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(54) **FUEL CELL COOLANT BUBBLE CONTROL**

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

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To mitigate bubble blockage in water passageways (**78, 85**), in or near reactant gas flow field plates (**74, 81**) of fuel cells (**38**), passageways are configured with (a) intersecting polygons, obtuse angles including triangles, trapezoids, or (b) hydrophobic surfaces (**111**), or (c) differing adjacent channels (**127, 128**), or (d) water permeable layers (**93, 115, 116, 119**) adjacent to water channels or hydrophobic/hydrophilic layers (**114, 120**).

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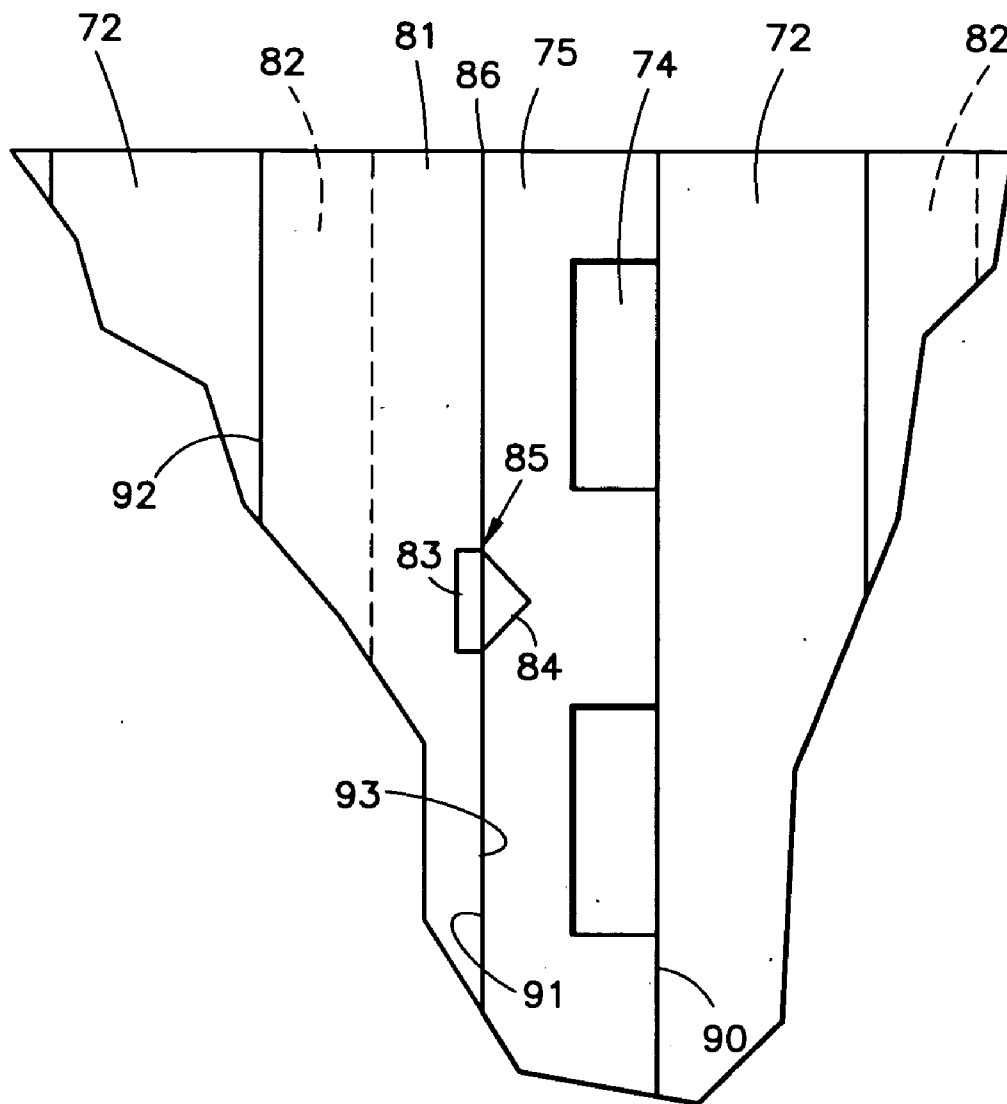


