

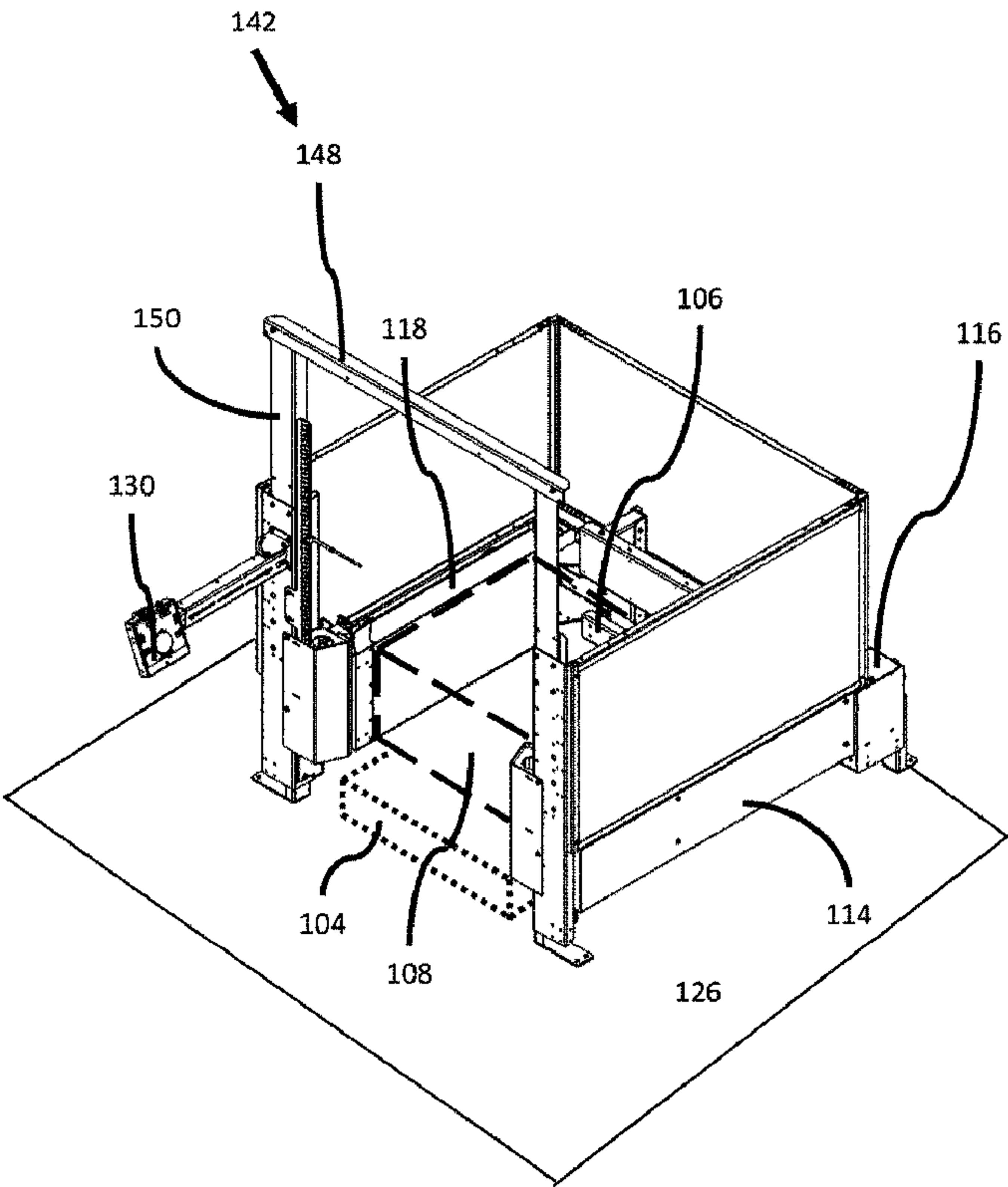


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(54) Title: PALLET EXCHANGER AND LOAD SPLITTER



(57) **Abrégé/Abstract:**
A pallet exchanger and load splitter apparatus and method are provided. The apparatus has a pallet-receiving assembly having a pallet-receiving zone configured to receive, at least in part, a pallet supporting a pallet load. The apparatus also has a clamp

(57) **Abrégé(suite)/Abstract(continued):**

assembly connected to the pallet-receiving assembly having a clamping zone configured to secure a first side, a second side, and a rear of the pallet load once the clamp assembly is activated so that the pallet load is supported, at least in part, by the clamp assembly.

ABSTRACT

A pallet exchanger and load splitter apparatus and method are provided. The apparatus has a pallet-receiving assembly having a pallet-receiving zone configured to receive, at least in part, a pallet supporting a pallet load. The apparatus also has a clamp assembly connected to the pallet-receiving assembly having a clamping zone configured to secure a first side, a second side, and a rear of the pallet load once the clamp assembly is activated so that the pallet load is supported, at least in part, by the clamp assembly.

PALLET EXCHANGER AND LOAD SPLITTER

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0001] Aspects generally relate to apparatus and method for exchanging pallets and splitting pallet loads.

BACKGROUND

[0002] Replacing or exchanging pallets from a stack of products such as cases of beer, cans, crated produce, and other such items is a common occurrence during the manufacturing, distribution, and shipment of goods. For example, a manufacturing facility using plastic pallets to stack finished product may wish to transfer the product to more economical wooden pallets prior to shipping. Likewise, a production facility receiving product, such as fresh produce, shipped on a wooden pallet may want to transfer the product to more hygienic plastic or metal pallets prior to introducing the product into the production facility.

[0003] Replacing pallets from a stack of products can be performed manually by re-stacking the product on to another pallet. This procedure, however is time consuming and ergonomically inefficient and difficult.

[0004] An example apparatus that may be used to exchange pallets is disclosed in US Patent 6,045,324 Stacking Clamp (Redman). This apparatus is configured to stack selected layers of product on a pallet by placing a load in the apparatus using a forklift truck, clamping the selected layers of product, removing the remaining pallet load, then placing a successive pallet load of different product in the apparatus and raising the pallet load to the lowermost surface of the previous clamped layer which is then released. A skilled person would understand that the entire load could be clamped allowing for the pallet to be replaced using a forklift truck.

[0005] In another example apparatus, a stationary pallet exchanger as disclosed by Baust Materialflusssysteme's Pallet Exchanger PW 500 holds the product in place using a side clamping mechanism so that the pallet can be exchanged using a hand-operated pallet jack.

[0006] Problems associated with the above apparatuses include, e.g. cost, complexity, ability to handle a tall load, and/or, inability to handle loads of different configurations.

SUMMARY

[0007] In an embodiment an apparatus for exchanging pallets is provided. The apparatus has a pallet-receiving assembly having a pallet-receiving zone configured to receive, at least in part, a pallet supporting a pallet load. A clamp assembly is connected to the pallet-receiving assembly. The clamp assembly has a clamping zone configured to secure a first side, a second side, and a rear of the pallet load once the clamp assembly is activated so that the pallet load is supported, at least in part, by the clamp assembly.

[0008] In another embodiment the yaw of the pressure plate of the clamp assembly can be adjusted to support irregularly sized pallet loads once the clamp assembly is activated.

[0009] In another embodiment the apparatus includes a load sensor. The load sensor detects when a load is insecure once the clamp assembly is activated.

[0010] In another embodiment the apparatus is elevated from a work surface.

[0011] In another embodiment the apparatus has a first-side clamping mechanism attached to a first side of a frame, the first-side clamping mechanism configured to move inwardly towards a clamping-zone once the first-side clamping mechanism is activated. And, a second-side clamping mechanism attached to a second side of the frame, the second-side clamping mechanism configured to move inwardly towards the clamping-zone once the second-side clamping mechanism is activated. Wherein, the first-side

clamping mechanism, the second-side clamping mechanism, or both adjusts a yaw angle to match a shape of a pallet load once the first-side clamping mechanism, the second-side clamping mechanism, or both are activated.

[0012] In another embodiment a method is provided. The method includes moving a pallet having a pallet load into a pallet-receiving zone. Once the pallet is in the pallet-receiving zone the pallet having the pallet load is then raised so that the pallet load is, at least in part, in a clamping zone. The operator then activates a clamp assembly so that the pallet load is supported, at least in part, by the clamp assembly. The operator then lowers the pallet from the pallet load. Once the pallet has been lowered, the operator then removes the pallet from the pallet-receiving zone. The operator then moves a different pallet into the pallet-receiving zone. The operator then raises the pallet to the pallet load and deactivates the clamp assembly so that the pallet load is supported by the different pallet. Finally, the operator removes the different pallet supporting the pallet load from the pallet-receiving zone. In this embodiment the clamp assembly is configured to adjust a yaw to secure an irregularly shaped pallet load.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0013] FIG. 1 depicts a top down view of an embodiment of the apparatus.

[0014] FIG. 2 depicts a perspective view of the embodiment of FIG. 1.

[0015] FIG. 3A depicts a perspective view of the embodiment of FIG. 1, the apparatus having a pallet and pallet load.

[0016] FIG. 3B depicts a perspective view of the embodiment of FIG. 1, the apparatus having a pallet and an insecure pallet load.

[0017] FIG. 4 depicts a side view of the apparatus of FIG. 1.

- [0018] FIG. 5 depicts a front view of the apparatus of FIG. 1.
- [0019] FIG. 6A depicts a partial top down view of the rear clamp and the rear bumper of an embodiment apparatus.
- [0020] FIG. 6B depicts a partial top down cutaway view of FIG. 6A.
- [0021] FIG. 6C depicts a load in the apparatus interacting with the rear clamp.
- [0022] FIG. 7 depicts a perspective view of another embodiment of the apparatus.
- [0023] FIG. 8A depicts a top down partial cutaway view of an alternate embodiment of the apparatus.
- [0024] FIG. 8B depicts a simplified top down partial cutaway view of FIG. 8A.
- [0025] FIG. 8C depicts a simplified top down partial cutaway view of FIG. 8A.
- [0026] FIG. 8D depicts a simplified top down partial cutaway view of FIG. 8A.
- [0027] FIG. 9 depicts a partial perspective view of a first-side clamping mechanism.
- [0028] FIG. 10 depicts a front partial view of a first-side clamping mechanism.
- [0029] FIG. 11 depicts a front partial view of a first-side clamping mechanism in a partially extended state.
- [0030] FIG. 12 depicts a front partial view of a first-side clamping mechanism in a fully extended state.

[0031] FIG. 13 depicts a pneumatic circuit.

LISTING OF REFERENCE NUMERALS USED IN THE DRAWINGS

100	apparatus
102	pallet-receiving assembly
104	pallet-receiving zone
106	clamp assembly
108	clamping-zone
110	frame
112	first side
114	second side
116	rear
118	first-side clamping mechanism
120	second-side clamping mechanism
122	rear-clamping mechanism
124	pallet load
126	work surface
128	improperly secured load detector
130	signal light
132	pivot
140	pallet
142	height limiting apparatus
144	photoeye
146	risers
148	bar
150	post
152	support member
154	slot
155	cam follower
156	cam follower unit

157	link plate
158	movable arms
160	arm
162	extension assembly
164	airbag
166	pressure plate
168	compressed air source
170	front assembly
172	rear assembly
174	rear bumper

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0032] The following detailed description is merely exemplary and is not intended to limit the described embodiments or the application and uses of the described embodiments. As used, the word “exemplary” or “illustrative” means “serving as an example, instance, or illustration.” Any implementation described as “exemplary” or “illustrative” is not necessarily to be construed as preferred or advantageous over other implementations. All of the implementations described below are exemplary implementations provided to enable persons skilled in the art to make or use the embodiments of the disclosure and are not intended to limit the scope of the disclosure. The scope of the invention is defined by the claims. For the description, the terms “upper,” “lower,” “left,” “rear,” “right,” “front,” “vertical,” “horizontal,” and derivatives thereof shall relate to the examples as oriented in the drawings. It is also to be understood that the devices and processes illustrated in the attached drawings, and described in the following specification, are exemplary embodiments (examples), aspects and/or concepts defined in the appended claims. Hence, dimensions and other physical characteristics relating to the embodiments disclosed are not to be considered as limiting, unless the claims expressly state otherwise. It is understood that the phrase “at least one” is equivalent to “a”. The aspects (examples, alterations, modifications, options, variations,

embodiments and any equivalent thereof) are described regarding the drawings. It should be understood that the invention is limited to the subject matter provided by the claims, and that the invention is not limited to the particular aspects depicted and described.

[0033] An embodiment of the apparatus 100 is depicted in the sequence of figures labelled FIG. 1 – FIG. 5. The apparatus 100 allows for the replacement of a pallet supporting a pallet load by temporarily supporting the pallet load by clamping the pallet load, thereby allowing the pallet to be removed from the pallet-receiving zone (104) and then replaced with a different pallet.

[0034] Referring now to FIG. 1 to FIG. 5, these figures depict different views of an embodiment. FIG. 1 depicts a top down view of an embodiment of the apparatus 100. FIG. 2 depicts a perspective view of the apparatus 100 of FIG. 1. FIG. 3A depicts a perspective view of the apparatus 100 of FIG. 1 with the apparatus 100 having a pallet 140 and pallet load 124. FIG. 4 depicts a side view of the apparatus 100 of FIG. 1. FIG. 5 depicts a front view of the apparatus 100 of FIG. 1.

[0035] The apparatus 100 has a pallet-receiving assembly 102 having a pallet-receiving zone 104. The pallet-receiving zone 104 is configured to receive, at least in part, a pallet (FIG. 3A 140) supporting a pallet load (FIG. 3A 124).

[0036] The apparatus 100 also has a clamp assembly 106. The clamp assembly 106 has a clamping zone 108. The clamp assembly 106 has an activated state (wherein the clamp assembly 106 is said to be activated) and a deactivated state (wherein the clamp assembly 106 is said to be deactivated). When the clamping assembly 106 is activated, the clamping assembly 106 is configured to secure a pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) in the clamping zone 108.

