



- (51) International Patent Classification:
H01S 3/067 (2006.01) G02B 6/14 (2006.01)
H01S 3/10 (2006.01)
- (21) International Application Number:
PCT/US2018/024953
- (22) International Filing Date:
28 March 2018 (28.03.2018)
- (25) Filing Language: English
- (26) Publication Language: English
- (30) Priority Data:
PCT/US2017/034848
26 May 2017 (26.05.2017) US
15/607,411 26 May 2017 (26.05.2017) US
15/607,410 26 May 2017 (26.05.2017) US
15/607,399 26 May 2017 (26.05.2017) US

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- (81) Designated States (unless otherwise indicated, for every kind of national protection available): AE, AG, AL, AM, AO, AT, AU, AZ, BA, BB, BG, BH, BN, BR, BW, BY, BZ, CA, CH, CL, CN, CO, CR, CU, CZ, DE, DJ, DK, DM, DO, DZ, EC, EE, EG, ES, FI, GB, GD, GE, GH, GM, GT, HN, HR, HU, ID, IL, IN, IR, IS, JO, JP, KE, KG, KH, KN, KP, KR, KW, KZ, LA, LC, LK, LR, LS, LU, LY, MA, MD, ME, MG, MK, MN, MW, MX, MY, MZ, NA, NG, NI, NO, NZ,

(54) Title: FIBER OPTICAL BEAM DELIVERY DEVICE PRODUCING SELECTABLE INTENSITY PROFILES

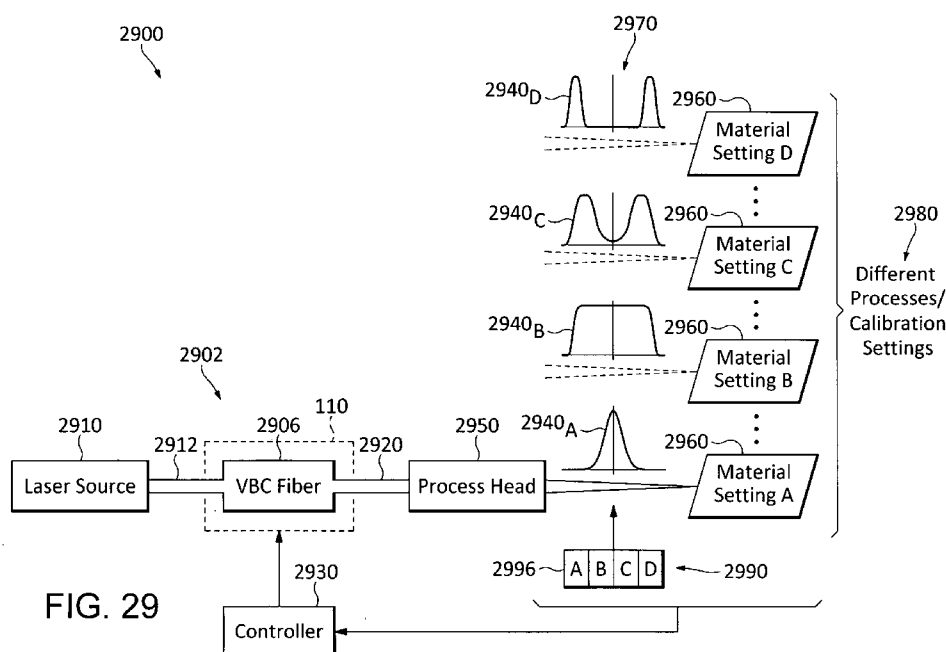


FIG. 29

(57) Abstract: An optical beam delivery device is configured to generate, from an optical beam, selectable intensity profiles. The device has a first length of fiber having a first refractive index profile (RIP), and a second length of fiber having second RIP that is different from the first RIP. The second length of fiber includes coaxial confinement regions arranged to confine at least a portion of an adjusted optical beam. The confined portion corresponds to an intensity distribution of different intensity distributions. The intensity distribution is established by a corresponding state of different states of perturbation that is applied to the device such that the confined portion is configured to provide, at an output of the second length of fiber, a selected intensity profile of the selectable intensity profiles.



OM, PA, PE, PG, PH, PL, PT, QA, RO, RS, RU, RW, SA,
SC, SD, SE, SG, SK, SL, SM, ST, SV, SY, TH, TJ, TM, TN,
TR, TT, TZ, UA, UG, US, UZ, VC, VN, ZA, ZM, ZW.

- (84) Designated States** (*unless otherwise indicated, for every kind of regional protection available*): ARIPO (BW, GH, GM, KE, LR, LS, MW, MZ, NA, RW, SD, SL, ST, SZ, TZ, UG, ZM, ZW), Eurasian (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, RU, TJ, TM), European (AL, AT, BE, BG, CH, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, HR, HU, IE, IS, IT, LT, LU, LV, MC, MK, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, RO, RS, SE, SI, SK, SM, TR), OAPI (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GQ, GW, KM, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).

Published:

- *with international search report (Art. 21(3))*

FIBER OPTICAL BEAM DELIVERY DEVICE PRODUCING SELECTABLE INTENSITY PROFILES

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0001] The technology disclosed herein relates to fiber lasers and fiber-coupled lasers. More particularly, the disclosed technology relates to methods, apparatus, and systems for adjusting and maintaining adjusted optical beam characteristics (spot size, divergence profile, spatial profile, or beam shape, or the like or any combination thereof) at an output of a fiber laser or fiber-coupled laser.

RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0002] This application is a continuation-in-part of each of the following applications filed May 26, 2017: U.S. Patent Application Nos. 15/607,399; 15/607,410; and 15/607,411; and International Application No. PCT/US2017/034848. Each of these applications claims benefit of U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 62/401,650, filed September 29, 2016. All of these applications are incorporated by reference herein in their entireties.

BACKGROUND

[0003] The use of high-power fiber-coupled lasers continues to gain popularity for a variety of applications, such as materials processing, cutting, welding, and/or additive manufacturing. These lasers include, for example, fiber lasers, disk lasers, diode lasers, diode-pumped solid state lasers, and lamp-pumped solid state lasers. In these systems, optical power is delivered from the laser to a workpiece via an optical fiber.

[0004] Various fiber-coupled laser materials processing tasks require different beam characteristics (e.g., spatial profiles and/or divergence profiles). For example, cutting thick metal and welding generally require a larger spot size than cutting thin metal. Ideally, the laser beam properties would be adjustable to enable optimized processing for these different tasks. Conventionally, users have two choices: (1) Employ a laser system with fixed beam characteristics that can be used for different tasks but is not optimal for most of them (i.e., a compromise between performance and flexibility); or (2) Purchase a laser system or accessories that offer variable beam characteristics but that add significant cost, size, weight, complexity, and

perhaps performance degradation (e.g., optical loss) or reliability degradation (e.g., reduced robustness or up-time). Currently available laser systems capable of varying beam characteristics require the use of free-space optics or other complex and expensive add-on mechanisms (e.g., zoom lenses, mirrors, translatable or motorized lenses, combiners, etc.) in order to vary beam characteristics. No solution exists that provides the desired adjustability in beam characteristics that minimizes or eliminates reliance on the use of free-space optics or other extra components that add significant penalties in terms of cost, complexity, performance, and/or reliability. What is needed is an in-fiber apparatus for providing varying beam characteristics and shapes that does not require or minimizes the use of free-space optics and that can avoid significant cost, complexity, performance tradeoffs, and/or reliability degradation.

SUMMARY

[0005] This disclosure is summarized by way of the following example embodiments. Additional aspects and advantages will be apparent from the detailed description of embodiments that follows, which proceeds with reference to the accompanying drawings.