FIG. 1
Prior Art

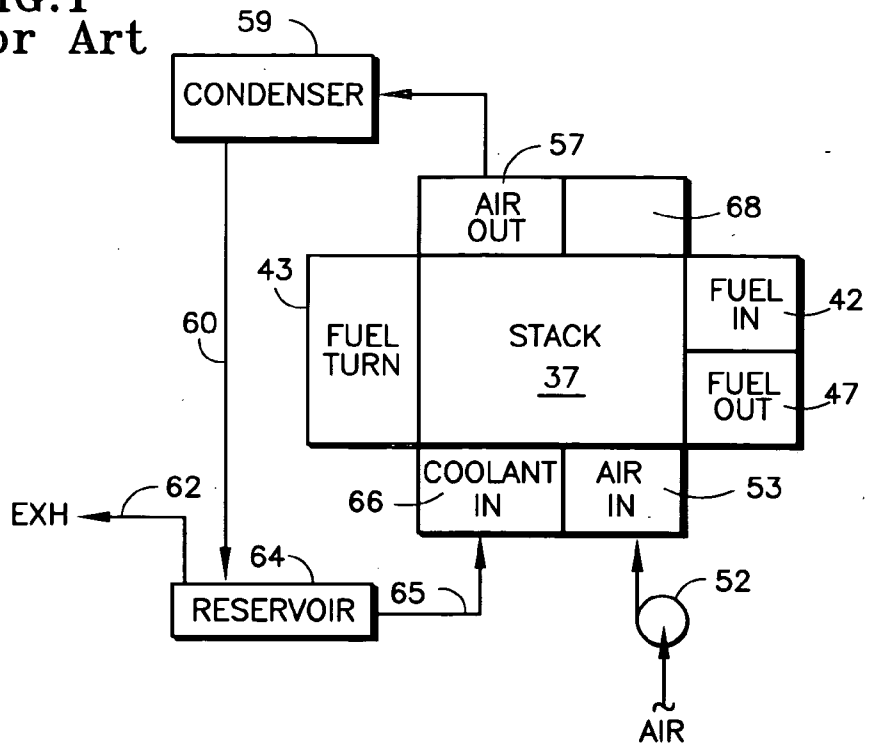
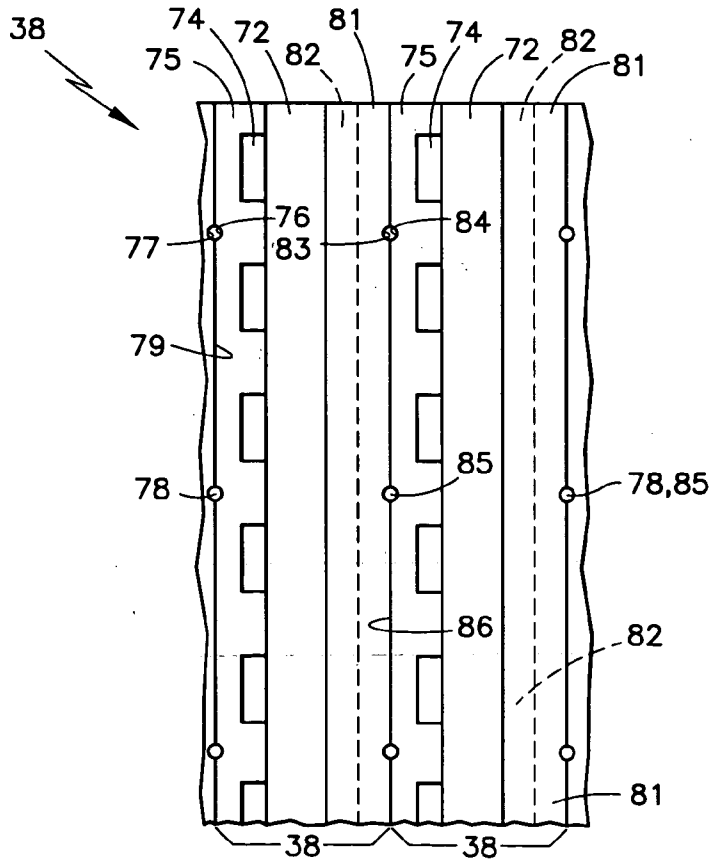
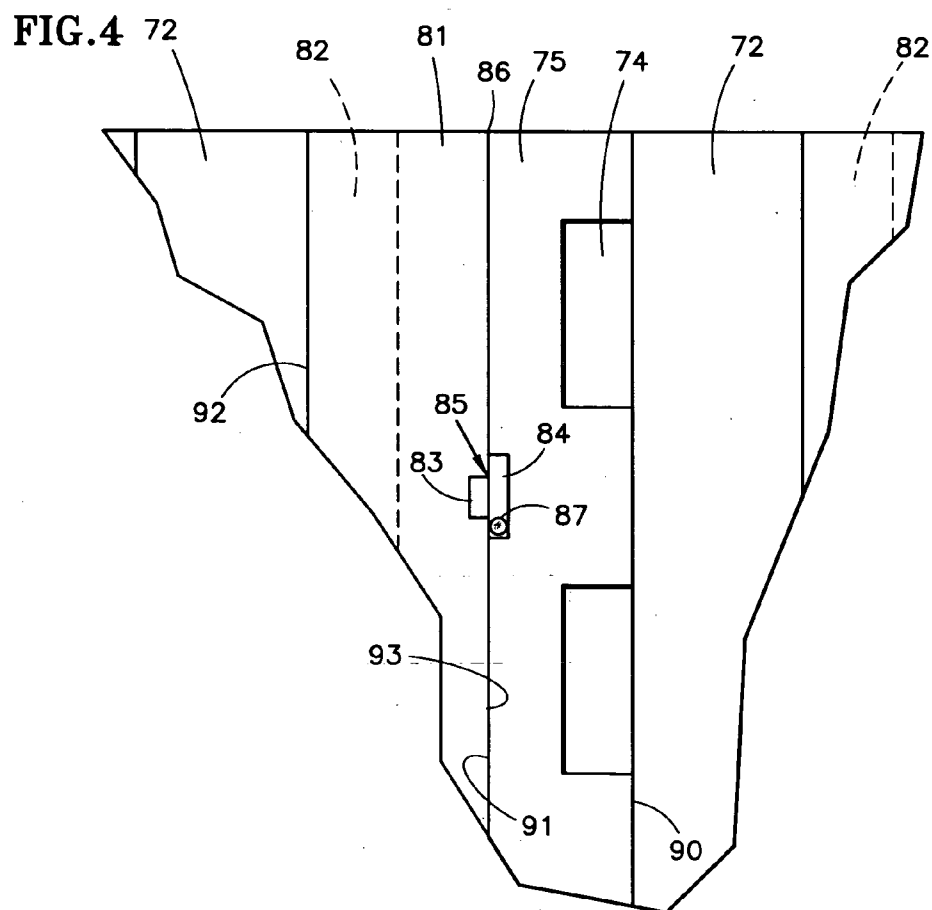
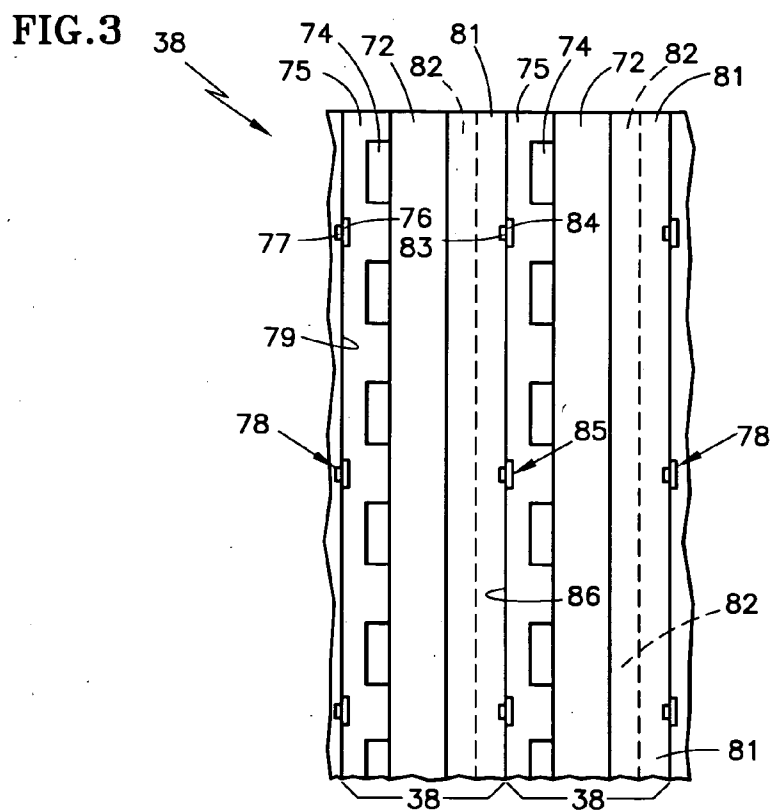
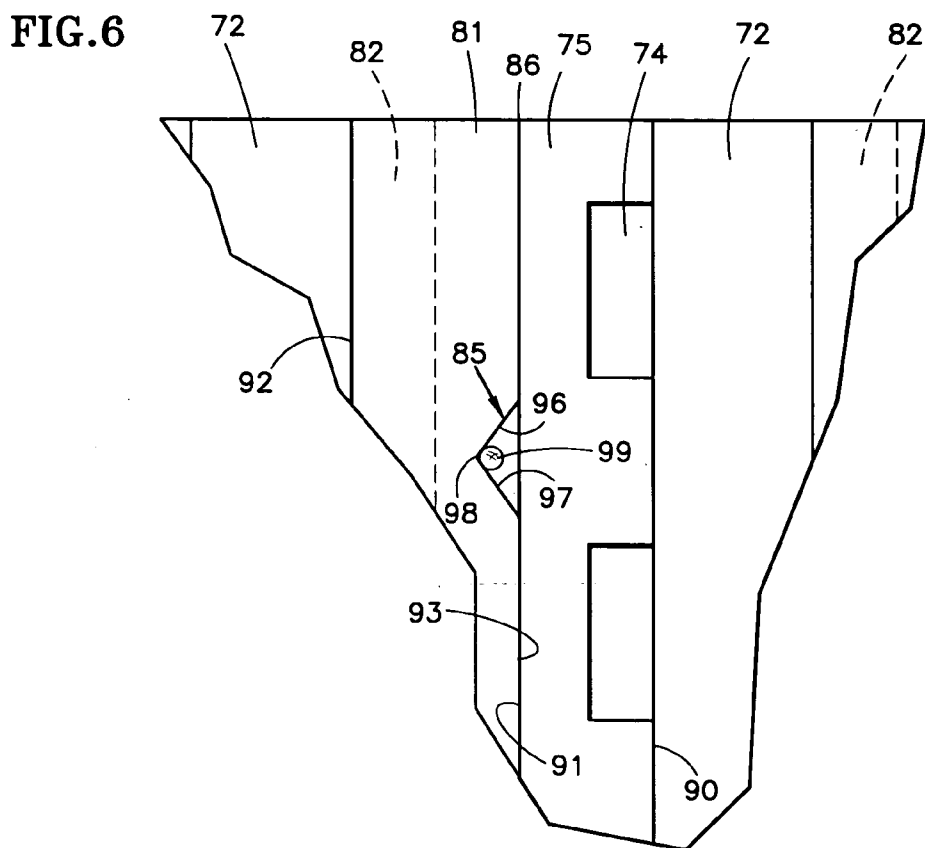
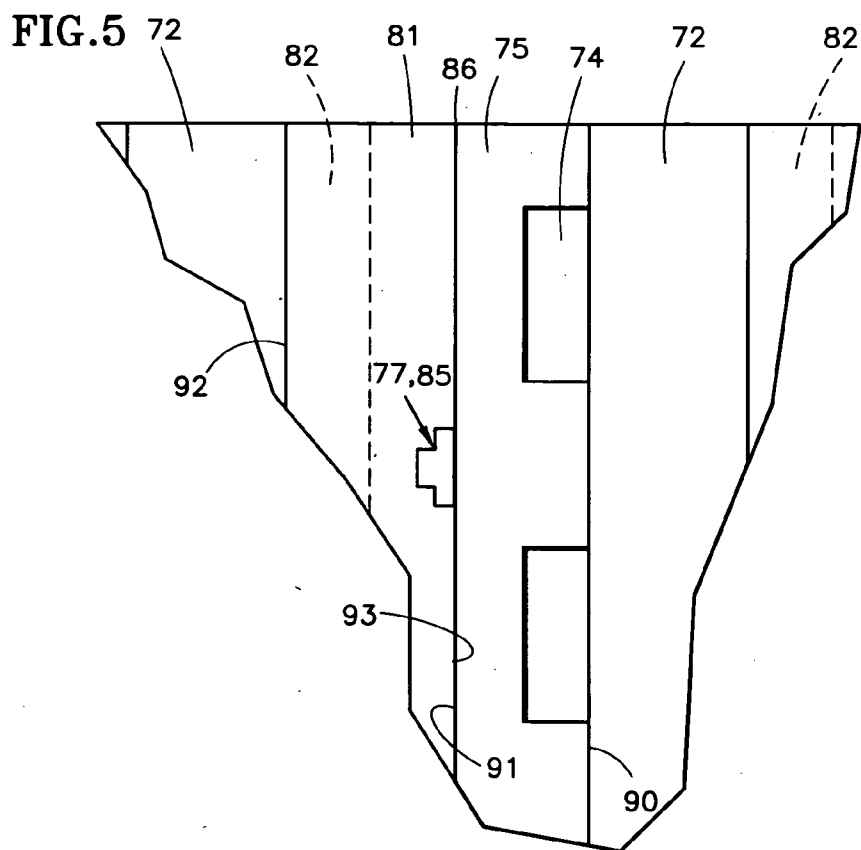
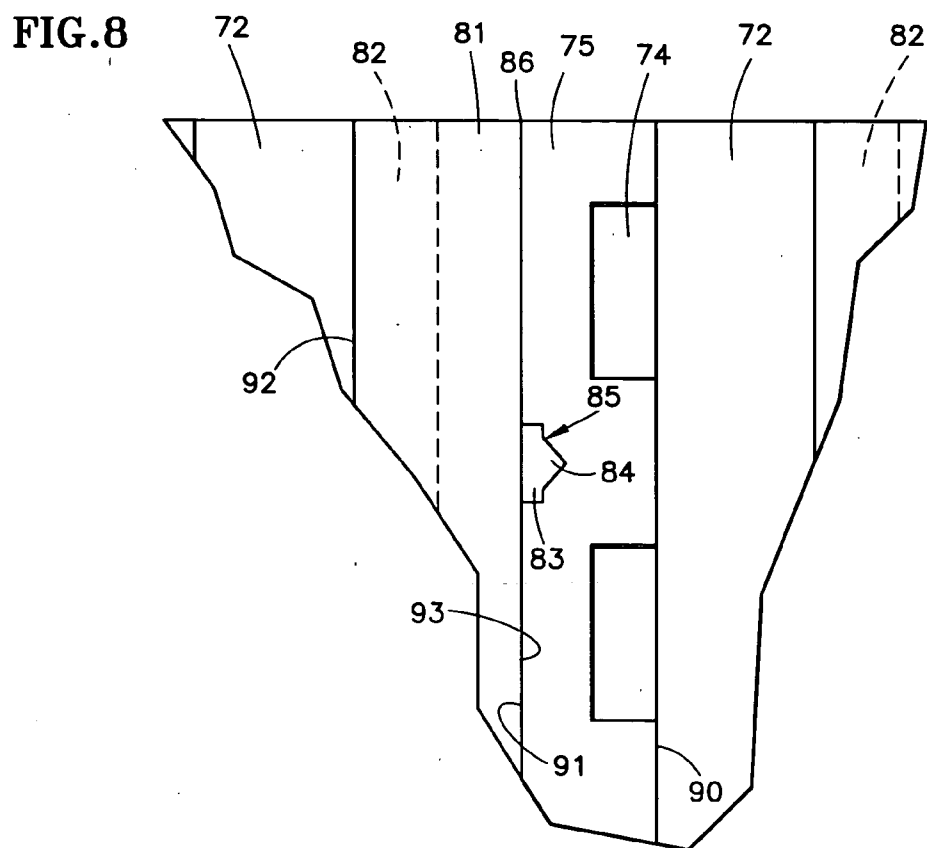
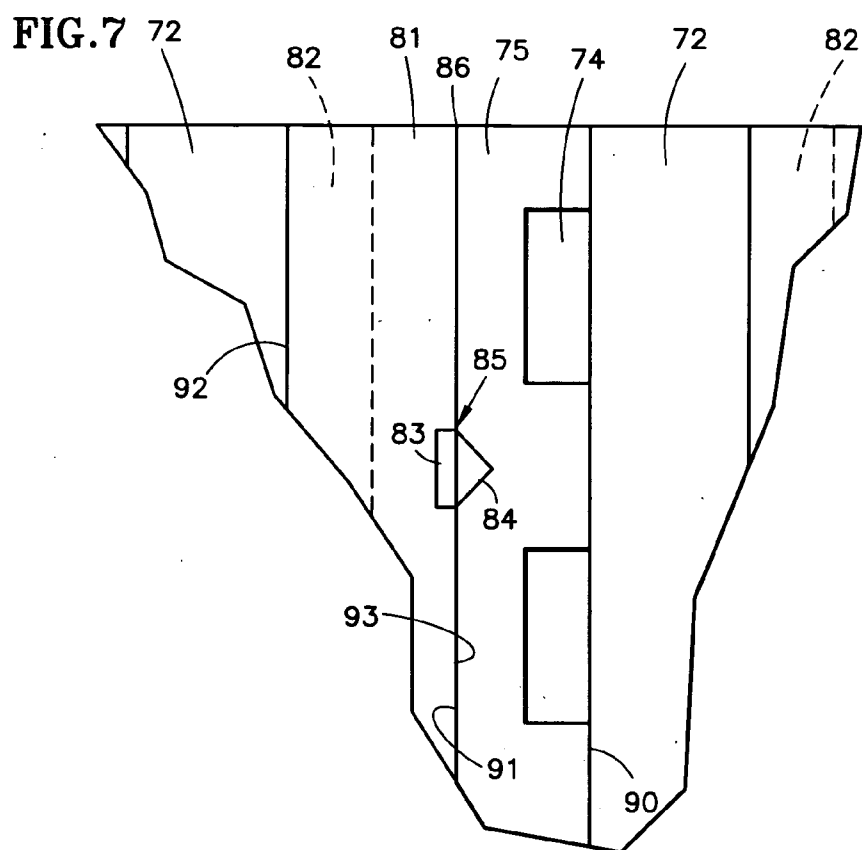


