



US 20070059144A1

(19) **United States**

(12) **Patent Application Publication**

**Lowrance et al.**

(10) **Pub. No.: US 2007/0059144 A1**

(43) **Pub. Date: Mar. 15, 2007**

(54) **METHODS AND APPARATUS FOR A TRANSFER STATION**

**Related U.S. Application Data**

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(60) Provisional application No. 60/717,150, filed on Sep. 14, 2005. Provisional application No. 60/717,335, filed on Sep. 14, 2005. Provisional application No. 60/717,336, filed on Sep. 14, 2005.

**Publication Classification**

(51) **Int. Cl.**  
**B65G 47/90** (2006.01)  
(52) **U.S. Cl.** ..... **414/626**

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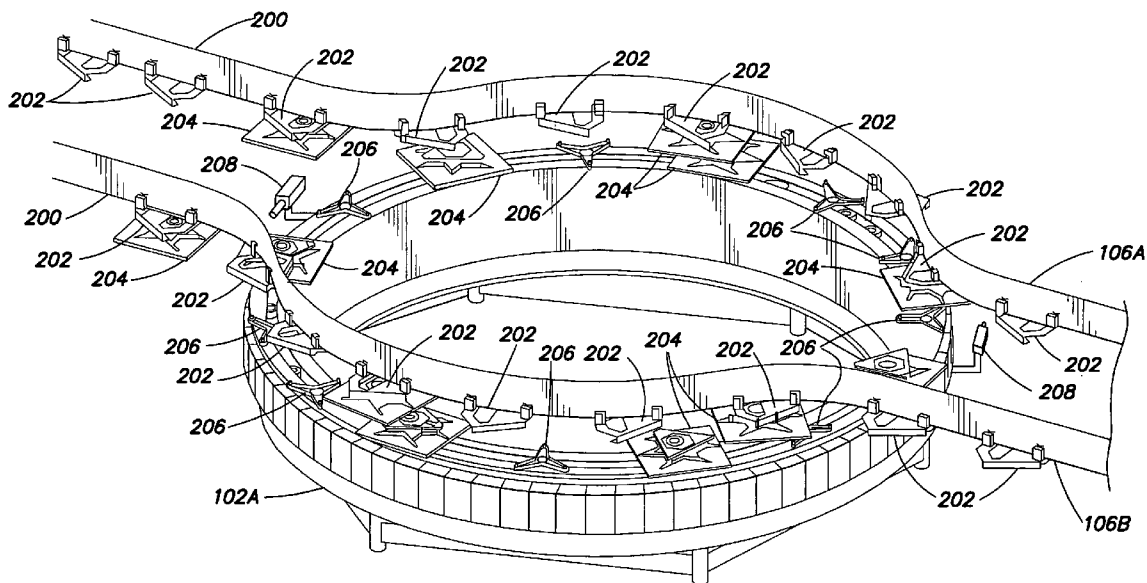
(57) **ABSTRACT**

Systems, methods and apparatus are provided for a conveyor-to-conveyor transfer station that includes a track having a drive mechanism, a control system coupled to the drive mechanism, and a plurality of transport lift assemblies. Each of the transport lift assemblies are adapted to be individually controlled, travel on the track, remove at least one carrier from a first conveyor, and mount the carrier onto a second conveyor.

