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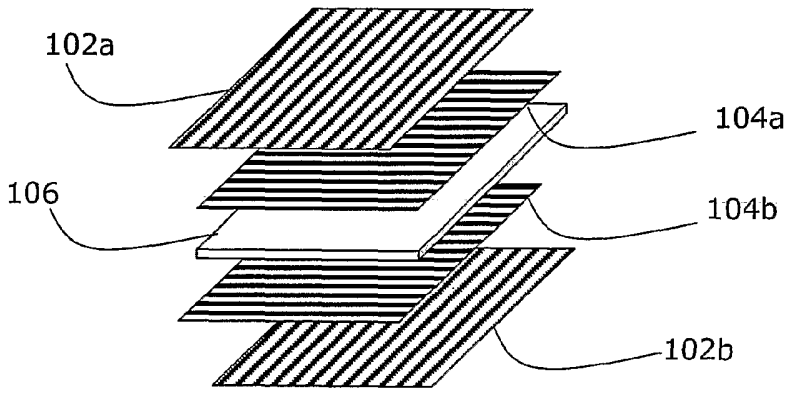

(57) Abstract: A method of producing a panel having at least one feature comprising a discontinuation in curvature of surface in the surface, the method comprising the steps of: providing a first reinforced layer of long and/or continuous parallel fibre reinforced thermoplastic of a first polymer (102a, 104a); providing a core layer of thermoplastic with at least roughly 70% by volume of a second polymer which is compatible with the first polymer (106); providing a second reinforced layer of long or continuous parallel fibre reinforced thermoplastic of the first polymer (102b, 104b); stacking the layers such that the reinforced layers are separated by the core layer; introducing the stack into a panel mould and heating the mould to at least the melting point of the predetermined polymer to consolidate the layers and form the panel.

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COMPOSITE PLASTICS AND RELATED MANUFACTURING METHODS

The present invention relates to the field of composite plastics and related manufacturing methods.

Plastics provide a versatile, convenient material for many products and has, in a great range of applications, replaced materials such as metal or wood. The convenience arises from the malleability of plastics, the fact that it can take on complex shapes, and the durability compared with previously used materials. Further, there is a great range of plastics available, with different characteristics such as melting point, stiffness, density, etc, and as such a suitable plastic can be found for a vast range of applications.

It will also be appreciated that many types of plastic are recyclable (this applies more to so-called thermo-plastics, which can be re-melted, than to thermosetting plastics). This is particularly beneficial as environmental issues have become important to consumers as well as the subject of considerable legislation. There now exist in various countries incentives to use or produce recyclable products in industry.

However, it will be appreciated that existing plastics cannot always replicate the properties of other materials. Considering the example of a bonnet of a car, this is required to be strong (to protect the occupants of the car in the event of a collision), resilient (to protect a pedestrian hit in a collision), and also to have a low heat expansion factor (it will be appreciated that the bonnet will be heated by the engine and simply by standing in the sun; it is important that the part does not change shape and size significantly). There are further manufacturing preferences- the part must be paintable, and produced at reasonable cost. It is preferably fairly

light-weight (lighter cars are either cheaper to run or better performers than a heavier car of the same design) and easy to mould, both in terms of taking the required shape and in taking the required design details, such as an inset area for a car company's badge.

In the past, steel, aluminium or thermosetting plastic has been used to manufacture car bonnets, roofs and other like parts. However, the tooling-up costs associated with this method make steel and aluminium undesirable and unsuitable for limited production runs. Thermosetting plastics are not generally recyclable.

Fibre reinforced sheets are well known in order to provide plastics material with improved mechanical properties. The fabrication of such materials is known from documents such as US 5 194 462 which describes a method of making a glass matt thermoplastic material in which the reinforcing fibres are arranged in a continuous gradient layer structure wherein the density of fibres is continuously varied through the material from a high density layer to a lower density layer. This process is commonly referred to as a 'film stack' process. Other methods of producing a random fibre matrix in a thermoplastic include the 'The ICI hot tube process', 'Flexline', 'Bay Mills / Spiflex', 'Radlite' and powder impregnation .

According to a first aspect of the invention there is provided a method of producing a panel having at least one feature comprising a discontinuation in curvature of surface in the surface, the method comprising the steps of:

providing a first reinforced layer of long or continuous parallel fibre reinforced thermoplastic of a first polymer;

providing a core layer of thermoplastic of a second polymer which is compatible with the first polymer;

providing a second reinforced layer of long or continuous parallel fibre reinforced thermoplastic of the first polymer;

stacking the layers such that the reinforced layers are separated by the core layer;

introducing the stack into a panel mould and heating the mould to at least the melting point of the predetermined polymer to consolidate the layers and form the panel.

The skilled person will appreciate that the parallel fibres in a layer may run in one direction or more than one direction, for example in woven fibre reinforced material. Further, it should be appreciated that 'compatible' in the sense used above means that the plastic layers melt together. It is likely that compatible polymers have the same polymer base. It will be appreciated that with thermosetting plastics melting of the core and reinforced layers would not occur in the same manner and so thermosetting plastics materials would not be suitable for this method.

Further, a discontinuity in the curvature of the surface may comprise rounding, for example at the edges of the panel, or may comprise an indentation. In one embodiment, the panel is a car body panel and the indentation may comprise a hollow for a car company's badge or a particular design feature, such as a fin, a vent, ridge, undulation, or the like.

This may be advantageous as separating the two reinforced layers adds stiffness and strength to the panel which allow the panel to be used in place of steel panels (which are expensive) and thermosetting plastic panels (which cannot easily be recycled). The material may also exhibit qualities of resilience which improve pedestrian safety. The reinforcing fibres act to limit the thermal expansion of the panels, which can therefore be used in part with a high thermal load, such as car roofs or

bonnets, which are heated by the sun. Further, the process of heating the mould can result in a smooth surface which can readily be painted. The core provides a polymer rich layer and polymer from this layer can penetrate the reinforced layers in particular in sharp concave corners of a mould to fill voids left between the reinforcing layers and these corners. The skilled person will appreciate that the resulting panel will better follow the shape of the mould. Further, heating the mould allows a low pressure to be used in the moulding process, which means that delicate 'in-mould' processes, such as laying a circuit board, can be performed.