[0006] Example embodiment 1: An optical beam delivery device configured to generate, from an optical beam, selectable intensity profiles, the optical beam delivery device comprising: a first length of fiber having a first refractive index profile (RIP), the first RIP enabling, in response to an applied perturbation, modification of the optical beam to form an adjusted optical beam, the adjusted optical beam defining, at an output end of the first length of fiber, different intensity distributions based on different states of the applied perturbation; and a second length of fiber having an input end coupled to the output end of the first length of fiber, the second length of fiber formed with coaxial confinement regions defining a second RIP that is different from the first RIP, the coaxial confinement regions arranged to confine at least a portion of the adjusted optical beam, the confined portion corresponding to an intensity distribution of the different intensity distributions, and in which the intensity distribution is established by a corresponding state of the different states of the applied perturbation such that the confined portion is configured to provide, at an output of the second length of fiber, a selected intensity profile of the selectable

intensity profiles. In some examples of the device, the selected output intensity profile is Gaussian, super-Gaussian, flat-top, saddle-shaped, or donut-shaped.

[0007] Example embodiment 2: The optical beam delivery device of the previous example 1, in which the selected intensity profile is a Gaussian intensity profile.

[0008] Example embodiment 3: The optical beam delivery device of the previous example 2, in which the corresponding state of the different states of the applied perturbation establishing the Gaussian intensity profile includes an unperturbed state of the first length of fiber.

[0009] Example embodiment 4: The optical beam delivery device of the previous example 2, in which a central core of the coaxial confinement regions is configured to provide the confined portion having the Gaussian intensity profile.

[0010] Example embodiment 5: The optical beam delivery device of the previous example 1, in which the selected intensity profile is a super-Gaussian intensity profile.

[0011] Example embodiment 6: The optical beam delivery device of the previous example 1 or 5, in which the coaxial confinement regions comprise a central core and an annular region encompassing the central core, and in which the corresponding state of the different states of the applied perturbation is that which shifts, expands, or simultaneously shifts and expands the optical beam in forming the adjusted optical beam so that the intensity distribution which results at the input of the second length of fiber spatially overlaps adjacent portions of the central core and the annular region.

[0012] Example embodiment 7: The optical beam delivery device of the previous example 1, in which the selected intensity profile is a flat-top intensity profile.

[0013] Example embodiment 8: The optical beam delivery device of the previous example 1, in which the selected intensity profile is a saddle-shaped intensity profile.

[0014] Example embodiment 9: The optical beam delivery device of any one of the previous example 1, 5, or 8, in which the coaxial confinement regions comprise a central core and an annular region encompassing the central core, and in which the intensity distribution spatially overlaps an outer portion of the central core and an inner portion of the annular region.

[0015] Example embodiment 10: The optical beam delivery device of the previous example 1, in which the selected intensity profile is a donut-shaped intensity profile.

[0016] Example embodiment 11: The optical beam delivery device of any one of the previous example 1, 8 or 10, in which the selected intensity profile includes a local minimum between bimodal local maxima.

[0017] Example embodiment 12: A beam shaper system, comprising a laser source to provide an optical beam; a variable beam characteristics (VBC) fiber including first and second lengths of fiber coupled to each other and having, respectively, first and second refractive index profiles (RIPs) that are different from each other, the first RIP enabling, in response to perturbation applied to the VBC fiber, modification of the optical beam to form an adjusted optical beam exhibiting at an input of the second length of fiber an intensity distribution that is adjustable based on different states of the perturbation applied, and the second RIP defined by coaxial confinement regions arranged to confine at least a portion of the adjusted optical beam that corresponds to the intensity distribution; and a controller operatively coupled to the VBC fiber and configured to control the different states of the perturbation so as to establish different selectable intensity profiles that the confined portion of the adjusted optical beam is configured to provide at an output of the second length of fiber.

[0018] Example embodiment 13: The beam shaper system of the previous example 12, in which one of the different selectable intensity profiles is a Gaussian intensity profile.

[0019] Example embodiment 14: The beam shaper system of the previous example 12, in which one of the different selectable intensity profiles is a super-Gaussian intensity profile.

[0020] Example embodiment 15: The beam shaper system of the previous example 12, in which one of the different selectable intensity profiles is a saddle-shaped intensity profile.

[0021] Example embodiment 16: The beam shaper system of the previous example 12, in which one of the different selectable intensity profiles is a donut-shaped intensity profile.

[0022] Example embodiment 17: A method of generating, from an optical beam, different beam shapes defined by selectable intensity profiles, comprising: receiving the optical beam at a variable beam characteristics (VBC) fiber including first and second lengths of fiber coupled to each other and having, respectively, first and second refractive index profiles (RIPs) that are different from each other, the first RIP

enabling, in response to a selected state of perturbation applied to the VBC fiber, modification of the optical beam to form an adjusted optical beam that is adjustable based on the selected state of applied perturbation, and the second RIP defined by coaxial confinement regions arranged to confine at least a portion of the adjusted optical beam; applying a first state of perturbation to the VBC fiber to establish a first selected intensity profile at an output end of the second length of fiber; and applying a second state of perturbation, different from the first state, to the VBC fiber to establish a second selected intensity profile, different from the first selected intensity profile, at the output end of the second length of fiber.

[0023] Example embodiment 18: The method of the previous example 17, in which the first selected intensity profile is a generally Gaussian intensity profile, and the second intensity profile is a generally super-Gaussian profile.

[0024] Example embodiment 19: The method of the previous example 17, in which the second state of perturbation is a magnitude of perturbation that is greater than that of the first state.

[0025] Example embodiment 20: The method of the previous example 17, in which the first selected intensity profile is a generally saddle-shaped intensity profile, and the second intensity profile is a generally donut-shaped intensity profile.

[0026] Further example embodiments: A computer- or machine-readable medium to realize an apparatus, system, or device, or to store instructions thereon for a processor that, when executing the instructions, performs any example method.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0027] The accompanying drawings, wherein like reference numerals represent like elements, are incorporated in and constitute a part of this specification and, together with the description, explain the advantages and principles of the presently disclosed technology. In the drawings,

[0028] FIG. 1 illustrates an example fiber structure for providing a laser beam having variable beam characteristics;

[0029] FIG. 2 depicts a cross-sectional view of an example fiber structure for delivering a beam with variable beam characteristics;

[0030] FIG. 3 illustrates an example method of perturbing a fiber structure for providing a beam having variable beam characteristics;

[0031] FIG. 4 is a graph illustrating the calculated spatial profile of the lowest-order mode (LP_{01}) for a first length of a fiber for different fiber bend radii;

[0032] FIG. 5 illustrates an example of a two-dimensional intensity distribution at a junction when a fiber for varying beam characteristics is nearly straight;

[0033] FIG. 6 illustrates an example of a two-dimensional intensity distribution at a junction when a fiber for varying beam characteristics is bent with a radius chosen to preferentially excite a particular confinement region of a second length of fiber;

[0034] FIGS. 7A, 7B, and 7C collectively show a prophetic example of a second length of the fiber structure of FIG. 2 receiving at its input end an optical beam having an intensity distribution (shown in a pictorial view of FIG. 7A), which is developed by not substantially perturbing the fiber structure such that the second length exhibits at its output end a Gaussian intensity distribution (shown in a pictorial view of FIG. 7B) and a corresponding intensity profile (shown in a graph of FIG. 7C);

[0035] FIGS. 8A, 8B, and 8C collectively show a prophetic example of a second length of the fiber structure of FIG. 2 receiving at its input end an optical beam having an intensity distribution (shown in a pictorial view of FIG. 8A), which is developed by a low to intermediate amount of perturbation applied to the fiber structure such that the second length exhibits at its output end a super-Gaussian intensity distribution (shown in a pictorial view of FIG. 8B) and a corresponding intensity profile (shown in a graph of FIG. 8C) that is adjustable to approach an idealized flat-top intensity profile;

[0036] FIGS. 9A, 9B, and 9C collectively show a prophetic example of a second length of the fiber structure of FIG. 2 receiving at its input end an optical beam having an intensity distribution (shown in a pictorial view of FIG. 9A), which is developed by a further amount of perturbation applied to the fiber structure such that the second length exhibits at its output end a saddle-shaped intensity distribution (shown in a pictorial view of FIG. 9B) and a corresponding intensity profile (shown in a graph of FIG. 9C);

[0037] FIGS. 10A, 10B, and 10C collectively show a prophetic example of a second length of the fiber structure of FIG. 2 receiving at its input end an optical beam having an intensity distribution (shown in a pictorial view of FIG. 10A), which is developed by a still further amount of perturbation applied to the fiber structure such that the second length exhibits at its output end a donut-shaped intensity distribution