[0037] In this embodiment, and as shown in FIG. 2 and FIG. 3A, the clamping zone 108 is positioned above the pallet-receiving zone 104 so that once the clamp assembly 106 is activated, only the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) is secured by the clamp assembly 106 and

the pallet 140 is not secured. In the embodiment where the apparatus 100 is positioned on a work surface 126, the clamping zone 108 is configured so that a bottom of the clamping zone 108 (and also the bottom of the clamp assembly 106) engages, at least in part, a bottom layer (not shown) of the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124).

[0038] Furthermore, in the embodiment where the apparatus 100 is positioned on a work surface 106 the pallet-receiving zone 104 should be sufficiently sized to allow for a pallet to be freely removed and replaced by a pallet transporter (not shown) once the clamp assembly 106 is activated and has engaged the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124). In some instances this will require that the pallet transporter (not shown) slightly raise or lower the pallet (FIG. 3A 140) (and the corresponding pallet load FIG. 3A 124) to position the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) in the clamping zone 108 and to separate the pallet (FIG. 3A 140) from the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) once the clamp assembly 106 is activated.

[0039] For instance, in an example where the pallet is a standard CHEP wood block pallet, the dimensions of the pallet-receiving zone 104 defined by the pallet-receiving assembly 102 would be larger than the standard CHEP pallet itself. In an embodiment, the vertical dimension of the pallet-receiving zone 104 would be taller than the pallet (FIG. 3A 140) so that the pallet transporter can move the pallet (FIG. 3A 140) and corresponding pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) vertically towards the clamping zone 108. Furthermore, in some embodiments it may be beneficial for the horizontal and/or depth dimensions of the pallet-receiving zone 104 to be larger than the pallet (FIG. 3A 140) so that the pallet (FIG. 3A 140) can be moved freely once the clamp assembly 106 is activated and has secured the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124).

[0040] In this embodiment the clamp assembly 106, once activated, is configured to secure a first side, a second side, and a rear of the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) in the clamping zone 108. In this embodiment the second side of the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) is substantially parallel to and separated from the first side of the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124). That is, the first side of the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) is the opposite side of the second side of the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124).

- [0041] In this embodiment once the clamp assembly 106 is activated the clamping assembly 106 moves inwards towards the clamping zone 108.
- [0042] Once the clamp assembly 106 is activated and the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) is secured the pallet (FIG. 3A 140) can be separated from the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124). This is because the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) is no longer supported by the pallet (FIG. 3A 140) but by the clamp assembly 106. That is, the pallet load 124 is supported by the clamp assembly 106.
- [0043] Once the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) is secured the pallet can then be removed from the pallet-receiving zone (104). That is, once the pallet (FIG. 3A 140) has been separated from the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) the pallet (FIG. 3A 140) can be removed from the apparatus 100 and replaced. In this embodiment the pallet transporter would separate the pallet (FIG. 3A 140) from the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) by lowering the pallet (FIG. 3A 140) from the now secured pallet load (FIG. 3A 124), thereby creating a vertical separation between the pallet (FIG. 3A 140) and the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124)
- [0044] A different pallet (not shown) can then be moved into the pallet-receiving zone 104. The different pallet (not shown) is then positioned relative to the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) so that once the clamp assembly 106 is deactivated the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) is supported by the different pallet (not shown).
- [0045] Referring again to FIG. 1, the pallet receiving assembly 102 has a frame 110. The frame defines the pallet receiving zone 104. The pallet receiving zone 104 is sized so that a pallet 140 can be freely moved into and out of the pallet receiving zone 104. For instance, in some embodiments the pallet receiving zone is sized so that standardized pallets (such as CHEP pooled wood block pallets) can be freely moved into and out of the pallet receiving zone 104. It will be appreciated that the size of the pallet-receiving zone 104 and the frame 110 will depend on the size of the pallet being used.

[0046] In this embodiment, the frame 110 has a first side 112, a second side 114 substantially parallel and separated from the first side 110, and a rear 116 connecting the first side and the second side so that the first side 112 is substantially parallel to the second side 114 and that the first side 112 and second side 114 are substantially perpendicular to the rear 116.

[0047] In this embodiment the frame 110 forms a partially open enclosure that defines the pallet receiving zone 104. Since the frame is partially open, a pallet 140 and its corresponding pallet load 124 (if the pallet 140 is supporting a pallet load 124) can be freely moved into and out of the pallet receiving zone 104 (when the clamp assembly 106 is deactivated).

[0048] It will be appreciated that, in this embodiment, the first side 112, the second side 114, and the rear 116 can be connected using any number or combination of known techniques without departing from the scope of this disclosure. For example, in some embodiments the first side 112, second side 114, and rear 116 can be connected using nuts and bolts, welds, screws, locking pins, friction fit, rivets, etc.

[0049] Referring again to FIG. 1, in the shown embodiment, the apparatus 100 also has a clamp assembly 106. The clamp assembly 106 has a first-side clamping mechanism 118 that is attached to the first side 112 of the frame 110. The clamp assembly 106 also has a second-side clamping mechanism 120 that is attached to the second side 114 of the frame 110. The clamp assembly 106 also has a rear-clamping mechanism 122 that is attached to the rear 116 of the frame 110.

[0050] It will be appreciated that the first-side clamping mechanism 118, the second-side clamping mechanism 120, and the rear-clamping mechanism 122 can be attached to the first-side 112, second side 114, and rear 116 using any known or combination of known techniques without departing from the scope of this disclosure. For example, in some embodiments the respective clamping mechanisms can be connected using nuts and bolts, welds, screws, locking pins, friction fit, rivets, etc.

[0051] Each of the respective clamping mechanisms are configured to move inwardly towards the clamping zone 108 once activated and to move outwardly away from the clamping zone 108 once deactivated. That is, the first-side clamping mechanism 118 is configured to move inwardly towards the clamping-zone 108 once the first-side clamping mechanism 118 is activated. Similarly, the second-side clamping mechanism 120 is configured to move inwardly towards the clamping-zone 108 once the second-side clamping mechanism 120 is activated. Finally, the rear clamping mechanism 122 is configured to move inwardly towards the clamping-zone 108 once the rear clamping mechanism 122 is activated.

[0052] Once each of the first-side clamping mechanism 112, second-side clamping mechanism 114, and rear-clamping mechanism 122 are activated the first-side clamping mechanism 118, second-side clamping mechanism 120, and rear-clamping mechanism 122 secures, at least in part, the pallet load (FIG. 3 124) so that the pallet (FIG. 3 140) does not support the pallet load (FIG. 3 124).

[0053] For example, in the embodiment depicted in FIG. 1 – FIG. 6 once activated each of the first-side clamping mechanism 118, the second-side clamping mechanism 120, and rear-clamping mechanism 122 move inwards towards the clamping-zone 108 until the first side clamping mechanism 118, the second-side clamping mechanism 120, and rear-clamping mechanism 122 contacts the first-side (at least in part), second-side (at least in part), and rear (at least in part) of the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) respectively.

[0054] Once the clamp mechanism 106 is deactivated the first-side clamping mechanism 118, second-side clamping mechanism 120, and rear clamping mechanism 122 move outwardly away from the clamping-zone 108 so that a pallet 140 having a pallet load 124 can be moved into and out of the pallet-receiving zone 104.

[0055] In the embodiment depicted in FIG. 1 – FIG. 6B the apparatus 100 further includes a rear bumper 174. The rear bumper 174 is configured to contact the pallet load

124 when the pallet load 124 is moved into the pallet-receiving zone 104 (and clamping zone 108). This prevents the pallet load 124 from becoming misaligned when being moved into the pallet-receiving zone 104 (and clamping zone 108). The rear bumper 174 can also serve to alert the operator to when the pallet load 124 is in the pallet-receiving zone 104 (and clamping zone 108)

[0056] It will be appreciated that the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) typically consists of several layers of product stacked on top of the pallet (FIG. 3A 140). The product is typically arranged on the pallet (FIG. 3A 140) so that the width and the depth of the layers of product (and the pallet load FIG. 3A 124) does not exceed the width and depth of the pallet (FIG. 3A 140). In many cases the layers of product are arranged so that the width and depth of the product (and the pallet load FIG. 3A 124) closely matches the width and depth of the pallet (FIG. 3A 140).

[0057] In contrast, the height of the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) can be arbitrarily high. In the interests of safety, however, the height of the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) will typically not exceed several feet (approximately 6 or 7 feet), depending on the product being placed on the pallet (FIG. 3A 140). In some instances several layers of product will be stacked on the pallet (FIG. 3A 140) until a safe and manageable height for the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) is achieved.

[0058] In the embodiment depicted in FIG. 1- FIG. 6, a height limiting apparatus 142 is attached to the first side 112 and the second side 114 of the frame 110, opposite the rear 116, and near the front of the pallet-receiving zone 104 and the clamping-zone 108. The height limiting apparatus 142 is configured to prevent the apparatus 100 from being used if the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) exceeds an arbitrary height. In this embodiment if a pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) exceeds the maximum safe height for the apparatus 100, the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) will be blocked from entering the pallet receiving zone 104 and the clamping zone 108.

[0059] In this embodiment the height limiting apparatus 142 is a bar 148 that spans the first side 112 and the second side 114. The bar 148 is attached to posts 150 that extend vertically from each of the first side 112 and the second side 114. The maximum allowable height of the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) is limited by the height of the 150 posts and the placement of the bar 148 on those posts 150. In some embodiments the bar 148 is positionable on the posts 150 so that different maximum pallet load heights can be moved into and out of the pallet-receiving zone 104. In other embodiments the bar 148 is removable so that an exceptionally tall pallet load can be moved into and out of the pallet-receiving zone 104.

[0060] In the embodiment depicted in FIG. 1 – FIG. 6, the first-side clamping mechanism 118 and the second-side clamping mechanism 120 are configured so that, once activated, the first-side clamping mechanism 118 and the second-side clamping mechanism 120 secures at least several layers of product of the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124), including a bottom layer of product.

[0061] In the example depicted in FIG. 3, a shorter pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) is depicted. In this example the entirety of the first-side and the second-side of the load is secured. When a taller pallet load is used the first-side clamping mechanism 118 and second-side clamping mechanism 120 may not secure the entirety of the first-side and second-side of the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124). That is, the first-side clamping mechanism 118 and second-side clamping mechanism 120 will only secure a portion of the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) approximately equal to the height of the pressure plate 166 of the first-side clamping mechanism 118 and the pressure plate 166 of the second-side clamping mechanism 120. This portion of the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) corresponds to several layers of product including a bottom layer of product. The remainder of the product not secured by the first-side clamping mechanism 118 and second-side clamping mechanism 120 is then supported by the portion of the product secured by the first-side clamping mechanism 118 and second-side clamping mechanism 120.

[0062] In the embodiment depicted in FIG. 1- FIG. 6, the rear clamping mechanism 122 is configured so that the rear clamping mechanism 122 secures one or more lower layers of product including the bottom layer of product of the rear of the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124). Furthermore, in this embodiment the height of the rear clamping mechanism 122 is shorter than the height of the first-side clamping mechanism 118 and/or the second-side clamping mechanism 120. That is, the rear clamping mechanism 122 is configured to contact fewer layers of product than the first-side clamping mechanism 118 and/or the second-side clamping mechanism 120.

[0063] Referring now to FIG. 6B a partial cutaway view of the rear clamping mechanism 122 is depicted. The rear clamping mechanism 122 includes a pressure plate 166, an extension assembly 162. It will be noted that in this embodiment the rear bumper 174 is substantially in-line with the pressure plate 166 of the rear clamping mechanism 122 when the rear clamping mechanism 122 is in its deactivated state.

[0064] Referring now to FIG. 6C, in some embodiments the rear clamping mechanism 122 is configured to allow for any voids that may be present in the lowest rear layers of product so that the bottom layer of product, once secured, forms a stable base on which the remaining layers of product of the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) can be supported. For instance, in some embodiments the rear clamping mechanism 122 is configured to extend further into the clamping zone 108 (when compared to the first-side clamp and/or second-side clamp) thereby allowing for, at least in part, any voids present in the bottom layer of the product at the rear of the pallet load (FIG. 3 124). In another embodiment the rear clamping mechanism 122 is configured to apply pressure or more pressure to the bottom layer of product of the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124), again to allow for any voids present in the bottom layer of the product of the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124). In another embodiment, the rear clamping mechanism 122 is for applying pressure to the bottom layer of the pallet load at the rear for more securely clamping the pallet load 124.

[0065] In the embodiment depicted in FIG. 1 – FIG. 6 the apparatus 100 further includes load detector 128 configured to detect improperly secured loads. The load detector 128 is

used to detect whether a load is improperly secured by detecting whether the bottom of the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124), once the clamping mechanism 122 has been activated, drops, sags, droops, or otherwise crosses any portion of a plane that is below the bottom of the clamp assembly 106. Improperly secured loads typically indicate that the pallet load (FIG. 3A 124) is not properly secured and that some or all the product layers of the pallet load (FIG. 3 124) may fall once the pallet (FIG. 3A 140) has been separated from the pallet load (FIG. 3 124).

[0066] In an embodiment, once the pallet load 124 is secured by the clamp assembly 106 the operator lowers the pallet 140, thereby separating the pallet 140 from the pallet load 124. If the now secured pallet load 124 is adequately secured, then the pallet load 124 will not drop, sag, or otherwise cross any portion of a plane that is below the bottom of the clamp assembly 106. An operator would then monitor the load detector 128 as the pallet 140 is lowered to confirm that the pallet load 124 is secured. Once the operator is satisfied that the pallet load 124 is secured, then the operator can remove the pallet 140 from the pallet-receiving zone 104 and replace the pallet with a different pallet.

[0067] Referring now to FIG. 3B, If, however, the pallet load 124 is improperly secured, then as the operator begins to separate the pallet 140 from the pallet load 124 the pallet load 124 will begin to drop, sag, or otherwise cross any portion of a plane that is below the bottom of the clamp assembly 106. Once the load detector 128 detects that the pallet load 124 is improperly secured, then the operator will be notified that the pallet load 124 is insecure. In the embodiment depicted in FIG. 3B the load detector 128 causes a signal light 130 to illuminate, notifying the operator that the pallet load 124 is insecure. The operator can then raise the pallet 140 towards the improperly secured pallet load 124 to avoid the improperly secured pallet load 124 from falling.