It will be seen that the method proposed by the application brings together a first reinforced layer of long or continuous parallel fibre reinforced thermoplastic of a first polymer, a core layer and a second reinforced layer of long or continuous parallel fibre reinforced thermoplastic of a first polymer. Each of the layers may be constituted by a commercial product but the hybrid structure produced by the method has advantageous properties as outlined herein which are not achievable from any of the starting materials.

The core layer may be provided by any suitable material examples of which include random glass reinforced thermoplastic such as 'Azdel' produced by GE Azdel, Southfield MI 48076, USA, or a similar product from Quadrant Composites of Lenzburg, Switzerland.

The first and second reinforced layers may be provided by a continuous unidirectional fibre reinforced material. Examples of such materials are provided under the trade name 'Plytron' from Gurit Suprem, CH-8247 Flurlingen, Switzerland, or similar products from Mitsui, Japan. Similar products can be used from a variety of sources. Alternative embodiments may use continuous fibres with a powder coated product, but it is believe that the properties of the finished hybrid structure are not as good.

Preferably the core layer has at least roughly 70% by volume of the second polymer (i.e. there may be up to roughly 30% of other material in the core layer which would generally be a reinforcing material). Provision of a core layer having generally 70% by volume of the second polymer generally equates to providing a structure in which the volume of the core material is roughly equal to the volume of the material in the reinforced layers.

Provision of the second polymer to greater than 50% of the sum of the skin materials by volume is thought to be advantageous because it generally provides a core layer which is roughly equal in thickness to the combined thickness of the two reinforced layers. This allows stiffness and dimensional stability to be maintained, whilst improving processability and reducing cost.

In some embodiments (and depending upon the polymer used), the method further comprises treating the moulded panel with a flame treatment, corona discharge or a plasma gun. As will be familiar to the man skilled in the art, treating a polymer in this way increases the surface tension which can improve paint adhesion.

As will be understood by the person skilled in the art, 'long-fibre' reinforced thermoplastics are impregnated with fibres- which are commonly glass, carbon, synthetic or natural materials- such that they maintain their shape under varying environmental conditions. The skilled person will appreciate that within the art the term long has a meaning of a fibre having a length of between roughly 1mm and roughly 10mm and that a continuous fibre has a length of any thing over roughly 10mm up to the length of the product in which the fibre is used. Short fibres are recognised as having a length of under roughly 1mm. In a particularly

preferred embodiment, the fibres are continuous and therefore may be anywhere between 10mm in length and up to roughly the length of the panel being produced.

The first and second polymers may be the same, or substantially the same polymer. This is advantageous as such a panel may be readily melted and recycled- a panel incorporating more than one polymer may have unpredictable qualities and therefore its re-use may be limited or prevented.

The moulding may be performed in a vacuum consolidation mould, a stamp-press mould or any other suitable mould. These provide convenient moulds which are in use in the art.

In preferred embodiments, the tooling surface (i.e. the surface in contact with the panel) is heated. This may save energy when compared to heating the mould as a whole.

Further, in preferred embodiments, heat is applied to at least the tooling surface intended to mould a side of the panel to be painted. This is advantageous as the heating process allows the plastic to melt and form a smooth, readily paintable surface.

The method may further comprise cooling the mould. This may allow the panel to be cooled and therefore processed more quickly than would be possible if the mould was left to cool. The mould may be cooled using a cooling fluid or in some other way. In some embodiments, particularly where only the tooling surface of the mould is heated, only the cooling surface may be cooled. This may reduce the amount of cool fluid required.

The method may comprise providing the core layer such that it comprises approximately 50% of the depth of the panel. This is convenient as it allows the reinforced layers to be separated by a reasonable amount (as a rule, the greater their separation, the greater the stiffness of the panel). However, in alternative embodiments, the core layer may comprise roughly any of the following: 25%, 40%, 60%, 80% or some value in between.

In some embodiments, the method may comprise providing more than two reinforced layers. In what is perhaps a preferred embodiment, there are two reinforced layers either side of the core layer, wherein the outermost layers incorporate fibres in a first direction and the inner reinforced layers incorporated fibres in a second direction, orthogonal to the first and the core is disposed between the inner reinforced layers. This may be advantageous as the fibres act to limit thermal expansion in two directions.

In preferred embodiments, the reinforcing layer(s) to one side of the core layer may be arranged to substantially 'mirror' the reinforcing layer(s) to the other side of the core. This is intended to mean both that the layers are balanced in number either side of the core and also that the orientation of the fibres are mirrored, for example in a 5-layer structure, the outermost layers may comprise longitudinally oriented fibres and the inner reinforced layers may comprise transversely orientated fibres (see Figure 1 for an example of a 'mirrored' arrangement). This arrangement is advantageous as it prevents distortion. It should be noted that further finish- for example a paint layer or fabric layer- does not upset the balance of the panel.

In further alternative embodiments, the method may comprise providing the reinforced layer(s) with fibres lying in two roughly orthogonal

directions. For example layers in the first and second reinforced layers may normally be laid in what is termed a 0° 90° matrix, mirror imaged from the centre/core.

The layer(s) may additionally or alternatively, comprise fibres lying across the diagonal in what is termed in the art a 'Quasi isotropic' arrangement. In such embodiments, the method may comprise weaving together the fibres before incorporating them into a layer. This may restrict the thermal expansion in various directions with just two layers of reinforced material.

Additionally, or in alternative embodiments, the method may comprise providing the reinforced layer(s) with fibres laying at angles to one another other than at 90°. In one particularly advantageous embodiment fibres are oriented at roughly 37° to one another. This, in the case of a polypropylene matrix, has been found to be particularly advantageous since it will gives the resultant plastics material thermal expansion properties roughly equal to those of steel. The thermal properties of the resultant plastics material may be matched to other materials by orienting the fibres at other directions to one another.

The method may comprise providing the core layer with reinforcing fibres. Suitable fibres may be randomly orientated fibres. This may improve the strength of the panel. Alternatively, the core may be provided as a natural, or un-reinforced, material. This may be advantageous as it may improve the malleability of the panel.

The core may be made up of recycled material, for example ground-up plastic parts. In one example, a bumper may be recycled. As will be appreciated by the person skilled in the art, bumper material does not generally include fibre reinforcement, but there is a 'filler', normally a

synthetic rubber that improves impact performance and paint adhesion). The bumper may also be painted. The ground bumper may be regarded as a filled grade with paint particles also acting as a filler in the ground material. It has previously been considered that such recycled material cannot be used in manufacturing panel which are required to be strong. This is because the impurities such as paint flecks cause discontinuities in the structure, which is then prone to fracture about those points. However, under the present arrangement, the strength is provided by the reinforced layers and the recycled material may be used without the need to strip the part of paint or remove other impurities first.