(73) Assignee: **APPLIED MATERIALS, INC.**

(21) Appl. No.: **11/521,576**

(22) Filed: **Sep. 13, 2006**



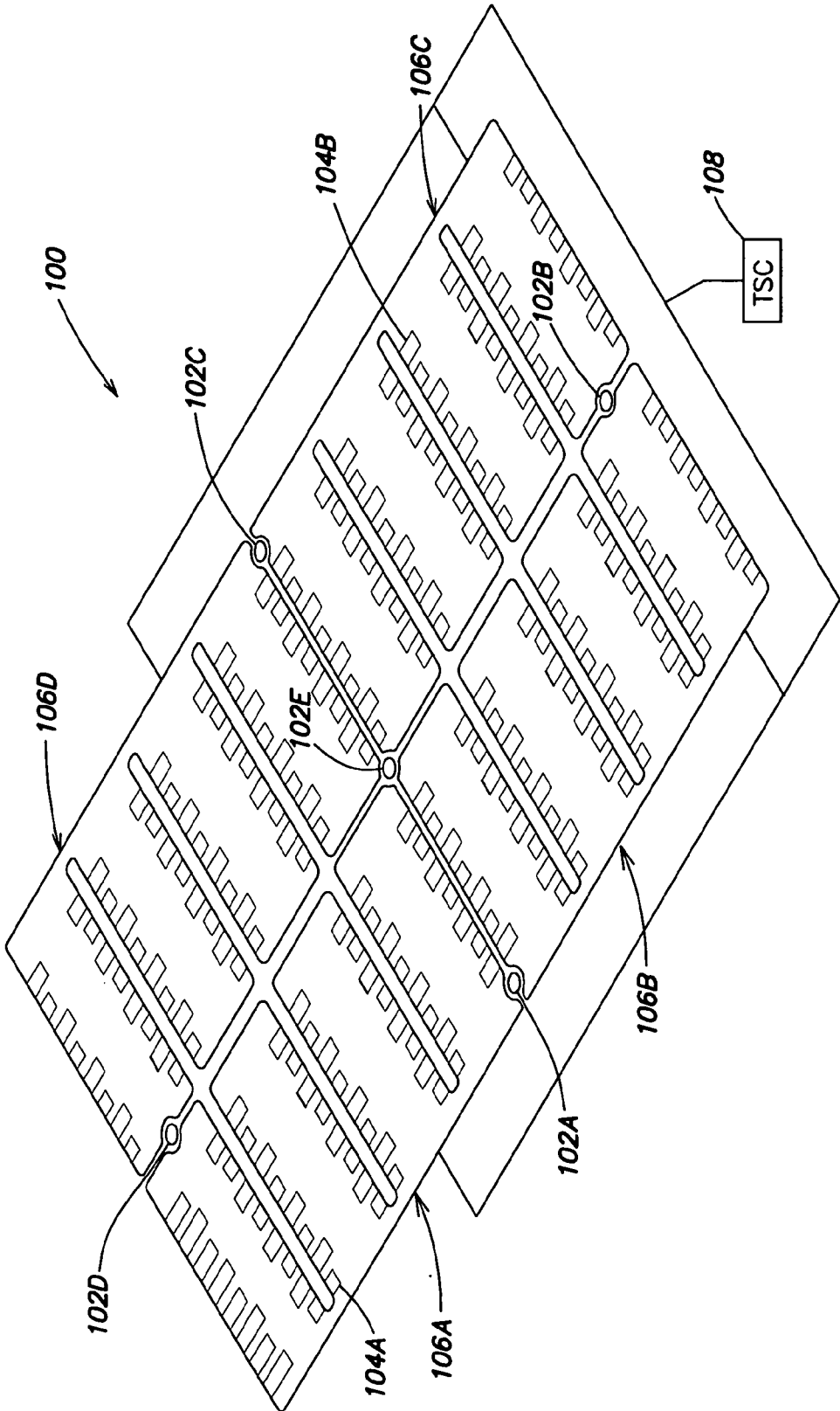


FIG. 1

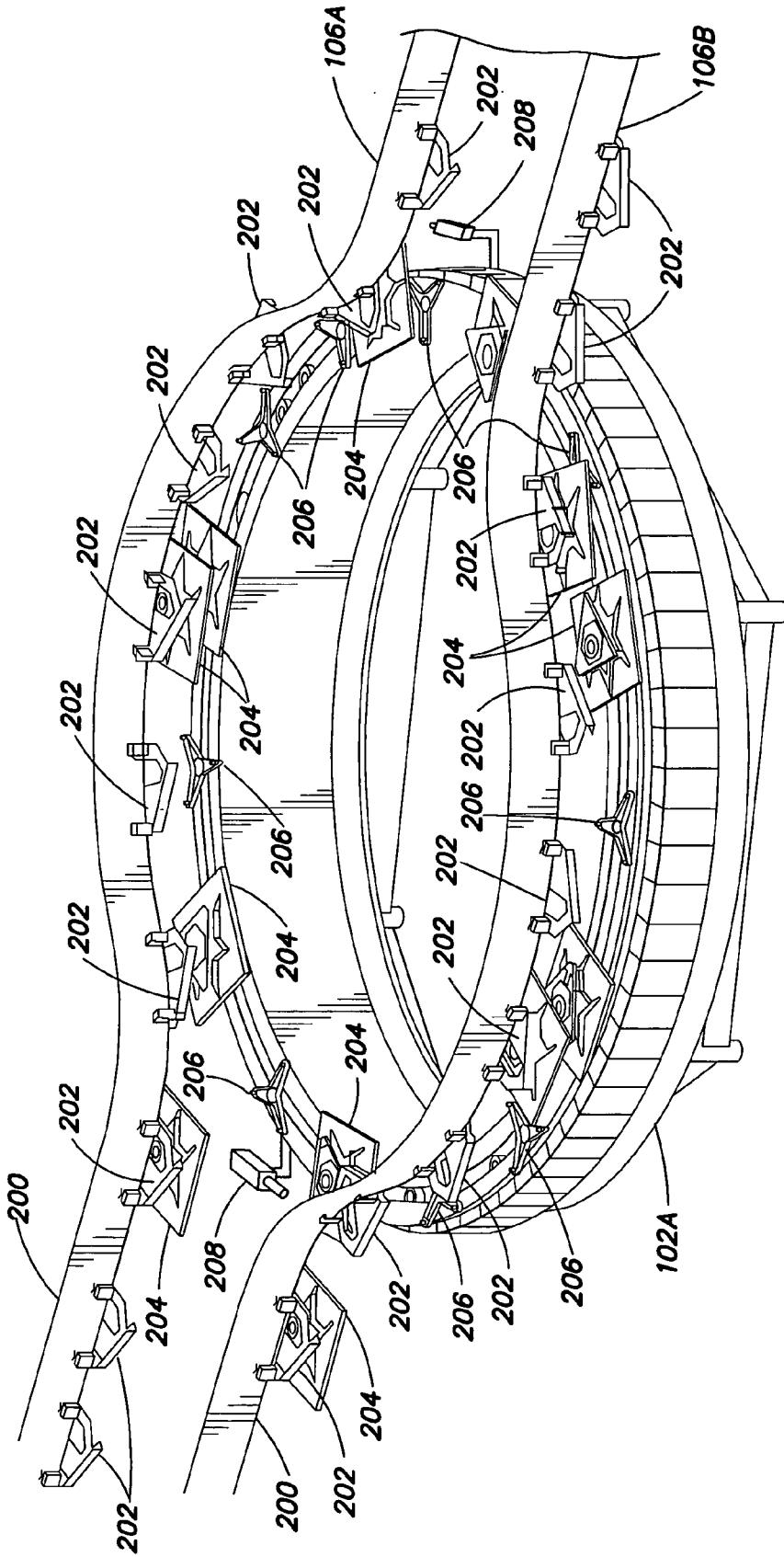


FIG. 2

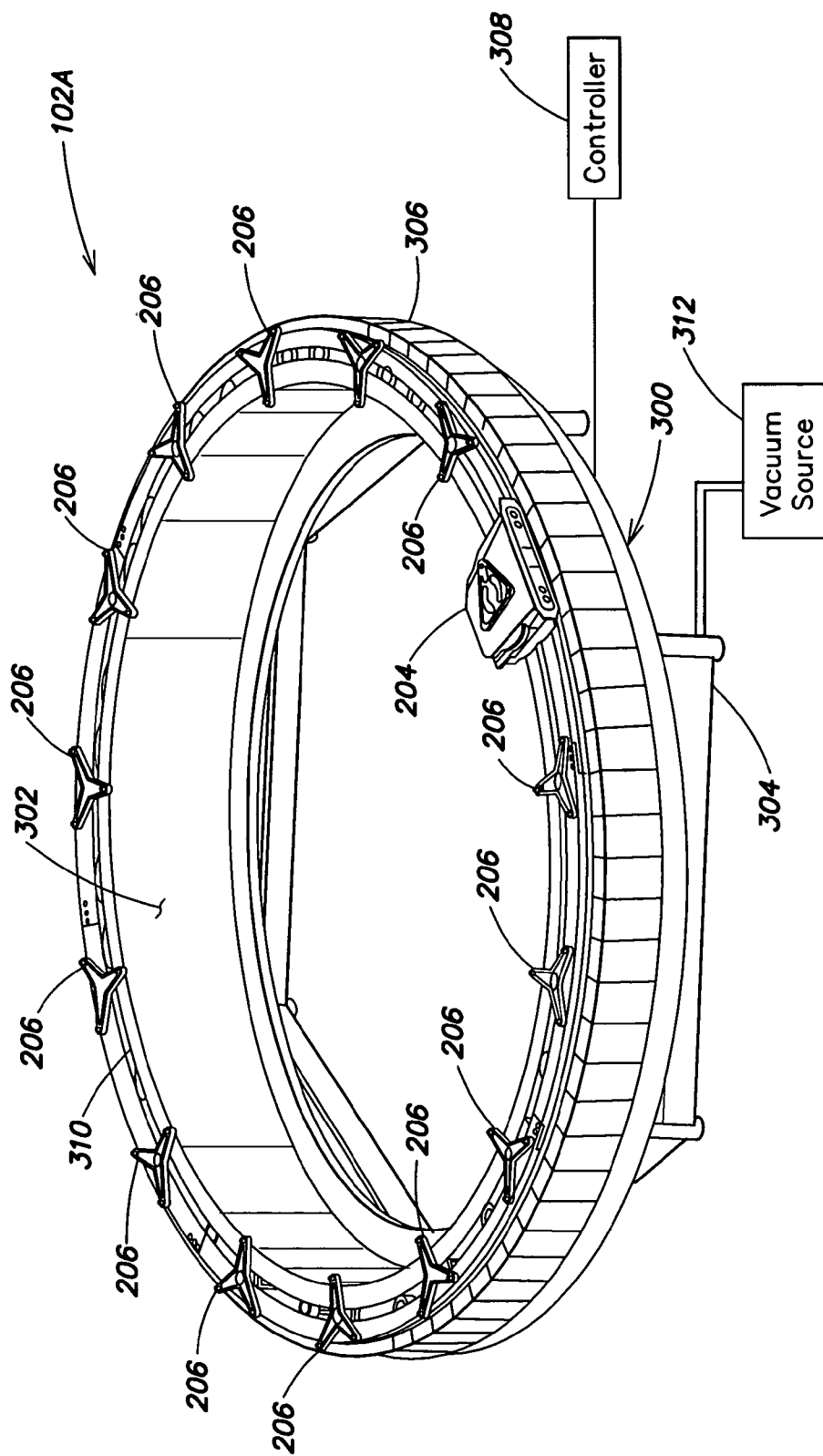


FIG. 3

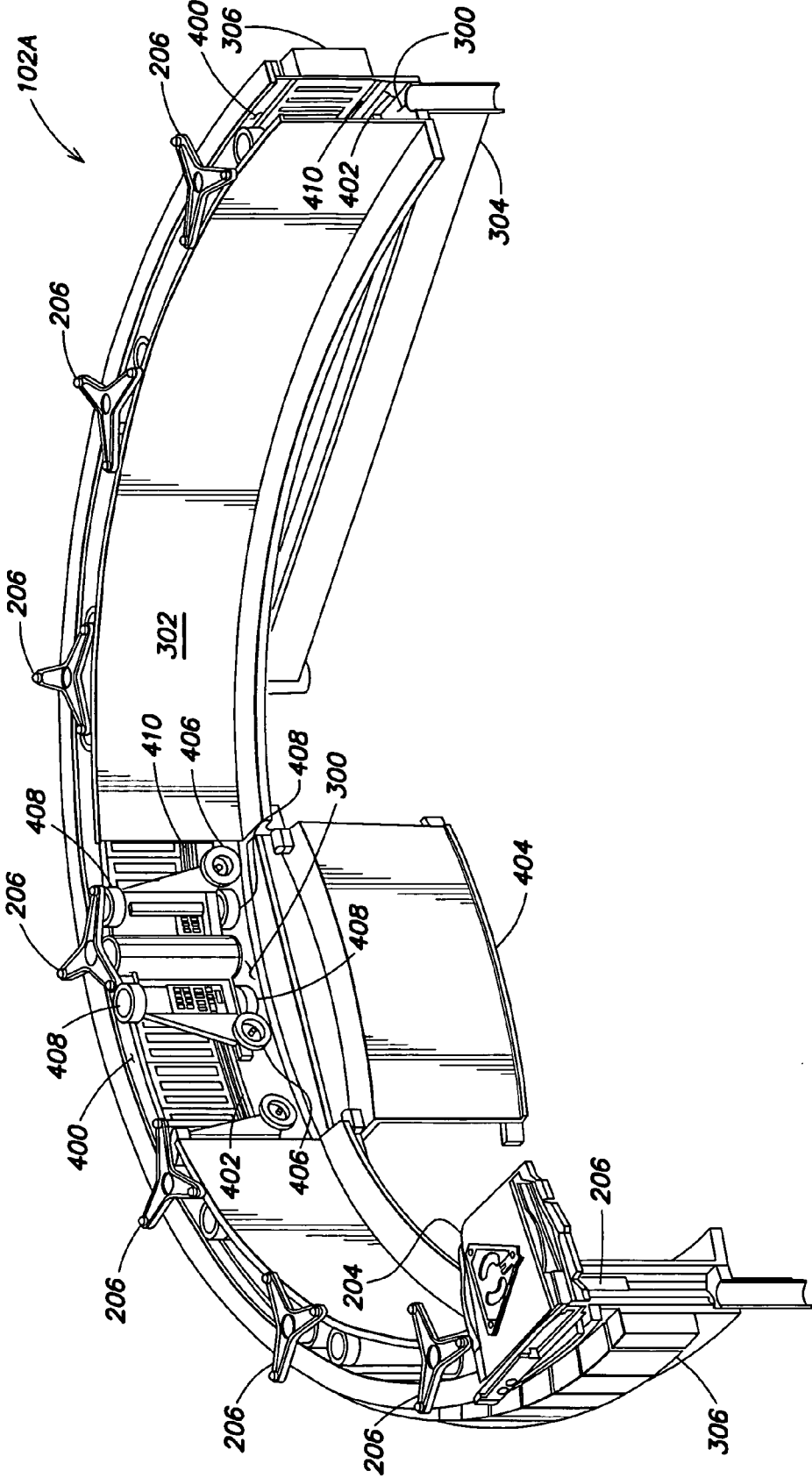


FIG. 4

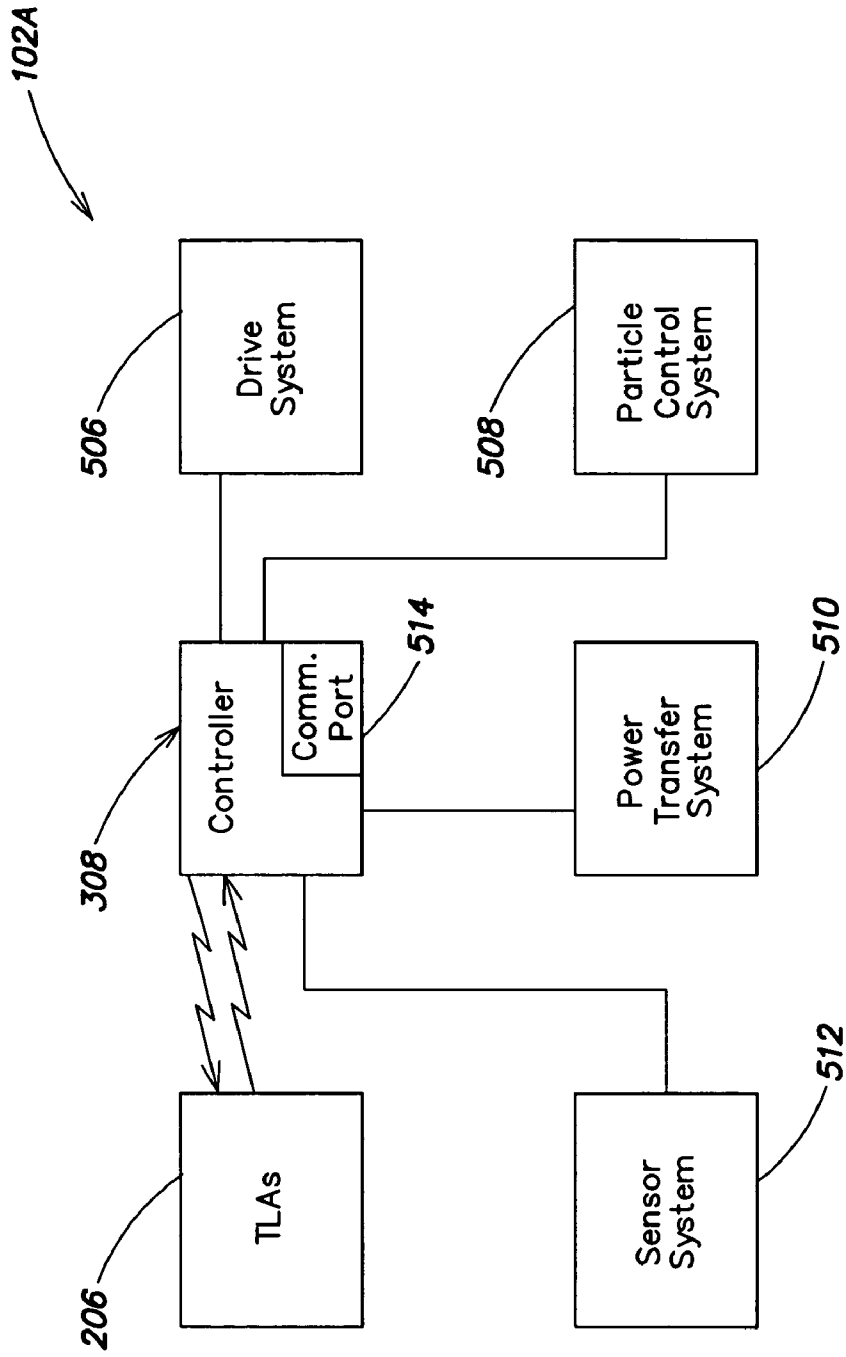


FIG. 5

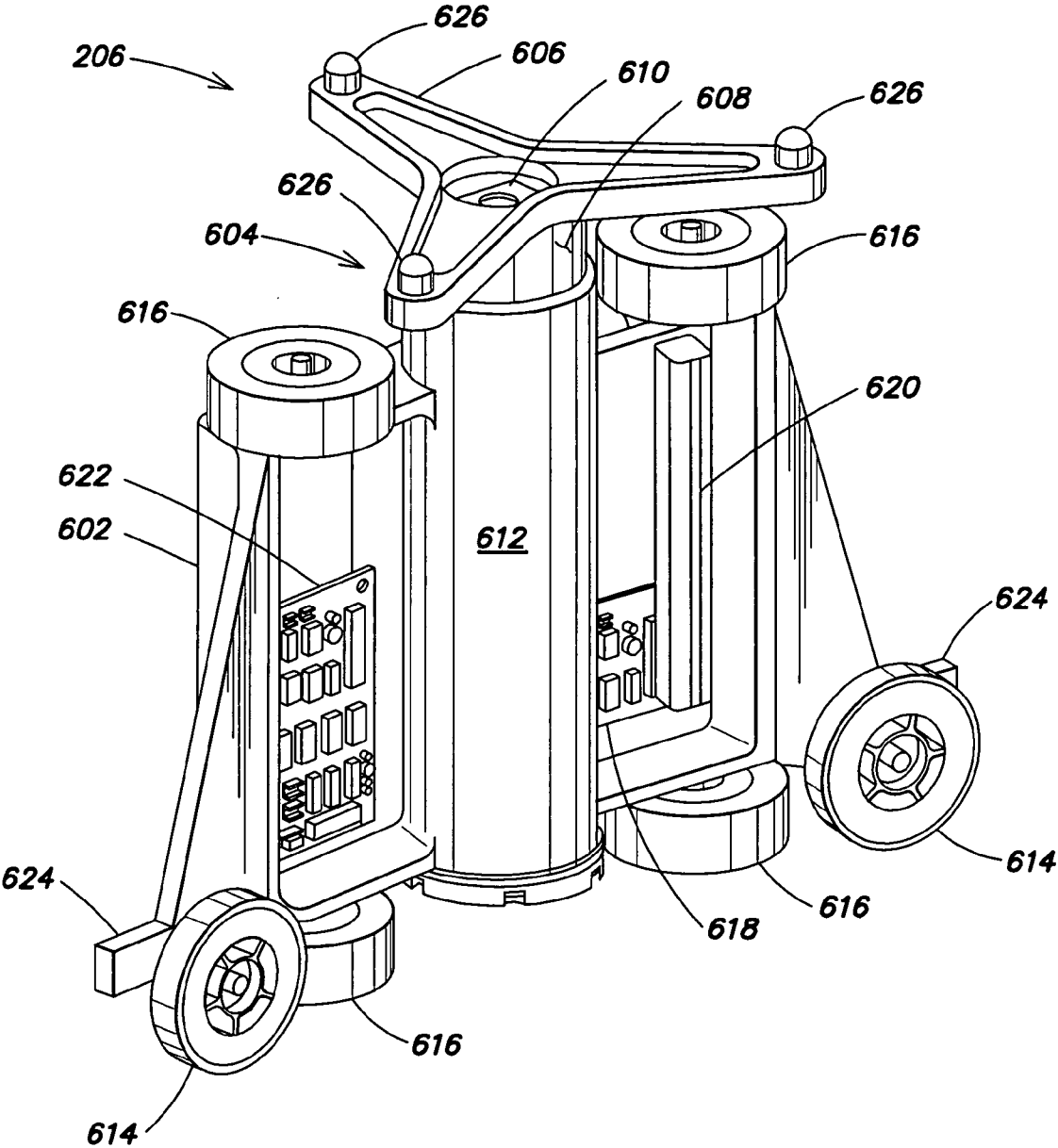
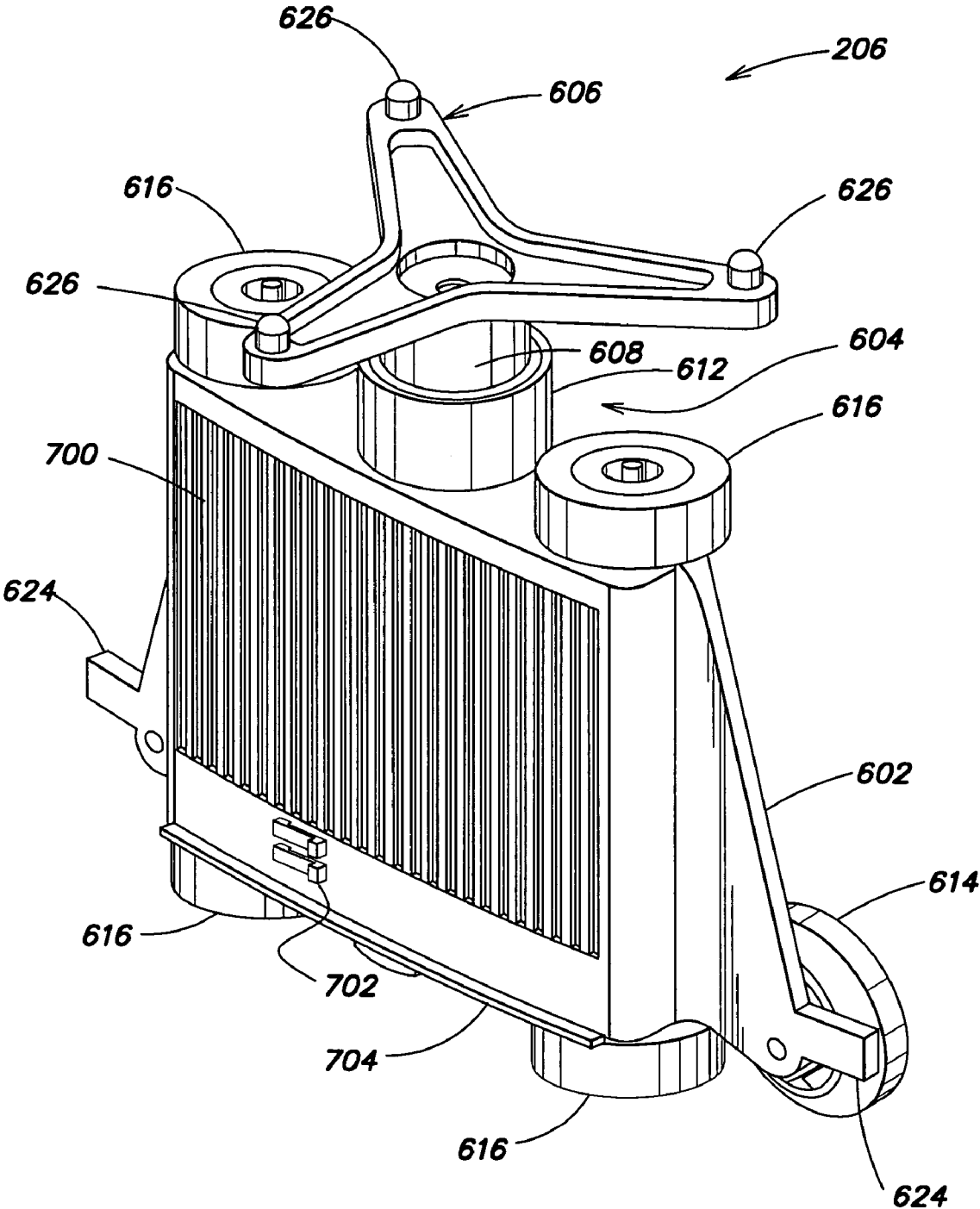