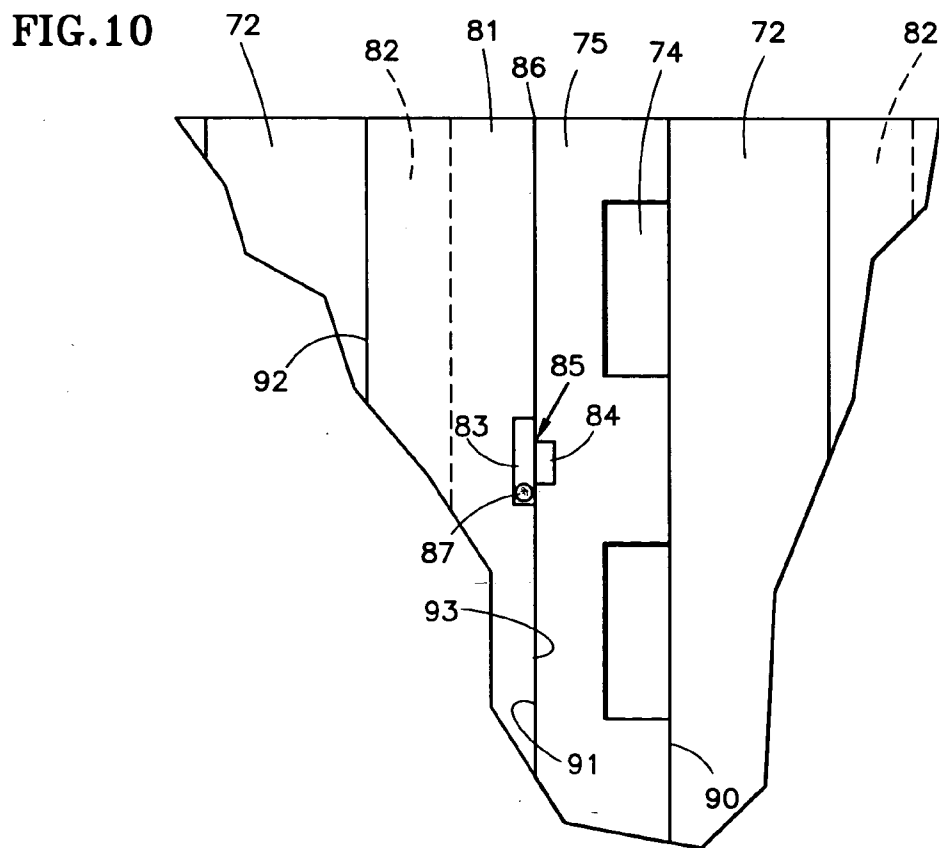
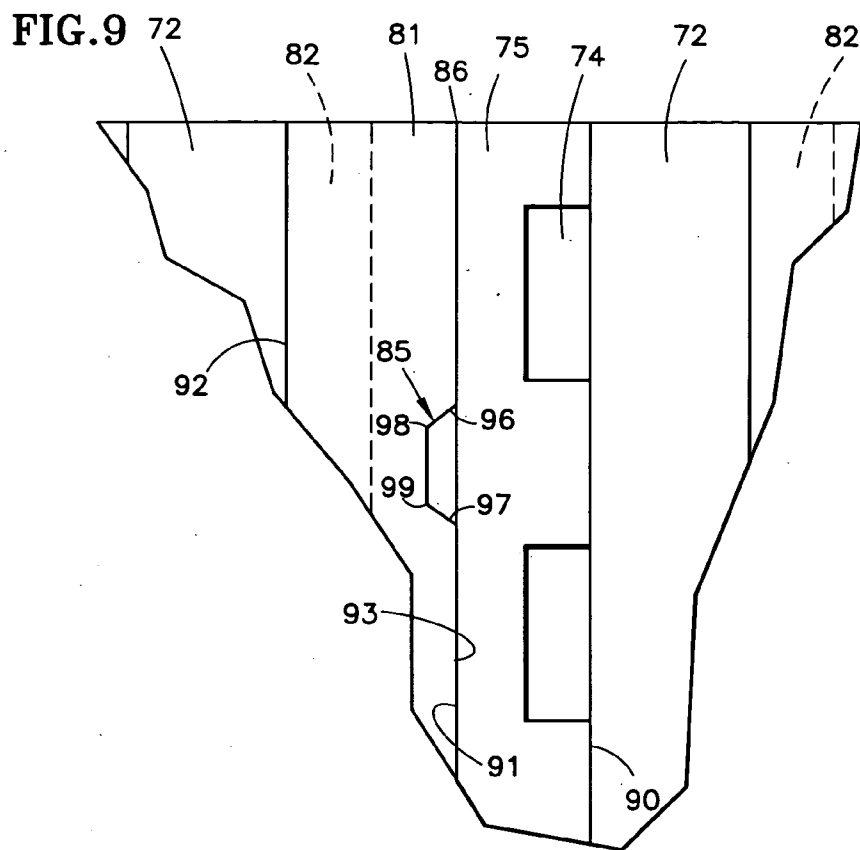
FIG. 2
Prior Art











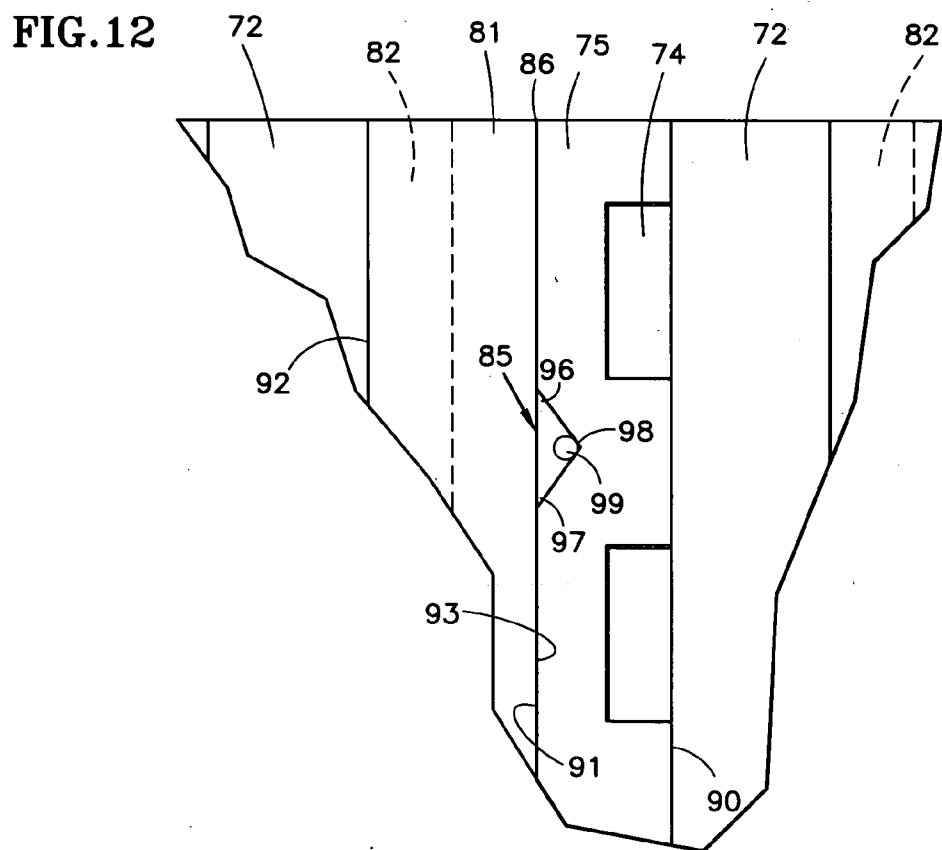
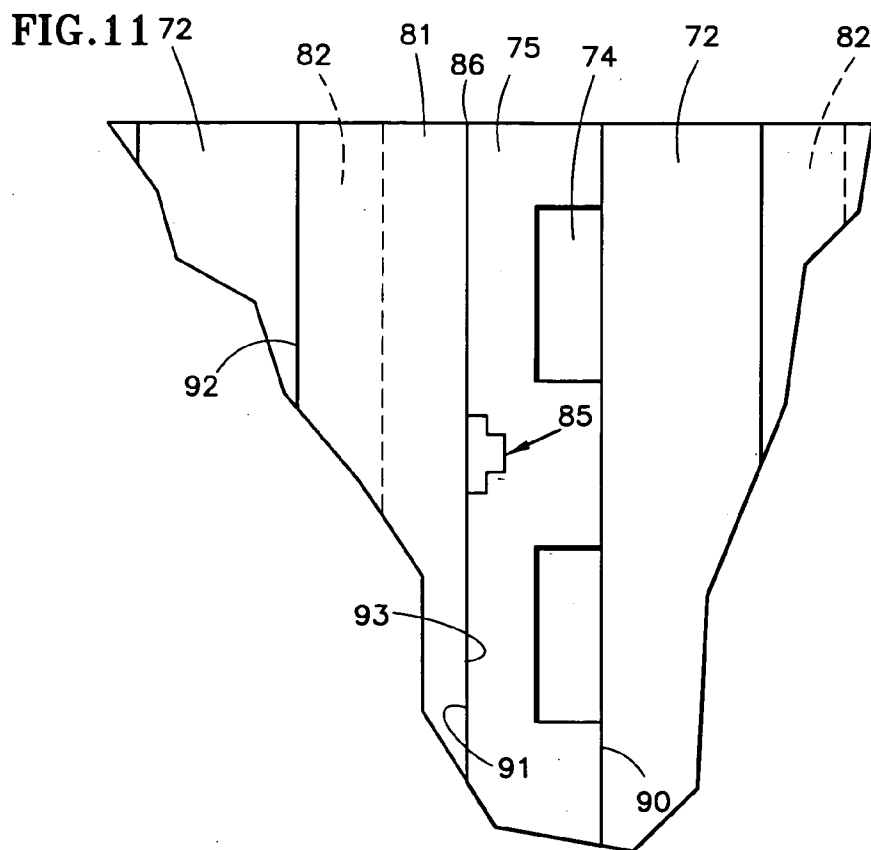