(shown in a pictorial view of FIG. 10B) and a corresponding intensity profile (shown in a graph of FIG. 10C);

[0038] FIGS. 11 – 16 illustrate cross-sectional views of example first lengths of fiber for enabling adjustment of beam characteristics in a fiber assembly;

[0039] FIGS. 17 – 19 illustrate cross-sectional views of example second lengths of fiber (“confinement fibers”) for confining adjusted beam characteristics in a fiber assembly;

[0040] FIGS. 20 and 21 illustrate cross-sectional views of example second lengths of fiber for changing a divergence angle of and confining an adjusted beam in a fiber assembly configured to provide variable beam characteristics;

[0041] FIG. 22A illustrates an example laser system including a fiber assembly configured to provide variable beam characteristics disposed between a feeding fiber and process head;

[0042] FIG. 22B illustrates an example a laser system including a fiber assembly configured to provide variable beam characteristics disposed between a feeding fiber and process head;

[0043] FIG. 23 illustrates an example laser system including a fiber assembly configured to provide variable beam characteristics disposed between a feeding fiber and multiple process fibers;

[0044] FIG. 24 illustrates examples of various perturbation assemblies for providing variable beam characteristics according to various examples provided herein;

[0045] FIG. 25 illustrates an example process for adjusting and maintaining modified characteristics of an optical beam;

[0046] FIGS. 26 – 28 are cross-sectional views illustrating example second lengths of fiber (“confinement fibers”) for confining adjusted beam characteristics in a fiber assembly; and

[0047] FIG. 29 is a block diagram of a beam shaper configured to generate beam shapes based on selected intensity profiles.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0048] As used herein throughout this disclosure and in the claims, the singular forms “a,” “an,” and “the” include the plural forms unless the context clearly dictates otherwise. Additionally, the term “includes” means “comprises.” Further, the term

“coupled” does not exclude the presence of intermediate elements between the coupled items. Also, the terms “modify” and “adjust” are used interchangeably to mean “alter.”

[0049] The systems, apparatus, and methods described herein should not be construed as limiting in any way. Instead, the present disclosure is directed toward all novel and non-obvious features and aspects of the various disclosed embodiments, alone and in various combinations and sub-combinations with one another. The disclosed systems, methods, and apparatus are not limited to any specific aspect or feature or combinations thereof, nor do the disclosed systems, methods, and apparatus require that any one or more specific advantages be present or problems be solved. Any theories of operation are to facilitate explanation, but the disclosed systems, methods, and apparatus are not limited to such theories of operation.

[0050] Although the operations of some of the disclosed methods are described in a particular sequential order for convenient presentation, it should be understood that this manner of description encompasses rearrangement, unless a particular ordering is required by specific language set forth below. For example, operations described sequentially may in some cases be rearranged or performed concurrently. Moreover, for the sake of simplicity, the attached figures may not show the various ways in which the disclosed systems, methods, and apparatus can be used in conjunction with other systems, methods, and apparatus. Additionally, the description sometimes uses terms like “produce” and “provide” to describe the disclosed methods. These terms are high-level abstractions of the actual operations that are performed. The actual operations that correspond to these terms will vary depending on the particular implementation and are readily discernible by one of ordinary skill in the art.

[0051] In some examples, values, procedures, or apparatus are referred to as “lowest,” “best,” “minimum,” or the like. It will be appreciated that such descriptions are intended to indicate that a selection among many used functional alternatives can be made, and such selections need not be better, smaller, or otherwise preferable to other selections. Examples are described with reference to directions indicated as “above,” “below,” “upper,” “lower,” and the like. These terms are used for convenient description, but do not imply any particular spatial orientation.

Definitions

[0052] Definitions of words and terms as used herein:

1. The term “beam characteristics” refers to one or more of the following terms used to describe an optical beam. In general, the beam characteristics of most interest depend on the specifics of the application or optical system.
2. The term “beam diameter” is defined as the distance across the center of the beam along an axis for which the irradiance (intensity) equals $1/e^2$ of the maximum irradiance. While examples disclosed herein generally use beams that propagate in azimuthally symmetric modes, elliptical or other beam shapes can be used, and beam diameter can be different along different axes. Circular beams are characterized by a single beam diameter. Other beam shapes can have different beam diameters along different axes.
3. The term “spot size” is the radial distance (radius) from the center point of maximum irradiance to the $1/e^2$ point.
4. The term “beam divergence distribution” is the power vs the full cone angle. This quantity is sometimes called the “angular distribution” or “NA distribution.”
5. The term “beam parameter product” (BPP) of a laser beam is defined as the product of the beam radius (measured at the beam waist) and the beam divergence half-angle (measured in the far field). The units of BPP are typically mm-mrad.
6. A “confinement fiber” is defined to be a fiber that possesses one or more confinement regions, wherein a confinement region comprises a higher-index region (core region) surrounded by a lower-index region (cladding region). The RIP of a confinement fiber may include one or more higher-index regions (core regions) surrounded by lower-index regions (cladding regions), wherein light is guided in the higher-index regions. Each confinement region and each cladding region can have any RIP, including but not limited to step-index and graded-index. The confinement regions may or may not be concentric and may be a variety of shapes such as circular, annular, polygonal, arcuate, elliptical, or irregular, or the like or any combination thereof. The confinement regions in a particular confinement fiber may all have the same shape or may be different shapes. Moreover, confinement regions may be co-axial or may have offset axes with respect to one another. Confinement regions may be of uniform thickness

- about a central axis in the longitudinal direction, or the thicknesses may vary about the central axis in the longitudinal direction.
7. The term “intensity distribution” generally refers to optical intensity as a function of position. When referring to optical intensity along a line (1D, see e.g., FIGS. 7C, 8C, 9C, and 10C), the specific term “intensity profile” is preferred. When referring to optical intensity along a plane (2D, see e.g., FIGS. 7B, 8B, 9B, and 10B), the more general term “intensity distribution” is used. In either case, the line or plane is usually taken perpendicular to the propagation direction of the light. It is a quantitative property. Furthermore, the term “beam shape” is used to describe spatial aspects of a profile (e.g., as in saddle-shaped profiles), but it is also used to describe spatial aspects of a distribution (e.g., as in donut-shaped distributions). Skilled persons will appreciate that, depending on the context, the aforementioned terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Thus, some additional qualitative properties of certain beam shapes are shown in the drawing figures and described in later paragraphs.
 8. “Luminance” is a photometric measure of the luminous intensity per unit area of light travelling in a given direction.
 9. “ M^2 factor” (also called “beam quality factor” or “beam propagation factor”) is a dimensionless parameter for quantifying the beam quality of laser beams, with $M^2 = 1$ being a diffraction-limited beam, and larger M^2 values corresponding to lower beam quality. M^2 is equal to the BPP divided by λ / π , where λ is the wavelength of the beam in microns (if BPP is expressed in units of mm-mrad).
 10. The term “numerical aperture” or “NA” of an optical system is a dimensionless number that characterizes the range of angles over which the system can accept or emit light.
 11. The term “optical intensity” is not an official (SI) unit, but is used to denote incident power per unit area on a surface or passing through a plane.
 12. The term “power density” refers to optical power per unit area, although this is also referred to as “optical intensity.”
 13. The term “radial beam position” refers to the position of a beam in a fiber measured with respect to the center of the fiber core in a direction perpendicular to the fiber axis.
 14. “Radiance” is the radiation emitted per unit solid angle in a given direction by a unit area of an optical source (e.g., a laser). Radiance may be altered by

changing the beam intensity distribution and/or beam divergence profile or distribution. The ability to vary the radiance profile of a laser beam implies the ability to vary the BPP.

15. The term “refractive-index profile” or “RIP” refers to the refractive index as a function of position along a line (1D) or in a plane (2D) perpendicular to the fiber axis. Many fibers are azimuthally symmetric, in which case the 1D RIP is identical for any azimuthal angle.
16. A “step-index fiber” has a RIP that is flat (refractive index independent of position) within the fiber core.
17. A “graded-index fiber” has a RIP in which the refractive index decreases with increasing radial position (i.e., with increasing distance from the center of the fiber core).
18. A “parabolic-index fiber” is a specific case of a graded-index fiber in which the refractive index decreases quadratically with increasing distance from the center of the fiber core.