FIG. 6



**FIG. 7**



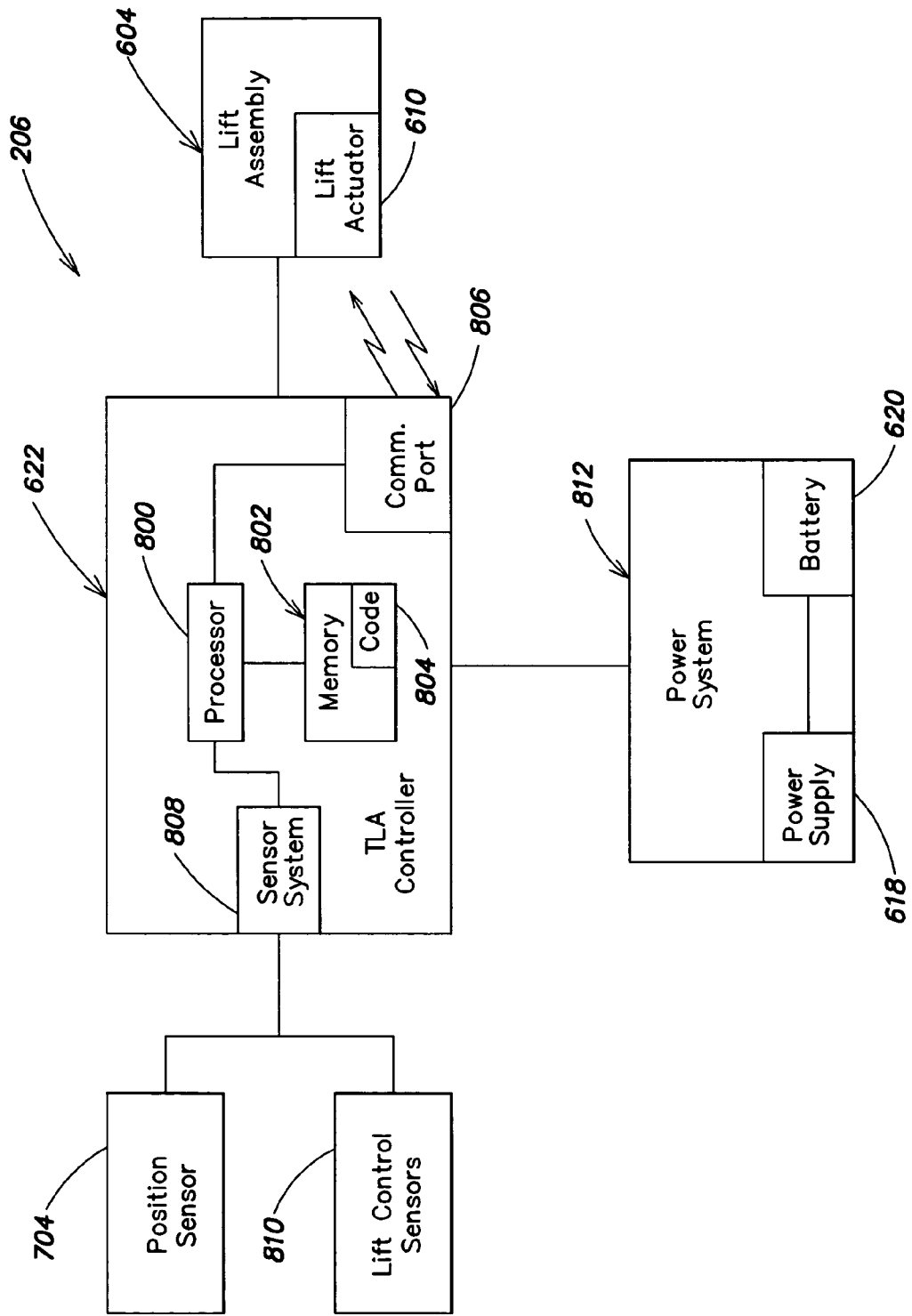
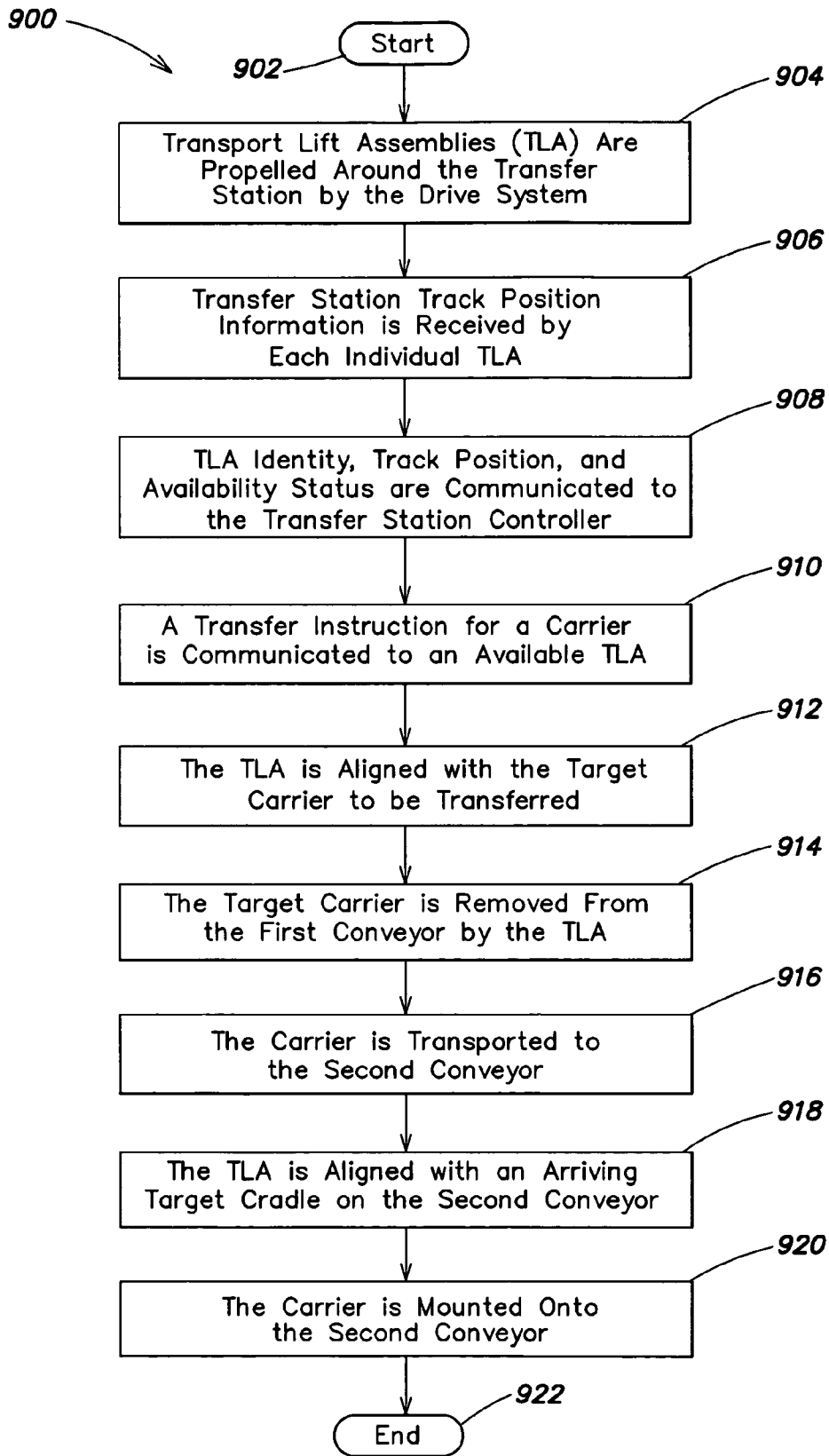