FIG. 13

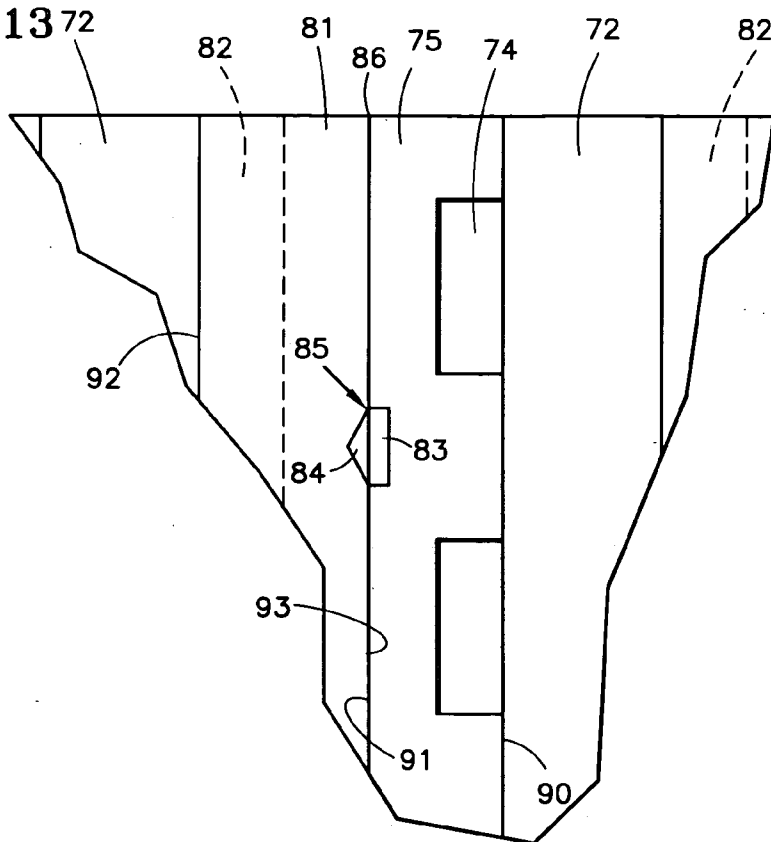


FIG. 14

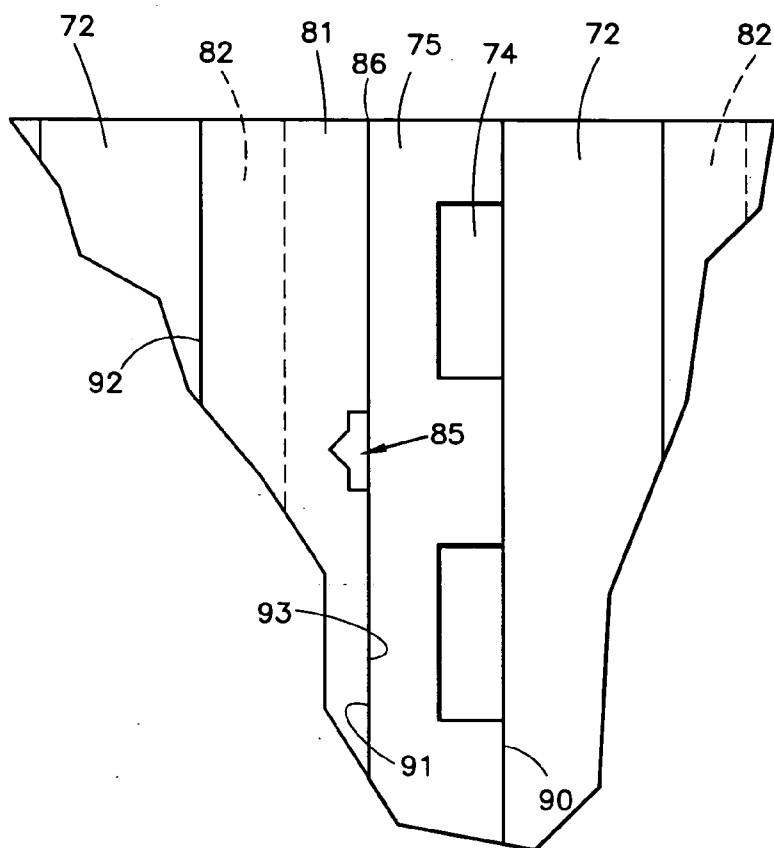


FIG. 15

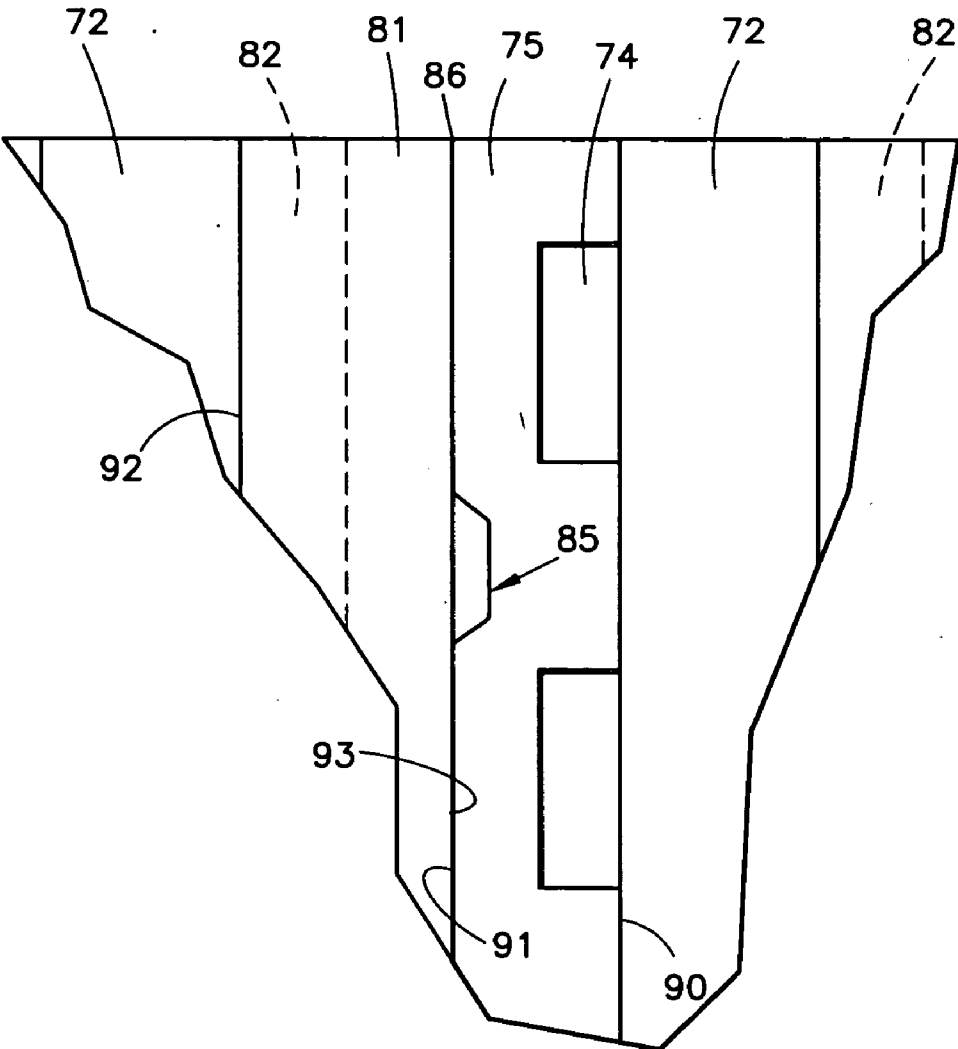


FIG. 16

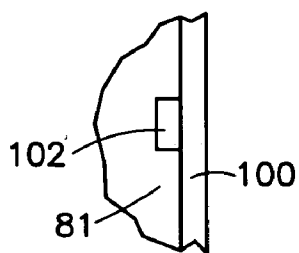
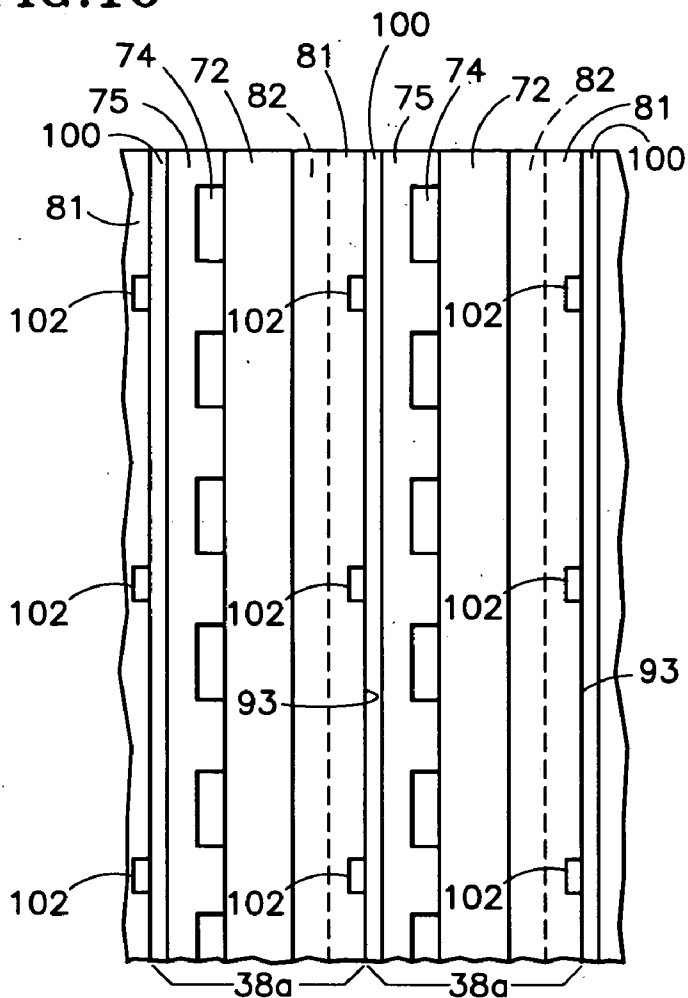