[0068] In the embodiment depicted in FIG. 1 – FIG. 6, the load detector is a photoeye 144. In this embodiment the photoeye 144 is set for the width of the pallet and “looks” across the center of the pallet from left to right. The photoeye 144 is battery powered.

[0069] If the load or a portion of the load drops, sags, droops, or otherwise crosses a beam emitted by the photoeye 144 then the operator will be alerted that the load is improperly secured. In the embodiment depicted in FIG. 1 – FIG. 6 a signal light 130 (in this embodiment a green light) is used to alert the operator that the load is properly secured. In the case where the load is improperly secured then the photoeye 144 will detect that the load is insecure and the signal light 130 will turn off, thereby notifying to the operator that the load is insecure. It will be appreciated that other ways to detect an improperly secured load and to alert the operator of such a condition can be used without departing from the scope of this disclosure. For example, a weight activated switch, magnetic switch, etc. can be used to detect whether the load is improperly secured. An auditory signal or alert may also be used (via a speaker) to indicate to the operator that the load is improperly secured.

[0070] Referring now to FIG. 7, in another embodiment the apparatus 100 is elevated from a work surface 126 using risers 146 attached the bottom of the first side 112 and the second side 114 respectively. In the embodiment depicted in FIG. 7 the risers 146 are attached (using known methods such as welding, nuts and bolts, rivets, screws, etc) to each of the front end and the back end of the first side 112 and the second side 114 respectively.

[0071] Raising the apparatus 100 from the work surface 26 can improve the throughput of the apparatus 100 in situations where palletized product is stored on elevated shelves, for example. In scenarios where the apparatus 100 is elevated to approximately the same height as the raised shelves storing palletized product, the operator can move the pallet supporting the pallet load directly into the pallet-receiving assembly 102. The operator does not have to lower the palletized product to the level of the work surface 126 to exchange pallets (FIG. 3 140). This saves the operator the time of having to wait for the pallet transporter to lower the palletized product to the work surface 126.

[0072] Raising the apparatus can also assist in pallet splitting. Pallet splitting allows a larger pallet load to be split into two or more smaller loads. Rather than clamping the

bottom layer of the pallet load 124, an operator can raise or lower the pallet load 124 (using, for example, a pallet transporter) so that the clamp assembly 106 secures a selected portion of the pallet load 124 that does not include the bottom layer of the pallet load. For instance, the operator can align the pallet load so that the clamp assembly 106 secures the portion of the pallet load 124 above the mid-point. As the operator lowers the pallet 140, the portion of the pallet load 124 that is unsecured (i.e., below the mid-point) will be lowered with the pallet 140. Once the pallet 140 with the unsecured portion of the pallet load 124 is removed from the pallet-receiving zone 104, a different pallet is then brought into the pallet receiving zone 104 and raised to the bottom of the secured pallet load 124. The original pallet load is split into two separate loads in this manner.

[0073] In some scenarios the pallet load 124 may not be rectangular or square in shape. In these scenarios the clamp assembly 106 is configured to conform, at least in part, to the sides of the pallet load 124 to secure the pallet load 124.

[0074] Referring now to FIG. 8A to FIG. 8D, another embodiment of the apparatus 100 is depicted. In this embodiment the first-side clamping mechanism 118, the second-side clamping mechanism 120, or both, are configured to secure an irregularly shaped pallet load 124.

[0075] In this embodiment the first-side clamping mechanism 118, the second side clamping mechanism 120, or both are configured to adjust the yaw (as shown by the yaw angle 176 in FIG. 8D) of a pressure plate 166 (or clamp face) once the respective clamp mechanism is activated.

[0076] By way of example, in the scenario where the pallet load 124 is irregularly shaped in the area corresponding to the front of the first-side clamping mechanism 118 as shown in FIG. 8A to FIG. 8D, the first-side clamping mechanism 118, once activated, will adjust the yaw (as shown by the yaw angle 176 in FIG. 8D) of the pressure plate 166 (or clamp face) so that the pressure plate 166 (or clamp face) of the first-side clamping mechanism 118 will contact (and secure) the irregularly shaped pallet load 124.

[0077] Referring now to FIG. 9, an embodiment of the first-side clamping mechanism 118 is depicted. In FIG. 9 the pressure plate 166 (or clamp face) of the first-side clamping mechanism 118 has been removed to expose the assembly for the purposes of this discussion. It will be appreciated that the second-side clamping mechanism 120 will also have a similar structure mirrored on the second side 114.

[0078] In this embodiment each of the first-side clamping mechanism 118 and the second-side clamping mechanism 120 has a front assembly 170 and a rear assembly 172. That is, there are two assemblies (front and rear) for the first-side clamping mechanism 118, and two assemblies (front and rear) for the second-side clamping mechanism 120. It will be appreciated that fewer or more assemblies can be used depending on the application.

[0079] In the embodiment depicted in FIG. 9 – FIG. 12 the front assembly 170 and the rear assembly 172 of the first-side clamping mechanism 118 are identical. Furthermore, the front assembly 170 and the rear assembly 172 of the second-side clamping mechanism 118 are also identical. In other embodiments the front assembly 170 and the rear assembly 172 may be different. For instance, in some embodiments it may be beneficial for the front assembly 170 to have a support member 152 having a longer slot 154 than the rear assembly 172 (or vice-versa).

[0080] Referring again to FIG. 9, the front assembly 170 has a pivot 132. The pivot 132 has a support member 152 attached to the first-side clamping mechanism 118. In this embodiment the support member 152 is bolted to the first-side clamping mechanism 118. In other embodiments the support member 152 may be welded, riveted, or otherwise affixed to the first-side clamping mechanism 118 using any known means.

[0081] In the embodiment depicted in FIG. 9 two support members 152 are provided for each of the first-side clamping mechanism 118 and the second-side clamping mechanism

120. It will be appreciated that fewer or more support structures, or different support structures, can be used depending on the application.

[0082] In this embodiment the support member 152 further includes a slot 154 that is configured to guide a cam follower unit 156. The slot 154 and cam follower unit 156 combination allows each support member 152 to move independently of any other support member 152 on the respective side of the clamping mechanism in a substantially horizontal direction while restricting movement in the vertical or lateral direction. That is, it allows for the front assembly 170 and the rear assembly 172 to move independently of each other in a horizontal direction. When viewing from the front of the apparatus 100 the clamping mechanism 118 can have a yaw angle (as shown by the yaw angle 176 in FIG. 8D). Since the support member 152 restricts movement in the vertical or lateral direction, other undesirable movement such as forward/back shifting, vertical movement, roll, and/or pitch is reduced or minimized.

[0083] The pivot 132 further includes movable arms 158, each having two ends. The movable arms 158, at one end, are pivotingly connected to the cam follower unit 156 that is positioned in the slot 154 of the support member 152 and pivotingly connected, at the other end, to an arm 160 extending substantially perpendicularly from the first-side 112. In this embodiment each support member 152 and arm 160 has eight movable arms 158 connected to them in total – that is, four on each side of the support member 152 and arm 160. The pivotingly connected arms 158, arm 160, and cam follower unit 156 form a parallelogram. This parallelogram structure minimizes the roll of the pressure plate 166. Roll can lead to poor clamping of the pallet load 124, especially the bottom of the pallet load 124.

[0084] In the embodiment shown in Fig. 10, the cam follower unit 156 comprises two cam followers 155 connected by a link plate 157. The length of the link plate 157 is about the same length as the arm 160. The link plate cooperates with the arm 160 to keep the movable arms 158 parallel to each other.

[0085] The front assembly 170 further includes an extension assembly 162. The extension assembly 162 is attached to the first side 112 and is configured to generate an inwardly directed clamping force. In this example the extension assembly 162 is an airbag 164 and a pneumatic circuit (not shown) for inflating the airbag 164. The airbags 164 are resilient cylinders having pleated side walls that are adapted to extend flexibly along the longitudinal axis of the cylinder. One end of the airbag 162 is connected to the first side 112 via the pneumatic circuit. In this example embodiment, the pneumatic circuit includes a header (not shown) attached to a compressed air source 168 through a network of pneumatic hoses, valves, and couplers. An embodiment of the pneumatic circuit is provided in FIG. 13.

[0086] Referring now to FIG. 10 – FIG. 12, an example sequence for the operation of a part of the clamp assembly 106 is provided. Specifically, a front view of the front assembly 170 of the first-side clamping mechanism 120 is depicted. The second, rear assembly 172 of the first-side clamping mechanism 120 is not depicted, though both operate in the same manner.

[0087] In FIG. 10 the clamp assembly 106 is in a deactivated state. In this state the clamp assembly 106 is not supporting a load. The movable arms 158 are substantially perpendicular to the support member 152 and the arm 160. The airbag 164 is deflated. The pressure plate 166 is not contacting a pallet load 124. In this state the clamp assembly 106 is in its most retracted position. This position allows pallets 140 and their associated loads 124 to be moved into and out of the pallet-receiving zone 104 by a pallet transporter (not shown).

[0088] Referring now to FIG. 11, the clamp assembly 106 is in an activated state. In this state the clamp assembly 106 is partially extending into the clamping zone 108 to meet a side of the pallet load 124 corresponding to the first-side clamping mechanism 118. In this example the clamp assembly 106 is not required to reach its full extension for the pressure plate 166 of the clamp assembly 106 to contact (and secure, once all other clamp assemblies 106 have contacted the pallet load 124) the pallet load 124. In this example

the airbag 164 is only partially filled, and sufficient pressure is maintained in the airbag 164 to ensure good contact between the pressure plate 166 and the pallet load 124. It will be appreciated that an air pressure sensor or gauge can be used to regulate the pressure of the airbag 164 to ensure that sufficient pressure is maintained in the airbag 164 to support the pallet load 124.

[0089] Referring now to FIG. 12, in some scenarios the pallet load 124 is irregularly shaped or small. In these scenarios the clamp assembly 106, once activated, can extend further into the clamping-zone 108 to contact the pallet load 124.

[0090] In the scenario where the pallet load 124 is irregularly shaped, as the extension mechanism 162 extends the clamp assembly 106 towards the clamping zone 108 one end of the clamp assembly 106 may contact the pallet load 124 before the other end of the clamp assembly 106 contacts the pallet load 124. For instance, the front assembly 170 of the first-side clamping mechanism 118 may contact the irregularly shaped pallet load 124 before the rear assembly 172 of the first-side clamping mechanism 118 has fully contacted the irregularly shaped pallet load 124. In this scenario the rear assembly 172 of the first-side clamping mechanism 118 can continue to extend substantially horizontally inwards towards the clamping zone 108 so that the first-side clamping mechanism 118 fully contacts the irregularly shaped pallet load 124. When viewing the clamping mechanism 118 from the front of the apparatus, then, the first-side clamping mechanism 118 has a yaw angle (as shown by the yaw angle 176 in FIG. 8D). This yaw angle (as shown by the yaw angle 176 in FIG. 8D) allows the clamp assembly 106 to conform to irregularly shaped pallet loads, especially for trapezoidal loads, or loads that are not square or rectangular.

[0091] The amount of travel provided in the slot 154 and cam follower unit 156 will determine the maximum amount of yaw for the pressure plate 166 of the apparatus 100. In this embodiment the slot 154 and cam follower unit 156 combination allows for a yaw travel of approximately 2-3 inches. It will be appreciated that other maximum yaw angles will depend on the characteristics of the typical load being handled.

[0092] An embodiment of how an operator would use the apparatus is as follows. In this embodiment the operator is using a pallet jack, though the operator can also use a walkie-rider, forklift, or any other pallet handling equipment.

[0093] The operator moves a pallet 140 having a pallet load 124 into a pallet-receiving zone 104. The operator then raises the pallet 140 having the pallet load 124 so that the pallet load 124 is, at least in part, in a clamping zone 108. The operator then activates a clamp assembly 106 so that the pallet load 124 is supported, at least in part, by the clamp assembly 106. Once the pallet load 124 is supported, the operator then lowers the pallet 140 from the pallet load 124. In some embodiments the apparatus is configured to detect whether the pallet load 124 is insecure, using a photoeye 144 for instance. If the pallet load 124 is determined to be insecure then a signal light 130 is deactivated to alert the operator that the load is insecure.

[0094] Now that the pallet 140 is separated from the pallet load 124 the operator is free to remove the pallet 140 from the pallet-receiving zone 104.

[0095] The operator can now replace the pallet. The operator first moves a different pallet into the pallet-receiving zone 104. The operator then raises the pallet to the pallet load 124 so that the pallet 140 meets the bottom of the pallet load 124. The operator then deactivates the clamp assembly 106 so that the pallet load 124 is supported by the different pallet. The operator can then remove the different pallet supporting the pallet load 124 from the pallet-receiving zone 104. It will be noted that, in this embodiment, the clamp assembly 106 is configured to adjust a yaw to secure an irregularly shaped pallet load 124 once the clamp assembly is activated.

[0096] This written description uses examples to disclose the invention, including the best mode, and also to enable any person skilled in the art to make and use the invention. The patentable scope of the invention is defined by the claims, and may include other examples that occur to those skilled in the art. Such other examples are within the scope of the claims if they have structural elements that do not differ from the literal language

of the claims, or if they include equivalent structural elements with insubstantial differences from the literal language of the claims.

[0097] It may be appreciated that the assemblies and modules described above may be connected with each other as required to perform desired functions and tasks within the scope of persons of skill in the art to make such combinations and permutations without having to describe each and every one in explicit terms. There is no particular assembly or component that may be superior to any of the equivalents available to the person skilled in the art. There is no particular mode of practicing the disclosed subject matter that is superior to others, so long as the functions may be performed. It is believed that all the crucial aspects of the disclosed subject matter have been provided in this document. It is understood that the scope of the present invention is limited to the scope provided by the independent claim(s), and it is also understood that the scope of the present invention is not limited to: (i) the dependent claims, (ii) the detailed description of the non-limiting embodiments, (iii) the summary, (iv) the abstract, and/or (v) the description provided outside of this document (that is, outside of the instant application as filed, as prosecuted, and/or as granted). It is understood, for this document, that the phrase “includes” is equivalent to the word “comprising.” The foregoing has outlined the non-limiting embodiments (examples). The description is made for particular non-limiting embodiments (examples). It is understood that the non-limiting embodiments are merely illustrative as examples.