FIG. 8



**FIG. 9**

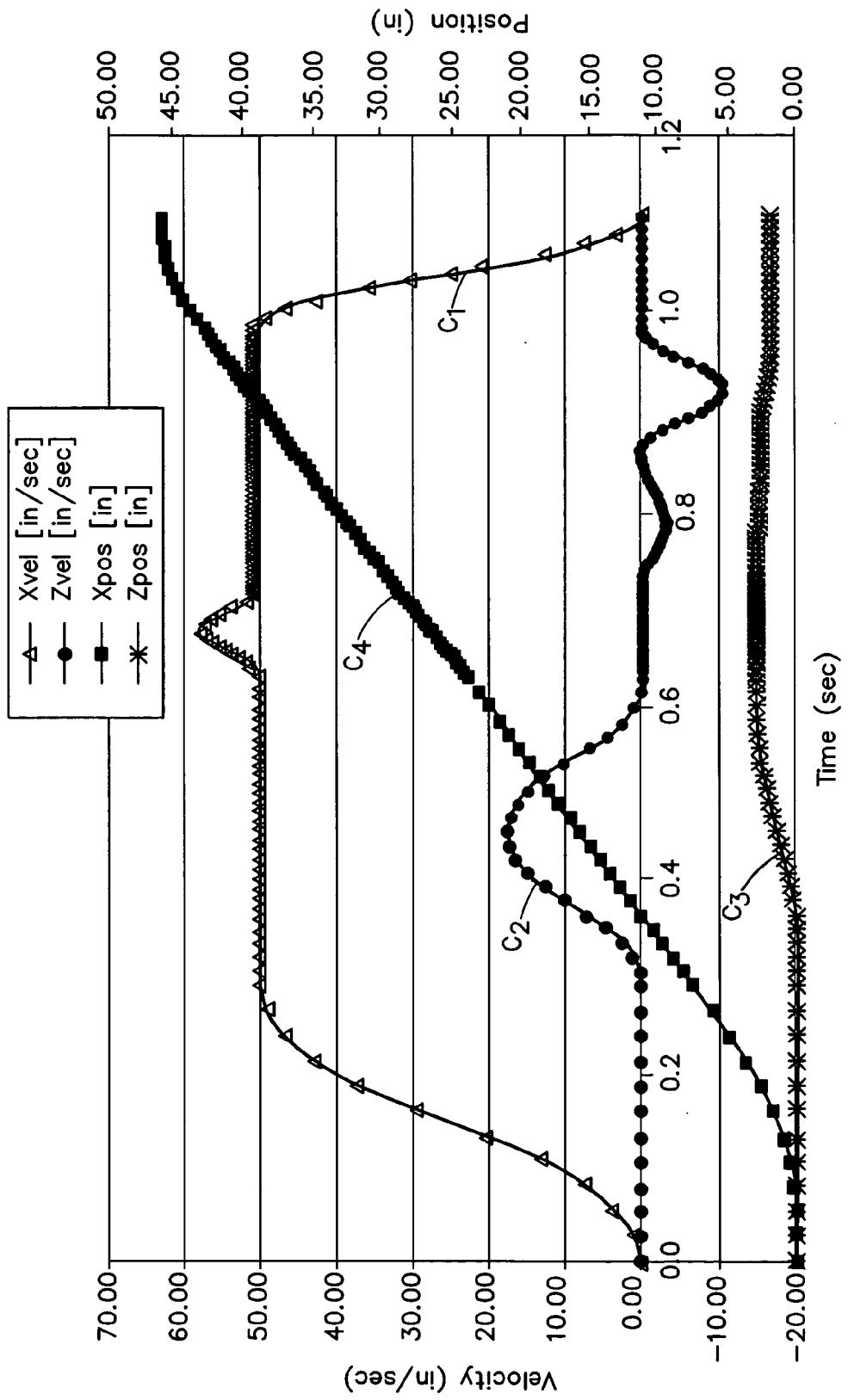


FIG. 10A

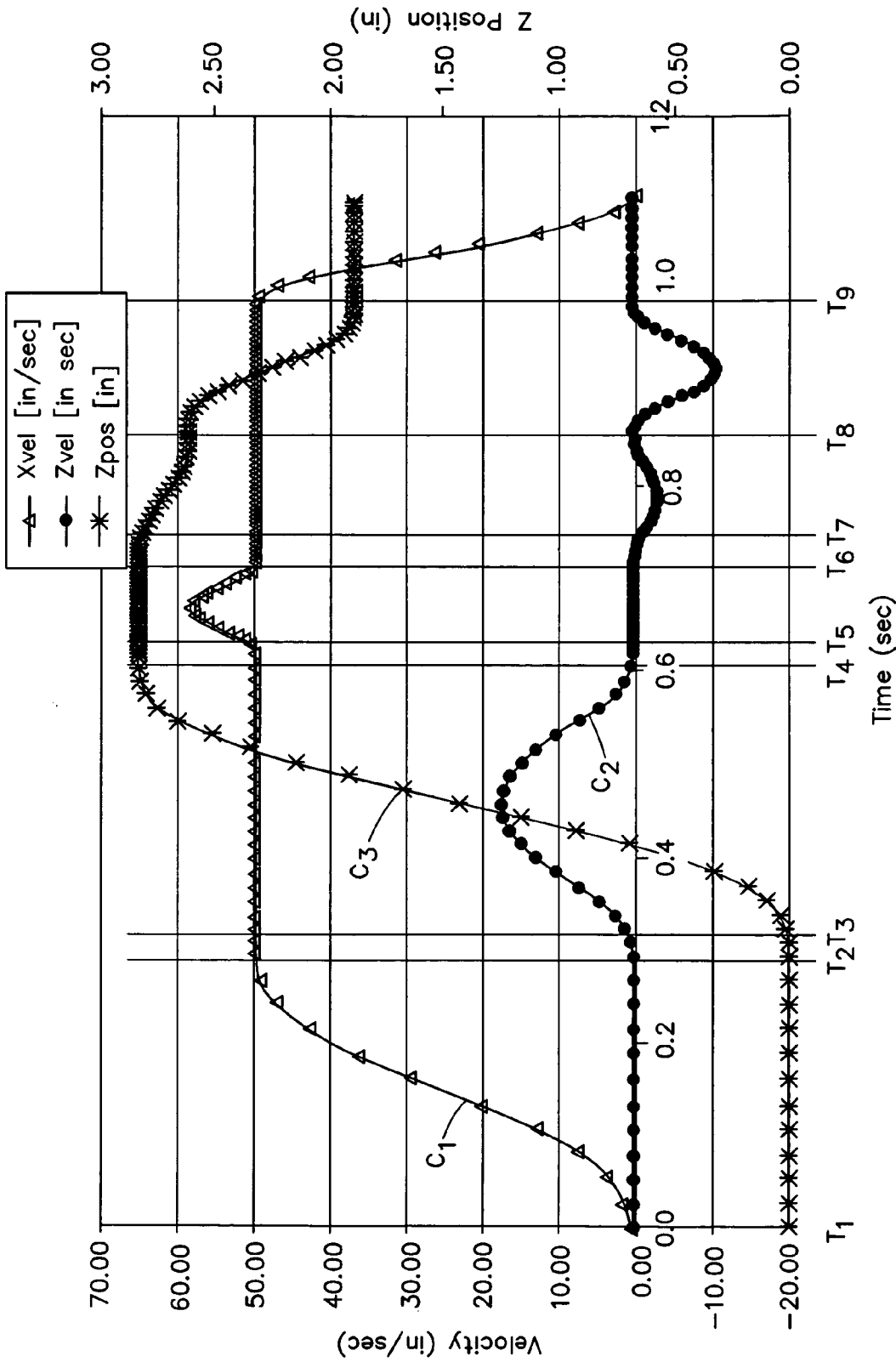
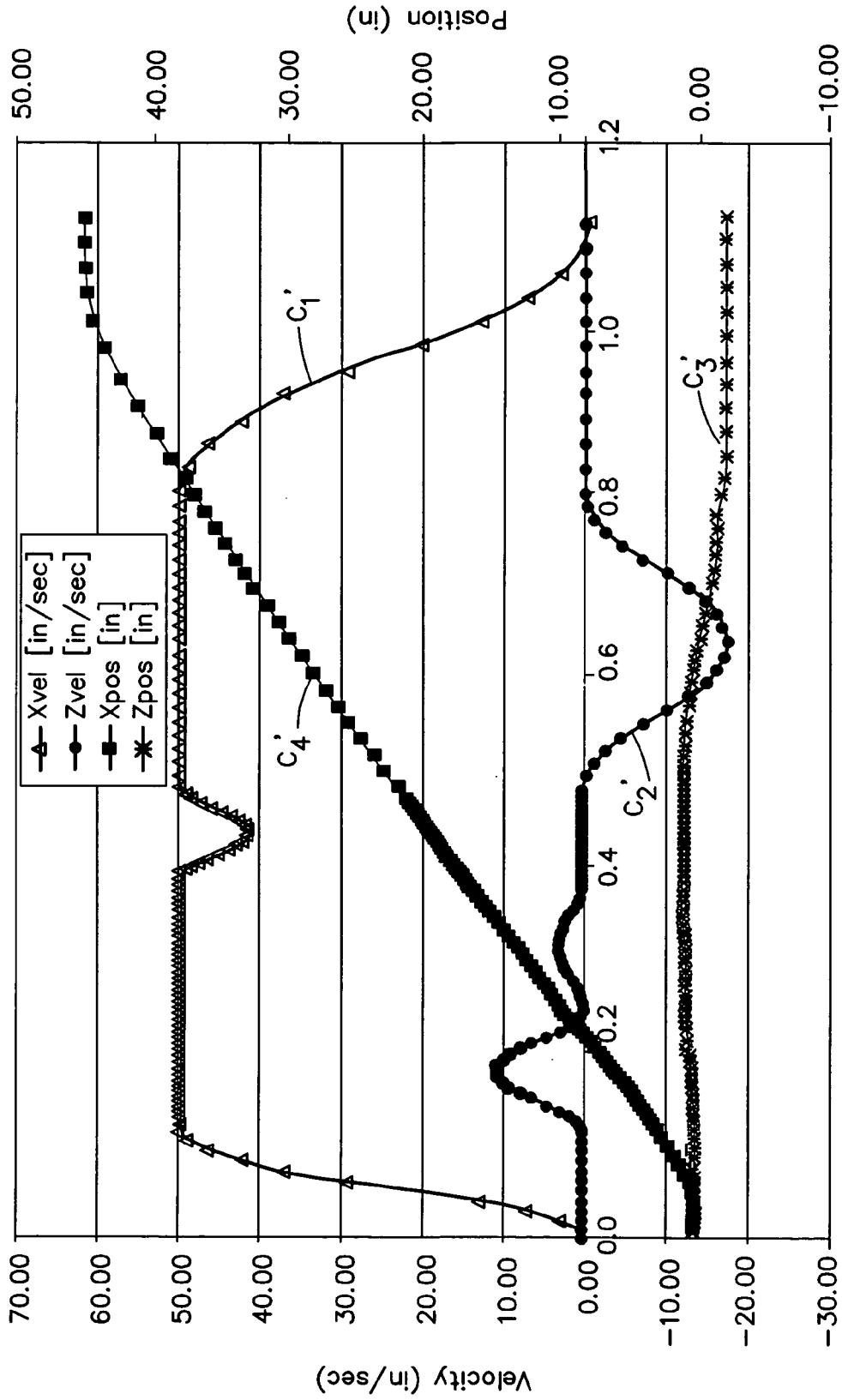


FIG. 10B



Time (sec)  
**FIG. 10C**

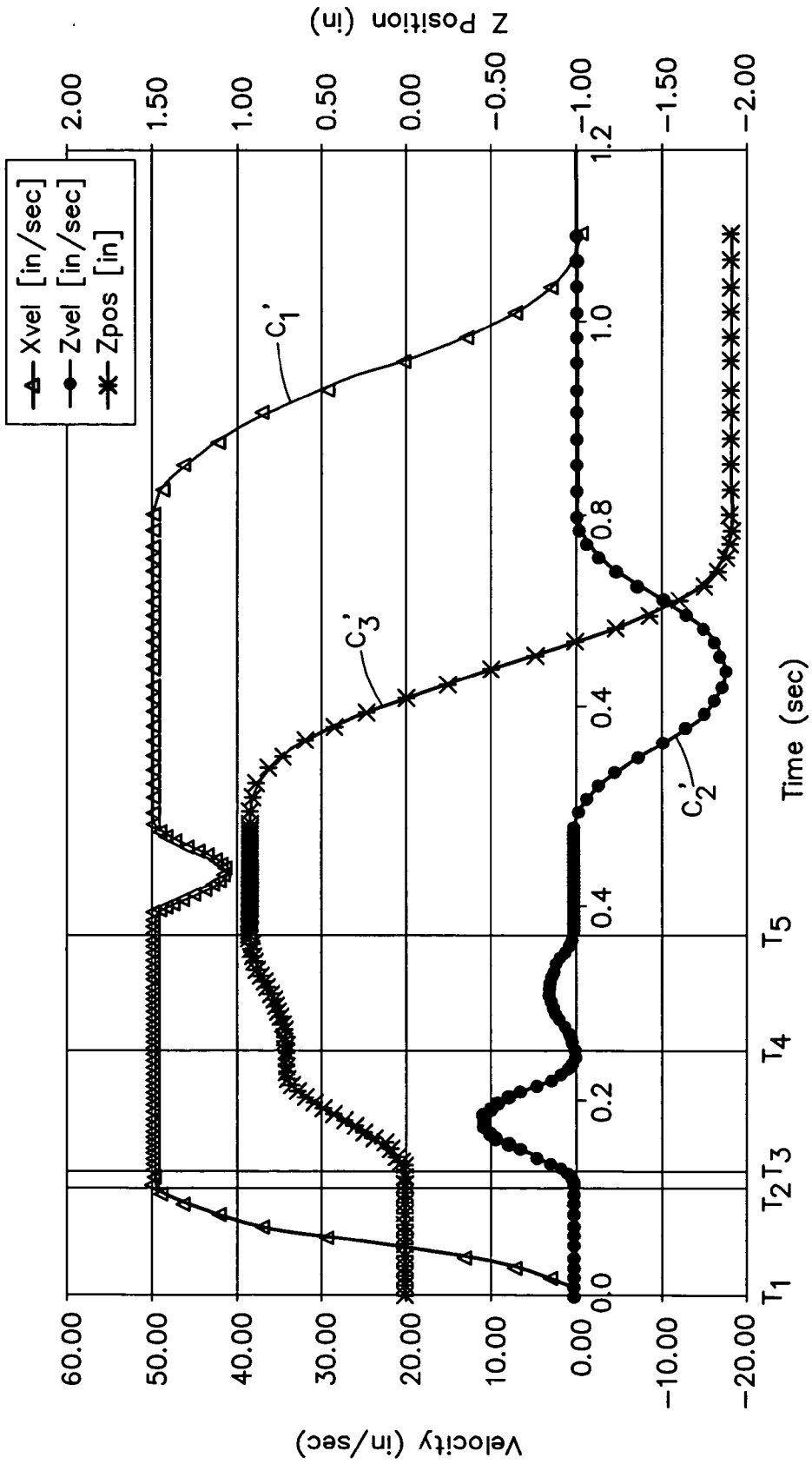


FIG. 10D

**METHODS AND APPARATUS FOR A TRANSFER STATION**

**CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS**

[0001] The present application claims priority to U.S. Provisional Patent Application Ser. No. 60/717,150, filed Sep. 14, 2005 and titled "METHODS AND APPARATUS FOR A TRANSPORT LIFT ASSEMBLY" (Attorney Docket No. 9613/L2/SYNX/SYNX/JW), which is hereby incorporated by reference herein in its entirety.

[0002] The present application also claims priority to U.S. Provisional Patent Application Ser. No. 60/717,335, filed Sep. 14, 2005 and titled "METHODS AND APPARATUS FOR A TRANSFER STATION" (Attorney Docket No. 9613/L/SYNX/SYNX/JW), which is hereby incorporated by reference herein in its entirety.

[0003] The present application also claims priority to U.S. Provisional Patent Application Ser. No. 60/717,336, filed Sep. 14, 2005 and titled "METHODS AND APPARATUS FOR A BAND TO BAND TRANSFER MODULE" (Attorney Docket No. 9613/L3/SYNX/SYNX/JW), which is hereby incorporated by reference herein in its entirety.