FIG. 17

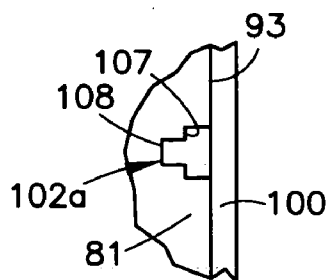


FIG. 18

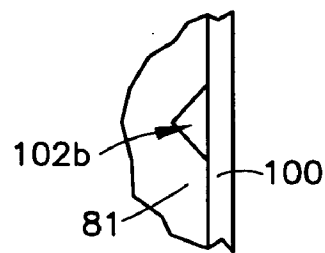


FIG. 19

FIG. 20

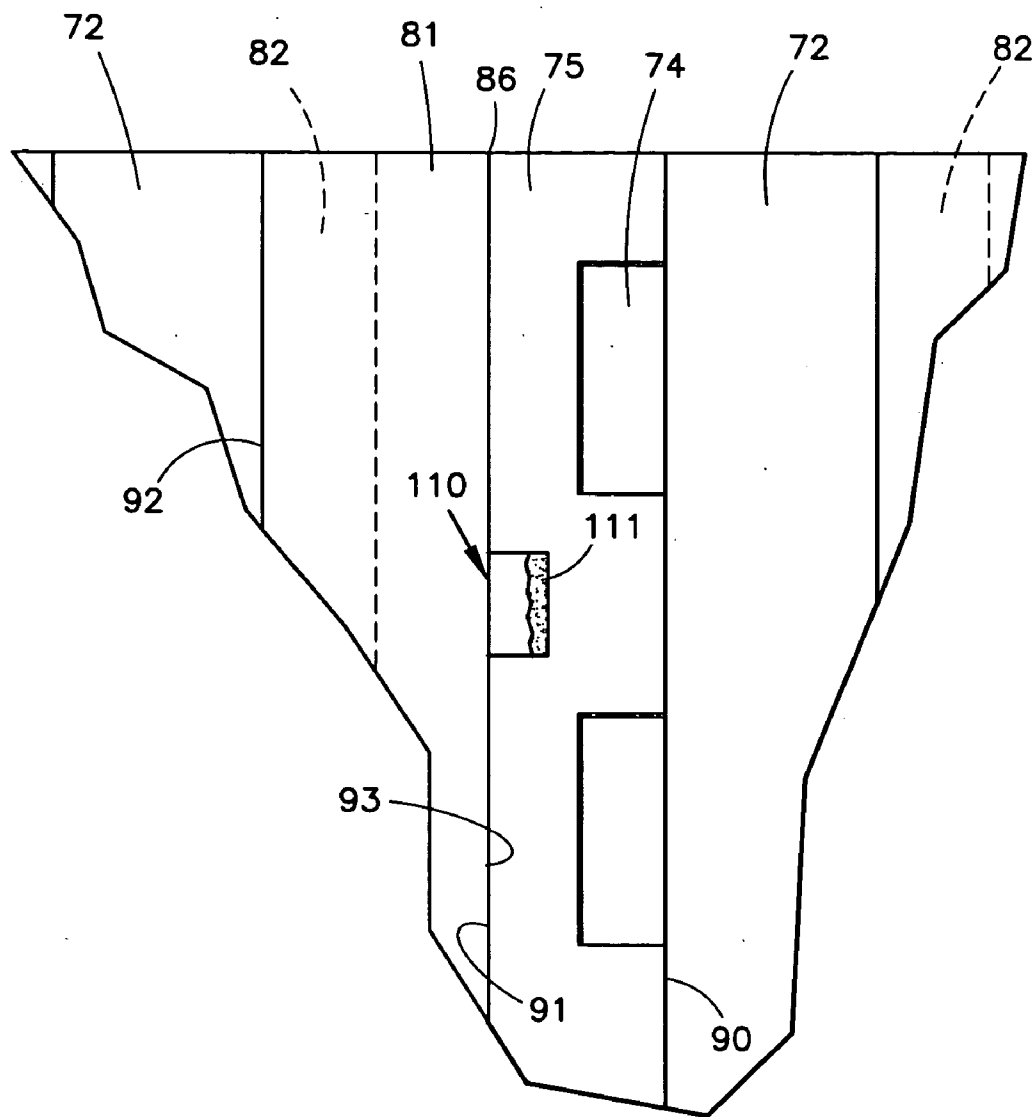


FIG.21

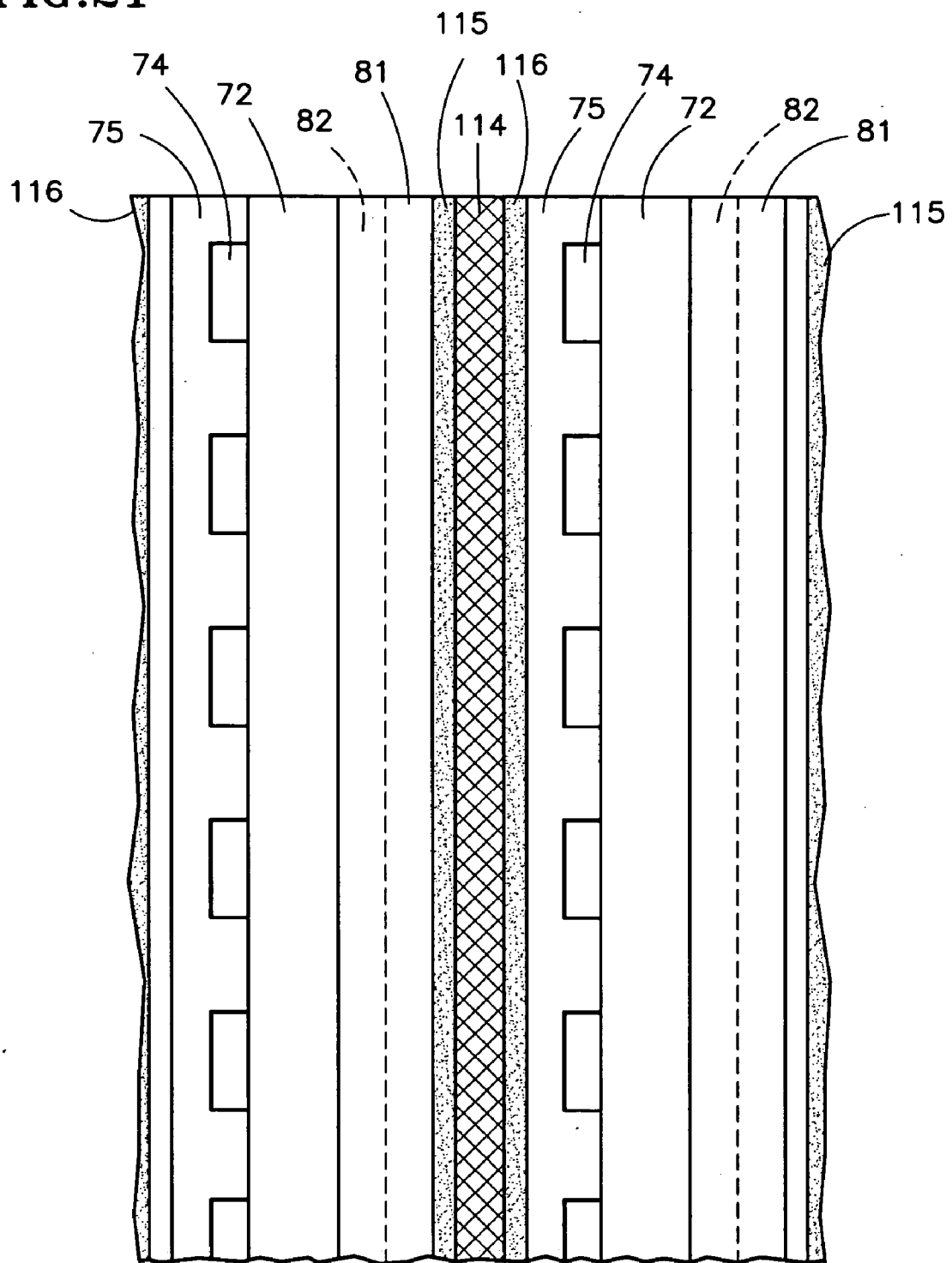
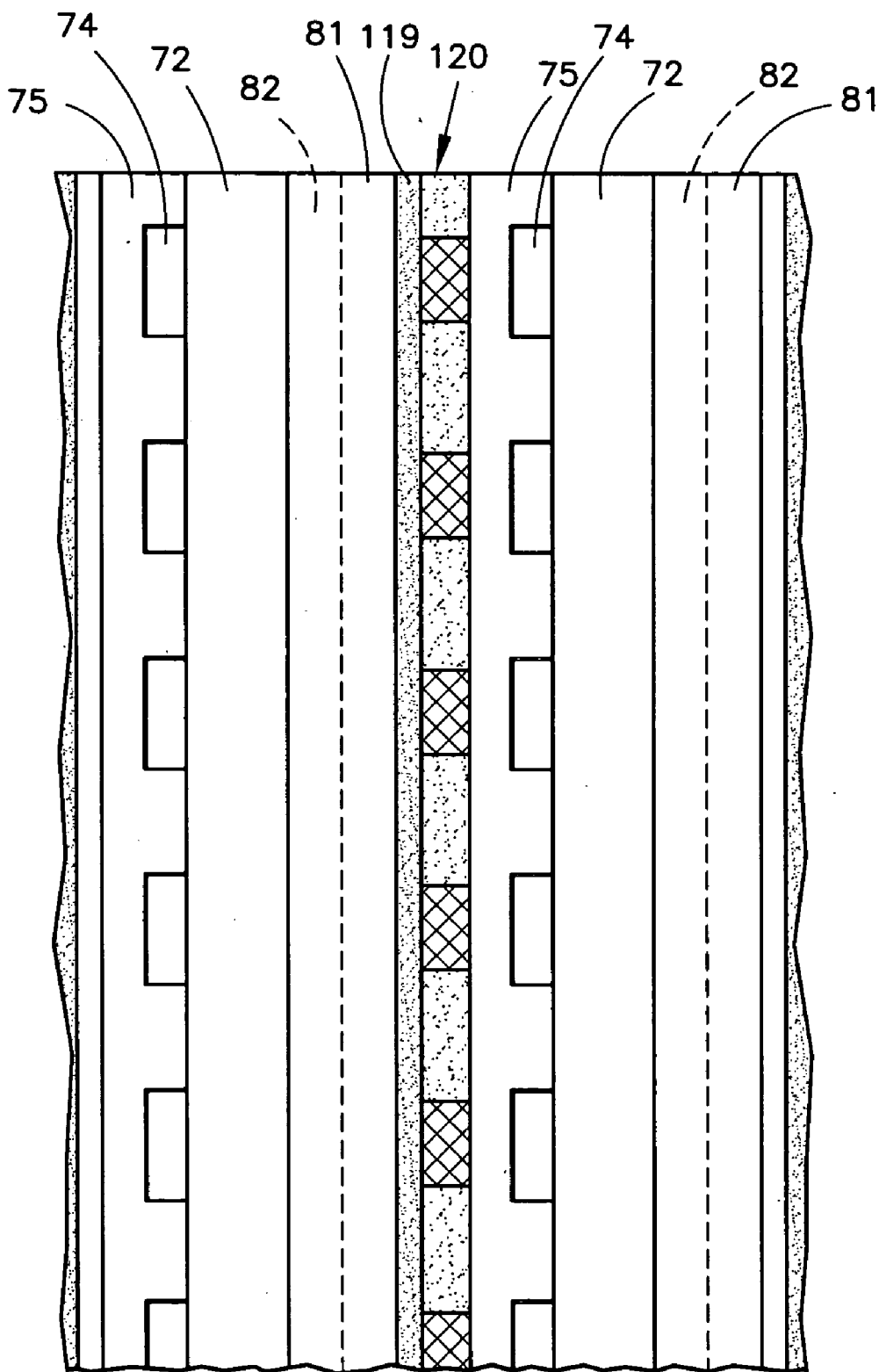


FIG.22



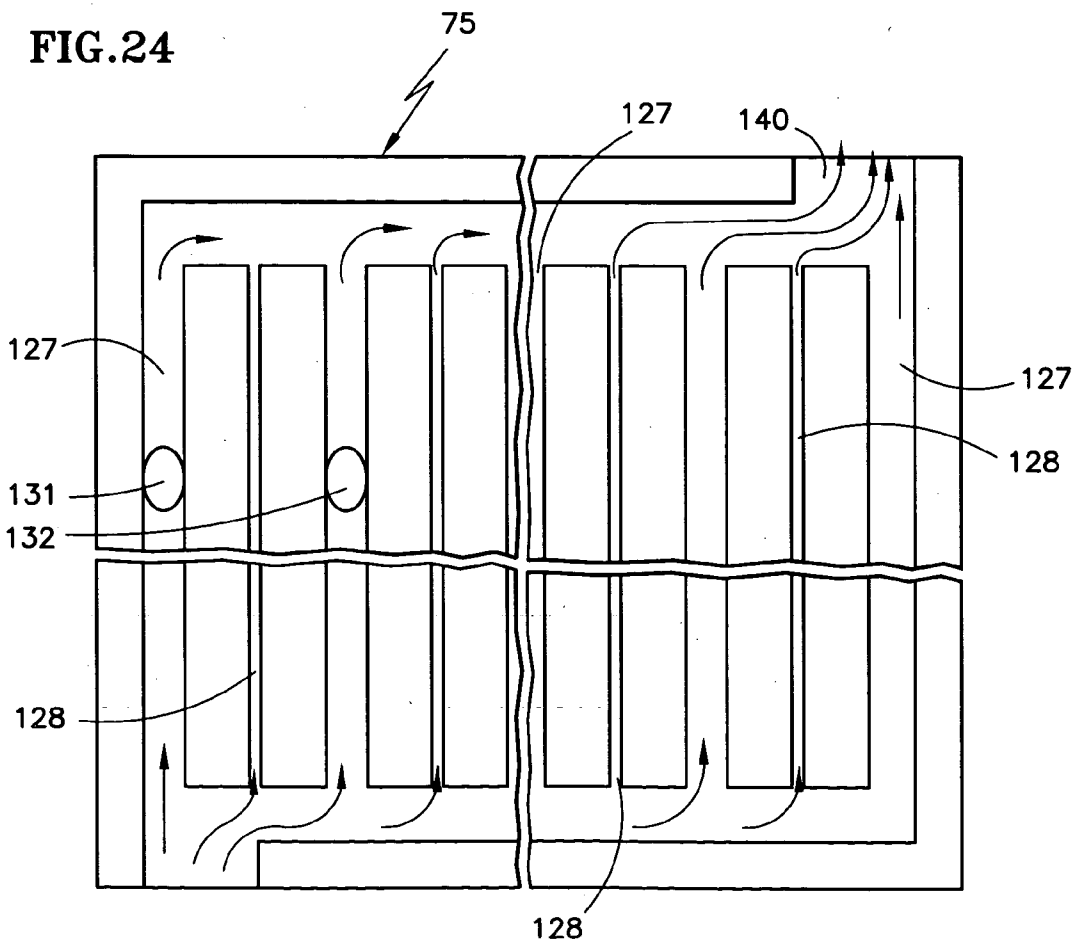
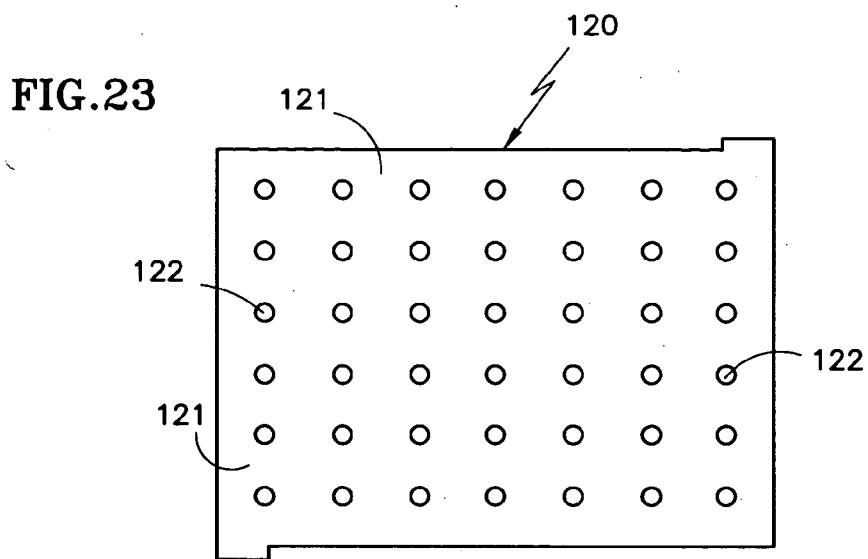


FIG.25

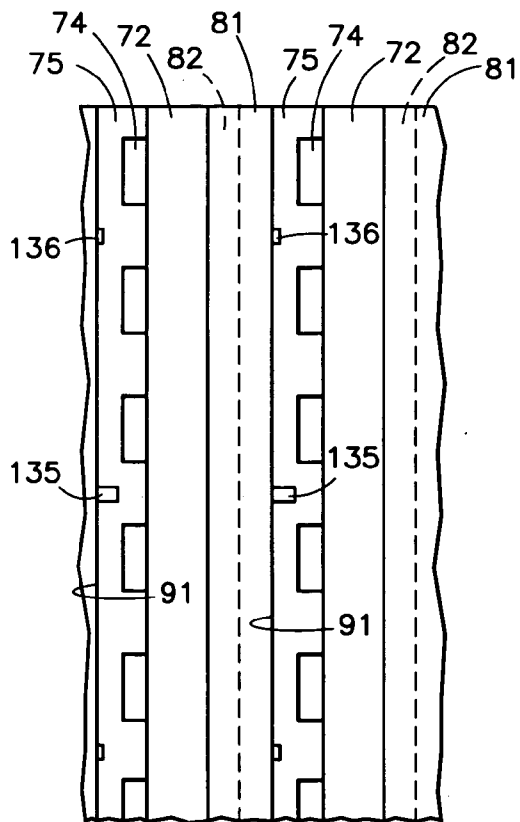
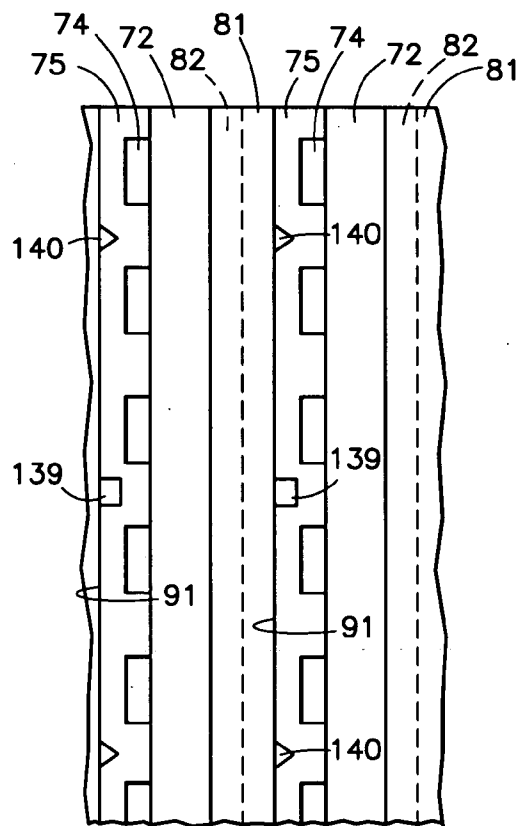


FIG.26



FUEL CELL COOLANT BUBBLE CONTROL

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0001] This invention relates to reducing gas bubble blockage in small, low flow coolant passageways of fuel cells, by means of gas segregating passageway configurations, and/or layers of liquiphilic and liquiphobic material adjacent to reactant gas flow field plates.