What is claimed is:

1. An apparatus (100) comprising:
 - a pallet-receiving assembly (102) having a pallet-receiving zone (104) configured to receive, at least in part, a pallet supporting a pallet load; and
 - a clamp assembly (106) connected to the pallet-receiving assembly (102) having a clamping zone (108) configured to secure a first side, a second side, and a rear of the pallet load once the clamp assembly (106) is activated so that the pallet load is supported, at least in part, by the clamp assembly (106).
2. The apparatus of claim 1, the pallet-receiving assembly 102 comprising:
 - a frame (110) defining the pallet receiving zone (104), the frame (110) having a first side (112), a second side (114) substantially parallel to and separated from the first side 110, and a rear (116) connecting the first side (112) and the second side (114) so that the first side 112 is substantially parallel to the second side 114 and that the first side 112 and second side 114 are substantially perpendicular to the rear 116.
3. The apparatus of claim 2, the clamp assembly 106 comprising:
 - a first-side clamping mechanism (118) attached to the first side (112) of the frame (110), the first-side clamping mechanism (118) configured to move inwardly towards the clamping-zone (108) once the first-side clamping mechanism (112) is activated;
 - a second-side clamping mechanism (120) attached to the second side (120) of the frame (110), the second-side clamping mechanism (120) configured to move inwardly towards the clamping-zone (108) once the second-side clamping mechanism (120) is activated;
 - so that once each of the first-side clamping mechanism (112), second-side clamping mechanism (114), and rear-clamping mechanism (122) are activated the first-side clamping mechanism (118) and the second-side clamping mechanism (120), secures, at least in part, the pallet load so that the pallet does not support the pallet load.
4. The apparatus of claim 3, the clamp assembly 106 further comprising:

a rear-clamping mechanism (122) attached to the rear (116) of the frame (110), the rear clamping mechanism (122) configured to move inwardly towards the clamping-zone (108) once the rear clamping mechanism (122) is activated so that the rear clamping mechanism (122), once activated, engages a rear lower portion of the pallet load (124).

5. The apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 4, wherein the clamp assembly (106) is activated by a pneumatic circuit.
6. The apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 5 wherein the pallet receiving assembly (102) is elevated from a work surface (126).
7. The apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 6 wherein the pallet receiving assembly (102) is proximate to a work surface (126).
8. The apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 7 further comprising a load detector (128) configured to detect whether the pallet load is improperly secured once the clamp assembly (106) is activated and the pallet is separated from the pallet load (124).
9. The apparatus of claim 9 wherein the load detector (128) is a photoeye (130).
10. The apparatus of any one of claims 8 or 9 wherein a signal light (130) is activated once the load detector (128) detects that the pallet load (124) is improperly secured.
11. The apparatus of any one of claims 3 to 10 wherein each of the first-side clamping mechanism (118) and the second-side clamping mechanism (120) includes:
 - a front assembly having a front pivot and a front extension assembly; and
 - a rear assembly (172) having rear pivot and rear extension assembly;
 - so that the first-side clamping mechanism (118), the second-side clamping mechanism (120), or both adjusts a yaw angle to match the shape of the pallet load

(124) once the first-side clamping mechanism (118), the second-side clamping mechanism (120), or both are activated.

12. An apparatus comprising:

a first-side clamping mechanism (118) attached to a first side (112) of a frame (110), the first-side clamping mechanism (118) configured to move inwardly towards a clamping-zone (108) once the first-side clamping mechanism (112) is activated; and

a second-side clamping mechanism (120) attached to a second side (114) of the frame (110), the second-side clamping mechanism (120) configured to move inwardly towards the clamping-zone (108) once the second-side clamping mechanism (120) is activated;

wherein the first-side clamping mechanism (118), the second-side clamping mechanism (120), or both adjusts a yaw angle to match a shape of a pallet load (124) once the first-side clamping mechanism (118), the second-side clamping mechanism (120), or both are activated.

13. The apparatus of claim 12 further comprising:

a rear-clamping mechanism (122) attached to the rear (116) of the frame (110), the rear clamping mechanism (122) configured to move inwardly towards the clamping-zone (108) once the rear clamping mechanism (122) is activated.

14. The apparatus of claim 13 wherein the first-side clamping mechanism (118), second-side clamping mechanism (120), and the rear clamping mechanism (122) are activated by a pneumatic circuit.

15. The apparatus of any one of claims 12 to 14, the apparatus further comprising a load detector (128) configured to detect whether the pallet load is improperly secured once the clamp assembly (106) is activated and the pallet is separated from the pallet load (124).

16. A method, comprising:

activating a clamp assembly (106) so that a pallet load (124) on a pallet (140) is supported, at least in part, by the clamp assembly (106), the pallet load (124) in a clamping zone (108) and the pallet in a pallet-receiving zone (104);

wherein the clamp assembly (106) is configured to adjust a yaw to secure an irregularly shaped pallet load (124).

17. The method of claim 16, further comprising:

lowering the pallet (140) from the pallet load (124);

detecting whether the pallet load (124) is securely clamped.

18. The method of claim 17, further comprising:

activating a signal light (13) if the pallet load (124) is detected to be secure.

19. The method of any one of claims 17 to 18, further comprising:

removing the pallet (140) from the pallet-receiving zone (104);

moving a different pallet into the pallet-receiving zone (104);

raising the pallet to the pallet load (124);

deactivating the clamp assembly (106) so that the pallet load (124) is supported by the different pallet; and

removing the different pallet supporting the pallet load (124) from the pallet-receiving zone (104).

20. The method of any one of claims 16 to 19, further comprising:

moving the pallet (140) having the pallet load (124) into the pallet-receiving zone (104);

raising the pallet (140) having the pallet load (124) so that the pallet load (124) is, at least in part, in the clamping zone (108).