Fiber for Varying Beam Characteristics

[0053] Disclosed herein are methods, systems, and apparatus configured to provide a fiber operable to provide a laser beam having variable beam characteristics (VBC) that may reduce cost, complexity, optical loss, or other drawbacks of the conventional methods described above. This VBC fiber is configured to vary a wide variety of optical beam characteristics. Such beam characteristics can be controlled using the VBC fiber thus allowing users to tune various beam characteristics to suit the particular requirements of an extensive variety of laser processing applications. For example, a VBC fiber may be used to tune beam diameter, beam divergence distribution, BPP, intensity distribution, M^2 factor, NA, optical intensity, power density, radial beam position, radiance, spot size, or the like, or any combination thereof.

[0054] In general, the disclosed technology entails coupling a laser beam into a fiber in which the characteristics of the laser beam in the fiber can be adjusted by perturbing the laser beam and/or perturbing a first length of fiber by any of a variety of methods (e.g., bending the fiber or introducing one or more other perturbations) and fully or partially maintaining adjusted beam characteristics in a second length of fiber. The second length of fiber is specially configured to maintain and/or further

modify the adjusted beam characteristics. In some cases, the second length of fiber preserves the adjusted beam characteristics through delivery of the laser beam to its ultimate use (e.g., materials processing). The first and second lengths of fiber may comprise the same or different fibers.

[0055] The disclosed technology is compatible with fiber lasers and fiber-coupled lasers. Fiber-coupled lasers typically deliver an output via a delivery fiber having a step-index refractive index profile (RIP), i.e., a flat or constant refractive index within the fiber core. In reality, the RIP of the delivery fiber may not be perfectly flat, depending on the design of the fiber. Important parameters are the fiber core diameter (d_{core}) and NA. The core diameter is typically in the range of 10 – 1000 microns (although other values are possible), and the NA is typically in the range of 0.06 – 0.22 (although other values are possible). A delivery fiber from the laser may be routed directly to the process head or workpiece, or it may be routed to a fiber-to-fiber coupler (FFC) or fiber-to-fiber switch (FFS), which couples the light from the delivery fiber into a process fiber that transmits the beam to the process head or the workpiece.

[0056] Most materials processing tools, especially those at high power (> 1 kW), employ multimode (MM) fiber, but some employ single-mode (SM) fiber, which is at the lower end of the d_{core} and NA ranges. The beam characteristics from a SM fiber are uniquely determined by the fiber parameters. The beam characteristics from a MM fiber, however, can vary (unit-to-unit and/or as a function of laser power and time), depending on the beam characteristics from the laser source(s) coupled into the fiber, the launching or splicing conditions into the fiber, the fiber RIP, and the static and dynamic geometry of the fiber (bending, coiling, motion, micro-bending, etc.). For both SM and MM delivery fibers, the beam characteristics may not be optimum for a given materials processing task, and it is unlikely to be optimum for a range of tasks, motivating the desire to be able to systematically vary the beam characteristics in order to customize or optimize them for a particular processing task.

[0057] In one example, the VBC fiber may have a first length and a second length and may be configured to be interposed as an in-fiber device between the delivery fiber and the process head to provide the desired adjustability of the beam characteristics. To enable adjustment of the beam, a perturbation device and/or assembly is disposed in close proximity to and/or coupled with the VBC fiber and is

responsible for perturbing the beam in a first length such that the beam's characteristics are altered in the first length of fiber, and the altered characteristics are preserved or further altered as the beam propagates in the second length of fiber. The perturbed beam is launched into a second length of the VBC fiber configured to conserve adjusted beam characteristics. The first and second lengths of fiber may be the same or different fibers and/or the second length of fiber may comprise a confinement fiber. The beam characteristics that are conserved by the second length of VBC fiber may include any of: beam diameter, beam divergence distribution, BPP, intensity distribution, luminance, M^2 factor, NA, optical intensity, power density, radial beam position, radiance, spot size, or the like, or any combination thereof.

[0058] FIG. 1 illustrates an example VBC fiber 100 for providing a laser beam having variable beam characteristics without requiring the use of free-space optics to change the beam characteristics. VBC fiber 100 comprises a first length of fiber 104 and a second length of fiber 108. First length of fiber 104 and second length of fiber 108 may be the same or different fibers and may have the same or different RIPs. The first length of fiber 104 and the second length of fiber 108 may be joined together by a splice. First length of fiber 104 and second length of fiber 108 may be coupled in other ways, may be spaced apart, or may be connected via an interposing component such as another length of fiber, free-space optics, glue, index-matching material, or the like or any combination thereof.

[0059] A perturbation device 110 is disposed proximal to and/or envelops a perturbation region 106. Perturbation device 110 may be a device, assembly, in-fiber structure, and/or other feature. Perturbation device 110 at least perturbs optical beam 102 in first length of fiber 104 or second length of fiber 108 or a combination thereof in order to adjust one or more beam characteristics of optical beam 102. Adjustment of beam 102 responsive to perturbation by perturbation device 110 may occur in first length of fiber 104 or second length of fiber 108 or a combination thereof. Perturbation region 106 may extend over various widths and may or may not extend into a portion of second length of fiber 108. As beam 102 propagates in VBC fiber 100, perturbation device 110 may physically act on VBC fiber 100 to perturb the fiber and adjust the characteristics of beam 102. Alternatively, perturbation device 110 may act directly on beam 102 to alter its beam characteristics. Subsequent to being adjusted, perturbed beam 112 has different beam characteristics from those of

beam 102, which will be fully or partially conserved in second length of fiber 108. In another example, perturbation device 110 need not be disposed near a splice. Moreover, a splice may not be needed at all, for example VBC fiber 100 may be a single fiber, first length of fiber and second length of fiber could be spaced apart, or secured with a small gap (air-spaced or filled with an optical material, such as optical cement or an index-matching material).

[0060] Perturbed beam 112 is launched into second length of fiber 108, where perturbed beam 112 characteristics are largely maintained or continue to evolve as perturbed beam 112 propagates yielding the adjusted beam characteristics at the output of second length of fiber 108. In one example, the new beam characteristics may include an adjusted intensity distribution. In an example, an altered beam intensity distribution will be conserved in various structurally bounded confinement regions of second length of fiber 108. Thus, the beam intensity distribution may be tuned to a desired beam intensity distribution optimized for a particular laser processing task. In general, the intensity distribution of perturbed beam 112 will evolve as it propagates in the second length of fiber 108 to fill the confinement region(s) into which perturbed beam 112 is launched responsive to conditions in first length of fiber 104 and perturbation caused by perturbation device 110. In addition, the angular distribution may evolve as the beam propagates in the second fiber, depending on launch conditions and fiber characteristics. In general, fibers largely preserve the input divergence distribution, but the distribution can be broadened if the input divergence distribution is narrow and/or if the fiber has irregularities or deliberate features that perturb the divergence distribution. The various confinement regions, perturbations, and fiber features of second length of fiber 108 are described in greater detail below. Beams 102 and 112 are conceptual abstractions intended to illustrate how a beam may propagate through a VBC fiber 100 for providing variable beam characteristics and are not intended to closely model the behavior of a particular optical beam.

[0061] VBC fiber 100 may be manufactured by a variety of methods including PCVD (Plasma Chemical Vapor Deposition), OVD (Outside Vapor Deposition), VAD (Vapor Axial Deposition), MOCVD (Metal-Organic Chemical Vapor Deposition.) and/or DND (Direct Nanoparticle Deposition). VBC fiber 100 may comprise a variety of materials. For example, VBC fiber 100 may comprise SiO₂, SiO₂ doped with GeO₂, germanosilicate, phosphorus pentoxide, phosphosilicate, Al₂O₃,

aluminosilicate, or the like or any combinations thereof. Confinement regions may be bounded by cladding doped with fluorine, boron, or the like or any combinations thereof. Other dopants may be added to active fibers, including rare-earth ions such as Er^{3+} (erbium), Yb^{3+} (ytterbium), Nd^{3+} (neodymium), Tm^{3+} (thulium), Ho^{3+} (holmium), or the like or any combination thereof. Confinement regions may be bounded by cladding having a lower index than that of the confinement region with fluorine or boron doping. Alternatively, VBC fiber 100 may comprise photonic crystal fibers or micro-structured fibers.