The core layer could also be formed from industrial regrind (e.g. from a fibre manufacturer) or end of use recycling (e.g. packaging).

The method may comprise using the panel in the manufacture of a vehicle. The panel may for example provide the bonnet, roof or boot of a car. Alternatively, it may provide a panel for an aircraft door or body part.

According to a second aspect of the invention there is provided a panel formed of laminate composite material comprising a core of thermoplastic comprising at least 70% of a predetermined polymer by volume and cover layers comprising long and/or continuous fibre reinforced thermoplastic of the predetermined polymer, wherein the long and/or continuous fibres are oriented parallel to the surface of the cover layers and the inner layer is at least partly covered on each surface by a cover layer, wherein the layers have been consolidated in a heated mould.

Preferably, the material is arranged such that when heat is applied to the cover layer, polymer from the core will be drawn towards the surface(s) of the cover layers.

This may be advantageous as it provides a smooth surface which is easy to paint.

Preferably, the stack comprises at least three layers, the two outer layers comprising continuous fibre reinforced thermoplastic of the common polymer and at least one inner layer comprising an unreinforced or random fibre reinforced thermoplastic of the common polymer.

The layers may have been consolidated in a vacuum consolidation mould or by stamping. These are convenient methods of forming a panel which are in use in the art.

According to a third aspect of the present invention there is provided a composite plastic comprising at least one inner layer of thermoplastic of a predetermined polymer and further comprising at least two cover layers of long or continuous fibre reinforced thermoplastic of the predetermined polymer, wherein the long or continuous fibres are oriented substantially parallel to the surface of the cover layers and the inner layer is generally covered on each surface by a cover layer.

Such a composite plastic may be advantageous as the cover layers may enable a sample of the composite to maintain its shape under different environmental conditions and the inner layer may provide increased malleability.

In a particularly preferred embodiment the fibres in the cover layers are continuous.

According to a fourth aspect of the present invention, there is provided a method of painting a fibre reinforced plastic panel comprising applying a

first layer of primer paint which is thixotropic, allowing the first layer to form a rigid coating and applying a second layer of paint.

This may be advantageous as composite laminate plastic panels may comprise outer layers reinforced with fibres, which may be glass, carbon, natural or synthetic fibres. Such panels will, when subjected to changes in temperature due, for example, to standing in the sun, be subject to changes in thickness under thermal expansion and contraction. On expansion, a paint layer may be pushed up and may remain in that position following contraction. This can result in 'witness marks', in particular of the fibres, being left in the paint finish over time.

In some embodiments, the plastic may comprise a composite plastic. In such embodiments, the composite may comprise at least three layers, the two outer layers comprising a long and/or continuous fibre reinforced thermoplastic of the common polymer and at least one inner layer comprising an unreinforced or random fibre reinforced thermoplastic of the common polymer.

This method may be particularly advantageous in the case of a panel formed from a stack of at least three layers, the two outer layers comprising a long and/or continuous fibre reinforced thermoplastic of the common polymer and at least one core layer comprising a thermoplastic of the common polymer. Although such a panel may have desirable strength and heat expansion properties, the long fibres may be particularly prone to leaving witness marks. Such a primer layer can help to seal the surface such that changes in thickness may not be perceptible by the naked eye.

The method may further comprise providing the second layer of paint as a coloured layer. This is convenient as it allows a coloured panel to be produced.

The method may further comprise providing a layer of clear gloss coat. This may be advantageous as it provides a high quality finish which is durable an visually pleasing.

As will be appreciated by the man skilled in the art, features described in relation to one of the aspects of invention described above may equally apply to other aspects.

Embodiments of the invention are now described by way of example only and with reference to the accompanying Figures of which:

Figure 1a shows a five layer composite before the layers are bonded;

Figure 1b shows a 'blank' formed from the five layer composite of Figure 1a;

Figure 2a shows a panel being formed in a mould according to a prior art process;

Figure 2b shows a panel being formed in a vacuum mould according to one embodiment of the present invention;

Figure 2c shows a panel being formed in a press mould according to one embodiment of the present invention;

Figure 3 shows a flow chart of a process according to one embodiment of the present invention;

The present example relates to providing a car panel with a high quality painted finish. Figure 1a shows the layers that make up a laminate blank 100 (a 'blank' is an item to be moulded) of Figure 1b according to the present invention. The layers comprise two outermost layers 102a, 102b of continuous-fibre unidirectional reinforced polypropylene, an example of what is known in the art as a 'thermoplastic prepreg', wherein the fibres are orientated in a first direction. As will be familiar to a person skilled in the art, a 'long' fibre, in this context, generally means a fibre with a length greater than around 1cm, distinguishing from 'short' fibres of around 0.4mm in length, such as are used to reinforce plastics to be injection moulded. In the present example, fibres of at least four to ten centimetres are suitable (i.e. what would be termed continuous fibres) and the fibres run roughly parallel to the surface of the layers 102a, 102b.

The layers 102a, 104a, 106, 104b, 102b may generally be provided on rolls and can be pulled out to and cut to the size of the blank 100 in step 300 of the process described in the flowchart of Figure 3. The layers 102a, 104a, 106, 104b, 102b are then placed in a stack to form the blank 100 in step 302.

Inside each of the outermost fibre reinforced layer 102a, 102b is an inner layer 104a, 104b of continuous-fibre unidirectional reinforced polypropylene, wherein the fibres are orientated in a second direction, roughly orthogonal to the first direction.

Between the inner layers 104a, 104b is a substrate, or core layer 106 comprising 'natural' polypropylene (i.e., the propylene is not reinforced with fibres). This provides a polymer rich core.

The lay-up of the blank 100 is balanced, in that there are the same number of layers either side of the core and that the layers are organised to form a mirror image in the sense that the order of the layer moving out from the core it the same on both sides (e.g. a layer with fibres in the first direction followed by a layer of fibres in the second direction).

The next step is to mould the panel. The skilled person will appreciate that there are various ways of moulding a panel, of which vacuum consolidation and pressing are briefly discussed below, following some discussion of the prior art.