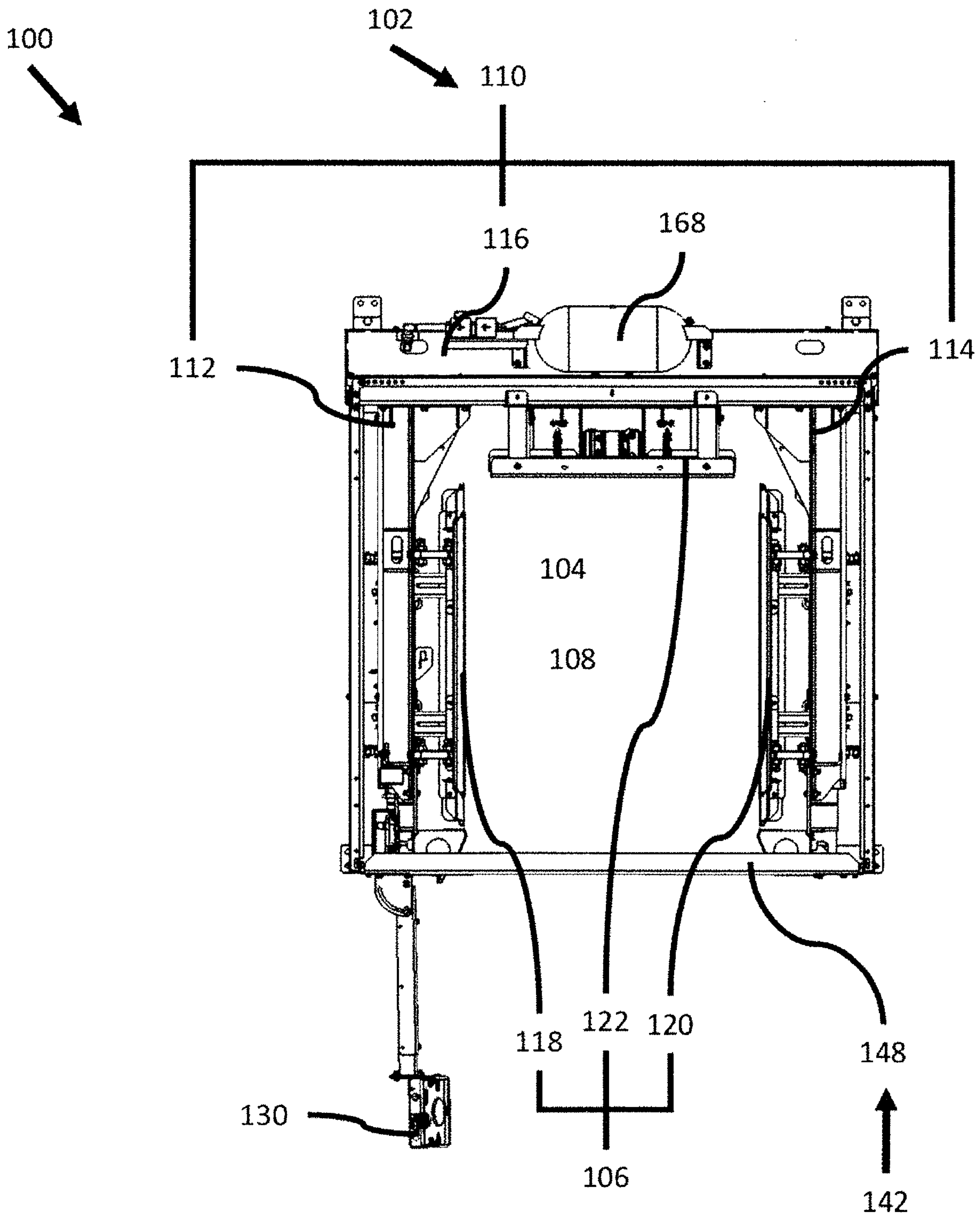


FIG. 1

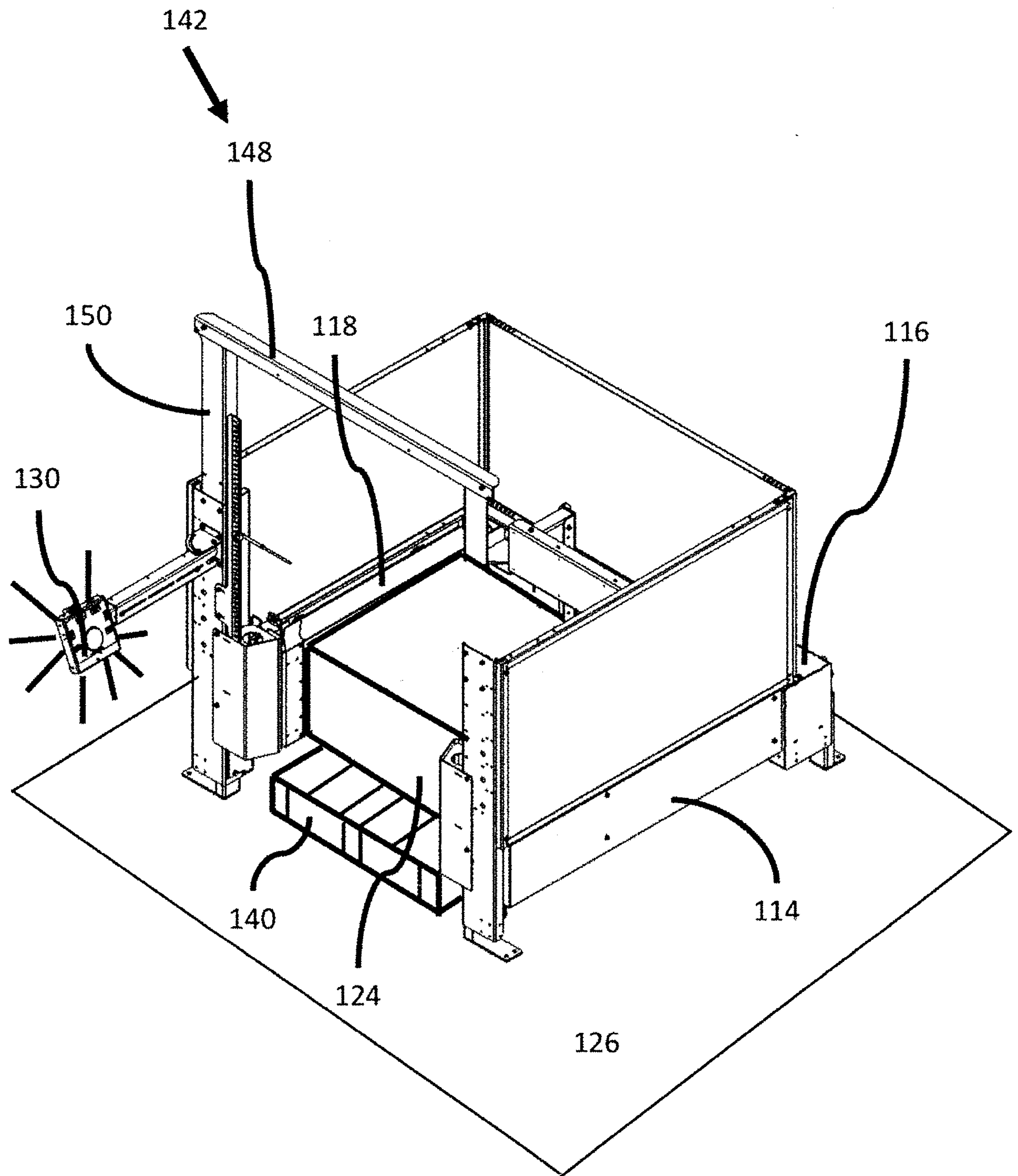


FIG. 3A

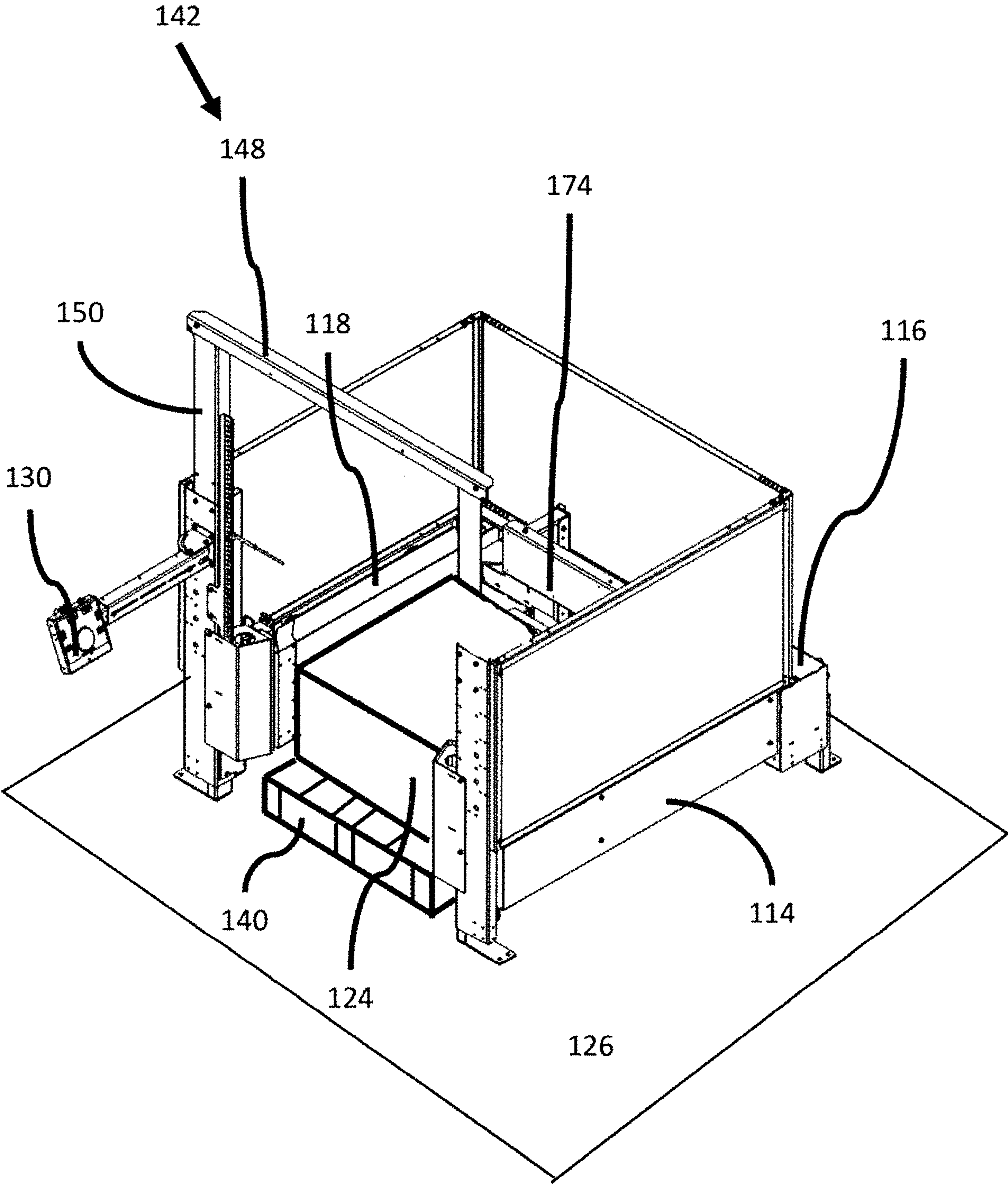


FIG. 3B

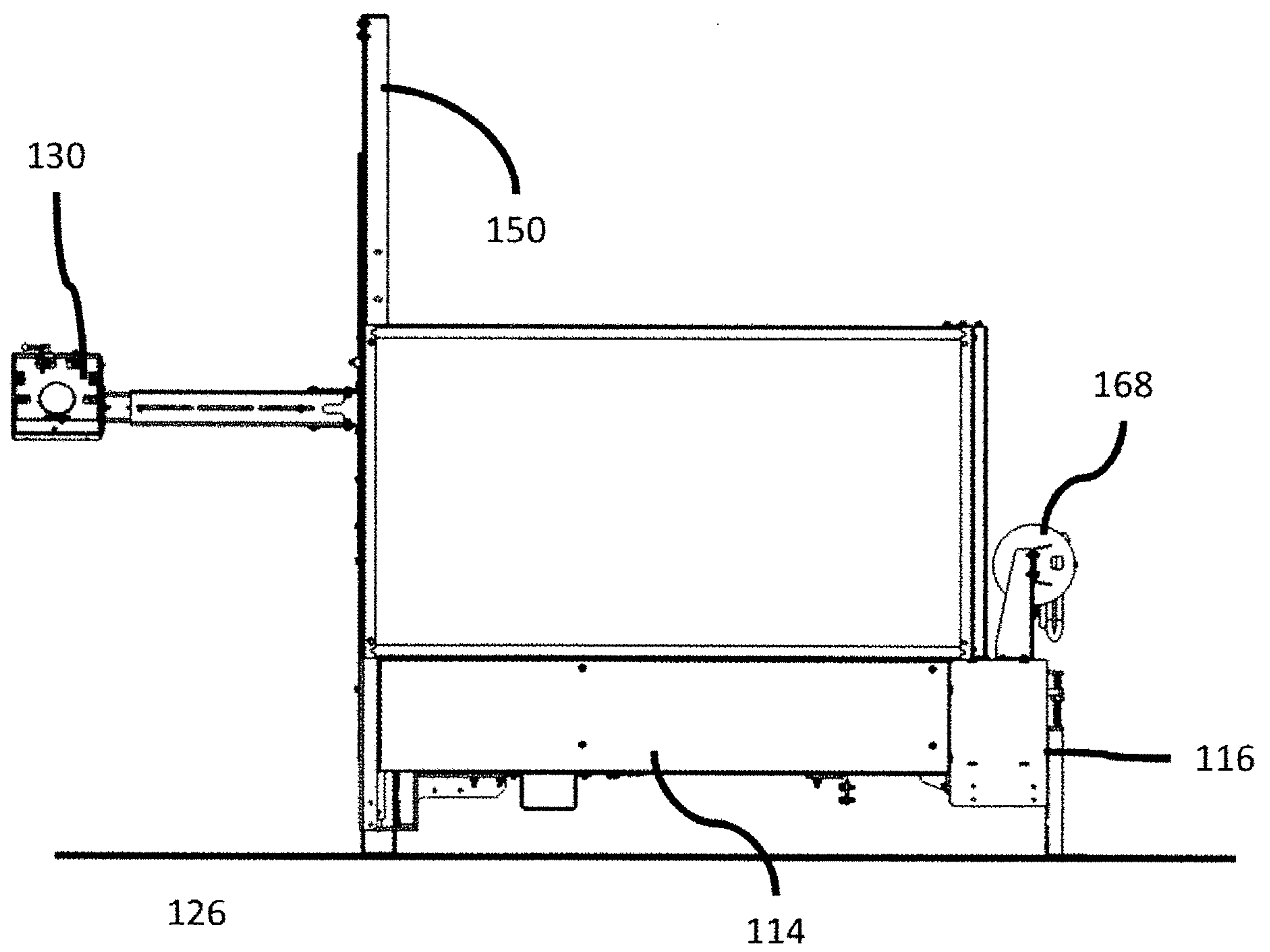
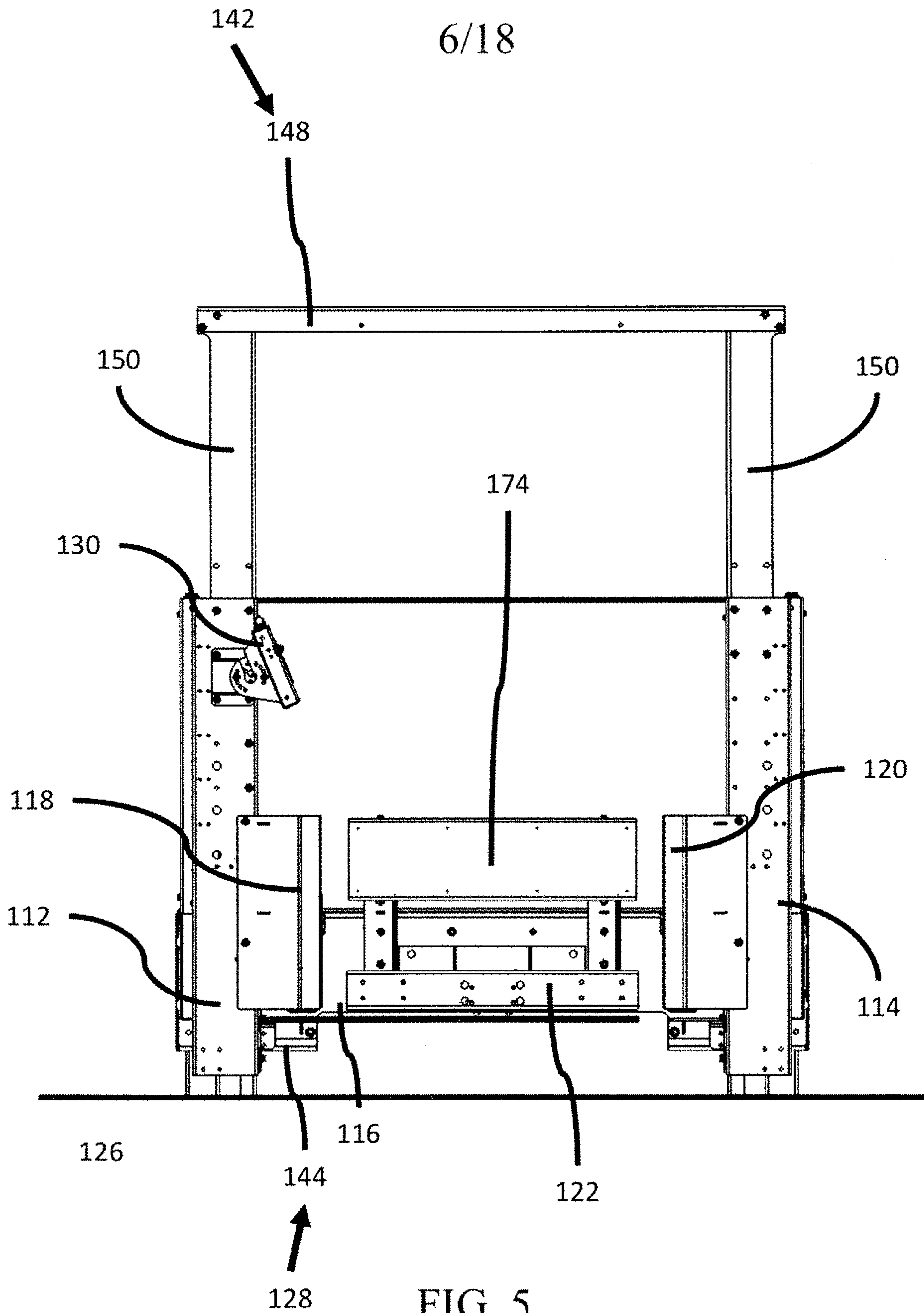