[0062] VBC fiber 100 is suitable for use in any of a variety of fiber, fiber optic, or fiber laser devices, including continuous wave and pulsed fiber lasers, disk lasers, solid state lasers, or diode lasers (pulse rate unlimited except by physical constraints). Furthermore, implementations in a planar waveguide or other types of waveguides and not just fibers are within the scope of the claimed technology.

[0063] FIG. 2 depicts a cross-sectional view of an example VBC fiber 200 for adjusting beam characteristics of an optical beam. In an example, VBC fiber 200 may be a process fiber because it may deliver the beam to a process head for material processing. VBC fiber 200 comprises a first length of fiber 204 spliced at a junction 206 to a second length of fiber 208. A perturbation assembly 210 is disposed proximal to junction 206. Perturbation assembly 210 may be any of a variety of devices configured to enable adjustment of the beam characteristics of an optical beam 202 propagating in VBC fiber 200. In an example, perturbation assembly 210 may be a mandrel and/or another device that may provide means of varying the bend radius and/or bend length of VBC fiber 200 near the splice. Other examples of perturbation devices are discussed below with respect to FIG. 24.

[0064] In an example, first length of fiber 204 has a parabolic-index RIP 212 as indicated by the left RIP graph. Most of the intensity distribution of beam 202 is concentrated in the center of fiber 204 when fiber 204 is straight or nearly straight. Second length of fiber 208 is a confinement fiber having RIP 214 as shown in the right RIP graph. Second length of fiber 208 includes confinement regions 216, 218, and 220. Confinement region 216 is a central core surrounded by two annular (or ring-shaped) confinement regions 218 and 220. Layers 222 and 224 are structural barriers of lower index material between confinement regions (216, 218 and 220), commonly referred to as “cladding” regions. In one example, layers 222 and 224 may comprise rings of fluorosilicate; in some embodiments, the fluorosilicate

cladding layers are relatively thin. Other materials may be used as well, and claimed subject matter is not limited in this regard.

[0065] In an example, as beam 202 propagates along VBC fiber 200, perturbation assembly 210 may physically act on fiber 204 and/or beam 202 to adjust its beam characteristics and generate an adjusted beam 226. In the current example, the intensity distribution of beam 202 is modified by perturbation assembly 210. Subsequent to adjustment of beam 202, the intensity distribution of adjusted beam 226 may be concentrated in outer confinement regions 218 and 220 with relatively little intensity in the central confinement region 216. Because each of confinement regions 216, 218, and/or 220 is isolated by the thin layers of lower index material in barrier layers 222 and 224, second length of fiber 208 can substantially maintain the adjusted intensity distribution of adjusted beam 226. Adjusted beam 226 will typically become distributed azimuthally within a given confinement region (see e.g., FIGS. 7B, 8B, 9B, and 10B) but will not transition (significantly) between the confinement regions as it propagates along the second length of fiber 208. Thus, the adjusted beam characteristics of adjusted beam 226 are largely conserved within the isolated confinement regions 216, 218, and/or 220.

[0066] In one example, core confinement region 216 and annular confinement regions 218 and 220 may be composed of fused silica glass, and cladding 222 and 224 defining the confinement regions may be composed of fluorosilicate glass. Other materials may be used to form the various confinement regions (216, 218 and 220), including germanosilicate, phosphosilicate, aluminosilicate, or the like, or a combination thereof and claimed subject matter is not so limited. Other materials may be used to form the barrier rings (222 and 224), including fused silica, borosilicate, or the like or a combination thereof, and claimed subject matter is not so limited. In other embodiments, the optical fibers or waveguides include or are composed of various polymers or plastics or crystalline materials. Generally, the core confinement regions have refractive indices that are greater than the refractive indices of adjacent barrier/cladding regions.

[0067] In some examples, it may be desirable to increase a number of confinement regions in a second length of fiber to increase granularity of beam control over beam displacements for fine-tuning a beam profile. For example, confinement regions may be configured to provide stepwise beam displacement.

[0068] FIG. 3 illustrates an example method of perturbing fiber 200 for providing variable beam characteristics of an optical beam. Changing the bend radius of a fiber may change the radial beam position, divergence angle, and/or radiance profile of a beam within the fiber. The bend radius of VBC fiber 200 can be decreased from a first bend radius R_1 to a second bend radius R_2 about splice junction 206 by using a stepped mandrel or cone as perturbation assembly 210. Additionally or alternatively, the engagement length on the mandrel(s) or cone can be varied. Rollers 250 may be employed to engage VBC fiber 200 across perturbation assembly 210. In an example, an amount of engagement of rollers 250 with fiber 200 has been shown to shift the distribution of the intensity profile to the outer confinement regions 218 and 220 of fiber 200 with a fixed mandrel radius. There are a variety of other methods for varying the bend radius of fiber 200, such as using a clamping assembly, flexible tubing, or the like, or a combination thereof, and claimed subject matter is not limited in this regard. In another example, for a particular bend radius the length over which VBC fiber 200 is bent can also vary beam characteristics in a controlled and reproducible way. In examples, changing the bend radius and/or length over which the fiber is bent at a particular bend radius also modifies the intensity distribution of the beam such that one or more modes may be shifted radially away from the center of a fiber core.

[0069] Maintaining the bend radius of the fibers across junction 206 ensures that the adjusted beam characteristics such as radial beam position and radiance profile of optical beam 202 will not return to its unperturbed state before being launched into second length of fiber 208. Moreover, the adjusted radial beam characteristics, including position, divergence angle, and/or intensity distribution, of adjusted beam 226 can be varied based on an extent of decrease in the bend radius and/or the extent of the bent length of VBC fiber 200. Thus, specific beam characteristics may be obtained using this method.

[0070] In the current example, first length of fiber 204 having first RIP 212 is spliced at junction 206 to a second length of fiber 208 having a second RIP 214. However, it is possible to use a single fiber having a single RIP formed to enable perturbation (e.g., by micro-bending) of the beam characteristics of beam 202 and to enable conservation of the adjusted beam. Such a RIP may be similar to the RIPs shown in fibers illustrated in FIGS. 17, 18, and/or 19.

[0071] FIG. 4 is an example graph 400 illustrating the calculated profile of the lowest-order mode (LP_{01}) for a first length of fiber 204 for different fiber bend radii 402, wherein perturbation assembly 210 involves bending VBC fiber 200. As the fiber bend radius is decreased, an optical beam propagating in VBC fiber 200 is adjusted such that the mode shifts radially away from the center 404 of a VBC fiber 200 core ($r = 0$ micron) toward the core/cladding interface (located at $r = 100$ micron in this example). Higher-order modes (LP_{ln}) also shift with bending. Thus, for a straight or nearly straight fiber (very large bend radius), curve 406 for LP_{01} is centered at or near the center of VBC fiber 200. At a bend radius of about 6 cm, curve 408 for LP_{01} is shifted to a radial position of about $40 \mu\text{m}$ from the center 406 of VBC fiber 200. At a bend radius of about 5 cm, curve 410 for LP_{01} is shifted to a radial position about $50 \mu\text{m}$ from the center 406 of VBC fiber 200. At a bend radius of about 4 cm, curve 412 for LP_{01} is shifted to a radial position about $60 \mu\text{m}$ from the center 406 of VBC fiber 200. At a bend radius of about 3 cm, curve 414 for LP_{01} is shifted to a radial position about $80 \mu\text{m}$ from the center 406 of VBC fiber 200. At a bend radius of about 2.5 cm, a curve 416 for LP_{01} is shifted to a radial position about $85 \mu\text{m}$ from the center 406 of VBC fiber 200. Note that the shape of the mode remains relatively constant (until it approaches the edge of the core), which is a specific property of a parabolic RIP. Although, this property may be desirable in some situations, it is not required for the VBC functionality, and other RIPs may be employed.