The blank 100 is laid into a mould 200a, 200b, 200c allowing sufficient 'drape' to fill the mould 200a, 200b, 200c. In prior art methods, the blank 100 is heated before being placed in the mould 200a, both so that the layers combine and so that the blank 100 is malleable and will take on the shape of the mould 200a. However, the material will cool slightly in transfer into the mould 200a. The material may not conform entirely to the shape of the mould and a pitted surface may result. This creates a surface which is hard to paint and which may not produce an aesthetically pleasing result.

A further problem is that fibre reinforced materials tend to 'hold off' in concave corners of moulds. An example of this is shown in Figure 2a. The material will not readily take the shape of the mould 200a and voids 202, 204 are left between the draped material and the mould 200a. This means that sharp corners in a mould 200a are not reproduced in the moulded panel. Figure 2a also illustrates that, the sharper the corner

(i.e. the smaller the radius of curvature), the more of a void 202, 204 can be seen.

The next stage in the process according to one embodiment of the present invention, step 304, is to consider whether pre-forming is required. Pre-forming is generally required when the shape required from the blank 100 is complex or convoluted. Pre-forming comprises the steps of heating the blank 100 (generally to less than the melting point of the material) (step 306) (Step 306) draping the blank 100 into a mould 200a (Step 308), 200b, 200c and pressing the blank 100 into the extremities of the mould (step 310). Such pressing can be done with a hand-held tool.

Alternatively, where no performing is required, the blank is laid into the mould at substantially the ambient temperature (step 312).

According to this embodiment of the present example although the layers are laid up to create the blank 100, the layers are not bonded, or 'consolidated', together and, at approximately the ambient temperature, the blank 100 is placed in a heated mould 200b, 200c as shown in Figures 2b, 2c, in which the outermost layers 102a are shown but the remaining layers are not shown for the sake of clarity. A suitable mould 200b, 200c is manufactured by Roctool, of BP341 Savoie Technolac, 73377 Le Bourget You Lac, France.

The case of vacuum consolidation is considered first. The heated vacuum mould 200b of Figure 2b comprises a channel 206 for the introduction of heating or cooling fluids. In alternative embodiments, a mould may be heated by electromagnetic inductive process.

Where vacuum consolidation is used, the heated mould 200b has only one surface to which heat is applied. As will be familiar to the person skilled

in the art, a panel is formed when pressed into the mould 200b by a vacuum applied to a vacuum bag.

In vacuum consolidation, once the blank 100 has been draped into the mould 100b, the vacuum bag is sealed, a vacuum is applied and the surface of the mould 200b is heated in step 314. The material softens and melts to the face of the mould 200b. The mould 200b is heated to above the melting point of the material 100. Under the present example, as the melting point of polypropylene is 170°C, the mould 200b is heated to 180°C, although in other examples, this may be increase by 30°C to speed the melting process.

Once the composite has reached 180°C through to the core, the layers 102a, 104a, 106, 104b, 102a become fully consolidated. Under the present example, the tool is heated for around ten minutes to reach the temperature required. The composite is then allowed a few minutes (typically five minutes) 'dwell' time within the mould 200b temperature (step 316), where the mould 200b is maintained at 180°C, before cooling for around ten minutes (Step 318) before being removed in step 320), giving an overall cycle time of around thirty minutes for the complete cycle including loading and removal.

A faster alternative to vacuum consolidation is press moulding, but as will be appreciated by the skilled person, the tooling-up costs are high as it requires the investment in 'matched' tooling. An example of a press mould 200c is shown in Figure 2c.

The press mould 200c comprises a female part 200ci and a male part 200cii, which are brought together to press a part. In the embodiment here described, both the female 200ci and the male 200cii parts incorporate

cooling channels 206i, 206ii for the introduction of heating or cooling fluids near the surfaces in contact with the part to me machined.

In press moulding, once the blank 100 has been loaded into the mould 200c, which is sometimes referred to as a 'tool' in this context, and the mould 200c is heated and closed in step 314. A slip frame controls the way that the continuous fibres are allowed to 'slip' into the profile of the mould 200b. As will be understood by those skilled in the art, a slip frame comprises a substantially rectangular frame which holds the edges of a rectangle of material to be pressed, clamping with a predetermined tension provided by springs. The tension is set so that the material is allowed to 'slip' though the frame and into the mould 200c with a predetermined tension. A suitable slip frame can be supplied by Elkington Brothers of Birmingham, UK. Once the blank has been laid into the mould 200c, and as the mould 200c closes, the heating on the mould 200c brings the material up above its melting point (step 306) as described above in relation to vacuum consolidation). The blank 100 has a 'dwell' time before the heat on the mould 200c removed (step 316) and the mould 200c cooled. The part is then cooled (step 318) to a temperature at which it can safely be removed from the mould 200c (step 320). The overall cycle time can be under two minutes.

In both pressing and vacuum consolidation, the presence of heat at the surface means that the polymer tends to melt and run into any voids between the mould 200b, 200c and the fibres of the outermost layers 102a, 102b.

Both processes operate at a 'low' pressure of around one bar to ensure that there is minimal fibre movement in the outermost 102a,b and inner layers 104a, b. In alternative embodiments, pressures of between roughly one to ten bars may be appropriate.

The panel is taken from the mould 200b and trimmed as necessary. In the present example of polypropylene, if it is to be painted, some pre-treatment is required. The surface of panel is prepared with flame treatment or plasma gun (step 322) and tested to ensure a surface tension in excess of 40 Dynes/cm, as is required for paint adhesion for a high quality finish. Other polymers may not require this treatment or may require another treatment.

Whilst it will be understood that the thermal expansion of the panel has been reduced by the inclusion of fibre reinforcement, there is still thermal expansion in the thickness of the panel described caused by changed in the temperature of the environment, which remains unrestricted by fibres. Thermal expansion does also occur but to a much lesser degree compared to the same polymer but with not reinforcing. Unless preventative action is taken, this movement is however sufficient to allow a so-called 'witness' of the fibre reinforcement to show in the surface aspect. A 'witness' is seen when the panel has expanded and the paint moved with it, but the paint returns to it original position on cooling. This effect can leave a 'witness' of the fibres in the paint finish. It will be appreciate by the man skilled in the art that a paint finish for a car will be subjected to standard climatic cycle tests before it is used on a car and such test will demonstrate this effect.