FIG. 4



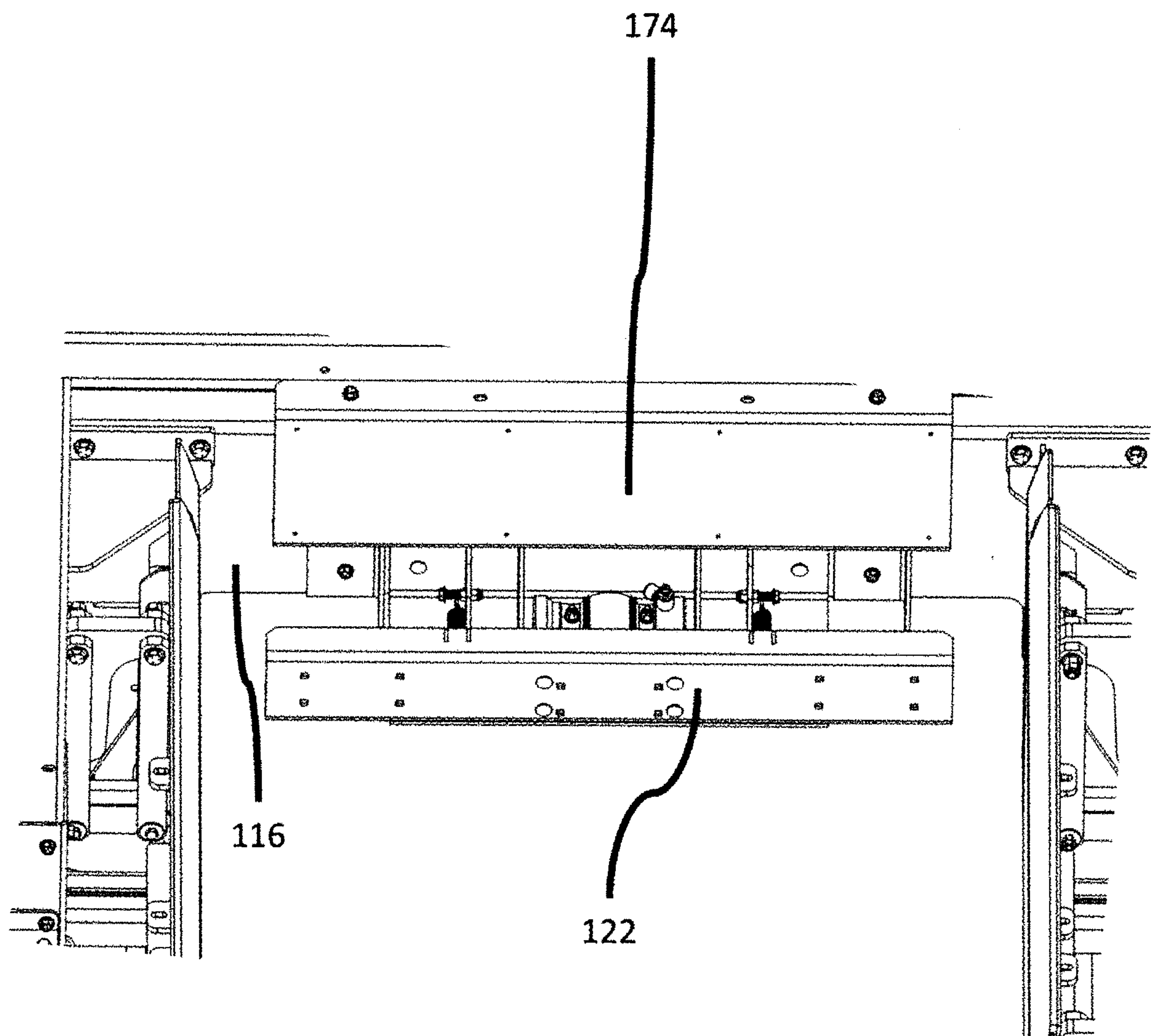


FIG. 6A

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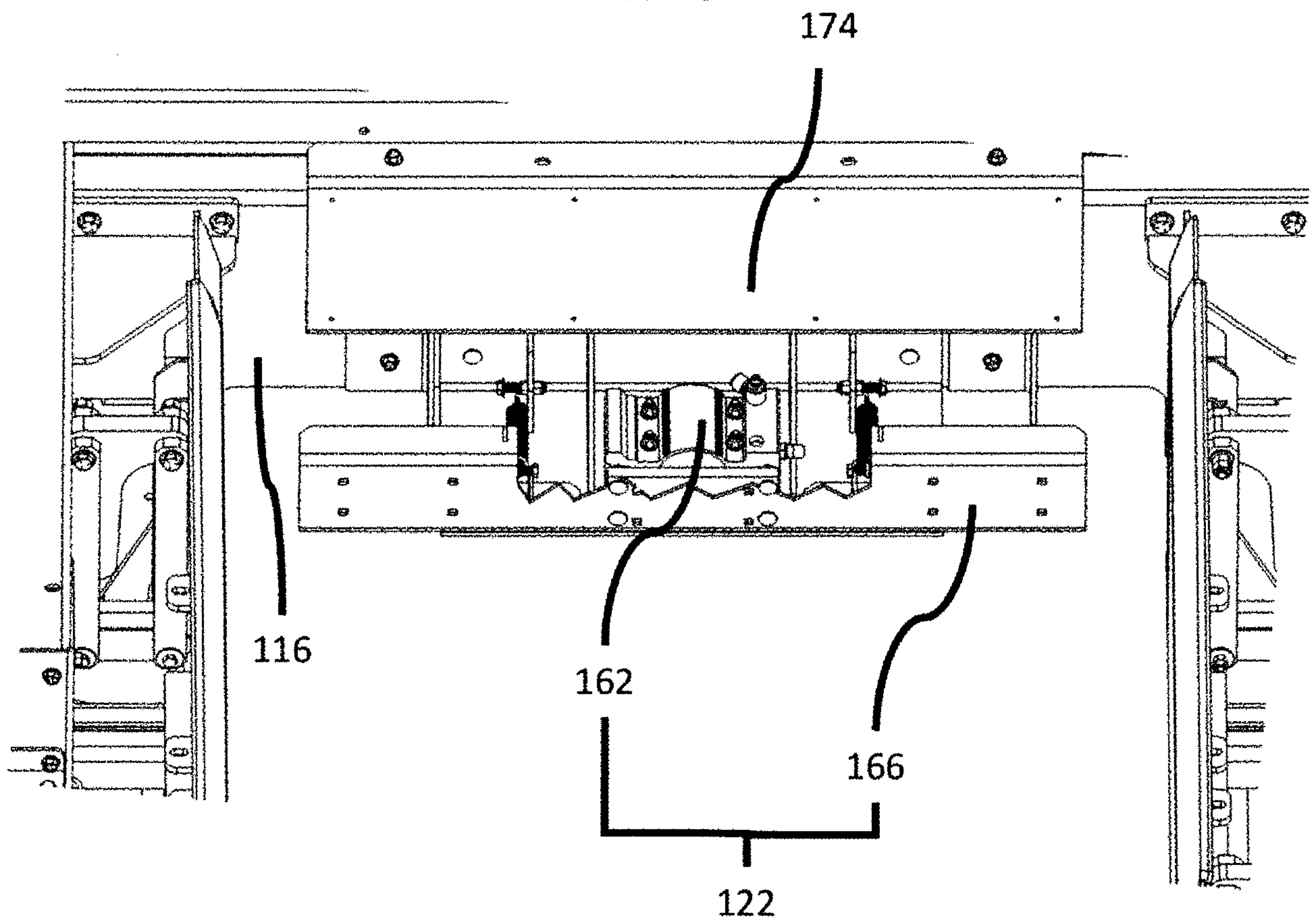


FIG. 6B

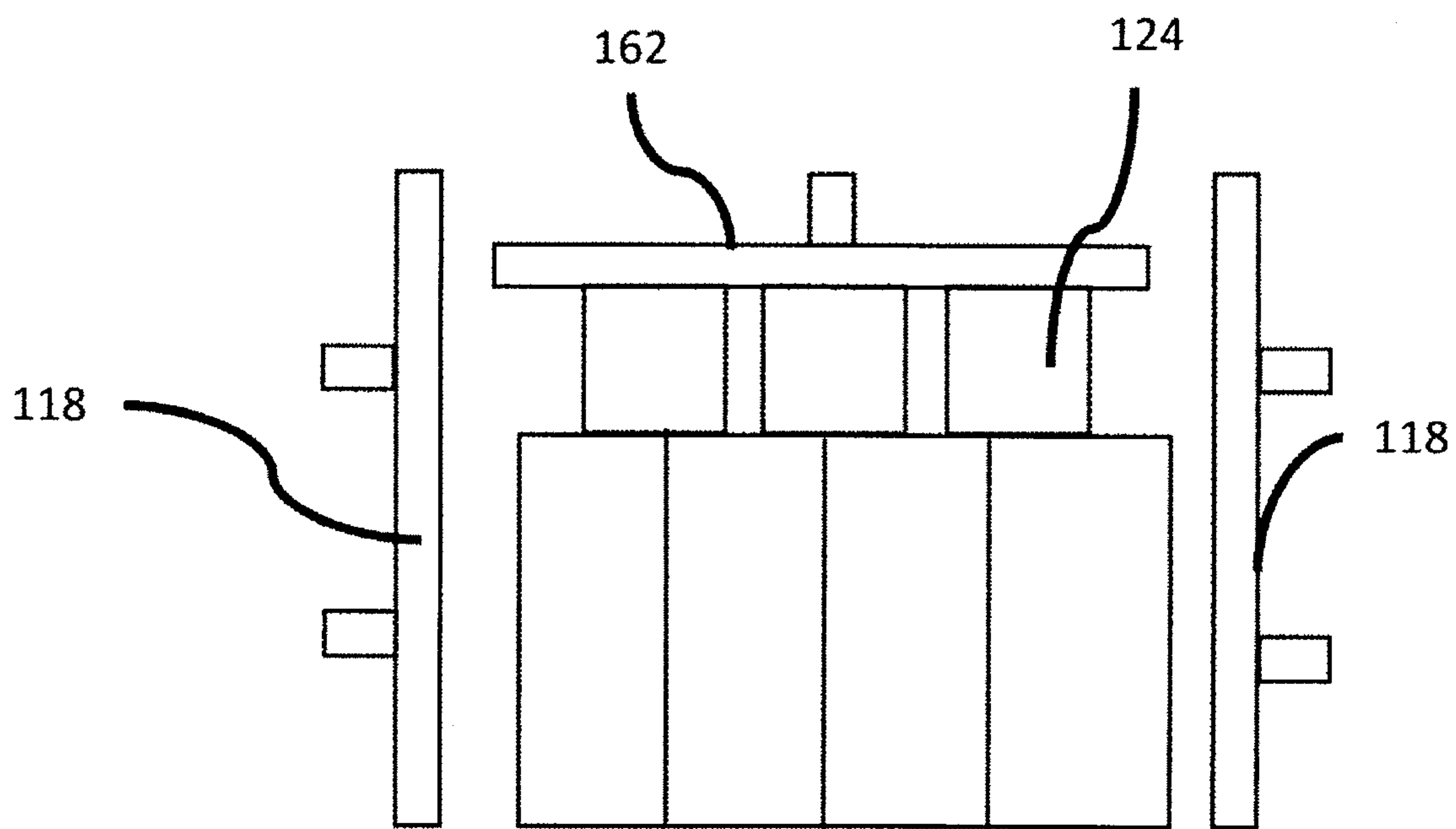


FIG. 6C

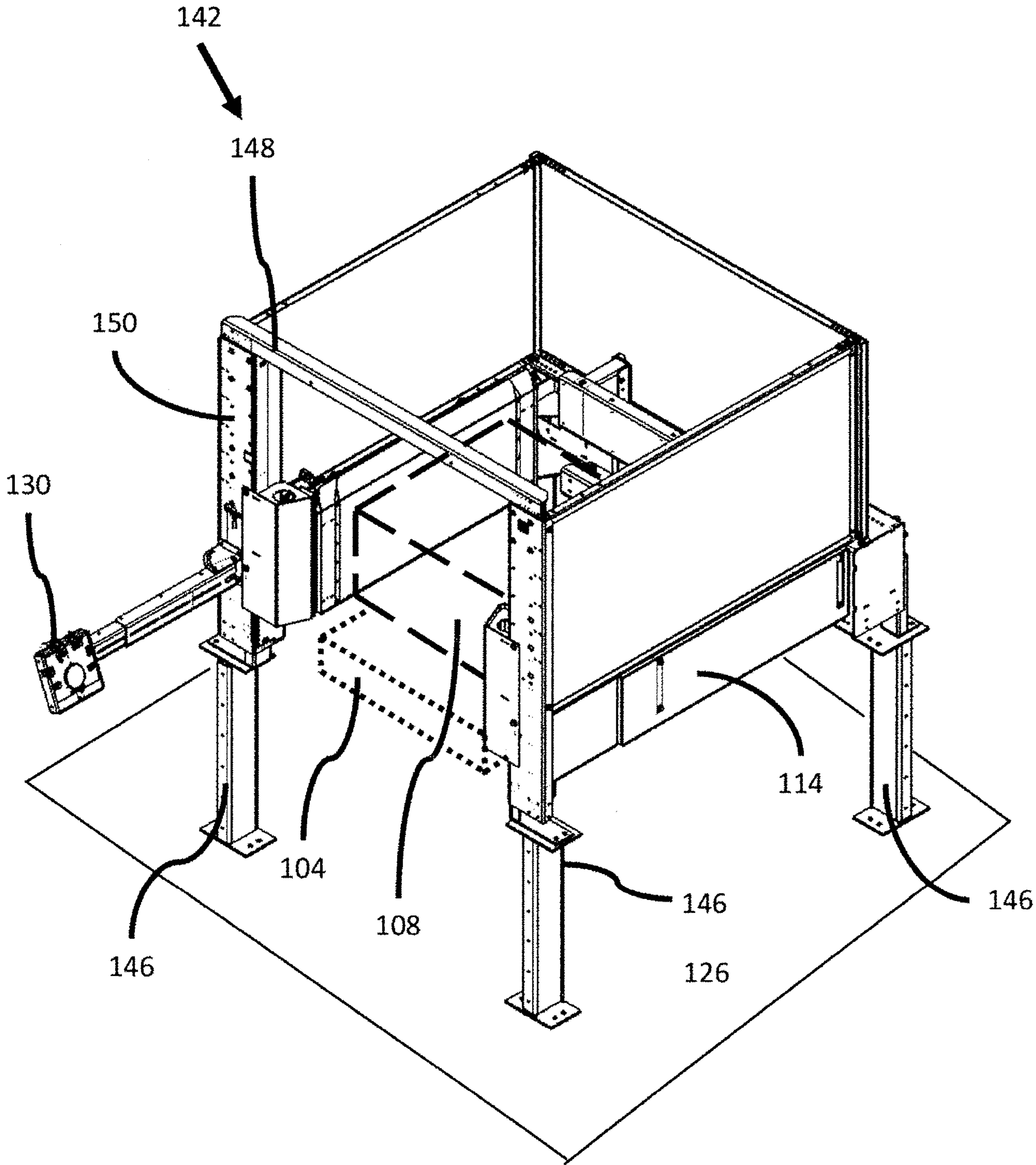


FIG. 7

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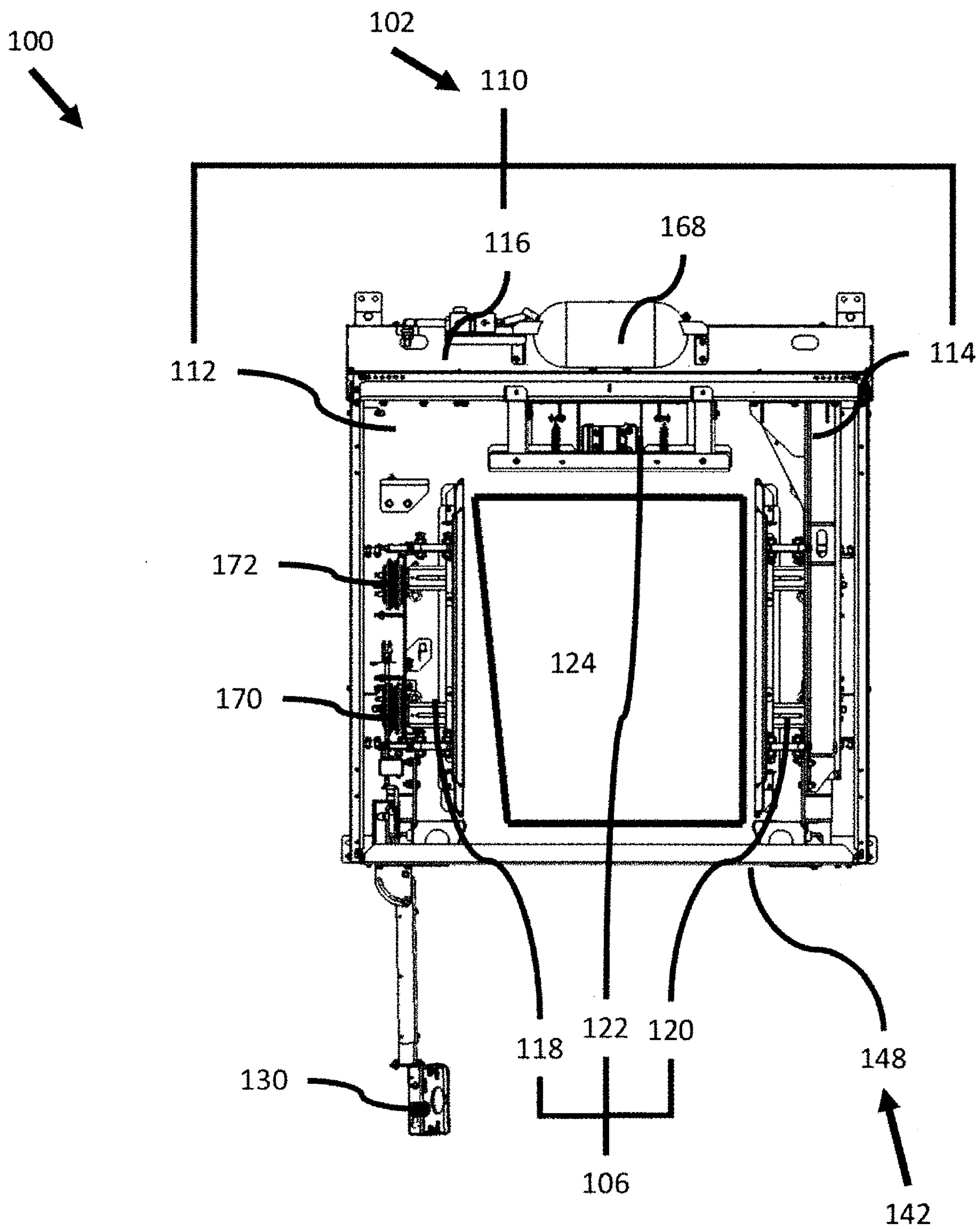