[0072] In an example, if VBC fiber 200 is straightened, LP_{01} mode will shift back toward the center of the fiber. Thus, the purpose of second length of fiber 208 is to “trap” or confine the adjusted intensity distribution of the beam in a confinement region that is displaced from the center of the VBC fiber 200. The splice between fibers 204 and 208 is included in the bent region, thus the shifted mode profile will be preferentially launched into one of the ring-shaped confinement regions 218 and 220 or be distributed among the confinement regions. FIGS. 5 and 6 illustrate this effect.

[0073] Initially, in second length of fiber 208 shown in the example of FIGS. 5 and 6, confinement region 216 has a 100 micron diameter, confinement region 218 is between 120 micron and 200 micron in diameter, and confinement region 220 is between 220 micron and 300 micron diameter. Confinement regions 216, 218, and 220 are separated by $10 \mu\text{m}$ thick rings of fluorosilicate, providing an NA of 0.22 for the confinement regions. Other inner and outer diameters for the confinement

regions, thicknesses of the rings separating the confinement regions, NA values for the confinement regions, and numbers of confinement regions may be employed.

[0074] With the above-noted example dimensions, FIG. 5 illustrates a simulated example of a two-dimensional intensity distribution at junction 206 within second length of fiber 208 when VBC fiber 200 is nearly straight. A significant portion of LP_{01} and LP_{1n} is within confinement region 216 of fiber 208. When VBC fiber 200 is straight (e.g., unperturbed), about 90% of the power is contained within the central confinement region 216, and about 100% of the power is contained within confinement regions 216 and 218. In contrast, FIG. 6 shows a simulated example of a two-dimensional intensity distribution of adjusted optical beam 226 applied to junction 206 within second length of fiber 208 when VBC fiber 200 is bent. A significant portion of LP_{01} and LP_{1n} is within confinement region 220 of fiber 208 in response to VBC fiber 200 being bent with a radius chosen to preferentially excite confinement region 220 (the outermost confinement region) of second length of fiber 208. Thus, when fiber 200 is bent to preferentially excite second ring confinement region 220, nearly 75% of the power is contained within confinement region 220, and more than 95% of the power is contained within confinement regions 218 and 220. These calculations include LP_{01} and two higher-order modes, which are typical in some 2 – 4 kW fiber lasers. Specific RIPs, dimensions, and shapes of the confinement regions for the two fibers were assumed for the purpose of these calculations, but other RIPs, dimensions, and shapes are possible, and claimed subject matter is not limited in this regard.

[0075] It is clear from FIGS. 5 and 6 that, in the case where perturbation assembly 210 acts on VBC fiber 200 to bend the fiber, the state of the bend radius establishes the spatial overlap of the modal intensity distribution of the first length of fiber 204 with the different confinement regions (216, 218, and 220) of the second length of fiber 208. Changing the bend radius can thus change the intensity distribution at the output of the second length of fiber 208, thereby changing the diameter, spot size, or intensity profile of the beam, and thus changing its radiance and BPP value. This adjustment of the spot size may be accomplished in an all-fiber structure, involving no free-space optics and consequently may reduce or eliminate the disadvantages of free-space optics discussed above. Such adjustments can also be made with other perturbation assemblies that alter bend radius, bend length, fiber tension, temperature, micro-bending, or other perturbations discussed below.

[0076] In a typical materials processing system (e.g., a cutting or welding tool), the output of the process fiber is imaged at or near the workpiece by the process head. Varying the intensity distribution as shown in FIGS. 5 and 6 thus enables variation of the beam profile at the workpiece in order to tune and/or optimize the process, as desired. For example, FIGS. 7A, 8A, 9A, and 10A show, at junction 206, end views of second length of fiber 208 as different, progressively increasing amounts of perturbation are applied to VBC fiber 200 in response to perturbation assembly 210 acting on VBC fiber 200 to bend the fiber at various radii (i.e., decreasing of the bend radius). In these prophetic examples, a beam from a laser source could be launched into an input fiber (not shown) with a 40 micron core diameter. The input fiber would be spliced to first length of fiber 204. The exact implementation details however, will vary depending on the specifics of the application. In particular, the spatial profile and divergence distribution of the output beam and their dependence on bend radius (or other states of applied perturbation) will depend on the specific RIPs employed, on the splice parameters, and on the characteristics of the laser source launched into the first fiber.

[0077] Optical beam 202, whether adjusted or not, has an intensity distribution in which its area spatially overlaps one or more confinement regions. A selectable state of perturbation may be applied to moderately shift optical beam 202, change its BPP, or modify other beam characteristics (i.e., a change in how the aforementioned area spatially overlaps one or more confinement regions) so as to generate adjusted optical beam 226. Thus, different beam shapes may be generated based on the amount of perturbation applied to VBC fiber 200.

[0078] FIG. 7A shows a pictorial view of an input end (the end coupled at splice junction 206 to an output end of a first fiber) of fiber 208. Fiber 208 is shown receiving in its central coaxial confinement region 216 an optical beam 202 that is generally unperturbed so as to produce from it, at the output end of fiber 208, a Gaussian intensity distribution shown in FIG. 7B, which has a corresponding Gaussian intensity profile 720 shown in FIG. 7C. For example, when VBC fiber 200 is straight, a nearly Gaussian input beam shown in FIG. 7A is substantially confined to confinement region 216 so as to generate the desired Gaussian intensity distribution at the output. An initial, nominally unperturbed state maintains a generally Gaussian intensity profile having about 90% of its power contained within the central confinement region 216, whereas incremental changes in state may shift

the generally Gaussian distribution from lower to higher orders of a generally super-Gaussian distribution. Different states of perturbation may be used to change the Gaussian center, RMS width, or other Gaussian distribution parameters of Gaussian intensity profile 720, or to generate a super-Gaussian beam within central confinement region 216.

[0079] Despite excitation of portions of confinement regions from one side at splice junction 206, the results intensity distributions at the opposing side—shown at the output end in FIGS. 7B, 8B, 9B, and 10B—are nearly symmetric azimuthally because of scrambling within confinement regions as the beam propagates within the VBC fiber 200. Although the beam will typically scramble azimuthally as it propagates, various structures or perturbations (e.g., coils) could be included to facilitate this process.

[0080] In some embodiments, it may be desirable to have optical power of adjusted optical beam 226 divided among confinement regions 216, 218, and/or 220 rather than have it concentrated in a single region. In other words, particular confinement regions need not be exclusively excited. For example, as the bend radius is decreased, the intensity distribution at the input shifts to the larger diameters of confinement regions 218 and 220 located farther away from confinement region 216—see e.g., this shift is visible in FIGS. 8A, 9A, and 10A and the resulting output is shown in, respectively, FIGS. 8B, 9B, and 10B. The capability to distribute intensity across one or more confinement regions based on an amount of perturbation advantageously facilitates materials processing applications optimized by having a flatter (or distributed) beam intensity distribution. Other applications expecting more discrete excitation of a particular confinement region are also possible using different fiber RIPs to enable this feature.

[0081] FIG. 8A depicts the intensity distribution when the bend radius of VBC fiber 200 is chosen to shift the intensity distribution between confinement regions 216 and 218. In one example, the selected amount of applied perturbation is that which simultaneously shifts and expands optical beam 202 in forming the adjusted optical beam 226 so the area of its intensity distribution spatially overlaps the adjacent confinement regions. Thus, the input end of fiber 208 receives adjusted optical beam 226 in adjacent portions (e.g., neighboring portions optionally separated by lower-index cladding) of its central coaxial confinement region 216 and middle confinement region 218 so as to produce an output optical beam having a

generally super-Gaussian intensity distribution shown in FIG. 8B, which has a corresponding super-Gaussian intensity profile 820 shown in FIG. 8C.

[0082] In some embodiments, the aforementioned shift and expansion of optical beam 202 causes adjusted optical beam 226 to possess non-zero ellipticity (this phenomena is also simulated as adjusted optical beam 226 of FIG. 6.), which facilitates a more even intensity distribution across confinement regions, resulting in a relatively flat top of a relatively high-order super-Gaussian intensity profile 824. In contrast, less perturbation may be employed to generate a relatively low-order super-Gaussian intensity profile 826. Low-order super-Gaussian intensity profile 826 is formed, in some embodiments, by applying less perturbation so as to concentrate more intensity in central coaxial confinement region(s). Conversely, it should be readily appreciated that high-order super-Gaussian intensity profile 824 may approach a flat-top (i.e., a top-hat, for circular beams) intensity profile 830.