BACKGROUND ART

[0002] In order to reduce the exposure of proton exchange membrane (PEM) fuel cells to problems resulting from freezing temperatures, and to reduce reliance on water pumps and other plumbing as accessories to the fuel cells, the total volume of coolant in the fuel cells may be reduced.

[0003] However, in systems which do not use either a coolant pump or a gas venting micropump, and have minimal external water plumbing, the flow rate of coolant in the cells is quite low. If only gas is vented from the coolant passageways, water flow is limited to that which evaporates into the reactant gases. With small passageways and low water flow, gas bubbles may join together (aggregate) and block water flow from large areas of the water channels, sometimes referred to as “gas breakthrough” of the reactant gas flow field plates, thereby causing localized heating and dehydration of the membrane at various spots, resulting in degradation of components and reduced performance.

[0004] Systems employing between-cell coolant plates, which have glycol or other coolants, may have extremely small, in-cell water passageways to provide low flows of water to the anode side of the fuel cells for hydration, with insignificant cooling resulting from the water flow.

DISCLOSURE OF INVENTION

[0005] Aspects of the invention include: assuring coolant flow in small fuel cell coolant passageways; mitigating bubble blockage of coolant flowing at a low flow rate in fuel cell coolant passageways; assisting gas bubbles to flow through coolant passageways from PEM fuel cells; improved venting of gas in PEM fuel cell coolant passageways; reducing or eliminating ingestion of gas into fuel cell coolant passageways; increasing gas flow toward a vent in PEM fuel cells; improved hydration in PEM fuel cells; and improved evaporative cooling in PEM fuel cells.

[0006] Although the ultimate purpose herein is to assure that coolant flow will not be blocked in small coolant passageways of a fuel cell, the removal of coolant-blocking gas bubbles is achieved by addressing the gas flow characteristics of the coolant passageways. This invention is predicated on the realization that gas, typically gas bubbles, may be present in small fuel cell coolant passageways having low coolant flow rates, and that properly designed passageways will assure sufficient flow of coolant to propel gas bubbles through the coolant passageways to the vents, thereby assuring an adequate flow of coolant for operational purposes, rather than blockage of coolant by gas bubbles.

[0007] As coolant flow passageways become smaller, they become more prone to being blocked by bubbles of any gas therein. For a given cross sectional area of a prior art coolant passageway, there is a threshold coolant flow rate at or below which bubbles will block the coolant passageways if

gas is present in the coolant; at coolant flow rates above the threshold, bubbles will be swept along by the flow of coolant, and will not block the coolant passageway.

[0008] As used herein, the term “fuel cell” may mean the apparatus for a complete, operative fuel cell capable of producing electricity from oxidant and fuel reactant gases, or where the context so requires, that term may mean the portion of a fuel cell exclusive of layers that provide coolant to the fuel cells, which may be disposed between adjacent ones of said fuel cell portions.

[0009] As used herein, the term “liquid coolant” means a coolant which is in the liquid state when the fuel cell is operating, even though such liquid coolant may freeze and become a solid when the fuel cell is not operating and the ambient temperature is below the freezing point of the coolant. The coolant may be water or other liquid; herein, “liquiphobic” is defined as having an aversion to the coolant, or lacking an affinity for the coolant, and “liquiphilic” is defined as having an affinity for, or lacking an aversion to, the coolant. The coolant flow assisted by the invention may, in some cases, be used primarily for hydration, with minimal cooling effect. Coolant flow paths and passageways herein are distinct from fuel and oxidant reactant gas flow field channels.

[0010] As used herein, the term “coolant passageways” refers to those portions of the coolant flow path in a fuel cell stack which are substantially coextensive with the planform (the in-plane outline) of the fuel cells.

[0011] According to the present invention, gas tolerant coolant passageways of fuel cells promote flow of coolant within such passageways with or without the presence of gas. In accordance further with the present invention, the gas tolerant configurations are provided along substantially the entire length of coolant passageways, thereby to provide a contiguous gas flow capability from inlets of said passageways to outlets thereof.

[0012] In accordance with one form of the invention, gas tolerant fuel cell coolant passageways are configured to provide portions for which gas has an affinity, that is, a propensity to migrate to such portions and to flow therein, in contrast with other portions of the passageways where coolant may flow without interference from gas, thereby to assure that there is room for coolant to flow without being blocked by gas bubbles.

[0013] According further to the invention, coolant passageways having gas tolerant cross sections may comprise first portions conducive to presence of gas preferentially in comparison with second portions which are less conducive to the presence of gas than the first portions.

[0014] Gas tolerant passageways of the invention may comprise first and second portions within the same passageway: the first portions may be adjacent to a wall of a passageway which is liquiphobic; the first portions may each comprise a corner which subtends more than 90° between two walls of a passageway; the first portions may comprise a portion of a triangle, a trapezoid or other polygon away from acute angular areas thereof; or they may comprise combinations of the foregoing. Gas tolerant passageways of the invention may comprise channels extending from surfaces of reactant gas flow field plates opposite to those surfaces from which reactant gas flow field channels extend.

The gas tolerant coolant passageways may comprise intersecting polygons, or other closed plane figures bounded by lines, at least some of which may not be straight, of the same or a different shape in the same or adjacent flow field plates; for instance, the gas tolerant coolant passageways may comprise two channels, one larger than the other, or of two different cross sections, extending inwardly from one of the fuel reactant gas flow field plates, or one extending from a surface of a reactant gas flow field plate of one fuel cell, and the other extending from a surface of a reactant gas flow field plate of an adjoining fuel cell.

[0015] In further accord with the present invention, gas tolerant passageways of the invention may comprise liquiphilic and/or liquiphobic layers disposed between and extending across substantially the entire planform of the reactant gas flow field plates of adjacent fuel cells. In one form, a layer which has high coolant permeability is disposed between coolant passageways and a reactant gas flow field plate in a proton exchange membrane fuel cell. According to the invention, the highly permeable layer may be adjacent conventional, rectangular coolant channels, or may be adjacent gas tolerant coolant channels, such as T-shaped channels or triangular shaped channels, or otherwise. This form of the invention may be implemented with liquiphilic permeable sheets such as carbon fiber paper treated with tin, in a conventional fashion. Disposing the layer of material with high coolant permeability adjacent the fuel reactant gas flow fields prevents dryout and subsequent gas ingestion toward the membrane through the fuel reactant gas flow field plates, and also reduces the amount of gas ingested into the coolant channels (flowing away from the membrane).

[0016] In another form, the gas tolerant coolant passageways comprise either a sandwich of a liquiphobic layer between liquiphilic layers, or a liquiphilic layer adjacent to a layer which is both liquiphilic and liquiphobic, the layers being disposed between adjacent fuel cells. In one embodiment, the liquiphilic/liquiphobic layer may comprise a layer that is first formed to be entirely liquiphobic, thereafter treated to form non-liquiphobic regions; or the layer may simply have holes through it to conduct coolant.

[0017] Gas tolerant passageways may comprise a combination of first channels having a first cross sectional area or shape and other channels, interspersed with said first channels, having a cross sectional area or shape different than said first cross sectional area or shape. A particular embodiment has channels of a larger cross section interspersed with separate channels of a smaller cross section, in pairs.

[0018] The flow of coolant is the purpose, rather than the flow of gas; however, the control of gas flow is accomplished by affecting the characteristics of the coolant channels with respect to gas: that is, while the coolant flow characteristics at low flow rates are essentially the same in one portion of the gas tolerant coolant passageways as in other portions thereof, the invention provides certain portions of gas tolerant channels for which gas has an affinity. For instance, gas prefers the larger channel of an intersecting channel configuration, and gas prefers the areas adjacent obtuse angles rather than acute angles in a triangular configuration. Therefore, affecting the location of gas within the passageway accomplishes the flow of coolant within the passageway, whether or not gas is present.

[0019] Other aspects, features and advantages of the present invention will become more apparent in the light of

the following detailed description of exemplary embodiments thereof, as illustrated in the accompanying drawing.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0020] FIG. 1 is a simplified, stylized block diagram of an evaporatively cooled fuel cell system, which may be modified to employ the present invention.

[0021] FIG. 2 is a partial, sectioned side elevation view of a pair of fuel cells employing minute water passageways, with the sectioning lines omitted for clarity.

[0022] FIG. 3 is a partial, sectioned, side elevation view of a pair of fuel cells employing gas tolerant coolant channels of the present invention, with the sectioning lines omitted for clarity.

[0023] FIGS. 4-9 are fragmentary, sectioned, side elevation views of gas tolerant coolant channels, with the portion for which gas has a proclivity oriented toward the fuel reactant gas flow fields as follows:

[0024] FIG. 4—intersecting rectangles formed in adjoining plates;

[0025] FIG. 5—intersecting rectangles formed in the oxidant reactant gas flow field plate;

[0026] FIG. 6—triangle formed in the oxidant reactant gas flow field plate;

[0027] FIG. 7—intersecting rectangle and triangle formed in adjoining plates;

[0028] FIG. 8—intersecting triangle and rectangle formed in the fuel reactant gas flow field plates;

[0029] FIG. 9—trapezoid formed in the oxidant reactant gas flow field plate;

[0030] FIGS. 10-15 are respective variants of FIGS. 4-9, with the portion of the coolant passageway for which gas has a proclivity oriented toward the oxidant reactant gas flow fields.

[0031] FIG. 16 is a partial, sectioned, side elevation view of a pair of fuel cells employing a layer highly permeable to coolant with adjacent coolant channels.

[0032] FIG. 17 is a fragmentary expanded view of the channels and layers of FIG. 16.

[0033] FIGS. 18 and 19 are fragmentary views of intersecting rectangles and triangles associated with the highly permeable layer of FIG. 16.

[0034] FIG. 20 is a fragmentary, sectioned, side elevation view of a coolant channel having one hydrophobic wall.

[0035] FIG. 21 is a partial, sectioned, side elevation view of a pair of fuel cells employing hydrophilic and hydrophobic layers between adjacent reactant gas flow field plates.

[0036] FIG. 22 is partial, sectioned, side elevation view of a pair of fuel cells employing a hydrophilic layer adjacent a hydrophilic/hydrophobic layer disposed between adjacent reactant gas flow field plates.

[0037] FIG. 23 is a plan view of a hydrophilic/hydrophobic layer of FIG. 22.

[0038] FIG. 24 is a plan view of adjacent narrow and wide coolant channels according to the invention.

[0039] FIGS. 25 and 26 are partial, sectioned, side elevation views of a pair of fuel cells embodying variants of the form of the invention shown in FIG. 24.

MODE(S) FOR CARRYING OUT THE INVENTION

[0040] A fuel cell system employing evaporative cooling is disclosed in U.S. Ser. No. 11/230,066 filed Sep. 19, 2005, and described with respect to FIGS. 1 and 2 herein. In the aforementioned application, water evaporates into air, pumped 52 through an air inlet 53, within the oxidant reactant gas (air) flow fields in the stack 37 thereby cooling the fuel cells 38 (FIG. 2). The outflow 57 of the oxidant reactant gas channels passes through a condenser 59 wherein heat is removed and the water is recovered and returned over a conduit 60 to a water/gas separator 64 which also serves as a reservoir. Any gas separated from the water is removed through exhaust 62, the water returning via a conduit 65 and a coolant inlet 66 to the water passageways in the stack 37 and upward toward an outlet 68.

[0041] In FIG. 2, fuel cells 38 each comprise a conventional membrane electrode assembly 72, which includes an electrolyte with anode and cathode catalysts on opposite sides thereof and may include a gas diffusion layer on one or both electrodes. Fuel reactant gas flows through channels 74 in a fuel reactant gas flow field plate 75 having grooves 76, which together with grooves 77 of an adjacent fuel cell, form minute water passageways 78 at a juncture 79 of the fuel cells 38. On the cathode side, an oxidant reactant gas flow field plate 81 includes air flow channels 82 and grooves 83 which, with grooves 84 on an adjacent fuel cell, together form minute water passageways 85 at a juncture 86 of the fuel cells.

[0042] To prevent flooding, pressure of water in the passageways is between one and ten Kilopascals lower than the pressure of the reactant gases, such as provided by an air pump and pressure-regulated fuel.

[0043] The passageways may be formed other than by matching grooves as shown, such as by channels 76, 83 or 77, 84 provided in only one of the reactant gas flow field plates 75, 81.

[0044] The reactant gas flow field plates 75, 81 appear to be the same as water transport plates, sometimes referred to as fine pore plates, in a fuel cell power plant which utilizes significant water flow through the water transport plates, with external water processing, as is disclosed in U.S. Pat. No. 5,700,595. However, because there is about a 40 times improvement in cooling effectiveness per volume of water when evaporative cooling is used, the water flow channels of the aforesaid '595 patent have cross sections which are several tens of times larger than the cross sections of the water passageways 78, 85 in FIG. 2.

