to offer a 4:1 density advantage over a comparably sized RAM circuit. So far it has not been able to do it, partly because RAM technology very quickly adopted all process improvements made for C.C.D. circuits and used them to make competitively sized RAMs.

However, C.C.D. technology is expected to establish a 4:1 density advantage over RAMs in the reasonably near future because its technology and organization permits:

a. Approaching the theoretical minimum storage area of $4\ f^2$ both more easily and more closely than RAMs.

b. Meeting the challenges of feature size reduction and device scaling more easily than dynamic RAM's.

Several features of C.C.D. technology contribute to these advantages. Absence of P-N junctions allows storage and transfer functions to be very similar structurally and either very closely spaced, or used interchangeably for both functions.

Although charge is stored dynamically, it is not held at any location for longer than a clock cycle so effect of

defect density fluctuation is averaged out over a large area. Signal strength is comparable to RAM's but there is more flexibility in sense amplifier design. Absence of contacts and P-N junctions allows more efficient layout and easier scaling of devices.

**Bubble Memory Technology**

Although both its device and material technology is significantly different from silicon integrated circuits, it is also based on a batch manufacturing process with the cost of a function very strongly dependent of the functional density per batch and manufacturing yields.

Examined from this point of view, it has some very major disadvantages coupled with some even greater potential long-term benefits.

First of all, as a device it is very well suited to serial storage of data. Although it is slower than any silicon I.C. based storage circuit, it is non-volatile—or at least it can be designed to be—and it can also be used to perform very simple logic functions which allow data to be stored and retrieved efficiently. Also, it can be used to pre-amplify the otherwise very small signal magnetically so it can be used to design a reasonably self-contained memory chip.

Its known major disadvantages are:

1. Very high material cost, caused by both very high initial substrate cost and a very costly, difficult and low productivity liquid phase epitaxy deposition process. Material cost is 30–50 times higher than silicon.

2. Very high packaging cost. Every circuit has to have an individually adjusted bias field and a rotating magnetic field built into the package.

3. A batch density which is presently not significantly higher than what is achievable with silicon.

Set against these disadvantages we can consider the potential long-term benefits which motivate the ever increasing activity in the field:

1. Processing typically requires only 3 masking steps, only one of which is critical, compared to 6+ for silicon.

2. Although present bit density is not impressive, it is based on a relatively simple design with bit area being in the 200 $f^2$ region for a T bar configuration, indicating very much room for improvement, some of which has already been implemented experimentally.

3. Because it has only one critical masking step and no critical alignment requirements, it is the technology best positioned to take advantage of improvements in pattern definition techniques.

It is difficult today to determine the point both in time and in level of complexity at which Bubble Memory Devices will be able to enter the market and compete successfully. But once they do, they will enjoy a very rapid growth comparable to silicon integrated circuit based memory circuits for exactly the same reasons.

Summarizing these trends, there is sufficient visibility for the continued technical progress of memory technology at essentially unchanged rates for the next 5 to 8 years.

One word of caution, however, is worth mentioning here. The key to past success and the continued objective of memory technology development is *cost reduction*.

Technical developments to continue to increase density of memory circuits are worthwhile only if they can make a significant contribution to this overall objective. They cannot do it if the cost of improvement is so high that it swallows up all future cost benefits.

Even if their cost is less than potential cost reduction benefit, they still represent a very significant investment in design, process development, production and testing facilities and product start-up costs for the component manufacturer.

Such an investment will only be economically attractive if the market for memory products continues to expand at a fast rate.

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