[0004] The present application is also related to the following commonly-assigned, co-pending U.S. Patent Applications, each of which is hereby incorporated herein by reference in its entirety for all purposes:

[0005] U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/650,310, filed Aug. 28, 2003 and titled "System For Transporting Substrate Carriers" (Attorney Docket No. 6900);

[0006] U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/764,982, filed Jan. 26, 2004 and titled "Methods and Apparatus for Transporting Substrate Carriers" (Attorney Docket No. 7163);

[0007] U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/650,480, filed Aug. 28, 2003 and titled "Substrate Carrier Handler That Unloads Substrate Carriers Directly From a Moving Conveyor" (Attorney Docket No. 7676);

[0008] U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/764,820, filed Jan. 26, 2004, and titled "Overhead Transfer Flange and Support for Suspending Substrate Carrier" (Attorney Docket No. 8092); and

[0009] U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/987,955, filed Nov. 12, 2004, and titled "Break-Away Positioning Conveyor Mount For Accommodating Conveyor Belt Bends" (Attorney Docket No. 8611).

**FIELD OF THE INVENTION**

[0010] The present invention relates generally to electronic device manufacturing, and more specifically to transporting substrates within an electronic device manufacturing facility.

**BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION**

[0011] Manufacturing of electronic devices typically involves performing a sequence of procedures with respect to a substrate such as a silicon substrate, a glass plate, etc. (Such substrates may also be referred to as wafers, whether patterned or unpatterned.) These steps may include polishing, deposition, etching, photolithography, heat treatment,

and so forth. Usually a number of different processing steps may be performed in a single processing system or "tool" which includes a plurality of processing chambers. However, it is generally the case that other processes are required to be performed at other processing locations within a fabrication facility, and it is accordingly necessary that substrates be transported within the fabrication facility from one processing tool to another. Depending upon the type of electronic device to be manufactured, there may be a relatively large number of processing steps required to be performed at a considerable number of different processing tools/locations within the fabrication facility.

[0012] It is conventional to transport substrates from one processing location to another via substrate carriers such as sealed pods, cassettes, containers, open trays, cassettes and so forth. It is also conventional to employ automated substrate carrier transport devices, such as automatic guided vehicles, overhead transport systems, substrate carrier handling robots, etc., to move substrate carriers from tool to tool within the fabrication facility or to transfer substrate carriers from or to a substrate carrier transport device.

[0013] For an individual substrate, the total device fabrication process, from formation of the substrate to cutting of individual electronic devices from the finished substrate, may require an elapsed time that is measured in weeks or months. Accordingly it would be desirable to reduce substrate transfer time in an effort to reduce non-value added time.

**SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION**

[0014] In a first aspect of the invention, an apparatus is provided that includes a track including a drive mechanism, a control system coupled to the drive mechanism, and a plurality of transport lift assemblies. Each transfer lift assembly is adapted to be individually controlled, travel on the track, remove at least one carrier from a first conveyor, and mount or transfer the carrier onto a second conveyor.

[0015] In a second aspect of the invention, a method is provided that includes (1) aligning a transport lift assembly with an arriving carrier carried by a first conveyor, (2) removing the carrier from the first conveyor using the transport lift assembly, (3) transporting the carrier to a second conveyor, (4) aligning the transport lift assembly with an arriving cradle on a second conveyor, and (5) mounting the carrier onto the second conveyor.

[0016] In a third aspect of the invention, a system is provided that includes a source conveyor adapted to transport at least one carrier, a destination conveyor adapted to transport the carrier, and a transfer station. The transfer station includes a track including a drive mechanism, a control system coupled to the drive mechanism, and a plurality of transport lift assemblies. Each transfer lift assembly is adapted to be individually controlled, travel on the track, remove the at least one carrier from the source conveyor, and mount the carrier onto the destination conveyor.

[0017] Numerous other aspects are provided, as are apparatus, systems and computer program products in accordance with these and other aspects of the invention. Each computer program product described herein may be carried by a medium readable by a computer (e.g., a carrier wave

signal, a floppy disc, a compact disc, a DVD, a hard drive, a random access memory, etc.).

[0018] Other features and aspects of the present invention will become more fully apparent from the following detailed description, the appended claims and the accompanying drawings.

#### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE FIGURES

[0019] FIG. 1 is a schematic representation of a electronic device manufacturing facility employing transfer stations according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0020] FIG. 2 is a perspective drawing of a transfer station and conveyors according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0021] FIG. 3 is a perspective drawing of the transfer station of FIG. 2.

[0022] FIG. 4 is a cross-sectional perspective drawing of the transfer station of FIG. 2.

[0023] FIG. 5 is a block diagram of components of a transfer station according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0024] FIG. 6 is a perspective drawing of a front view of a transport lift assembly according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0025] FIG. 7 is a perspective drawing of a rear view of a transport lift assembly according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0026] FIG. 8 is a block diagram of components of a transport lift assembly according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0027] FIG. 9 is a flowchart depicting an example method according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0028] FIG. 10A depicts position and velocity graphs illustrating a carrier loading motion profile process according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0029] FIG. 10B depicts a more detailed version of some of the position and velocity graphs of FIG. 10A.

[0030] FIG. 10C depicts position and velocity graphs illustrating a carrier unloading process according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0031] FIG. 10D depicts a more detailed version of some of the position and velocity graphs of FIG. 10C.

#### DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0032] Aspects of the present invention provide methods and apparatus for transferring carriers (e.g., substrate carriers) between two or more conveyors (e.g., continuously moving high-speed overhead transport systems (OHT systems)) within a electronic device manufacturing facility (Fab). The invention includes a transfer station with a plurality of independent transport lift assemblies (TLAs) that are each adapted to align with a moving carrier on a conveyor, disengage the carrier from the conveyor (e.g., using a lift assembly), transport the carrier to a second conveyor, and transfer (e.g., mount) the carrier to the second conveyor. The inventive transfer station enables transfers

between conveyors without having to stop the conveyors or TLAs and also enables continuous transfer of carriers as the carriers arrive at the transfer station. In other words, as fast as the carriers arrive on one conveyor, the transfer station of the present invention can operate to move the arriving carriers to another conveyor (e.g., with available or open carrier positions).

[0033] The transfer station may include a track that guides the TLAs to align with the conveyors. In one or more embodiments, the track may be a circular track that is disposed in close proximity to each of the conveyors. In some embodiments, other shape tracks may be used (e.g., elliptical). For example, a portion of each conveyor may pass directly over a different portion of the track. A drive system (e.g., a closed-path linear motor) may be provided to propel the TLAs around the track. In addition, a control system may be provided to receive information about arriving carriers and/or cradles and control the drive system to adjust an individual TLA's speed to align with an incoming carrier (e.g., in anticipation of an unload operation) or incoming conveyor location such as a cradle (e.g., in anticipation of a load operation). The control system may also control the drive system to adjust an individual TLA's speed as part of the actual unloading and loading process. In some embodiments, the track and lower portion of the TLAs may be surrounded by an enclosure within which a negative air pressure is maintained to capture any potentially contaminating particles. The enclosure may include one or more access doors that allow rapid replacement of TLAs.

[0034] Each TLA may include, for example, wireless communication facilities to receive control signals (e.g., using a protocol such as Bluetooth®, <http://www.bluetooth.org/spec/>) from the transfer station control system that directs a TLA to remove a carrier from a conveyor or mount a carrier on a conveyor. In response to such instructions, an individual TLA controller on board the TLAs may be preprogrammed to cause the TLAs to execute a load or unload procedure as instructed by the transfer station controller/control system.

[0035] The TLAs may include a lift assembly that includes an end effector with kinematic features to coupled to, support, and/or align with substrate carriers. In some embodiments, the TLA may include both horizontal and vertical oriented sets of wheels upon which the TLA travels around the track. In a circular track embodiment, the vertical oriented set of wheels may be canted so that on its own, the TLA follows a circular path that matches the diameter of the track. This feature of the TLA may reduce friction on the wheels and thus, reduce particle generation.

[0036] Turning to FIG. 1, a schematic representation of an electronic device manufacturing facility (Fab) 100 employing transfer stations 102A-E is depicted. The Fab 100 includes numerous processing tools 104A, 104B (only two of which are representatively labeled) that are served by conveyors 106A-D. The transfer stations 102A-E and/or conveyors 106A-D may be coupled to and controlled by one or more transport system controllers (TSC) 108.

[0037] In operation, the transfer stations 102A-E, conveyors 106A-D, and TSC 108 may be part of a continuously moving high-speed overhead transport system (OHT system) that is adapted to deliver carriers (not pictured) containing one or more substrates to the processing tools 104A,



**104B** (and/or other processing tools of the Fab **100**). Each of the conveyors **106A-D** may be implemented as a closed loop band that is especially well suited for transporting small lot size carriers, such as substrate carriers that hold a single substrate or substantially fewer than twenty-five substrates (e.g., less than thirteen and in some embodiments, five or less substrates). The particular example Fab **100** depicted in FIG. **1** includes an OHT system with four independent conveyors **106A-D**, each including several features that make the example OHT system particularly suitable for using small lot size carriers including: high-speed, low maintenance, constantly moving conveyors **106A-D**; a carrier loading/unloading function that does not require stopping or slowing the conveyors **106A-D**; conveyors **106A-D** that are able to physically support many carriers at one time; and flexible conveyors **106A-D** that may be readily customized to a desired transport path. These features are described further below.

[**0038**] Previously incorporated U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/650,310, filed Aug. 28, 2003 and titled "System For Transporting Substrate Carriers" (Attorney Docket No. 6900), discloses a substrate carrier transport system or similar delivery system that includes a conveyor for substrate carriers that is intended to be constantly in motion during operation of the Fab which it serves. The constantly moving conveyor is intended to facilitate rapid transportation of substrates within the Fab so as to reduce the total "dwell" time of each substrate in the Fab.

[**0039**] To operate a Fab in this manner, methods and apparatus are provided for unloading substrate carriers from the conveyor, and for loading substrate carriers onto the conveyor, while the conveyor is in motion. Previously incorporated U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/650,480, filed Aug. 28, 2003 and titled "Substrate Carrier Handler That Unloads Substrate Carriers Directly From a Moving Conveyor" (Attorney Docket No. 7676), discloses a substrate carrier handler at a substrate loading station or "tool station" (e.g., adjacent a processing tool or integrated with a processing tool) that may perform such loading/unloading operations with respect to a moving conveyor. For example, a substrate loading station or tool station may include a horizontal guide or crane that is moveable vertically, and an end effector that is moveable horizontally along the horizontal guide. Other configurations for moving the end effector vertically and/or horizontally are provided.

[**0040**] To unload a substrate carrier from a moving conveyor that transfers substrate carriers (a "substrate carrier conveyor") and that passes by the substrate loading station, the end effector is moved horizontally at a velocity that substantially matches the velocity of the substrate carrier as it is being transported by the substrate carrier conveyor (e.g., by substantially matching substrate carrier speed in a horizontal direction). In addition, the end effector may be maintained in a position adjacent the substrate carrier as the substrate carrier is being transported. The end effector thus may substantially match a position of the substrate carrier while substantially matching a velocity of the substrate carrier. Likewise, conveyor position and/or velocity may be substantially matched.

[**0041**] While the end effector substantially matches the substrate carrier's velocity (and/or position), the end effector is raised so that the end effector contacts the substrate carrier

and disengages the substrate carrier from the substrate carrier conveyor. A substrate carrier similarly may be loaded onto the moving substrate carrier conveyor by substantially matching end effector and conveyor velocities (and/or positions) during loading. In at least one embodiment, such substrate carrier handoffs between the end effector and substrate carrier conveyor are performed at a substantially zero relative velocity and/or acceleration between the end effector and the substrate carrier.

[**0042**] Previously incorporated U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/764,982, filed Jan. 26, 2004 and titled "Methods and Apparatus for Transporting Substrate Carriers" (Attorney Docket No. 7163), describes a conveyor system that may be employed with the above-described substrate carrier transport system and/or tool station for transporting substrate carriers between one or more processing tools of a electronic device manufacturing facility. The conveyor system may include a ribbon (or "band") that forms a closed loop within at least a portion of the electronic device manufacturing facility and that transports substrate carriers therein. In one or more embodiments, the ribbon or band may be formed from stainless steel, polycarbonate, composite materials (e.g., carbon graphite, fiberglass, etc.), steel or otherwise reinforced polyurethane, epoxy laminates, plastic or polymer materials that include stainless steel, fabric (e.g., carbon fiber, fiberglass, Kevlar® available from Dupont Corporation, polyethylene, steel mesh, etc.) or another stiffening material, etc. By orienting the ribbon so that a thick portion of the ribbon resides within a vertical plane and a thin portion of the ribbon resides within a horizontal plane, the ribbon is flexible in the horizontal plane and rigid in the vertical plane. Such a configuration allows the conveyor to be constructed and implemented inexpensively. For example, the ribbon requires little material to construct, is easy to fabricate and, due to its vertical rigidity/strength, can support the weight of numerous substrate carriers without supplemental support structure (such as rollers or other similar mechanisms used in conventional, horizontally-oriented belt-type conveyor systems). Furthermore, the conveyor system is highly customizable because the ribbon may be bent, bowed or otherwise shaped into numerous configurations due to its lateral flexibility.

[**0043**] As indicated above, the example Fab **100** of FIG. **1** includes four conveyors **106A-D** (e.g., ribbons or bands) that each form a loop through different quadrants of the example Fab **100**. The conveyors **106A-D** may comprise, for example, the ribbons described in previously incorporated U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/764,982. Also as indicated above, the conveyors **106A-D** may transport carriers (not shown) between processing tools **104A**, **104B** and each of the conveyors **106A-D** comprise straight portions and curved portions to form non-intersecting closed loops. Any number of processing tools **104A**, **104B**, conveyors **106A-D**, and/or loop configurations may be employed.