[0045] In another embodiment of the aforementioned patent application, there is a material which is conductive, hydrophilic and has a high permeability to water, extending over substantially the entire planform of the reactant gas flow field plates 75, 81 in place of grooves forming passageways 78, 85. Such material may be carbon fiber paper, with fibers aligned in the direction of water motion to help with in-plane water permeability, or it may be other material conventionally used as fuel cell diffusion media.

[0046] The water passageways are typically very small and capable of providing the water required for evaporative cooling. Water flow in addition to that needed for evaporative cooling can assist in removing gas bubbles which leak in from the reactant gas channels and may assist in deionizing (demineralizing) water which is circulating in the system. Such water flow can be adequate if provided by a pump and plumbing external to the fuel cells.

[0047] According to the invention, that portion of fuel cell coolant paths which are substantially coextensive with the general planform of the fuel cells comprise gas tolerant coolant passageways, such as the passageways 78, 85 in FIGS. 3 and 4. The general platforms of fuel cells are normal to FIGS. 2-22, and are illustrated (in specific forms) in FIGS. 23 and 24. Gas tolerant coolant passageways 78, 85 comprise rectangular channels 76, 84 extending inwardly from a surface 91 of the fuel reactant gas flow field plates 75, opposite to a surface 90 from which the fuel flow field channels 74 extend, and channels 77, 83 having rectangular cross sections, significantly smaller than the cross sections of the channels 76, 84. The channels 77, 83 extend from a surface 93 of the oxidant reactant gas flow field plate 81 which is opposite to a surface 92 from which the oxidant reactant gas channels 82 extend. This is one embodiment of gas tolerant coolant channels comprising intersecting closed plane figures, such as polygons.

[0048] In accordance with the invention, there is a tendency for any gas within the passageways 78, 85 to migrate and/or be retained in the larger rectangles 76, 84, rather than in the smaller rectangles 77, 83. As illustrated by the bubble 87, the first portion of the coolant passageways formed by the large rectangles 77, 83 is conducive to the presence of gas preferentially over the second portion of the passageways which comprises the small rectangles 76, 84. As a consequence, bubbles that aggregate do so in the larger rectangles 76, 84, thereby leaving the smaller rectangles 77, 83 free from any bubble blockage. This assures that the flow of coolant necessary for proper fuel cell operation will occur in the smaller rectangles 77, 83.

[0049] As a result of the flow of coolant in the smaller rectangles 77, 83, as well as in the larger rectangles 76, 84 wherever bubbles are not blocking the larger rectangles, the flow of water will sweep the bubbles toward the vent 68 (FIG. 1), assuring that the bubbles will not aggregate to the extent that the entire channels 78, 85 are filled with gas. Thus, the objectives of the invention are provided by causing an assured water flow, substantially not subject to blockage by gas bubbles, which however is capable of sweeping the gas bubbles toward a gas vent.

[0050] As illustrated in FIG. 5, the channels 77, 85 may be formed directly within the oxidant reactant gas flow field plates 81, extending from the surface 93 thereof, rather than two rectangles separately made in the fuel reactant gas flow field plates 75 and in the oxidant reactant gas flow field plate 81, as in FIG. 4.

[0051] Another form of the invention illustrated in FIG. 6 provides gas tolerant coolant channels 85 which are triangular in shape. In the embodiment of FIG. 6, an isosceles triangle is shown with its base in the same plane as the plane of the surface 93. In this embodiment, the acute angles 96, 97 at the surface 93 are smaller than the obtuse angle 98 away from the surface, and the bubbles tend to aggregate

near the obtuse angle **98**, as illustrated by the bubble **99**. As is seen by the bubble **99**, the gas has a proclivity to collect in the portions of the coolant passageways **85** adjacent to the obtuse angles **98** preferentially in comparison with the acute angles **96, 97** of the coolant passageways **85**. This means that the coolant can flow readily away from the apexes **98** of the channels **85**, closer to the fuel reactant gas flow field plates **75**. In the embodiment of FIG. 6, with coolant flowing adjacent to the fuel reactant gas flow field plates **75**, humidification of the anode side of the unitized electrode assembly **72** is assured.

[0052] The triangular cross sections of the gas tolerant coolant passageways **85** may be equilateral, or they may be either scalene or isosceles right triangles. Or, they may be scalene triangles other than right triangles. However, since the gas will tend to migrate toward and/or remain in large, obtuse corners, in preference over small, acute corners, an equilateral triangle is probably not as useful as one in which the angles **96, 97** near the surface **93** are acute and smaller than the apex **98** away from the surface **93**; the apex in such case is greater than $180^\circ/N$. Capillary flow may occur in a corner of a liquid passageway if

$$\theta < \frac{\pi}{2} - \alpha,$$

where α =half angle of the corner and θ =static contact angle of the liquid. For an equilateral triangle, $2\alpha=60^\circ$ and $\alpha=30^\circ$; $\theta < 90-30=60$; so if the contact angle is less than 60° , capillary flow of liquid will occur in the corner. High capillary pressure is defined as that which is sufficient to assure a non-zero flow of coolant through a coolant passageway.

[0053] In the general case, this form of the invention will have one angular intersection of sides of the coolant channel which has an angle greater than $180^\circ/N$, where N is the total number of sides (including an open portion substantially in the plane of one of the surfaces **91, 93**). Thus, one of the angles of a triangular passageway, typically the apex, will be greater than 60° .

[0054] Referring to FIG. 7, another form of the invention includes a triangular channel **84** extending from the surface **91** of the fuel reactant gas flow field plate **75**, intersecting with a rectangle **83** extending from the surface **93** of the oxidant reactant gas flow field plate **81**. In this case, bubbles will collect in the triangular channels **84**, allowing coolant to flow freely in the rectangular channels **83**, the flow sweeping the bubbles along toward the vent **68** (FIG. 1).

[0055] FIG. 8 illustrates that a triangle **84** intersecting with a rectangle **83** may both extend from the edge **91** of the fuel reactant gas flow field plate **75**. Although the embodiments of FIGS. 3-8 comprise intersecting polygons, in the general case within the purview of the invention, the gas tolerant coolant passageways may have cross sectional areas which comprise the intersection of two closed plane figures bounded by other than straight lines (having at least some curvilinear boundaries) as well as closed plane figures bounded by straight lines (polygons).

[0056] FIG. 9 illustrates that the gas tolerant coolant channels **85** may have a trapezoidal cross section. In such a

case, the gas tends to migrate or remain away from the acute angles **96, 97** opposite to the surface **93** of the oxidant reactant gas flow field plates **81**. Coolant is free to flow near the acute angle portions of the trapezoidal cross section, and the flow of coolant sweeps the gas bubbles along toward the vent **68** (FIG. 1). The obtuse angles **98, 99** are greater than $180^\circ/N$.

[0057] In FIGS. 4-9, there are first portions of the gas tolerant coolant passageways, such as the large rectangles **83** of FIG. 4 or the obtuse angles of the triangular passageways **85** of FIG. 6, to or in which the gas will migrate and/or flow, preferentially to second portions, such as the small rectangle of FIG. 4 or the acute angles of the triangular shaped gas tolerant coolant passageways **85** in FIG. 6, or the trapezoid of FIG. 9. The gas has an affinity for the first portions which allows coolant to flow, unfettered by bubbles, in the second portions. The water or other coolant will flow at a low flow rate in large or small channels and in corners or other parts of passageways; but to ensure that flow, the gas must be segregated to first portions of the passageways so that within the second portions of the passageways, which are less preferential to the migration or retention of gas bubbles, the water or other coolant will flow unimpeded by bubbles to achieve product water removal, hydration and/or evaporative cooling as required, while at the same time sweeping the bubbles toward the vent.

[0058] In the general case, gas tends to leak from the fuel reactant gas flow field plate into the coolant passageways of a fuel cell. For that reason, the portions of gas tolerant coolant passageways for which the gas has an affinity might preferably be disposed toward the fuel reactant gas flow field plate, whereas those portions of gas tolerant coolant passageways which are less conducive to gas bubbles will be positioned toward the oxidant reactant gas flow field plate. In the case of gas tolerant water passageways utilized in evaporatively cooled fuel cells, this assures that water will easily reach and be evaporated into the oxidant reactant gas flow field channels **82**.

[0059] Each of FIGS. 10-15 respectively corresponds to one of FIGS. 4-9 and illustrates that the configuration can be reversed from that illustrated in FIGS. 4-9 so as to provide the first portions to which or in which the gas preferentially migrates or remains is closer to the oxidant reactant gas flow field channels, whereas the second portion, which is less preferential to the gas, and thereby assures the presence and flow of water, is toward the fuel reactant gas flow field channels. The embodiments of the invention described hereinafter with respect to FIGS. 10-15 are useful in fuel cell stacks wherein humidification of the anode side of the proton exchange membrane is of paramount concern. These are useful, for instance, in fuel cell power plants wherein the stack is cooled by means of coolant plates having a non-freezable coolant, such as a water glycol mixture, but water is circulated adjacent to the fuel reactant gas flow field plates to humidify the proton exchange membrane.

[0060] Referring to FIG. 16, a pair of fuel cells **38a** in accordance with another form of the invention have gas tolerant coolant passageways which include a porous, conductive layer **100** that is highly permeable to water, disposed adjacent to the entire active area of the planform of the fuel reactant gas flow field plate. Coolant passageways also comprise channels, such as rectangular channels **102** pref-

erably extending from the surfaces **93** of the oxidant reactant gas flow field plates **81** which are opposite to the surfaces **92** from which the oxidant reactant gas flow field channels **82** extend. However, if desired in any given case, the channels could extend from the surfaces of the fuel reactant gas flow field plates. The permeable layer **100** may be formed of wettable carbon fiber paper, such as the commonly used TORAY® paper, which has been treated with tin in a conventional manner. Some fuel cell stacks have high ingestion of gas into the fuel reactant gas channels, which the porous layer helps to prevent.

[0061] Although a gas bubble may form in one of the channels **102** thereby tending to block water in that channel, the highly permeable layer **100** will conduct water, freely, around the bubble-blocked channel, from other channels **102** to the entire planform of the fuel reactant gas flow field plates **75**. The water flows faster within the permeable layer **106** than in channels **102**, and causes a pressure drop from the coolant inlet to the vent **68** (FIG. 1) which will propel bubbles in the channels **102** along toward the vent **68**.

[0062] Thus, the highly permeable layer **100** is disposed between the oxidant reactant gas flow field plate of each fuel cell and the fuel reactant gas flow field plate of the fuel cell adjacent thereto in said stack; of course, the highly permeable layer adjacent to the oxidant reactant gas flow field plate in a fuel cell which is at the cathode end of the stack will not be adjacent, in the usual case, to any fuel reactant gas flow field plate. As used herein, the term "each fuel cell" excludes the last fuel cell at the cathode end of the stack, which has a highly permeable layer next to its oxidant reactant gas flow field plate, but that layer is not typically adjacent to any fuel reactant gas flow field plate, there being none beyond the last fuel cell at the cathode end of the stack.

[0063] In addition, the highly permeable layer **100** allows water to move rapidly around any bubble that may be blocking an adjacent water channel. This prevents local dry-out of the fuel gas flow field plate, thereby avoiding "breakthrough, which allows gas to pass freely through the flow field plate. In this way, the layer **100** substantially "blocks" the flow of reactant gas from the fuel reactant gas flow field channels **74** and the oxidant reactant gas flow field channels **82** to the water passageways **102**. Thus, the formation of gas bubbles within the coolant water passageways **102** is reduced, and the effect of such bubbles, in blocking water from various parts of a fuel cell planform, is also reduced.

[0064] In FIG. 16, the water passageways **102** are rectangular, as illustrated in a larger form in FIG. 17. Because of the operation of the present invention, passageways **102** of rectangular cross section are readily utilized without gas bubble problems when the highly permeable layer **100** of the present invention is utilized adjacent to the passageways **102**.

[0065] However, if deemed necessary in any given utilization of the invention, such as in the case of desiring to have water passageways **102** of extremely small cross section, the cross section of the water passageways **102** may provide additional gas tolerance. For instance, a channel configuration illustrated in FIG. 18 has a first rectangular groove **107** extending from the second surface **93** of the oxidant reactant gas flow field plate **81** and a second rectangular groove **108**, smaller than the first groove,

extending from the first rectangular groove **107** toward the first surface **92** of the oxidant reactant gas flow field plate **81**. This configuration will permit gas bubbles to form and perhaps to aggregate with other bubbles to make larger bubbles in the channels **107**, while the groove **108**, being less conducive to gas migration and retention, provides for a contiguous water path throughout the planform of each fuel cell, as described with respect to FIGS. 3 and 4 hereinbefore.