However, under the present example, a primer finish is also applied (step 324) to the panel such that a layer of less flexible skin that does not move with the panel forms. The primer according to one embodiment of the present invention incorporates a hardening lacquer.

The resulting primed panel is left to dry before being painted with a coloured paint (step 326). Once this has dried, a topcoat comprising a clear gloss overcoat is applied (step 328).

It will be appreciated the example described herein has particular application where large horizontal panels such as bonnets, roofs and boots as these are subjected to a high thermal load from the sun.

In alternative embodiments, which are to be considered within the scope of the present invention, there may be only three layers- the outer layers comprising woven fibre, bi-direction fibre or 'quasi-isotropic' (fibres which run lengthwise, across and on the diagonal) fibre reinforcement, with the core layer as described above. Alternatively, the core layer may not comprise natural polypropylene but may instead comprise 'random fibre' reinforced polypropylene or may be a recycled material, (for example, a ground-up car part such as a bumper) with impurities such as paint flecks. Indeed, the layers of the composite may comprise a thermoplastic other than polypropylene, although the skilled person will appreciate that the choice of polymer will have an affect on the process as a whole- treatment temperatures will be different, some of the method steps (in particular, treating the panel prior to painting) will not be necessary.

Further, pre-treating a moulded part before painting may not be essential for some polymers.

The method may comprise additional 'in-mould' processes, such as coating with a decorative foil, a facing fabric or an electric circuit.

The fact that the panel has a feature comprising a discontinuation in curvature of the surface may be an optional feature to the invention.

CLAIMS

1. A method of producing a panel having at least one feature comprising a discontinuation in curvature of surface in the surface, the method comprising the steps of:

providing a first reinforced layer of long and/or continuous parallel fibre reinforced thermoplastic of a first polymer;

providing a core layer of thermoplastic of a second polymer which is compatible with the first polymer;

providing a second reinforced layer of long or continuous parallel fibre reinforced thermoplastic of the first polymer;

stacking the layers such that the reinforced layers are separated by the core layer;

introducing the stack into a panel mould and heating the mould to at least the melting point of the predetermined polymer to consolidate the layers and form the panel.

2. A method according to claim 1 in which the core material has at least one of the following: i. roughly 70% by volume of the second polymer and ii. roughly an equal volume as the two reinforced layers.

3. A method of producing a panel according to claim 1 or 2 which further comprises treating the moulded panel with a flame treatment, corona discharge or a plasma gun.

4. A method of producing a panel according to any preceding claim in which are the first and second polymers are the same, or substantially the same polymer.

5. A method of producing a panel according to any preceding claim in which the moulding is performed in a vacuum consolidation mould or a stamp-press mould.

6. A method of producing a panel according to any preceding claim in which at least a portion of the mould is heated.

7. A method of producing a panel according to claim 6 in which at least a tooling surface intended to mould a side of the panel to be painted is heated.

8. A method of producing a panel according to any preceding claim which further comprises cooling at least a portion of the mould.

9. A method of producing a panel according to claim 8 in which only the tooling surface is cooled.

10. A method of producing a panel according to any preceding claim which comprises providing the core layer such that it comprises approximately 50% of the depth of the panel.

11. A method of producing a panel according to any preceding claim comprises providing more than two reinforced layers.

12. A method of producing a panel according to claim 11 which comprises providing two reinforced layers either side of the core layer, wherein the outermost layers incorporate fibres in a first direction and the inner reinforced layers incorporated fibres in a second direction, orthogonal to the first and the core is disposed between the inner reinforced layers.

13. A method of producing a panel according to any preceding claim in which the reinforcing layer(s) to one side of the core layer are arranged to substantially mirror the reinforcing layer(s) to the other side of the core.

14. A method of producing a panel according to any preceding claim which comprises providing the reinforced layer(s) with fibres lying in two orthogonal directions and/or the layer(s) additionally comprise fibres lying across the diagonal in a Quasi isotropic arrangement.

15. A method of producing a panel according to claim 14 which comprises weaving together the fibres before incorporating them into a layer.

16. A method of producing a panel according to any preceding claim which comprises providing the core layer with reinforcing fibres.

17. A method of producing a panel according to any preceding claim in which the core is made up of recycled material, industrial regrind or end of use recycling.

18. A method of producing a panel according to any preceding claim which comprises using the panel in the manufacture of a vehicle.

19. A panel formed of laminate composite material comprising a core of thermoplastic comprising a predetermined polymer by volume and cover layers comprising long fibre reinforced thermoplastic of the predetermined polymer, wherein the long fibres are oriented parallel to the surface of the cover layers and the inner layer is at least partly covered on each surface by a cover layer, wherein the layers have been consolidated in a heated mould.

20. A panel according to claim 19 in which the stack comprises at least three layers, the two outer layers comprising a long or continuous fibre reinforced thermoplastic of the common polymer and at least one inner layer comprising an unreinforced thermoplastic of the predetermined polymer.

21. A panel according to claim 19 or 20 in which the core layer comprises at least one of 70% by volume of the predetermined polymer and 50% by volume of the panel.

22. A method of painting a fibre reinforced plastic panel comprising applying a first layer of primer paint which incorporates a lacquer, allowing the first layer to form a rigid coating and applying a second layer of paint.

23. A method of painting a fibre reinforced plastic panel according to claim 22 in which the plastic comprises a hybrid structure of a plurality of composite plastics materials.

24. A method of painting a fibre reinforced plastic panel according to claim 22 or 23 which further comprises providing the second layer of paint as a coloured layer.

25. A method of painting a fibre reinforced plastic panel according to any of claims 21 to 24 which further comprises providing a layer of clear gloss coat.

26. A method of producing a panel substantially as described herein and as illustrated in the accompanying Figures 1 to 3.

27. A panel substantially as described herein and as illustrated in the accompanying Figures 1 to 3.

28. A composite plastic substantially as described herein and as illustrated in the accompanying Figures 1 to 3.

29. A method of painting a fibre reinforced plastic panel substantially as described herein and as illustrated in the accompanying Figures 1 to 3.