[**0044**] The transfer stations **102A-E** allow carriers to be moved from one conveyor to another. For example, transfer station **102A** may be used to move carriers from conveyor **106A** to conveyor **106B**. In some embodiments, a conveyor **102E** may be adapted to allow direct transfer of carriers between more than two conveyors. For example, transfer station **102E** may be used to move carriers from conveyor **106A** to conveyor **106B**, **106C**, and/or **106D**, from conveyor **106B** to conveyor **106A**, **106C** and/or **106D**, from conveyor

**106C** to conveyor **106A**, **106B**, and/or **106D**, and from conveyor **106D** to conveyor **106A**, **106B**, and/or **106C**. Any number of conveyors may be served by a transfer station, not just two or four as depicted in the example of FIG. 1. Also, although not shown in FIG. 1, in additional or alternative embodiments, a transfer station may be adapted to transfer carriers from a conveyor directly to a processing tool or storage facility via a substrate loading station.

[0045] Each processing tool may include a substrate carrier handler at a substrate loading station or “tool station” (not pictured) of the processing tool **104A** for unloading a substrate carrier from or for loading a substrate carrier onto a respective conveyor **106A-D** as the conveyor passes by the tool station (as described in previously incorporated U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/650,480). For example, an end effector (not shown) of a tool station of the processing tool **104A** may be moved horizontally at a velocity that substantially matches a velocity of the substrate carrier as it is being transported by the conveyor **106A**, maintained in a position adjacent the substrate carrier as the substrate carrier is being transported and raised so that the end effector contacts the substrate carrier and disengages the substrate carrier from the conveyor **106A**. The substrate carrier then may be delivered to the processing tool **104A**. A substrate carrier similarly may be loaded onto the moving conveyor **106A** by substantially matching end effector and ribbon velocities (and/or positions) during loading.

[0046] Each tool station may include one or more load ports or similar locations where substrates or substrate carriers are placed for transfer to and/or from a processing tool (e.g., one or more docking stations, although transfer locations that do not employ docking/undocking movement may be employed). Various substrate carrier storage locations also may be provided at each tool station for substrate carrier buffering at a processing tool.

[0047] The example OHT system depicted in FIG. 1 includes a transport system controller (TSC) **108** for monitoring, controlling and/or directing operation of the conveyors **106A-D**, the tool station at each processing tool **104A**, **104B**, and/or the transfer stations **102A-E**. Although not shown in FIG. 1, the TSC **108** may be coupled to and/or in communication with each tool station at each processing tool **104A**, **104B**, and/or each transfer station **102A-E**. For example the TSC **108** may control/monitor the speed and/or status of the conveyors **106A-D**, allocate cradles of the conveyors **106A-D** that are used to support/transport substrate carriers, monitor the status of such cradles, provide such information to each tool station and/or transfer station **102A-E**, or the like. Likewise, each tool station may include tool station software (TSS) for controlling tool station operation (e.g., loading or unloading of substrate carriers to/from the conveyors **106A-D**, transporting of substrate carriers to/from load ports or storage locations of the tool station and/or processing tool serviced by the tool station, etc.). A material control system (MCS) (not shown) may be coupled to and/or in communication with the TSC **108**, the transfer stations **102A-E**, and/or the tool station software of each tool station of each processing tool for affecting operation of the same. The TSC **108**, the transfer stations **102A-E**, each TSS and/or the MCS may include a scheduler (not shown) for controlling scheduling of the operations performed by the TSC **108**, the transfer stations **102A-E**, the TSS and/or the MCS.

[0048] The topology of the Fab **100** depicted in FIG. 1 is designed to make the Fab **100** more fault tolerant while at the same time, enhance performance characteristics, particularly in terms of substrate throughput. In some embodiments, a single conveyor may be used throughout a Fab. However, if the conveyor fails or must be stopped in a single conveyor Fab, all carrier transfers via the conveyor are stopped. However, through the use of multiple conveyors **106A-D** and multiple transfer stations **102A-E**, transport of carriers may continue even if one or more of the conveyors **102A-D** are stopped. For example, if a carrier needs to be transported from processing tool **104A** to processing tool **104B** and both conveyor **106B** and transfer station **102E** have been stopped for repair, the carrier may still be transported between the processing tools **104A**, **104B** via conveyor **106A**, transfer station **102D**, conveyor **106D**, transfer station **102C**, and conveyor **106C**.

[0049] Turning to FIG. 2, a perspective drawing of an example embodiment of a transfer station **102A** and conveyors **106A**, **106B** (only the bands **200** are shown) is depicted. Cradles **202** are coupled to each of the bands **200** of the conveyors **106A**, **106B** and are adapted to support substrate carriers **204**. TLAs **206** which may each include a lift assembly (described below) are also adapted to support substrate carriers **204**. In the embodiment depicted in FIG. 2, cradles **202** support the carriers **204** from above and TLAs **206** support carriers **204** from below. However, other alternative configurations are possible including TLAs that support carriers from above and/or cradles that support carriers from below.

[0050] A transfer station **102A** may also include sensors **208** coupled to the transfer station and/or the conveyors **106A**, **106B**. The sensors **208** may include cameras, through-beam detectors, or other devices suitable for detecting/determining the arrival and/or velocity of a carrier **204** and/or an empty cradle **202**. In addition, sensors **208** may be used to determine/detect the position of a lift assembly on a TLA (e.g., up or down), the speed and/or position of a TLA, and/or the relative position, speed, and/or acceleration of a TLA/carrier to a cradle/carrier and vice versa. Such information may be provided to the TSC **108** (FIG. 1) and employed to control/affect substrate carrier transfers.

[0051] As indicated above, the particular depiction of the conveyors **106A**, **106B** in FIG. 2 omits the support, guide, and drive apparatus that may be used in conjunction with the depicted bands **200**. Support apparatus may be used to hold or support the bands **200** in a horizontal plane at a desired height above the transfer station **102A**. Guide apparatus may be used to direct the bands **200** in a path that substantially matches a portion of the track of the transfer station **102A**. Drive apparatus may be used to move the bands **200** through the guide apparatus. In some embodiments, a series of motor driven rollers mounted to a frame may be used to support, guide, and drive the bands **200**. The bands **200** are disposed so that carriers **204** brought to the transfer station **102A** via the conveyors **106A**, **106B** may be unloaded from cradles **202** of the conveyors **106A**, **106B** by TLAs **206** of the transfer station **102A**. Likewise, empty cradles **202** arriving at the transfer station **102A** on the bands **200** may be loaded with carriers **204** by the TLAs **206**.

[0052] FIG. 2 depicts a transfer station **102A** suitably sized to accommodate two conveyors **106A**, **106B**. Depend-

ing on various factors including the speeds of the bands, the spacing of cradles on the bands, and the amount of time needed to remove/mount a carrier, the size of a transfer station may be altered to accommodate transfers from/to any number of bands. For two bands **200** as depicted in FIG. **2** that are moving at approximately the same speed, for example, the diameter of a transfer station that accommodates carriers spaced approximately 500 mm apart and arriving at a rate of approximately 180 carriers per minute, may be as small as approximately 2.5 meters. Transfer stations having smaller diameters are possible, particularly with slower moving bands and/or with different configurations. TLAs on the example transfer station described above may circulate at approximately 12 revolutions per minute and such a transfer station is capable of transferring 10,800 carriers per hour from one band to another.

[0053] In operation, the TLAs **206** continuously circulate in the transfer station **102A**, independently unloading, transporting, and loading carriers **204** as directed by the TSC **108** (FIG. **1**). For example, the TSC **108** may receive information from sensors **208** or the transfer station **102A** indicating the arrival of a carrier **204**. The TSC **108** may then direct the transfer station **102A** to align an available TLA **206** with the arriving carrier **204** by matching speed with the carrier **204**. The TLA **206** may receive instructions from the TSC **108** and/or the transfer station **102A**, and unload the carrier **204** from the band **200** and transport the carrier **204** to the other side of the transfer station **102A**. The TLA **206** then may load the carrier **204** onto an arriving empty/available cradle **202** detected by the sensor **208**.

[0054] Turning to FIG. **3**, a perspective drawing of the transfer station **102A** of FIG. **2** is shown without conveyors. A single carrier **204** is shown supported by a TLA **206** (obscured) under the carrier **204**. The transfer station **102A** includes a track **300** that is surrounded by an enclosure **302**. The track **300** is supported by a frame **304**. A drive system **306** may surround the perimeter of the track **300** and a controller **308** may be coupled to the transfer station **102A**. The controller **308** may be a local controller.

[0055] In operation, the TLAs **206** transport carriers **204** around the track **300**. As will be described in detail below, the TLAs **206** can also load and unload carriers **204** from an overhead transport (OHT) system by raising and lowering a lift assembly while aligning with a cradle **202** on a conveyor **106A** (of FIG. **2**). The TLAs **206** are each driven by the drive mechanism **306**, which, in some embodiments, may include a closed-path linear motor. As shown in FIG. **3**, the linear motor may include an array of side-by-side armature windings or motor coils that can each be individually energized to each create a magnetic field to push or pull permanent magnets mounted on the TLAs **206**. The present invention may be implemented so that the speed of the TLAs **206** may be independently controlled and adjusted via control of the drive mechanism **306**. The drive mechanism **306** may be controlled by the TSC **108** (FIG. **1**) directly or, alternatively, by a local controller **308** and, in some embodiments, under the direction of the TSC **108**. Thus, the speed and position of each TLA **206** may be independently controlled via the drive mechanism **306** in response to signals from the controller **308** and/or the TSC **108**. The controller **308** may control the speed and position of TLAs **206** in response to information from the sensors **208** (of FIG. **2**) and/or in response to signals from the TLAs themselves. Further

details regarding the construction and operation of linear motors may be found in U.S. Pat. No. 6,713,902 to Chitayat which is hereby incorporated herein by reference for all purposes.

[0056] The enclosure **302** may include a series of panels on both sides of the track **300** that define a volume within which the TLAs **206** travel. The enclosure **302** depicted in FIG. **3** includes an opening or slot **310** at the top from which the lift assembly of each TLA protrudes. In addition to supporting the track **300**, the frame **304** may include an integral particle control system. For example, the frame **304** may be constructed of hollow, tubular members that are coupled to openings (not shown) in the bottom of the enclosure **302** and a vacuum source **312**. Through the frame members, vacuum pressure may be applied to the volume defined by the enclosure **302**. Any particles generated by the motion of the TLAs may thus be removed from the transfer station **102A** via the openings in the bottom of the enclosure **302** and carried away via the frame **304**. A separate particle control system (not shown) may alternatively or additionally be coupled directly to the enclosure **302** for removing particles therefrom.

[0057] Turning to FIG. **4**, a cross-sectional perspective drawing showing more details of the transfer station **102A** of FIG. **2** is provided. As with FIG. **3**, a single carrier **204** is shown supported by a TLA **206** under the carrier **204**. The transfer station **102A** includes the track **300** that is surrounded by the enclosure **302**. The track **300** is supported by the frame **304** and the drive system **306** surrounds the perimeter of the track **300**. In addition to the track **300**, the TLAs **206** may contact an upper roadway **400** and lower roadway **402** that both run along the inner surface of the exterior portion of the enclosure **302**. One or more access port doors **404** may be included in the interior portion of the enclosure **302**. As shown through the opening of the access port door **404**, the TLA **206** may include a set of two vertical wheels **406** and a set of four horizontal wheels **408**. In some embodiments, more or less vertical and/or horizontal wheels may be included on a TLA. The transfer station **102A** may further include a power transfer system **410** that also may run along the inner surface of the exterior portion of the enclosure **302** proximate to the TLAs.

[0058] As indicated above, the enclosure **302** may be a particle containment enclosure adapted to prevent potentially contaminating particles generated by moving parts within the enclosure **302** from being deposited or released into the atmosphere of the Fab **100**. In some embodiments, a negative air pressure (e.g., vacuum pressure) may be maintained within the enclosure **302**. In such embodiments, the negative air pressure may be applied via the frame **304** of the transfer station **102A** and/or directly to the enclosure **302**. The frame **304** may be embodied as a series of interconnected hollow members that provide a number of suction paths from the bottom of the enclosure **302** by which a vacuum may draw away any particles generated within the transfer station **102A**. Thus, a down draft may be created within the enclosure **302** from top to bottom such that particles are pulled from the TLAs **206** and out of the transfer station **102A** via the frame **304**. Such a particle containment system may be used to adhere to a better than class **1000** cleanroom rating (e.g., maintain a particle density less than one thousand particles larger than 0.5 microns in

each cubic foot of air space in compliance with Federal Standard 209) which is desirable within a Fab 100.

[0059] In operation, as the drive system 306 propels the TLAs 206 around the transfer station 102A, the vertical wheels 406 roll along the track 300. The vertical wheels 406 may be canted or otherwise adapted to cause the TLA 206 to naturally roll in a circle that matches the shape of the track 300. Thus, lateral rolling friction is minimized and particle generation is greatly reduced. Note that a circular track 300 that has a constant radius of curvature further allows the TLAs 206 with matched, canted vertical wheels 406 to roll with minimum friction and particle creation, thereby providing for a reduction in particulate contaminants being introduced into the manufacturing environment. In addition or alternative embodiments, the track 300 may be angled or banked at a constant pitch to minimize friction and particle generation.