FIG. 8A

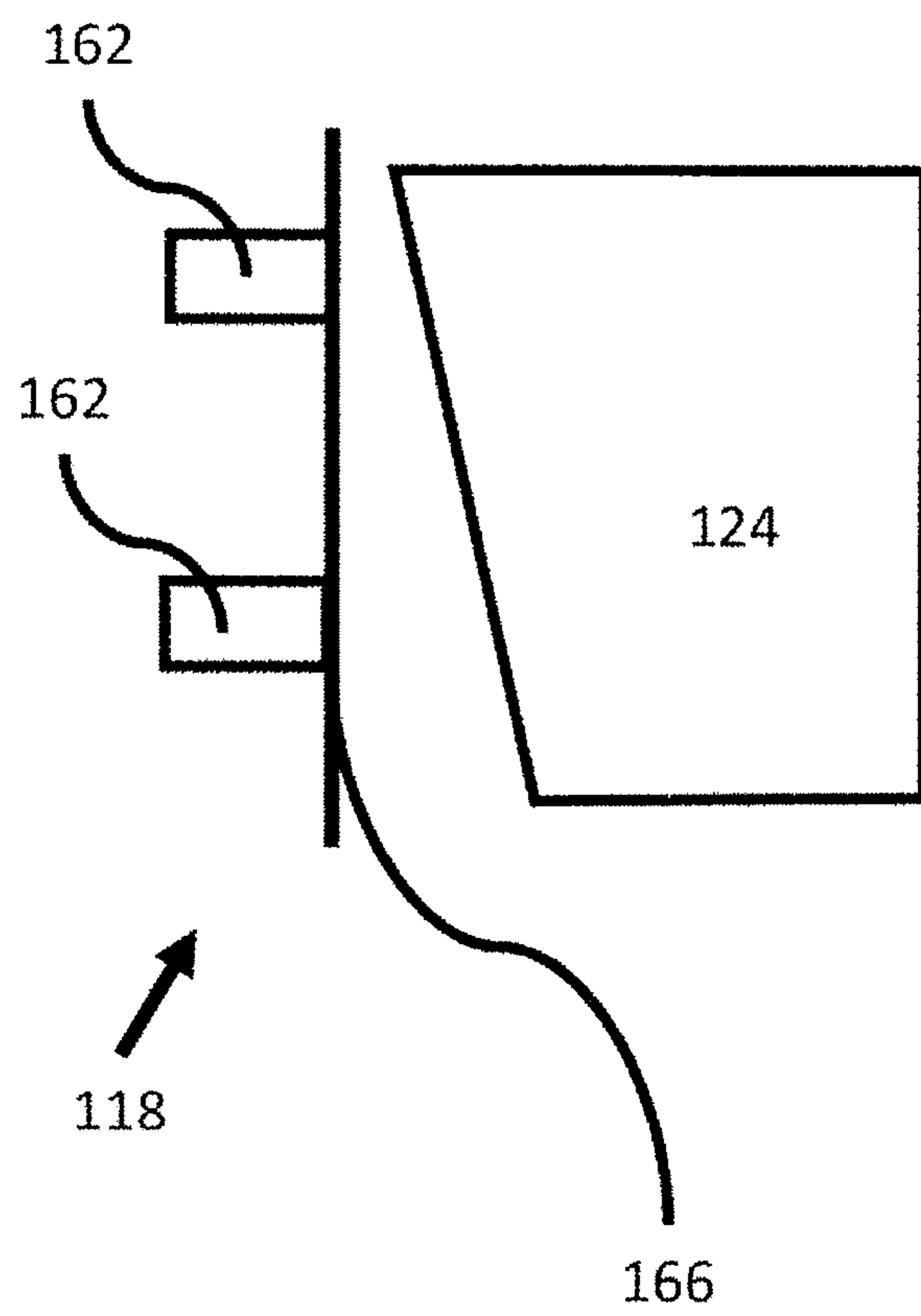


FIG. 8B

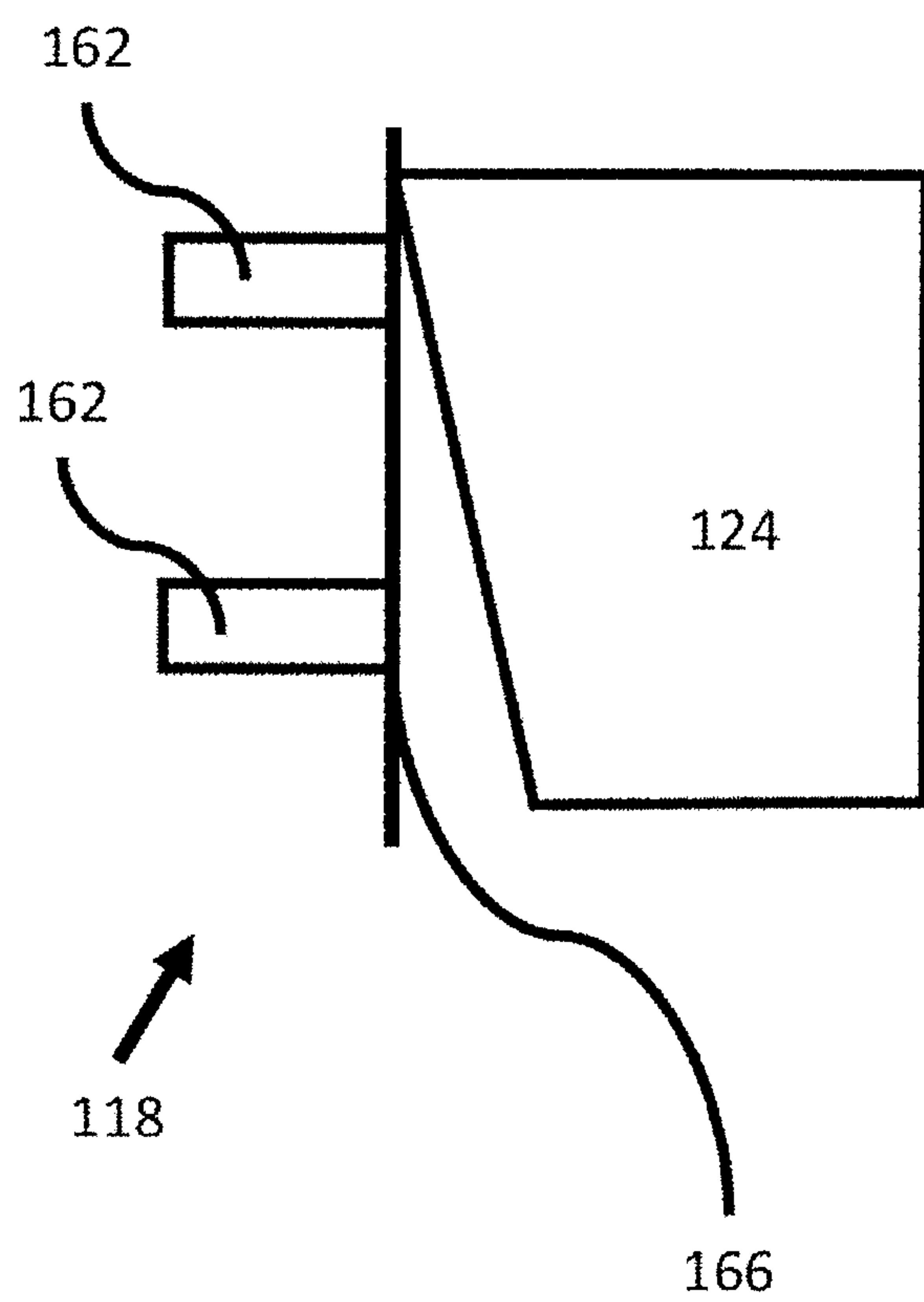


FIG. 8C

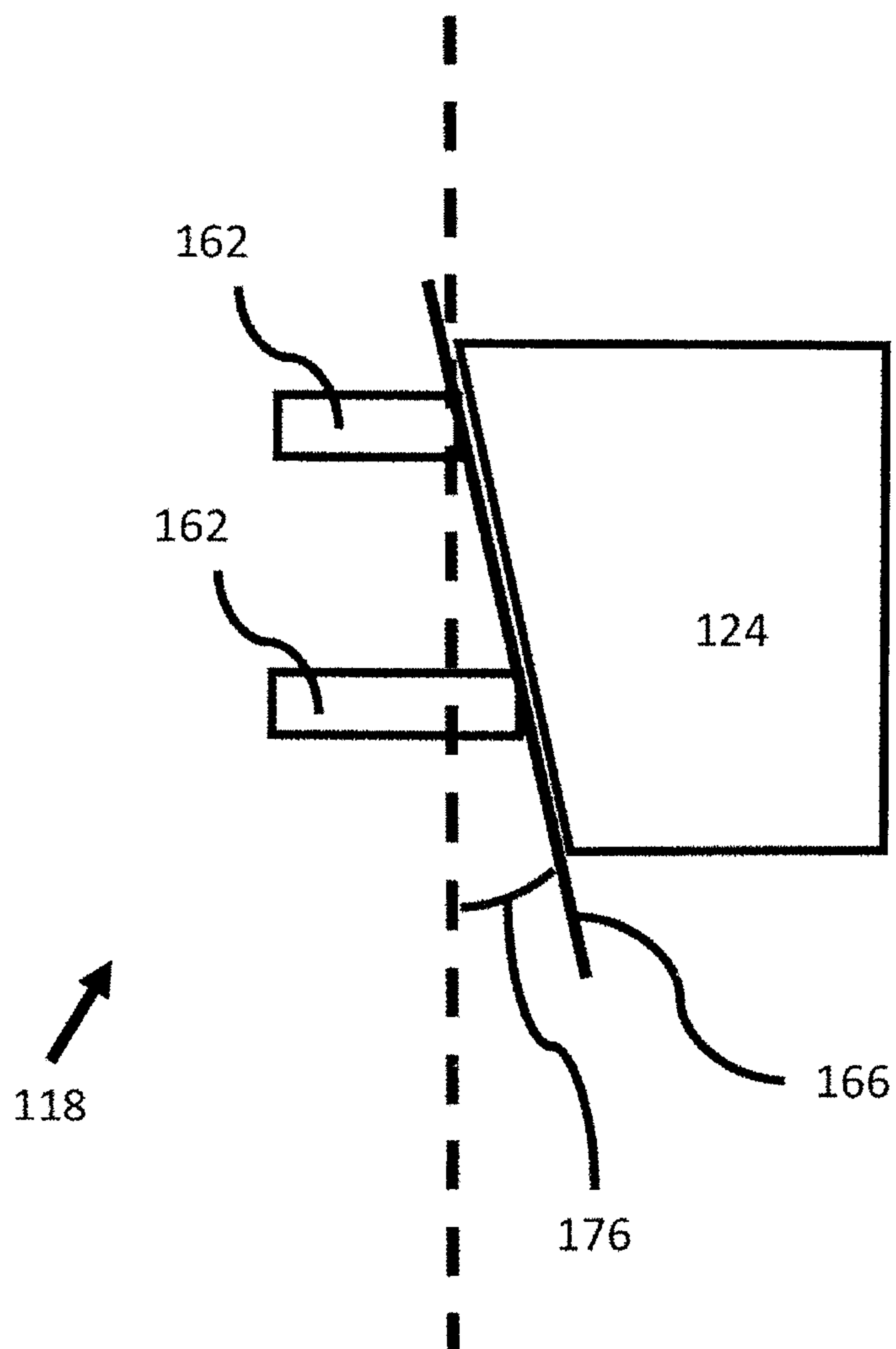


FIG. 8D

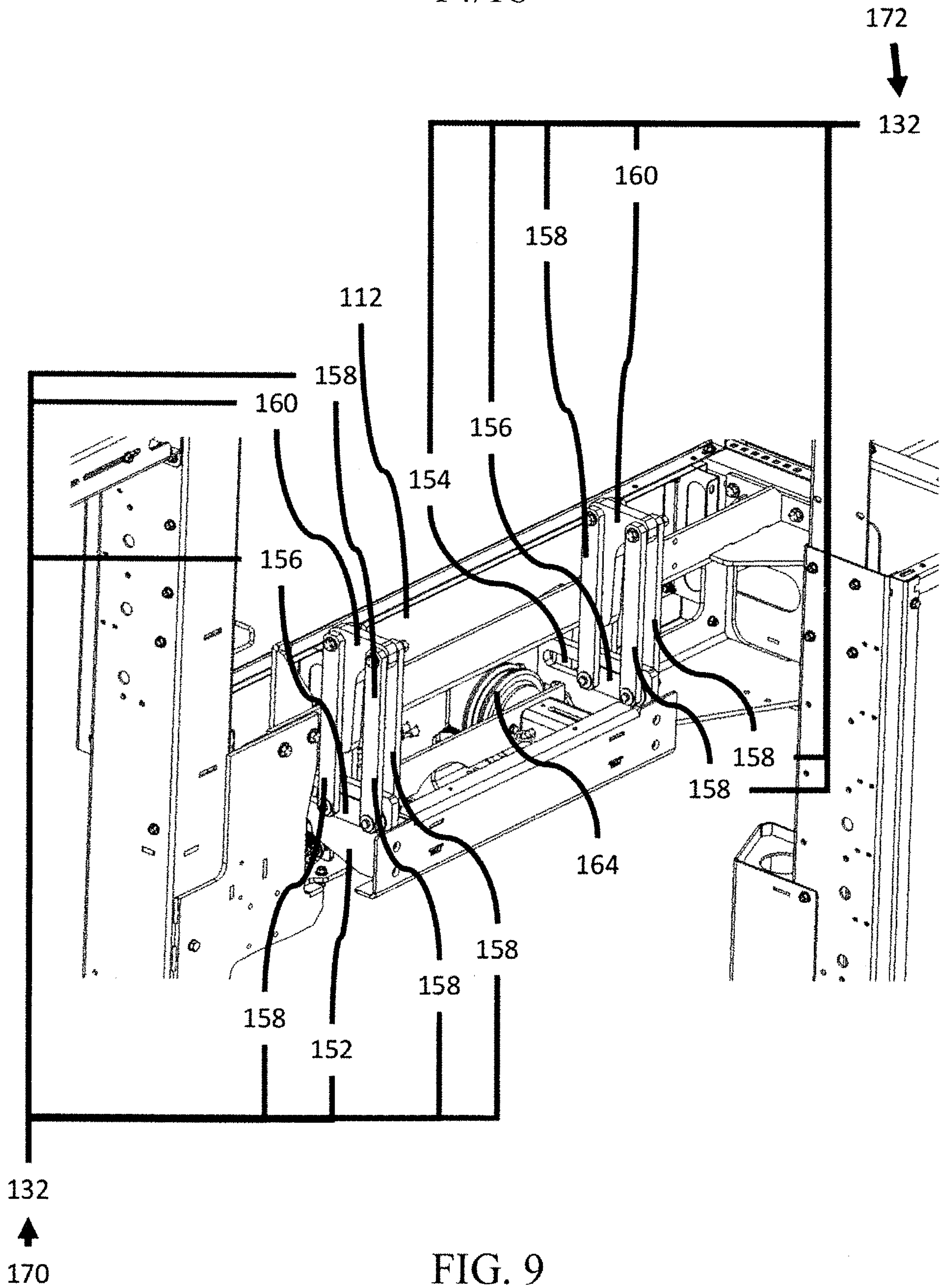


FIG. 9