[0066] The passageways may be triangular, as shown by the passageway **102b** in FIG. 19. The base of the triangle is in a plane coextensive with the second surface **93** of the oxidant reactant gas flow field plate **81**. This configuration, having two acute angles and an obtuse angle causes gas to flow in the small angles, allowing free flow of water in the areas remote from the obtuse angle, as described with respect to FIG. 6 hereinbefore.

[0067] The water passageways can be of other configurations since employment of the highly permeable layer **100** avoids the problem of water passageways being blocked by air bubbles when there is a very low flow rate of water.

[0068] Another form of the invention, illustrated in FIG. 20, employs gas tolerant coolant channels of which one wall **111** has been treated to be hydrophobic, as indicated by the stippling. In FIG. 20, the wall that is treated is parallel to the plane of the second surface **91** of the fuel reactant gas flow field plate **75**. However, the hydrophobicity may be applied to any other wall of the channel **110**, if desired, to suit any implementation of the present invention. In FIG. 20, the channel **110** is rectangular; however, it may be some other shape if desired, such as to suit ease of manufacture in the implementation of the invention.

[0069] Another form of the invention employs layers which are conductive, highly permeable to water, and including hydrophilicity and hydrophobicity. In one embodiment illustrated in FIG. 21, a hydrophobic layer **114** is disposed between two hydrophilic layers **115**, **116**; the layers being disposed between the oxidant reactant gas flow field plate **81** of one fuel cell and the fuel reactant gas flow field plate **75** of a fuel cell adjacent thereto. The hydrophilic layers **115**, **116** allow for in-plane water distribution and the hydrophobic layer **114** provides a path for gas to collect and flow out through the vent **68** (FIG. 1). If desired, a single hydrophilic layer **115** or **116** may be utilized rather than two hydrophilic layers; in the general case, or in the case where the primary objective is evaporative cooling, the single hydrophilic layer **115** should be adjacent to the oxidant reactant gas flow field plate **81**; when the primary objective is assuring hydration of the proton exchange membrane in the unitized electrode assembly **72**, the hydrophilic layer **116** should be adjacent to the fuel reactant gas flow field plate **75**.

[0070] The layers **114-116** may comprise porous carbon fiber layers of the type typically used for gas diffusion layers in fuel cells, with appropriate treatment to render them either hydrophilic or hydrophobic.

[0071] In another embodiment illustrated in FIGS. 22 and 23, a conductive porous hydrophilic layer **119** is adjacent to the oxidant reactant gas flow field plate **81**, and a layer **120** which is both hydrophilic and hydrophobic is adjacent to the fuel reactant gas flow field plate **75**.

[0072] The hydrophobic/hydrophilic plate **120** may comprise porous conductive hydrophobic material **121** with a

plurality of non-hydrophobic regions **122** therein. The non-hydrophobic regions **122** may be the same material as the rest of the plate **120**, which however are treated to make them hydrophilic, such as with a coating of tin. On the other hand, the non-hydrophobic regions **122** may simply be passageways (e.g., punched holes through the material **121**) to allow water to pass through the layer **120**. Thus, the non-hydrophobic regions **122** may be hydrophilic, or may simply be passageways.

[0073] The present invention has been described with respect to fuel cells employing a water coolant, by which is meant a coolant which is substantially pure water. The embodiment of FIG. **20** has been described as having coolant channels in which one wall **111** of each channel **110** has been treated to be hydrophobic with respect to water coolant; if a coolant other than water is utilized, the walls **111** of channels **110** illustrated in FIG. **20** may be more accurately described as liquiphobic, which is defined herein as having an aversion for the coolant liquid, or lacking affinity for the coolant liquid.

[0074] In FIGS. **21** and **22**, bipolar plates include at least one hydrophilic layer and at least one additional layer which has hydrophilic and/or hydrophobic regions. In the general case, the bipolar plates may include a liquiphilic layer, and at least one additional layer having liquiphilic and liquiphobic regions. The term liquiphilic is defined herein as having an affinity for the liquid coolant, whether it be substantially pure water or otherwise.

[0075] Gas tolerant coolant passageways according to the present invention may be configured in groupings, such as pairs or larger series of alternatively sized or shaped channels. In one embodiment of this form of the invention, illustrated in FIG. **24**, a fuel reactant gas flow field plate **75** has wide channels **127** interspersed with narrow channels **128**. As illustrated by the bubbles **131**, **132**, the gas follows the path of least resistance through the flow field, and the gas therefore preferentially travels through the wide channels **127**, rather than the narrow channels **128**. The channels could be formed in the oxidant-reactant gas flow field plates, if desired.

[0076] In another embodiment of this form of the invention illustrated in FIG. **25**, a variation in the depth of the channels causes the gas to have a proclivity for channels **135** which are deeper than channels **136** extending from the second surface **91** of the fuel reactant gas flow field plates **75**.

[0077] In FIG. **26**, another embodiment of this form of the invention illustrates that channels **139** that are rectangular may be interspersed with channels **140** which are triangular. The gas will have a proclivity for the triangular channels, thus assuring a water flow within the channels **139**.

[0078] In the embodiments of FIGS. **24-26**, the water flow in the channels for which the gas does not have a proclivity will create a pressure drop across the flow field plate thereby urging the gas bubbles to migrate toward the exit **142** (FIG. **24**) of the flow field plate **75**. In the embodiments of FIGS. **24-26**, the likelihood that gas will become trapped only in every other channel will minimize the distance required for in-plane transfer of water within the reactant gas flow field plates. Various other combinations may be utilized: for instance, the deep/shallow combination of FIG. **25** may well be triangular, rather than rectangular; or some may be circular.

[0079] The aforementioned patent and patent application are incorporated herein by reference.

[0080] Thus, although the invention has been shown and described with respect to exemplary embodiments thereof, it should be understood by those skilled in the art that the foregoing and various other changes, omissions and additions may be made therein and thereto, without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention.

We claim:

1. A fuel cell method comprising:

preventing gas bubbles from blocking coolant flowing in fuel cell coolant flow paths prone to bubble blockage of coolant flowing at or below a threshold flow rate by providing coolant passageways substantially coextensive with planforms of said fuel cells which have configurations, along substantially the entire length of said coolant passageways, allowing flow of coolant below said threshold flow rate both (a) when gas is present in said passageways and (b) when gas is not present in said passageways.

2. A method according to claim 1 wherein said step of providing comprises:

providing coolant passageways within said coolant flow path substantially coextensive with planforms of said fuel cells (a) within and/or (b) adjacent to reactant gas flow field plates of said fuel cells configured to allow flow of said coolant therein whether or not there is any gas in said passageways.

3. A method according to claim 1 wherein said step of providing comprises:

providing said coolant passageways having first portions for which gas has a propensity to migrate and flow in preference over second portions of said passageways for which gas does not have such propensity.

4. A method according to claim 1 wherein said step of providing comprises:

configuring said coolant passageways to provide first portions for which gas has a sufficient proclivity to segregate gas from coolant so that gas present in said passageways migrates to and flows in said first portions in preference to second portions of said passageways for which gas does not have said sufficient proclivity, thereby mitigating the blockage of said coolant passageways by gas bubbles.

5. A fuel cell stack comprising:

a plurality of fuel cells having an electrode assembly including an electrolyte having anode and cathode catalysts disposed on respective anode and cathode sides thereof, a fuel reactant gas flow field plate having fuel reactant gas flow channels extending from a first surface thereof adjacent said anode side, and an oxidant reactant gas flow field plate having oxidant reactant gas flow channels extending from a first surface thereof adjacent said cathode side, at least one of said flow field plates being porous and hydrophilic; and

a coolant flow path configured to allow coolant flow, including at least one coolant passageway disposed in or near a second surface of at least one of said flow field plates of each fuel cell which is opposite to said first surface thereof, said coolant passageways each config-

- ured to provide a first portion for which gas has a sufficient affinity to migrate to in said first portion in preference to a second portion of said passageways.
- 6.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 5 wherein: said coolant passageways are configured to provide second portions for which gas does not have said sufficient affinity, thereby mitigating the blockage of said coolant passageways by gas bubbles.
- 7.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 5 wherein: said portions extend along substantially the entire lengths of said coolant passageways.
- 8.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 5 wherein: said first portions are first channels having a first cross section; and said second portions are second channels, having a second cross section different than said first cross section.
- 9.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 8 wherein: said second channels are smaller than said first channels.
- 10.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 9 wherein: said second channels are interspersed with said first channels.
- 11.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 8 wherein: said first channels are rectangular and said second channels are triangular.
- 12.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 5 wherein: said second channels are of different shape than said first channels.
- 13.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 5 wherein: each of said first portions is contiguous with one of said second portions.
- 14.** A stack of fuel cells according to claim 5 wherein: each of said first portions is adjacent a wall of a corresponding passageway which has a liquiphobic surface.
- 15.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 5 wherein: each of said first portions comprises a corner between two walls of a corresponding coolant passageway which subtends more than 90°.
- 16.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 15 wherein: said coolant passageways have a triangular cross section.
- 17.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 15 wherein: said coolant passageways have a trapezoidal cross section.
- 18.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 17 wherein: said trapezoidal passageways have a longer one of two parallel sides in the same plane as said second surface.
- 19.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 5 wherein: said coolant passageways are provided by composite bipolar plates interspersed between said fuel cells.
- 20.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 19 wherein: each of said bipolar plates includes a liquiphilic layer for contact with one of said reactant gas flow field plates, and at least one additional layer providing liquiphilic and liquiphobic portions between said liquiphilic layer and another one of said reactant gas flow field plates.
- 21.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 10 wherein: said liquiphilic and liquiphobic layers are hydrophilic or hydrophobic, respectively.
- 22.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 19 wherein: each said bipolar plate comprises two liquiphilic layers with a liquiphobic layer between said two liquiphilic layers.
- 23.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 21 wherein: each said bipolar plate comprises a liquiphilic layer and a layer which has separate liquiphilic and liquiphobic portions.
- 24.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 5 wherein: said coolant passageways each include at least one first coolant channel in one of said plates and at least one second coolant channel in another of said plates adjacent to said one of said plates, said second coolant channels each aligned with a corresponding one of said first coolant channels.
- 25.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 24 wherein: said second coolant channels have cross sectional areas substantially smaller than cross sectional areas of said first coolant channels.
- 26.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 24 wherein: said second coolant channels have cross sections shaped differently than the cross sectional areas of said first coolant channels.
- 27.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 5 wherein: each of said passageways has a cross section comprised of at least two each of said areas intersecting closed plane areas bounded by lines, having a cross section different from each other area.
- 28.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 27 wherein: one of said closed plane areas bounded by lines extends from said second surface of one of said plates and another of said closed plane areas bounded by lines extends from a second surface of another of said plates adjacent to said one plate.
- 29.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 27 wherein: both of said closed plane areas bounded by lines extend from said second surface of one of said plates.
- 30.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 27 wherein: said closed plane areas bounded by lines are intersecting polygons.
- 31.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 30 wherein: one of said intersecting polygons is a rectangle.
- 32.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 30 wherein: two of said intersecting polygons are rectangles.
- 33.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 30 wherein: one of said intersecting polygons is a triangle.
- 34.** A fuel cell stack according to claim 5 wherein: said coolant passageways comprise coolant channels extending from said second surface of one of said flow field plates and a layer of material, highly permeable to coolant, disposed between and substantially coextensive with adjacent ones of said flow field plates in said stack.

35. A fuel cell stack according to claim 34 wherein:

said channels are either (a) substantially rectangular or (b) shaped to have a gas tolerant cross section.

36. A fuel cell stack according to claim 5 wherein:

the cross section of each of said passageways comprises the intersection of a first groove, extending from said second surface of said fuel reactant gas flow field plate and a second groove, smaller than said first groove, extending from said first groove toward said first surface of said fuel reactant gas flow field plate.

37. A fuel cell stack according to claim 5 wherein:

said coolant passageways are at least one of (a) within reactant gas flow field plates and (b) adjacent to reactant gas flow field plates.

38. A fuel cell stack comprising:

a plurality of fuel cells having reactant gas flow field plates;

a coolant flow path extending to a plurality of fuel cells in said stack; and

coolant passageways within said coolant flow path substantially coextensive with planforms of said fuel cells and at least one of (a) within said reactant gas flow field plates and (b) adjacent to said reactant gas flow field plates, said coolant passageways configured to provide portions with high capillary pressure extending along substantially the entire length of said passageways.

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