[0060] To provide a balancing centripetal force, the horizontal wheels 408 also roll on the upper roadway 400 and lower roadway 402 as the TLAs 206 are propelled around the transfer station 102A. The track 300, the upper roadway 400, and the lower roadway 402 may each include a thin polycarbonate top layer that helps resist particle generation. Any other practicable material may alternatively be used as a surface for the track 300 and/or roadways 400, 402.

[0061] In some embodiments, the TLAs 206 may receive power to operate on-board functions (e.g., the lift assembly, wireless communications, sensors, etc.) from the transfer station 102A. The power transfer system 410 may include a slip ring that provides an electrical contact to each of the TLAs 206. Alternatively, transformers may be used to transfer power to the TLAs 206 without using a contact. In either embodiment, on-board batteries may be installed in the TLAs 206 to store energy received from the power transfer system 410.

[0062] As mentioned above, the enclosure 302 may include any number of access port doors 404 which can be opened on hinges as shown in FIG. 4 or completely removed so as to expose other components of the transfer station 102A. The access port doors 404 may be opened to perform any cleaning, maintenance, or repair operations. The access port door opening may be sufficiently large to allow a TLA 206 to be easily removed from the track 300 and replaced with a substitute TLA 206 within a matter of a seconds.

[0063] Turning to FIG. 5, various components of an example embodiment of a transfer station 102A are depicted in a block diagram. A controller 308 may be in wireless two-way communication with a number of TLAs 206. The controller 308 may also be coupled to a drive system 506, a particle control system 508, a power transfer system 510, and a sensor system 512. The controller 308 may also include a communications port 514 to communicate with a TSC and/or a MCS within the Fab.

[0064] The controller 308 may be implemented as any computer, microprocessor, or computer system which may be adapted or programmed to provide control over the operation of the transfer station 102A. In some embodiments, the controller 308 may be a network computer equipped with a communications port 514 for facilitating communications with other computers and/or systems. For example, the controller 308 can be controlled by, or provide

information regarding the operation of the transfer station 102A or any system or component of the same, to an external computer or control system, such as, for example, a manufacturing execution system (MES) for a Fab.

[0065] The TLAs 206 (described in detail below) may communicate wirelessly with the controller 308 using any practicable protocol such as, for example, Bluetooth® or wireless Ethernet. In some embodiments, the TLAs 206 may provide status information to the controller 308, for example, indicating the completion of a transfer, a need for service, a current track position, an error condition, speed, "lift up," "lift down," "carrier centered," "low battery," "battery full," "power transfer disabled," "power transfer enabled", or the like. In some embodiments, the TLAs 206 may signal to the controller a need to accelerate or slow down to match the speed of a cradle or to remove a carrier from a cradle, for example. The controller 308 may, in response, control the drive system 506 to energize or de-energize an appropriate motor coil to achieve the desired effect on the TLA 206. In alternative or additional embodiments, the controller 308 may signal instructions to the TLAs 206 based on information received from the sensor system 512 and/or from a TSC (e.g., via the communication port 515). For example, the controller 308 may assign a TLA 206 to unload a carrier from a particular incoming cradle or to load a carrier onto an arriving cradle.

[0066] In another example, the controller 308 may signal a TLA 206 to unload a carrier from a conveyor, hold it for a specific amount of time (e.g., three revolutions around the transfer station 102A), and then load the carrier back onto the same conveyor. In this example, the transfer station 102A may serve to merely delay or relocate a particular carrier on a conveyor, for example, to give a downstream tool station more time to prepare for the arrival of the particular carrier. This may allow the carrier's substrates to be processed sooner instead of having to complete another full circuit on the conveyor because the tool station would not have been ready at the original arrival time.

[0067] In some embodiments, the particle control system 508, which may include a vacuum pump or other vacuum supply, may be controlled and/or monitored by the controller 308. For example, if a loss of vacuum pressure within the enclosure 302 (FIG. 3) is detected by the sensor system 512, the controller 308 may attempt to restart the particle control system 508. Likewise, the power transfer system 510 may, for example, be activated by the controller 308 in response to a signal from the TLAs 206 that onboard battery power is running low.

[0068] Turning to FIGS. 6 and 7, perspective drawings of a front view (FIG. 6) and rear view (FIG. 7) of an example embodiment of a transport lift assembly (TLA) 206 are provided. The TLA 206 includes a chassis 602 that supports a lift assembly 604 (shown in a lowered position). The lift assembly 604 includes a lift platform 606 (also referred to herein as an end effector) mounted on a lift slide 608 that is driven up and down by a linear lift actuator 610 within a lift tube 612. In addition to the lift assembly 604, a set of two vertical wheels 614, a set of four horizontal wheels 616, a power supply 618, a battery 620, a TLA controller 622, and front and rear bumpers 624 are supported by or mounted to the chassis 602. Referring to FIG. 7, a linear motor magnet array 700 and power pick-up contacts 702 are mounted on

the rear side of the chassis **602**. A position sensor **704** is mounted to the rear bottom edge of the chassis **602** and coupled to the TLA controller **622** depicted in FIG. 6.

[0069] With reference once again to both FIGS. 6 and 7, the chassis **602** may be constructed of any suitable material such as cast aluminum. In an exemplary embodiment, the chassis may be a single or integrated structure having the above-described components integrated therewith and/or attached thereto. In another exemplary embodiment, the chassis **602** may be formed of two or more structures.

[0070] In operation, the lift platform **606**, which may include kinematic features **626**, is adapted to engage mating kinematic features in the bottom of a substrate carrier **204** (FIG. 2) and to provide support when raising and lowering the carrier **204**. When either loading a carrier onto a conveyor or unloading a carrier from a conveyor, the lift assembly **604** (and TLA **206**) may follow a predetermined/preprogrammed motion profile (described in detail below with respect to FIGS. 11A-D) under the control of the TLA controller **622** and/or the controller **308**. When loading a carrier onto a conveyor, the linear lift actuator **610** pushes the lift slide **608** up through the lift tube **612**. This raises the lift platform **606** supporting the carrier to be loaded, up to the cradle so that a flange on top of the carrier engages the cradle. Likewise, when unloading a carrier from a conveyor, the linear lift actuator **610** pushes the lift slide **608** up through the lift tube **612** to raise the lift platform **606** so as to engage the kinematic features **626** in the mating recesses in the bottom of the carrier. The carrier is then lifted off of the cradle attached to the conveyor and lowered clear of the cradle.

[0071] As described above, a TLA **206** may include two sets of wheels **614**, **616**. The axels of the vertical wheels **614** may be angled relative to each other so that the TLA **206** tends to roll in a circular path. The angle of the axels relative to each other may be set such that the circular path that the TLA follows, matches the track **300** of the transfer station **102A**. Alternatively or additionally, the vertical wheels **614** may themselves be angled such that the diameter of the wheel on one side is smaller than the diameter of the same wheel on the other side. Such a wheel naturally follows a circular path and the diameter of the circular path is a function of the relative difference in the diameters of the two sides of the wheel. The difference may be selected such that the wheels follow a circular path that matches the track **300** of the transfer station **102A**. As indicated above, by angling the vertical wheels **614** and/or selecting angled wheels for use as the vertical wheels **614** (e.g., wheels adapted to follow a circular path that matches the track **300** of the transfer station **102A**), rolling friction is reduced and potentially contaminating particle generation is minimized. Two vertical wheels **614** are depicted as being used in the TLA embodiment of FIG. 6, however, one, three, four, or more wheels **614** may be used in alternative embodiments. The vertical wheels may be made from a polyurethane or polyethylene material or any other practicable material. Polyurethane may be selected, for example, because of its characteristics including providing a quiet rolling surface.

[0072] Because each TLA **206** is operated independently of the other TLAs, in some embodiments, the possibility exists that two or more TLAs may contact each other while circulating within the transfer station **102A**. Bumpers **624**

may be provided on either end of the TLA **206** to protect the vertical wheels **614** (and the TLA **206**) from other TLAs that may collide with the TLA **206** within the transfer station **102A**. The bumpers **624** may be made from a shock absorbing material such as a low derometer polyurethane or any other practicable material.

[0073] The TLA **206** may also use horizontal wheels **616** to guide the TLA **206** in the transfer station **102A** and provide centripetal support to the TLA **206** as it travels on the roadways **400**, **402** of the transfer station **102A**. The horizontal wheels **616** also serve to maintain the linear motor magnet array **700** and power pick-up contacts **702** on the rear of the TLA **206** at a constant distance from the drive system **306** and power transfer system **410**, respectively. Four horizontal wheels **616** are depicted as being used in the TLA embodiment of FIG. 6, however, one, two, three, five, or more wheels **616** may be used in alternative embodiments. The horizontal wheels **616** may be made from a ultra high molecular weight (UHMW) polyethylene material or any other practicable material. UHMW polyethylene may be chosen, for example, because of its lubricity and high abrasion resistance.

[0074] In embodiments where the TLA **206** receives energy via power pick-up contacts **702**, the contacts **702** are located on the TLA **206** so as to align with a slip ring in the transfer station **102A** which embodies the power transfer system **410**. The contacts **702** are coupled to the power supply **618** which is coupled to the battery **620**, the TLA controller **622**, and the linear lift actuator **610** via the TLA controller **622**. In addition to supplying power to the TLA controller **622**, the power supply **618** is operative to charge and maintain the battery **620** when the power transfer system **410** is enabled/supplying power and to draw power from the battery **620** when the power transfer system **410** is disabled/not supplying power.

[0075] In alternative embodiments, the power transfer system **410** may include a transformer coupled power transfer mechanism. The TLA **206** may be equipped with a transformer (e.g., in place of the power pick-up contacts **702**) that generates electricity for the TLA **206** as it is moved through magnetic fields created by energized transformers disposed around the circumference of the transfer station **102A**.

[0076] The linear motor magnet array **700** mounted on the TLA **206** provides magnets that are acted upon by the drive system **306**. The array **700** may use very strong permanent magnets such as those made from neodymium or neodymium-boron. The drive system **306**, which may include a closed-path linear motor, creates magnetic fields adjacent the TLA's linear motor magnet array **700** by energizing selected windings of the linear motor to push or pull the TLA's linear motor magnet array **700**, and consequently the TLA **206**. In this manner, the speed and position of the TLA **206** can be accurately controlled via the drive system **306**. The drive system **306** may be controlled in response to TLA position information that is determined via the position sensor **704**. The position sensor **704** may be a linear position sensor which allows accurate determination of the TLA's position in the transfer station **102A**. The position sensor **704** may communicate with the drive system **306** directly or may be coupled to the TLA controller **622** to facilitate providing feedback to the transfer station controller **308**/

drive system 306 for positioning the TLA 206 below an arriving carrier to be unloaded, for example. In some embodiments, the position sensor may include several sensors disposed around the circumference of the track 300 and the TLAs 206 may merely include a linear scale that the position sensors detect to determine TLA position. Thus, the position of the TLAs may be determined by either the transfer station 102A or the TLAs themselves.

[0077] Turning now to FIG. 8, a block diagram illustrating components of a transport lift assembly 206, and particularly the TLA controller 622, is provided. The TLA controller 622 may include a processor 800, associated memory 802 for storing executable code 804, communications facilities (e.g., a communications port 806), and a sensor system 808 for monitoring various sensors 810, 704 for controlling the TLA 206 and particularly the lift assembly 604. The processor 800 may be any suitable microprocessor or CPU that may be adapted for real time control of the TLA 206. The executable code 804 stored within the memory 802 may include sequences of lift assembly control commands that implement motion profile processes for loading and unloading carriers from conveyors. The communication port 806 may include a transmitter and receiver adapted to wirelessly exchange information with the transfer station controller 308 or other systems using any practicable protocol such as, for example, Bluetooth® or wireless Ethernet. Sensors 810, 704 coupled to the sensor system 808 for controlling the lift assembly 604 may include one or more sensors for detecting the position (e.g., up or down) of the lift platform 606, one or more sensors for detecting whether a carrier is currently on the lift platform 606, one or more sensors for determining that the lift platform 606 is centered below a carrier or cradle and ready to unload or load a carrier, and the like.

[0078] The TLA controller 622 may also be connected to the lift assembly 604 to actually signal the lift actuator 610 to execute motion profile processes. The TLA controller 622 may also be connected to the power system 812 to receive electrical power from the battery 620 and/or the power supply 618.

[0079] Turning to FIG. 9, a flowchart depicting an example method 900 of transferring a carrier from one conveyor to a second conveyor is provided. The method 900 commences at step 902. At step 904, the TLAs 206 are propelled along the transfer station track 300 by the drive system 506. In step 906, transfer station track position information is received by each individual TLA 206 from a respective onboard position sensor 704. In step 908, the TLAs' identity, track position, and availability status are communicated wirelessly to the transfer station controller 308. In step 910, a transfer instruction for a particular target carrier is communicated from the transfer station controller 308 to a particular available TLA 206. In step 912, the TLA 206 is aligned with the target carrier to be transferred that is arriving on the first conveyor. Aligning the TLA 206 with the target carrier may include sensing the position of the arriving carrier using sensor 208 and changing the speed of the TLA 206 to match the speed of the arriving carrier. Changing the speed of the TLA 206 may be affected by the transfer station controller 308 by signaling to the drive system 506 in response to alignment information determined by and received from the TLA 206.

[0080] In step 914, the target carrier is removed from the first conveyor by the TLA 206. Removing the carrier may

include raising an end effector (e.g., the lift platform 606) of the TLA 206 once the TLA 206 has been aligned with the carrier to be transferred. The lift platform 606 may be raised to contact the carrier and execute an unload motion profile process (described in detail below with respect to FIGS. 10C-D) to disengage the carrier from the moving conveyor.