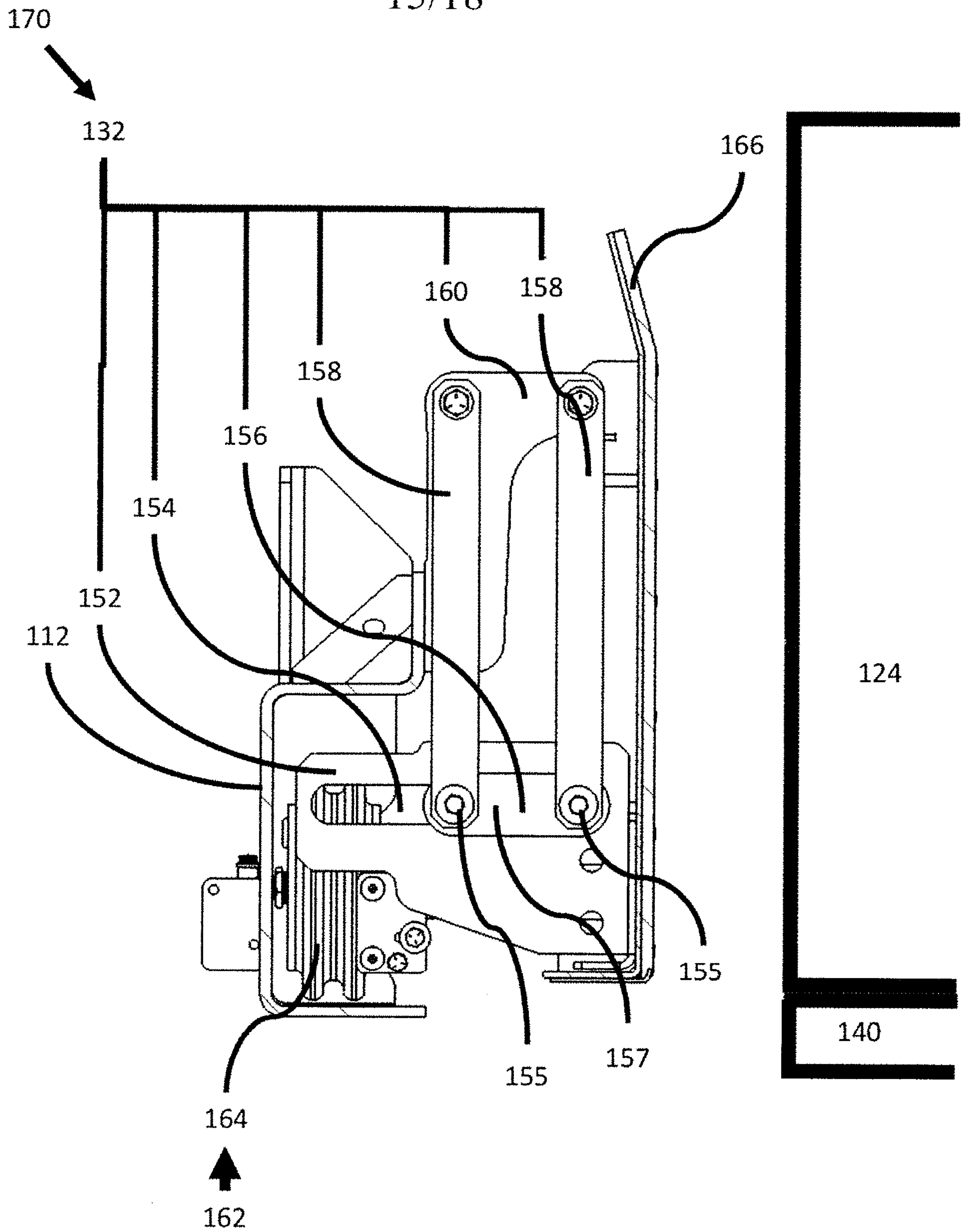


FIG. 10

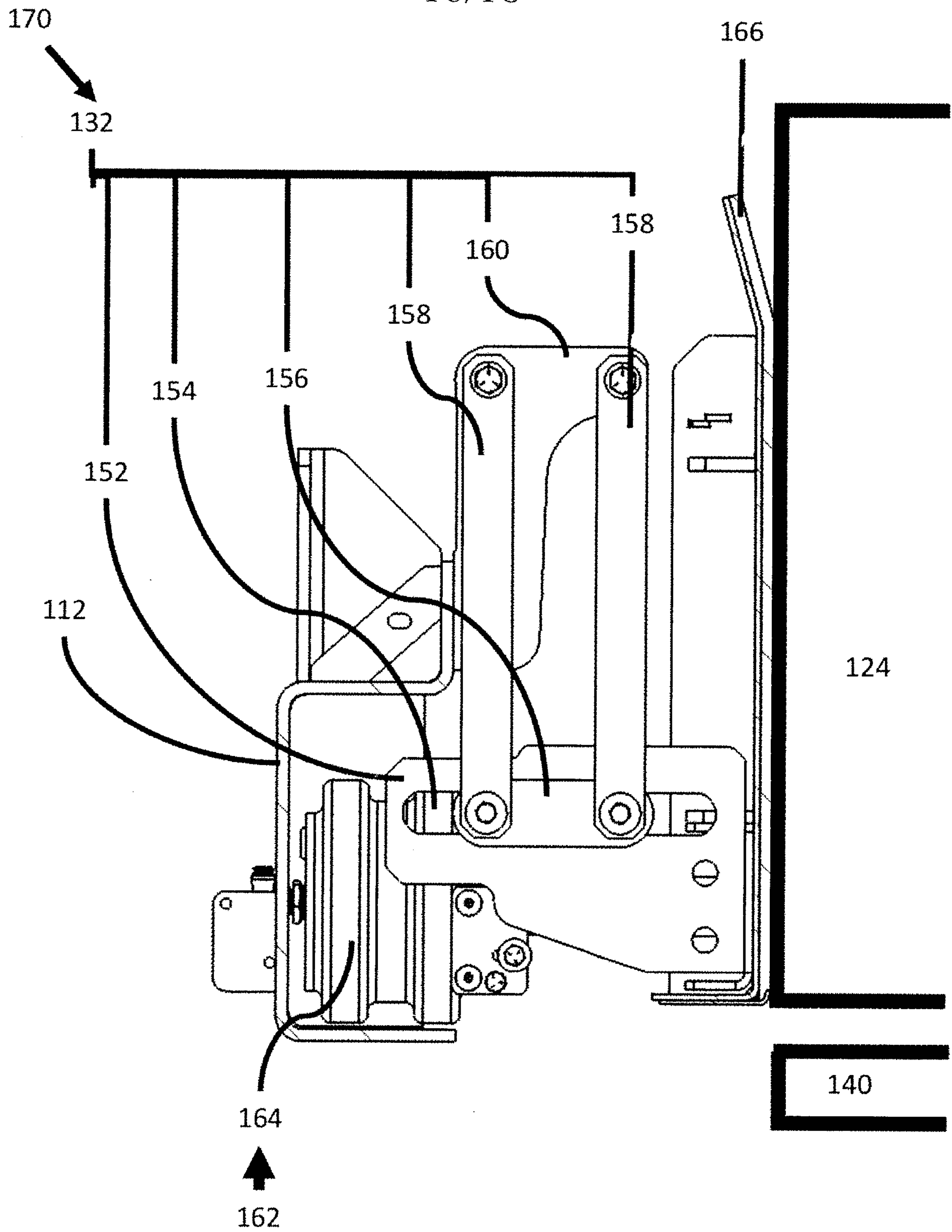


FIG. 11

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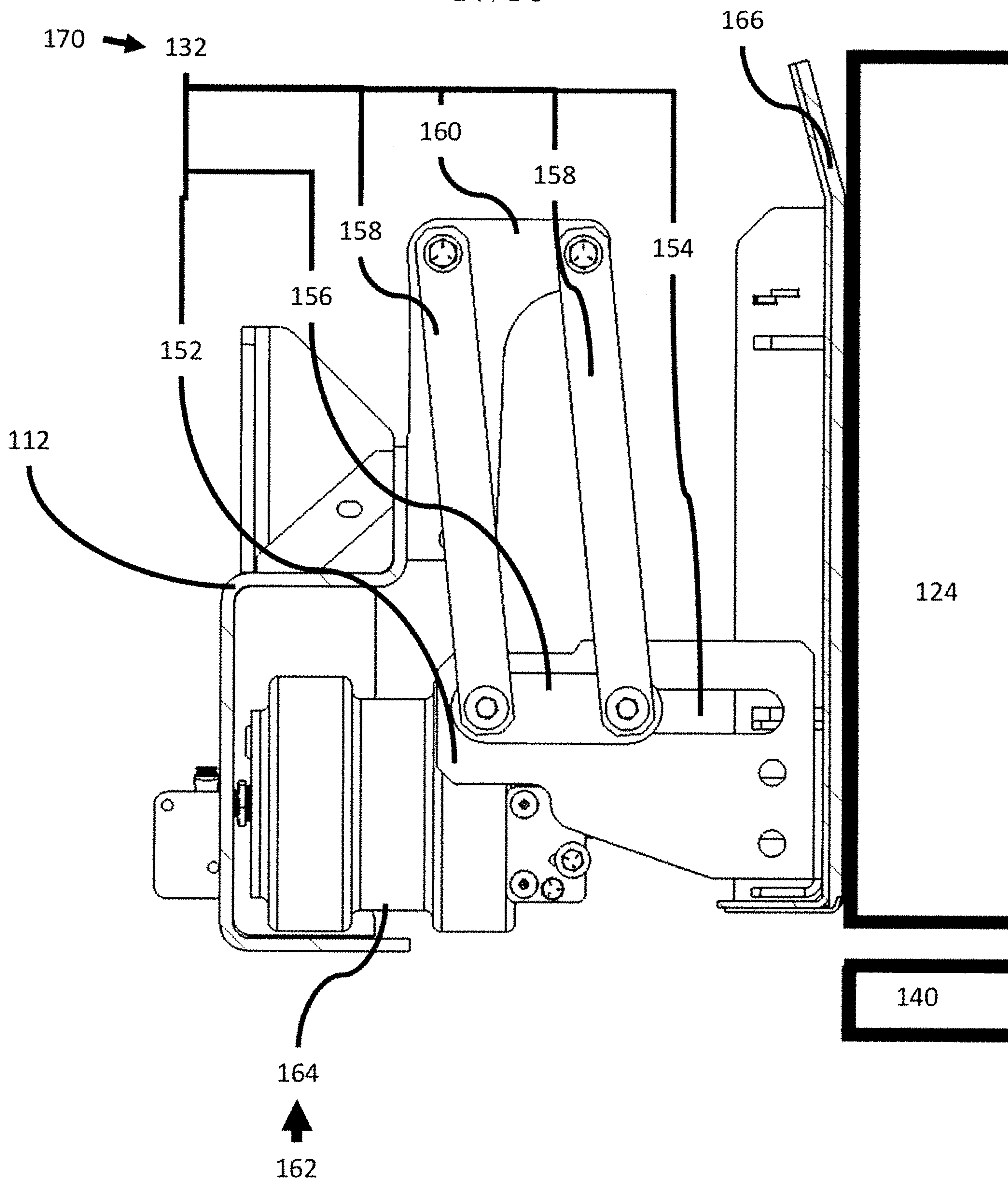


FIG. 12

FIG. 13