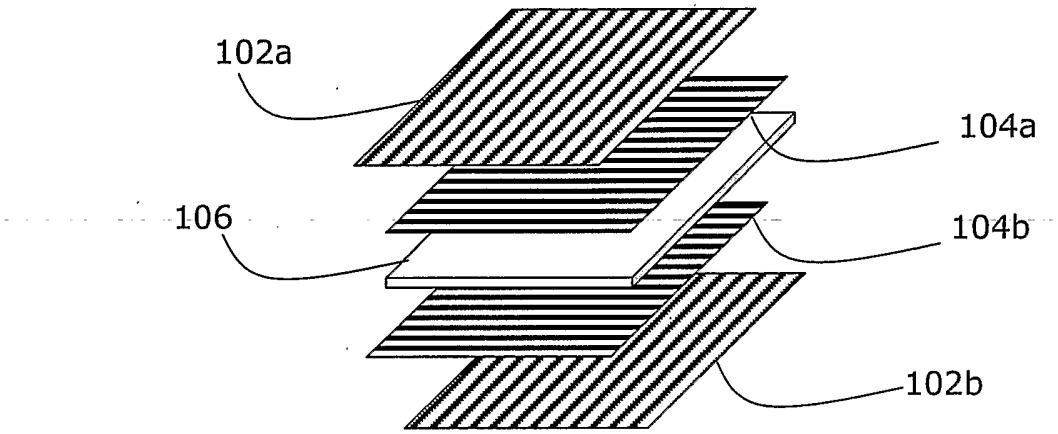

Fig. 1a

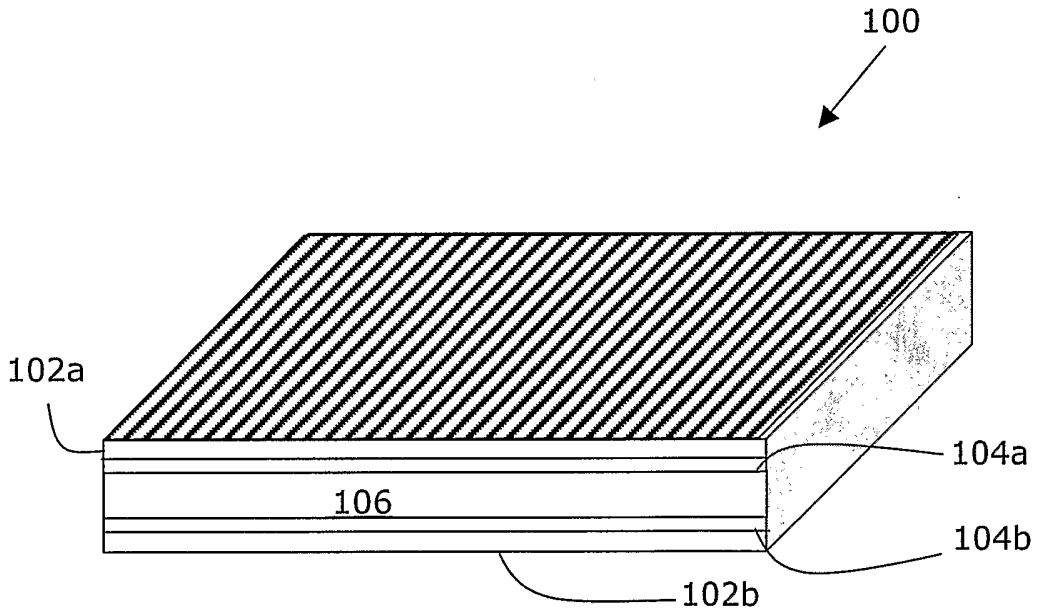

Fig. 1b

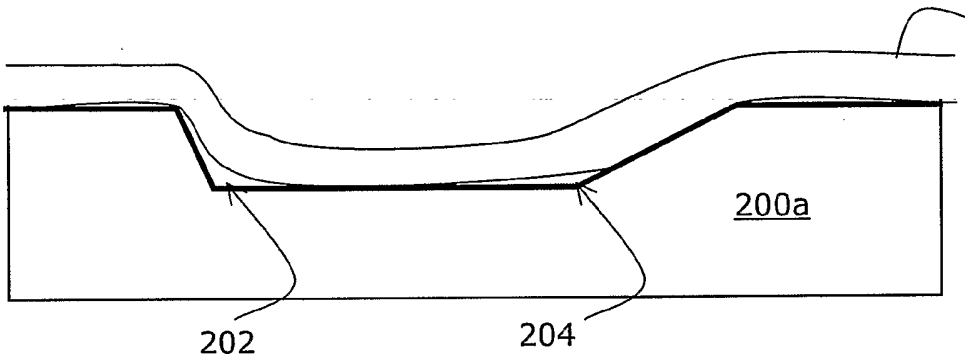

Fig. 2a
Prior Art

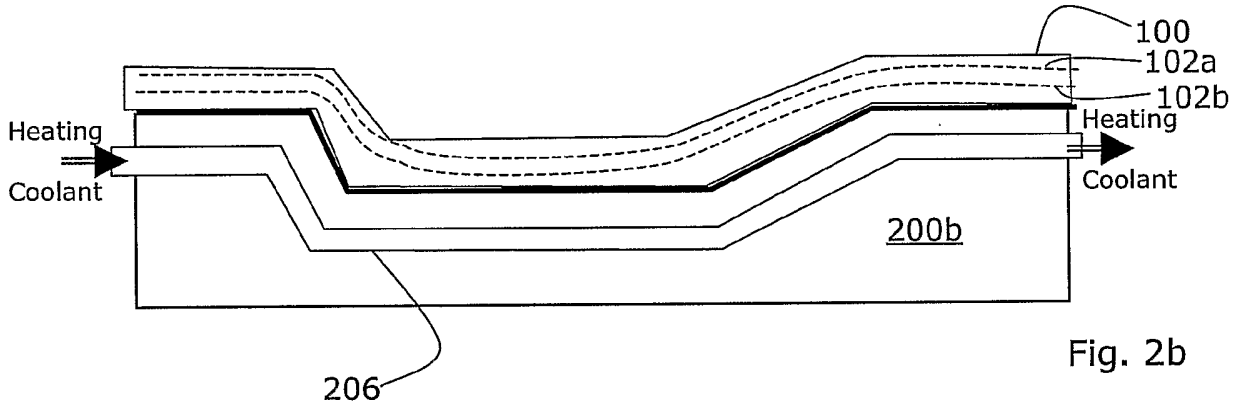

Fig. 2b

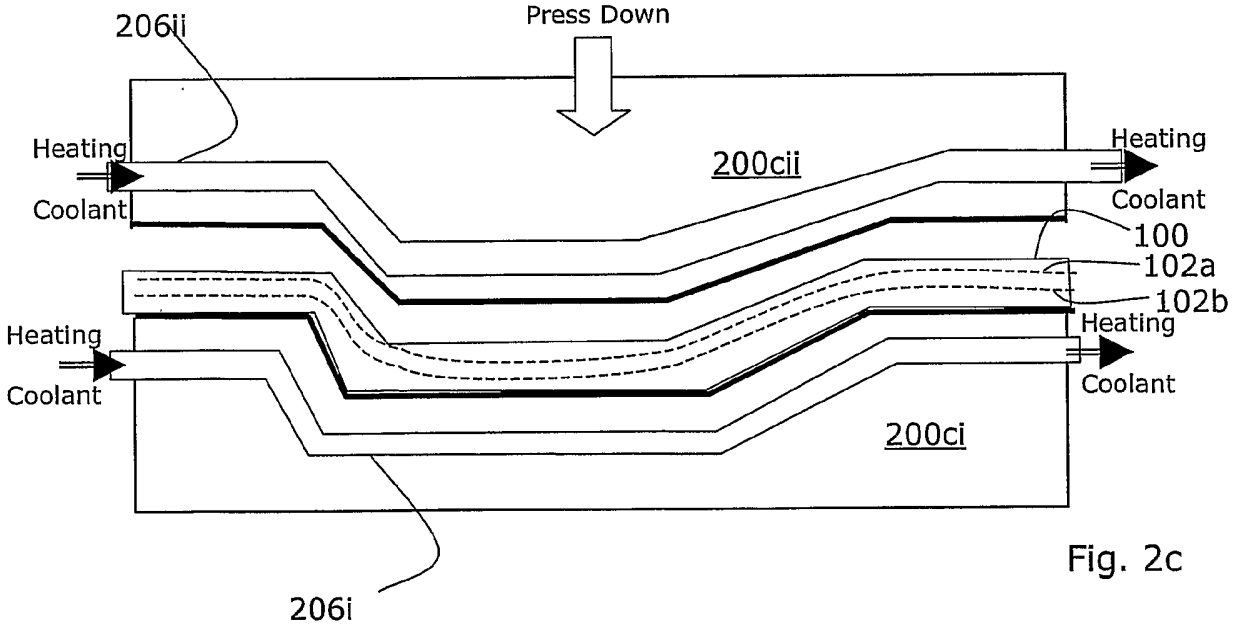

Fig. 2c

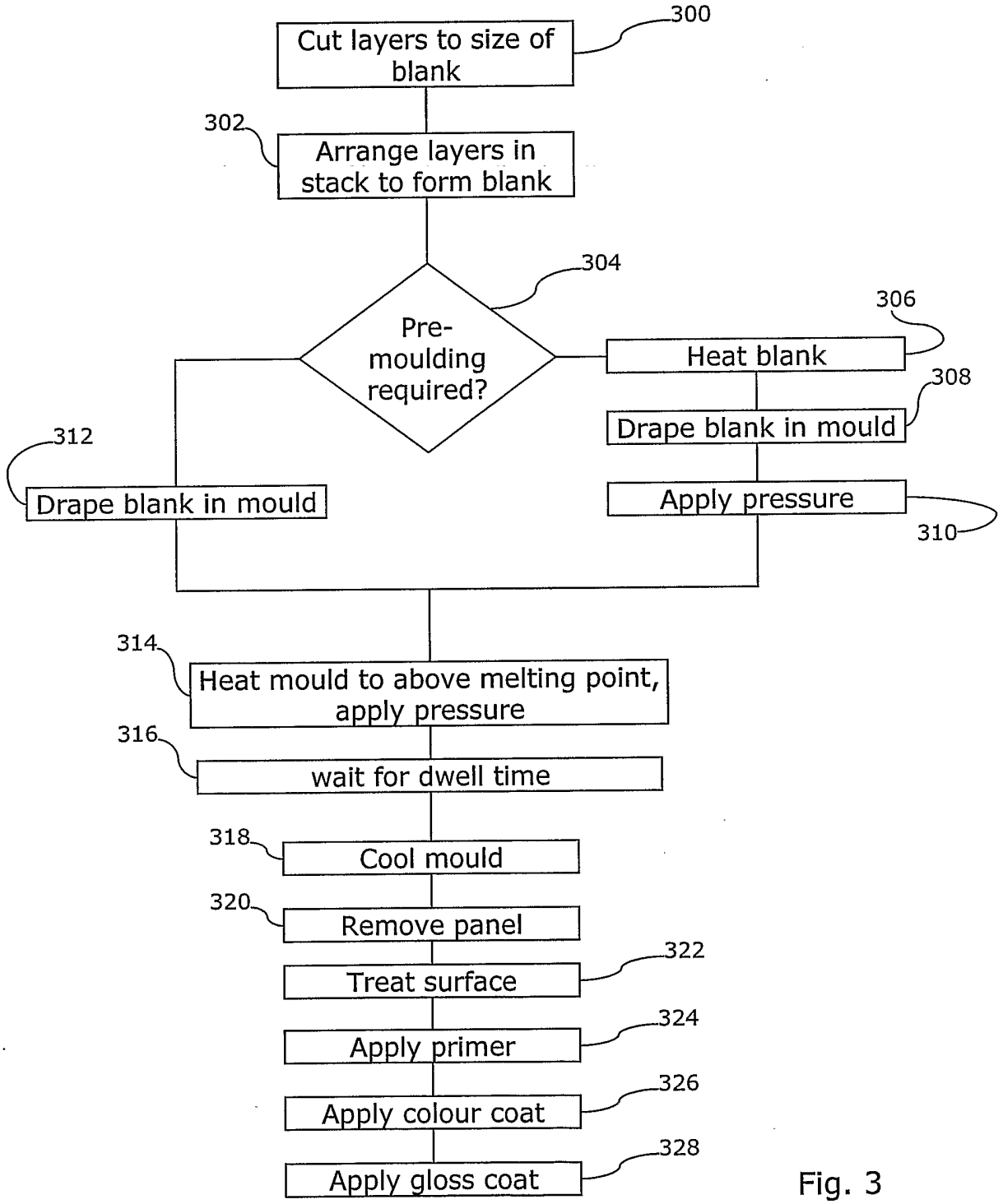
Cut layers to size of blank
300
Arrange layers in stack to form blank
302
Pre-moulding required?
304
Heat blank
306
Drape blank in mould
308
Apply pressure
310
Drape blank in mould
312
Heat mould to above melting point, apply pressure
314
wait for dwell time
316
Cool mould
318
Remove panel
320
Treat surface
322
Apply primer
324
Apply colour coat
326
Apply gloss coat
328