[0083] Skilled persons will appreciate that the higher the order of a super-Gaussian profile, the sharper its corners become as it eventually approximates an ideal flat-top. In practice, however, a flat-top profile maintains at least some rounding in its corners and is typically approximated as a high-order super-Gaussian profile rather than a strictly rectangular profile. Accordingly, a super-Gaussian beam profile having a substantially flat-top and Gaussian fall-off is more generally represented by the following equation:

$$I(r) = I_p e^{-\left(\frac{r}{w}\right)^{2n}}$$

where n is the order, r represents radial position, and I_p is peak intensity (on the beam axis) of a Gaussian beam having a Gaussian beam radius w .

[0084] Compared to the example of FIG. 8A, the example of FIG. 9A shows greater radial shift and less ellipticity, and thereby places more intensity away from region 216 and into region 218. As with the previous examples, the optimal amount of shift or ellipticity may be determined empirically, on an application-specific basis. For some applications, the bend radius may be further reduced and chosen to shift the intensity distribution more outward to confinement region 218 and confinement region 220, leaving less power density in the center and thereby approximating at the output a saddle-shaped distribution shown in FIG. 9B, which has a corresponding saddle-shaped intensity profile 920 shown in FIG. 9C. Profile 920 is generally defined by a bimodal shape that includes two local maxima 930 and a local

minimum 940 therebetween. In some embodiments, the local minimum may reach about zero intensity (which would be called a “donut” beam), whereas other embodiments maintain residual intensity at the local minimum.

[0085] FIG. 10A shows another pictorial view of the input end of fiber 208 primarily receiving in its outer coaxial confinement region 220 adjusted optical beam 226 so as to produce from it an output optical beam having a so-called donut mode shown in FIG. 10B, which has a corresponding intensity profile 1020 shown in FIG. 10C. In contrast to the previous examples, adjusted optical beam 226 also has a smaller diameter so as to concentrate intensity in outer coaxial confinement region 220. The smaller diameter is achieved, for example, using a RIP of a first fiber that is different from the RIP used in connection the previous examples shown in FIGS. 7B, 8B, and 9B.

[0086] Skilled persons will appreciate that the idealized graphs in FIGS. 7C, 8C, 9C, and 10C show smooth transitions. In practice, however, cladding between confinement regions introduces minor disruptions in intensity. These disruptions are, however, not so significant to fundamentally alter the character of selected beam shapes. In other words, a saddle shape, for example, need not possess a perfectly smooth bimodal profile to still serve its intended purpose.

[0087] Different fiber parameters from those shown in FIG. 2 may be used and still be within the scope of the claimed subject matter. Specifically, different RIPs and core sizes and shapes may be used to facilitate compatibility with different input beam profiles and to enable different output beam characteristics. Example RIPs for the first length of fiber, in addition to the parabolic-index profile shown in FIG. 2, include other graded-index profiles, step-index, pedestal designs (i.e., nested cores with progressively lower refractive indices with increasing distance from the center of the fiber), and designs with nested cores with the same refractive index value but with various NA values for the central core and the surrounding rings. Example RIPs for the second length of fiber, in addition to the profile shown in FIG. 2, include confinement fibers with different numbers of confinement regions, non-uniform confinement-region thicknesses, different and/or non-uniform values for the thicknesses of the rings surrounding the confinement regions, different and/or non-uniform NA values for the confinement regions, different refractive-index values for the high-index and low-index portions of the RIP, non-circular confinement regions (such as elliptical, oval, polygonal, square, rectangular, or combinations thereof), as

well as other designs as discussed in further detail with respect to FIGS. 26 – 28. Furthermore, VBC fiber 200 and other examples of a VBC fiber described herein are not restricted to use of two fibers. In some examples, implementation may include use of one fiber or more than two fibers. In some cases, the fiber(s) may not be axially uniform; for example, they could include fiber Bragg gratings or long-period gratings, or the diameter could vary along the length of the fiber. In addition, the fibers do not have to be azimuthally symmetric, e.g., the core(s) could have square or polygonal shapes. Various fiber coatings (buffers) may be employed, including high-index or index-matched coatings (which strip light at the glass-polymer interface) and low-index coatings (which guide light by total internal reflection at the glass-polymer interface). In some examples, multiple fiber coatings may be used on VBC fiber 200.

[0088] FIGS. 11 – 16 illustrate cross-sectional views of examples of first lengths of fiber for enabling adjustment of beam characteristics in a VBC fiber responsive to perturbation of an optical beam propagating in the first lengths of fiber. Some examples of beam characteristics that may be adjusted in the first length of fiber are: beam diameter, beam divergence distribution, BPP, intensity distribution, luminance, M^2 factor, NA, optical intensity profile, power density profile, radial beam position, radiance, spot size, or the like, or any combination thereof. The first lengths of fiber depicted in FIGS. 11 – 16 and described below are merely examples and do not provide an exhaustive recitation of the variety of first lengths of fiber that may be utilized to enable adjustment of beam characteristics in a VBC fiber assembly. Selection of materials, appropriate RIPs, and other variables for the first lengths of fiber illustrated in FIGS. 11 – 16 at least depend on a desired beam output. A wide variety of fiber variables are contemplated and are within the scope of the claimed subject matter. Thus, claimed subject matter is not limited by examples provided herein.

[0089] In FIG. 11 first length of fiber 1100 comprises a step-index profile 1102. FIG. 12 illustrates a first length of fiber 1200 comprising a “pedestal RIP” (i.e., a core comprising a step-index region surrounded by a larger step-index region) 1202. FIG. 13 illustrates a first length of fiber 1300 comprising a multiple-pedestal RIP 1302.

[0090] FIG. 14A illustrates a first length of fiber 1400 comprising a graded-index profile 1418 surrounded by a down-doped region 1404. When the fiber 1400 is

perturbed, modes may shift radially outward in fiber 1400 (e.g., during bending of fiber 1400). Graded-index profile 1402 may be designed to promote maintenance or even compression of modal shape. This design may promote adjustment of a beam propagating in fiber 1400 to generate a beam having a beam intensity distribution concentrated in an outer perimeter of the fiber (i.e., in a portion of the fiber core that is displaced from the fiber axis). As described above, when the adjusted beam is coupled into a second length of fiber having confinement regions, the intensity distribution of the adjusted beam may be trapped in the outermost confinement region, providing a donut shaped intensity distribution. A beam spot having a narrow outer confinement region may be useful to enable certain material processing actions.

[0091] FIG. 14B illustrates a first length of fiber 1406 comprising a graded-index profile 1414 surrounded by a down-doped region 1408 similar to that of fiber 1400. However, fiber 1406 includes a divergence structure 1410 (a lower-index region) as can be seen in profile 1412. The divergence structure 1410 is an area of material with a lower refractive index than that of the surrounding core. As the beam is launched into first length of fiber 1406, refraction from divergence structure 1410 causes the beam divergence to increase in first length of fiber 1406. The amount of increased divergence depends on the amount of spatial overlap of the beam with the divergence structure 1410 and the magnitude of the index difference between the divergence structure 1410 and the core material. Divergence structure 1410 can have a variety of shapes, depending on the input divergence distribution and desired output divergence distribution. In an example, divergence structure 1410 has a triangular or graded index shape.

[0092] FIG. 15 illustrates a first length of fiber 1500 comprising a parabolic-index central region 1502 surrounded by a constant-index region 1504. Between the constant-index region 1504 and the parabolic-index central region 1502 is a lower-index annular layer (or lower-index ring or annulus) 1506 surrounding the parabolic-index central region 1502. The lower-index annulus 1506 helps guide a beam propagating in fiber 1500. When the propagating beam is perturbed, modes shift radially outward in fiber 1500 (e.g., during bending of fiber 1500). As one or more modes shift radially outward, parabolic-index region 1502 promotes retention of modal shape. When the modes reach the constant-index region 1504 at outer portions of a RIP 1510, they will be compressed against the lower-index ring 1506,

which (in comparison to the first fiber RIP shown in FIGS. 14A and 14B) may cause preferential excitation of the outermost confinement region in the second fiber. In one implementation, this fiber design works with a confinement fiber having a central step-index core and a single annular core. The parabolic-index portion 1502 of the RIP 1510 overlaps with the central step-index core of the confinement fiber. The constant-index portion 1504 overlaps with the annular core of the confinement fiber. The constant-index portion 1504 of the first fiber is intended to make it easier to move the beam into overlap with the annular core by bending. This fiber design also works with other designs of the confinement fiber.