[0081] In step 916, the carrier is transported to the second conveyor. Transporting the carrier includes propelling the TLA 206 around the track 300 of the transfer station 102A via the drive system 506 (e.g., using a linear drive motor 306). In some embodiments, the TLA 206 bearing the carrier may simply circulate on the track 300 until an available cradle arrives, or, in additional or alternative embodiments, the TLA 206 may be instructed to load the carrier back onto the first conveyor to merely relocate the carrier on the first conveyor. This may be done to delay a carrier's arrival at a tool station at another location in the Fab until the tool station is ready for the carrier.

[0082] Returning to the method 900 of FIG. 9, in step 918, the TLA is aligned with an arriving (available) target cradle on the second conveyor. The target cradle may be a particular cradle previously identified or it may simply be the next available cradle on the second conveyor to arrive at the transfer station 102A when the TLA 206 is ready to unload. As above, aligning the TLA with the arriving target cradle may include sensing the position of the arriving cradle on the second conveyor and changing the speed of the TLA to match the speed of the arriving cradle.

[0083] In step 920, the carrier is mounted onto the second conveyor. Mounting or loading the carrier may include raising the carrier to the target cradle on the second conveyor via the end effector (e.g., the lift platform 606) of the TLA 206 once the TLA 206 has been aligned with the target cradle. A load motion profile process (described in detail below with respect to FIGS. 10A-B) may be executed to engage the carrier on the cradle on the moving conveyor. The method 900 completes at step 922.

[0084] FIGS. 10A-D depict exemplary motion profile processes for the lift assembly 604. In at least one embodiment of the invention, when such motion profiles are employed, only the TLA's position sensor 704 need be employed (e.g., the other sensors 208, 810 may be eliminated). With reference to FIG. 10A, curve C1 illustrates lift assembly 604 velocity along the x-axis (horizontal direction in which the conveyor 106A travels) during a load operation. Curve C2 illustrates lift assembly 604 velocity along the z-axis (vertical direction) during a load operation. Curve C3 illustrates lift assembly 604 z-axis position and curve C4 illustrates lift assembly 604 x-axis position during a load operation. FIG. 10B is similar to FIG. 10A, but shows the z-axis position data enlarged. FIGS. 10C-D are similar to FIGS. 10A-B, but illustrate x-axis velocity (curve C1'), z-axis velocity (curve C2'), z-axis position (curve C3') and x-axis position (curve C4') for the lift assembly 604 during an unload operation. Note that FIGS. 10A-B show the z-axis position data (curve C3) at a lower z-position during a start of a substrate carrier load operation (e.g., to compensate for the size of a substrate carrier).

[0085] With reference to FIGS. 10A-B and curves C1-C4, the lift assembly 604 may perform similar raisings, lowerings, and accelerations as described above with reference to a load operation. For example, after receiving a signal to

perform a load operation, the lift assembly 604 (via the TLA 206) accelerates to match the velocity of the conveyor 106A in the x-direction (curve C1) between times T1 and T2. Thereafter, between times T3 and T4, the lift assembly 604 (curve C3) is raised to the level of the conveyor 106A; for example, such that a flange on the top of the substrate carrier 204 to be loaded onto the conveyor 106A is above the cradle 202 that is to receive the substrate carrier 204.

[0086] Between times T5 and T6, the lift assembly 604 is accelerated (curve C1) above the speed of the conveyor 106A (and then is decelerated back to the speed of the conveyor 106A) so that the flange of the substrate carrier 204 is positioned above the cradle 202. At time T7, with the flange of the substrate carrier 204 positioned above the cradle 202, the lift assembly 604 lowers (curve C3) and stops as the flange contacts the cradle 202 (as shown at time T8). The lift assembly 604 then lowers until time T9 and the substrate carrier 204 remains on the cradle 202. The substrate carrier 204 thereby is transferred to the conveyor 106A with substantially zero relative velocity and/or acceleration (e.g., at time T8) between the lift assembly 604 and the cradle 202. For example, because the lift assembly 604 stops as the flange engages the cradle 202, transfer of the substrate carrier 204 occurs with substantially zero velocity and acceleration in the z-direction (curve C2). Likewise, because lift assembly 604 velocity in the x-direction is constant and matched to that of the conveyor 106A during carrier exchange (curve C1), transfer of the substrate carrier 204 occurs with substantially zero acceleration in the x-direction. Further, the only motion occurring in the y-direction during substrate carrier transfer is to accommodate the constant radius of curvature of the transfer station 102A. However, since both the lift assembly 604 and conveyor 106A follow substantially the same path, the relative motion in the y-direction is zero between the lift assembly 604 and conveyor 106A. Accordingly, substrate carrier transfer may be performed with substantially zero relative acceleration in three directions and substantially zero relative velocity in at least two directions. Following time T9, the lift assembly 604 decelerates (curve C1) to the steady state speed of the TLA 206.

[0087] With reference to FIGS. 10C-D and curves C1-C4, the lift assembly 604 may perform similar raisings, lowerings, and accelerations as described above with reference to an unload operation. For example, after receiving a signal to perform an unload operation, the lift assembly 604 via the TLA 206 is accelerated to match the velocity of the conveyor 106A in the x-direction (curve C1) between times T1 and T2. Thereafter, between times T3 and T4, the lift assembly 604 is raised (curve C3') so that the kinematic features 626 engage the bottom of the substrate carrier 204 to be unloaded from the conveyor 106A. At time T4, the lift assembly 604 stops raising as the kinematic features 626 engage the bottom of the carrier 204 (curves C2' and C3'). Between times T4 and T5, the lift assembly 604 is raised further so as to lift the flange of the substrate carrier 204 off of the cradle 202. The substrate carrier 204 thereby is unloaded from the cradle 202 with substantially zero relative velocity and/or acceleration (e.g., in the x, y and/or z-directions due to the halting of z-axis motion at time T4 prior to lifting the substrate carrier 204 from the cradle 202 and due to speed matching between the lift assembly 604 and the conveyor 106A). Following time T5, the lift assembly 604 decelerates

and reaccelerates (curve C1') and lowers (curve C3') to clear the cradle 202 as previously described and as shown in FIGS. 10C-D.

[0088] Accordingly, unloading/loading of substrate carriers from/onto a moving conveyor may occur with substantially zero relative velocity and/or acceleration in one or more directions, more preferably in two directions, and most preferably in all directions. Substantially zero velocity and acceleration in a vertical direction are preferred; and zero velocities and/or accelerations, rather than substantially zero velocities and/or accelerations, during unloading/loading are more preferred. As used herein, "zero velocity" or "zero acceleration" mean as close to zero as possible given system variations such as conveyor height, conveyor speed, actuator repeatability, etc., system limitations such as controller resolution, actuator resolution, TLA position tolerances, etc., and/or the like. "Substantially zero velocity" or "substantially zero acceleration" mean sufficiently close to zero so that a substrate carrier may be unloaded from and/or loaded onto a moving conveyor and/or cradle without damaging a substrate contained within the substrate carrier and/or generating potentially damaging particles. For example, a substrate carrier may be contacted with a relatively small velocity. In one embodiment, a lift assembly may raise vertically rapidly, and then slow down to a relatively small or substantially zero velocity prior to contacting a substrate carrier. A similar small (or substantially zero) acceleration also may be employed. Similar load operations may be performed. In one embodiment, substrates or substrate carriers are contacted in a vertical direction with less than about 0.5 G of force, and in another embodiment with less than about 0.15 G of force. Other contact force values may be employed.

[0089] While the present invention has been described primarily with reference to unloading/loading substrate carriers that contain only a single substrate or a small lot carrier from/onto a moving conveyor, it will be understood that substrate carriers that contain multiple substrates similarly may be unloaded from or loaded onto a moving conveyor. Further, the present invention may be employed within systems that transport both single substrate carriers and multiple substrate carriers (e.g., 25 substrate carrier front opening unified pods). Likewise, the present invention may be employed to unload individual substrates from and/or load individual substrates onto a moving conveyor (e.g., substrates that are not contained within a closed substrate carrier). For example, substrates may be transported via a conveyor using an open substrate carrier, a substrate support, a substrate tray or another substrate transport device that allows the lift assembly 604 (or a modified version thereof) to directly place a substrate on or remove a substrate from the substrate transport device of the conveyor using similar lift assembly movements and/or motion profiles. In some embodiments, the transfer station may be located adjacent a storage rack or processing tool station. Individual substrates may be transferred from a conveyor via a transfer station to a docking station or other load port, or directly into a load lock chamber and/or processing tool if desired. For example, a substrate may be transferred directly from the lift assembly 604 to a substrate handling robot of a factory interface and/or processing tool (e.g., via a direct "lift platform-to-end effector" transfer or via an intermediate transfer location). Multiple individual substrates similarly may be unloaded/loaded from/onto a moving conveyor.

[0090] The present invention makes it possible to unload individual substrates and/or substrate carriers from a conveyor, to load individual substrates and/or substrate carriers onto a conveyor, and to transfer individual substrates and/or substrate carriers from one conveyor to any number of other conveyors, without stopping the conveyors. Consequently, the conveyors can run continuously during operation of the Fab. These features provide more efficient operation of the Fab, including a reduced total elapsed time for fabricating each substrate, reduced work in progress for a given level of substrate throughput, and a lower manufacturing cost per electronic device produced in the Fab.

[0091] The foregoing description discloses only particular embodiments of the invention; modifications of the above disclosed methods and apparatus which fall within the scope of the invention will be readily apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art. It will be understood that the invention may be employed with any type of substrates such as a silicon substrate, a glass plate, a mask, a reticule, etc., whether patterned or unpatterned; and/or with apparatus for transporting and/or processing such substrates.

[0092] Accordingly, while the present invention has been disclosed in connection with specific embodiments thereof, it should be understood that other embodiments may fall within the spirit and scope of the invention, as defined by the following claims.

The invention claimed is:

1. An apparatus comprising:
  - a track including a drive mechanism;
  - a control system coupled to the drive mechanism; and
  - a plurality of transport lift assemblies, each adapted to be individually controlled, travel on the track, remove at least one carrier from a first conveyor, and mount the carrier onto a second conveyor.
2. The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the track is a circular track.
3. The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the drive mechanism is a closed-path linear motor.
4. The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the control system is adapted to control the drive mechanism to align a transport lift assembly with an arriving carrier carried by the first conveyor.
5. The apparatus of claim 4 wherein the control system is further adapted to signal the aligned transport lift assembly to remove the carrier from the first conveyor.
6. The apparatus of claim 5 wherein the control system is further adapted to control the drive mechanism to align the transport lift assembly supporting the carrier with an arriving cradle on the second conveyor.
7. The apparatus of claim 6 wherein the control system is further adapted to signal the transport lift assembly supporting the carrier to mount the carrier onto the second conveyor.
8. A method comprising:
  - aligning a transport lift assembly with an arriving carrier carried by a first conveyor;

- removing the carrier from the first conveyor using the transport lift assembly;
  - transporting the carrier to a second conveyor;
  - aligning the transport lift assembly with an arriving cradle on a second conveyor; and
  - mounting the carrier onto the second conveyor.
9. The method of claim 8 wherein aligning a transport lift assembly with an arriving carrier includes changing a speed of the transport lift assembly to match the speed of the arriving carrier.
  10. The method of claim 9 wherein removing the carrier includes:
    - raising an end effector of the carrier aligned transport lift assembly to contact the carrier; and
    - executing an unload motion profile process.
  11. The method of claim 8 wherein transporting the carrier includes propelling the transport lift assembly around a circular track via a linear drive motor.
  12. The method of claim 8 wherein aligning a transport lift assembly with an arriving cradle includes changing a speed of the transport lift assembly to match the speed of the arriving cradle.
  13. The method of claim 12 wherein mounting the carrier includes:
    - raising the carrier on the cradle aligned transport lift assembly to contact the cradle; and
    - executing a load motion profile process.
  14. The method of claim 8 wherein the steps of aligning each include sensing a position of a cradle on the conveyors, and wherein the steps of removing and mounting include assigning the transport lift assembly to a carrier or cradle by a controller.
  15. A system comprising:
    - a source conveyor adapted to transport at least one carrier;
    - a destination conveyor adapted to transport the at least one carrier; and
    - a transfer station including:
      - a track including a drive mechanism,
      - a control system coupled to the drive mechanism, and
      - a plurality of transport lift assemblies, each adapted to be individually controlled, travel on the track, remove the at least one carrier from the source conveyor, and mount the carrier onto the destination conveyor.
  16. The system of claim 15 wherein the source and destination conveyors are continuously moving, overhead transport systems.
  17. The system of claim 15 wherein the track is a circular track.
  18. The system of claim 15 wherein the drive mechanism is a closed-path linear motor.
  19. The system of claim 15 wherein the control system includes at least one sensor for detecting carriers arriving on



the conveyors and wherein the control system is adapted to control the drive mechanism to independently align one of the transport lift assemblies with an arriving carrier carried by the source conveyor.

**20.** The system of claim 19 wherein the control system is further adapted to signal the aligned transport lift assembly to remove the carrier from the source conveyor.

**21.** The system of claim 20 wherein the control system further includes at least one sensor for detecting empty cradles arriving on the conveyors and wherein the control

system is further adapted to control the drive mechanism to independently align the transport lift assembly supporting the carrier with an arriving cradle on the destination conveyor.

**22.** The system of claim 21 wherein the control system is further adapted to signal the transport lift assembly supporting the carrier to mount the carrier onto the destination conveyor.

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