Fig. 3

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International Application No
PCT/GB2005/002857

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER
B32B27/32 B29C70/46

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)
B32B B29C

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practical, search terms used)
EPO-Internal, WPI Data

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category °	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	US 5 866 051 A (LIN ET AL) 2 February 1999 (1999-02-02) column 5, lines 35-62; figure 1; example 1	1-21
X	WO 02/090089 A (STRUCTURAL POLYMER SYSTEMS LIMITED; JONES, DANIEL, THOMAS) 14 November 2002 (2002-11-14) page 12, line 23 - page 13, line 24 page 14, lines 5-11	1-21
X	EP 0 695 626 A (TEIJIN LIMITED) 7 February 1996 (1996-02-07) page 3, lines 36,37 page 3, line 46 page 4, lines 15-41 page 11, lines 42-47	1-21

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[X] Further documents are listed in the continuation of box C.

[X] Patent family members are listed in annex.

° Special categories of cited documents :

"A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance

"E" earlier document but published on or after the international filing date

"L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)

"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means

"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed

"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention

"X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone

"Y" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art.

"&" document member of the same patent family

Date of the actual completion of the international search	Date of mailing of the international search report
30 September 2005	24. 11. 2005

Name and mailing address of the ISA	Authorized officer
European Patent Office, P.B. 5818 Patentlaan 2 NL - 2280 HV Rijswijk Tel. (+31-70) 340-2040, Tx. 31 651 epo nl, Fax: (+31-70) 340-3016	Schweissguth, M

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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International Application No
PCT/GB2005/002857

C.(Continuation) DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category °	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	EP 0 648 602 A (HOOVER UNIVERSAL INC) 19 April 1995 (1995-04-19) page 3, line 57 - page 4, line 29 column 4, lines 31-38	1-21
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Y	DE 102 37 694 A1 (SAI AUTOMOTIVE SAL GMBH) 4 March 2004 (2004-03-04) paragraphs [0010], [0018]	1-21
X	WO 00/27632 A (STRUCTURAL POLYMER SYSTEMS LIMITED; NESS, DEREK; CRONK, PETER) 18 May 2000 (2000-05-18) page 3, line 13 - page 4, line 32	1-21

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/GB2005/002857

Box II Observations where certain claims were found unsearchable (Continuation of item 2 of first sheet)

This International Search Report has not been established in respect of certain claims under Article 17(2)(a) for the following reasons:

1. [X] Claims Nos.:
because they relate to subject matter not required to be searched by this Authority, namely:

Claims 26 to 29 do refer to the Figures of the application. Such reference lacks clarity since the essential features are not diosclosed.

2. [X] Claims Nos.: 26-29
because they relate to parts of the International Application that do not comply with the prescribed requirements to such an extent that no meaningful International Search can be carried out, specifically:

see FURTHER INFORMATION sheet PCT/ISA/210

3. [ ] Claims Nos.:
because they are dependent claims and are not drafted in accordance with the second and third sentences of Rule 6.4(a).

Box III Observations where unity of invention is lacking (Continuation of item 3 of first sheet)

This International Searching Authority found multiple inventions in this international application, as follows:

see additional sheet

1. [ ] As all required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant, this International Search Report covers all searchable claims.

2. [ ] As all searchable claims could be searched without effort justifying an additional fee, this Authority did not invite payment of any additional fee.

3. [ ] As only some of the required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant, this International Search Report covers only those claims for which fees were paid, specifically claims Nos.:

4. [X] No required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant. Consequently, this International Search Report is restricted to the invention first mentioned in the claims; it is covered by claims Nos.:

1-21

Remark on Protest

[ ] The additional search fees were accompanied by the applicant's protest.

[ ] No protest accompanied the payment of additional search fees.

FURTHER INFORMATION CONTINUED FROM PCT/ISA/ 210

This International Searching Authority found multiple (groups of) inventions in this international application, as follows:

1. claims: 1-21

The subject-matter of claims 1 to 21 refers to a panel headliner having a core layer and two reinforcement layers. The at least three layers are consolidated in order to impregnate the fibre layers with the thermoplastic from the middle layer.
Accordingly, the technical problem is related to the provision of a thermoplastic layered structure allowing a discontinuity in the curvature and a structure which may be recycled.
The problem is solved with the composite and the method of its preparation according to claims 1 and 19.

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2. claims: 22-25

The subject-matter of claims 22 to 26 is directed to a painted fibre reinforced plastic panel. Firstly, the order of layers is not comparable to the order of layers according to the first alleged invention.
Secondly, the feature "paint" includes mainly thermosetting polymers which is in contrast to the thermoplastic polymers according to the first alleged invention.
Thirdly, the technical problem of thermocompression including the provision of a discontinuity of curvature is not addressed according to claims 22 to 25.
Therefore, the objective technical problem is different from the problem according to claims 1 to 21. Claims 22 to 25 aim solely in the provision of a painted laminate.

FURTHER INFORMATION CONTINUED FROM PCT/ISA/ 210

Continuation of Box II.1

Claims 26 to 29 do refer to the Figures of the application. Such reference lacks clarity since the essential features are not diosclosed.

Continuation of Box II.2

Claims Nos.: 26-29

Claims 26 to 29 do refer to the Figures of the application. Such reference lacks clarity since the essential features are not diosclosed.

The applicant's attention is drawn to the fact that claims relating to inventions in respect of which no international search report has been established need not be the subject of an international preliminary examination (Rule 66.1(e) PCT). The applicant is advised that the EPO policy when acting as an International Preliminary Examining Authority is normally not to carry out a preliminary examination on matter which has not been searched. This is the case irrespective of whether or not the claims are amended following receipt of the search report or during any Chapter II procedure. If the application proceeds into the regional phase before the EPO, the applicant is reminded that a search may be carried out during examination before the EPO (see EPO Guideline C-VI, 8.5), should the problems which led to the Article 17(2) declaration be overcome.

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

Information on patent family members

International Application No
PCT/GB2005/002857

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