[0093] FIG. 16 illustrates a first length of fiber 1600 comprising guiding regions 1604, 1606, 1608, and 1616 bounded by lower-index layers 1610, 1612, and 1614 where the indexes of the lower-index layers 1610, 1612, and 1614 are stepped or, more generally, do not all have the same value. The stepped-index layers may serve to bound the beam intensity to certain guiding regions (1604, 1606, 1608, and 1616) when the perturbation assembly 210 (see FIG. 2) acts on the fiber 1600. In this way, adjusted beam light may be trapped in the guiding regions over a range of perturbation actions (such as over a range of bend radii, a range of bend lengths, a range of micro-bending pressures, and/or a range of acousto-optical signals), allowing for a certain degree of perturbation tolerance before a beam intensity distribution is shifted to a more distant radial position in fiber 1600. Thus, variation in beam characteristics may be controlled in a step-wise fashion. The radial widths of the guiding regions 1604, 1606, 1608, and 1616 may be adjusted to achieve a desired ring width, as may be required by an application. Also, a guiding region can have a thicker radial width to facilitate trapping of a larger fraction of the incoming beam profile if desired. Region 1606 is an example of such a design.

[0094] FIGS. 17 – 21 depict examples of fibers configured to enable maintenance and/or confinement of adjusted beam characteristics in the second length of fiber (e.g., fiber 208). These fiber designs are referred to as “ring-shaped confinement fibers” because they contain a central core surrounded by annular or ring-shaped cores. These designs are merely examples and not an exhaustive recitation of the variety of fiber RIPs that may be used to enable maintenance and/or confinement of adjusted beam characteristics within a fiber. Thus, claimed subject matter is not limited to the examples provided herein. Moreover, any of the first lengths of fiber

described above with respect to FIGS. 11 – 16 may be combined with any of the second length of fiber described FIGS. 17 – 21.

[0095] FIG. 17 illustrates a cross-sectional view of an example second length of fiber for maintaining and/or confining adjusted beam characteristics in a VBC fiber assembly. As the perturbed beam is coupled from a first length of fiber to a second length of fiber 1700, the second length of fiber 1700 may maintain at least a portion of the beam characteristics adjusted in response to perturbation in the first length of fiber within one or more of confinement regions 1704, 1706, and/or 1708. Fiber 1700 has a RIP 1702. Each of confinement regions 1704, 1706, and/or 1708 is bounded by a lower index layer 1710 and/or 1712. This design enables second length of fiber 1700 to maintain the adjusted beam characteristics. As a result, a beam output by fiber 1700 will substantially maintain the received adjusted beam as modified in the first length of fiber giving the output beam adjusted beam characteristics, which may be customized to a processing task or other application.

[0096] Similarly, FIG. 18 depicts a cross-sectional view of an example second length of fiber 1800 for maintaining and/or confining beam characteristics adjusted in response to perturbation in the first length of fiber in a VBC fiber assembly. Fiber 1800 has a RIP 1802. However, confinement regions 1808, 1810, and/or 1812 have different thicknesses from the thicknesses of confinement regions 1704, 1706, and 1708. Each of confinement regions 1808, 1810, and/or 1812 is bounded by a lower index layer 1804 and/or 1806. Varying the thicknesses of the confinement regions (and/or barrier regions) enables tailoring or optimization of a confined adjusted radiance profile by selecting particular radial positions within which to confine an adjusted beam.

[0097] FIG. 19 depicts a cross-sectional view of an example second length of fiber 1900 having a RIP 1902 for maintaining and/or confining an adjusted beam in a VBC fiber assembly configured to provide variable beam characteristics. In this example, the number and thicknesses of confinement regions 1904, 1906, 1908, and 1910 are different from those of fiber 1700 and 1800; and the barrier layers 1912, 1914, and 1916 are of varied thicknesses as well. Furthermore, confinement regions 1904, 1906, 1908, and 1910 have different indexes of refraction; and barrier layers 1912, 1914, and 1916 have different indexes of refraction as well. This design may further enable a more granular or optimized tailoring of the confinement and/or maintenance of an adjusted beam radiance to particular radial locations within fiber

1900. As the perturbed beam is launched from a first length of fiber to second length of fiber 1900, the modified beam characteristics of the beam (having an adjusted intensity distribution, radial position, and/or divergence angle, or the like, or a combination thereof) is confined within a specific radius by one or more of confinement regions 1904, 1906, 1908, and/or 1910 of second length of fiber 1900.

[0098] As noted previously, the divergence angle of a beam may be conserved or adjusted and then conserved in the second length of fiber. There are a variety of methods to change the divergence angle of a beam. The following are examples of fibers configured to enable adjustment of the divergence angle of a beam propagating from a first length of fiber to a second length of fiber in a fiber assembly for varying beam characteristics. However, these are merely examples and not an exhaustive recitation of the variety of methods that may be used to enable adjustment of divergence of a beam. Thus, claimed subject matter is not limited to the examples provided herein.

[0099] FIG. 20 depicts a cross-sectional view of an example second length of fiber 2000 having a RIP 2002 for modifying, maintaining, and/or confining beam characteristics adjusted in response to perturbation in the first length of fiber. In this example, second length of fiber 2000 is similar to the previously described second lengths of fiber and forms a portion of the VBC fiber assembly for delivering variable beam characteristics as discussed above. There are three confinement regions 2004, 2006, and 2008 and three barrier layers 2010, 2012, and 2016. Second length of fiber 2000 also has a divergence structure 2014 situated within the confinement region 2006. The divergence structure 2014 is an area of material with a lower refractive index than that of the surrounding confinement region. As the beam is launched into second length of fiber 2000, refraction from divergence structure 2014 causes the beam divergence to increase in second length of fiber 2000. The amount of increased divergence depends on the amount of spatial overlap of the beam with the divergence structure 2014 and the magnitude of the index difference between the divergence structure 2014 and the core material. By adjusting the radial position of the beam near the launch point into the second length of fiber 2000, the divergence distribution may be varied. The adjusted divergence of the beam is conserved in fiber 2000, which is configured to deliver the adjusted beam to the process head, another optical system (e.g., fiber-to-fiber coupler or fiber-to-fiber switch), the workpiece, or the like, or a combination thereof. In an example,

divergence structure 2014 may have an index dip of about $10^{-5} - 3 \times 10^{-2}$ with respect to the surrounding material. Other values of the index dip may be employed within the scope of this disclosure, and claimed subject matter is not so limited.

[0100] FIG. 21 depicts a cross-sectional view of an example second length of fiber 2100 having a RIP 2102 for modifying, maintaining, and/or confining beam characteristics adjusted in response to perturbation in the first length of fiber. Second length of fiber 2100 forms a portion of a VBC fiber assembly for delivering a beam having variable characteristics. In this example, there are three confinement regions 2104, 2106, and 2108 and three barrier layers 2110, 2112, and 2116. Second length of fiber 2100 also has a plurality of divergence structures 2114 and 2118. The divergence structures 2114 and 2118 are areas of graded lower index material. As the beam is launched from the first length fiber into second length of fiber 2100, refraction from divergence structures 2114 and 2118 causes the beam divergence to increase. The amount of increased divergence depends on the amount of spatial overlap of the beam with the divergence structure and the magnitude of the index difference between the divergence structure 2114 and/or 2118 and the surrounding core material of confinement regions 2106 and 2104 respectively. By adjusting the radial position of the beam near the launch point into the second length of fiber 2100, the divergence distribution may be varied. The design shown in FIG. 21 allows the intensity distribution and the divergence distribution to be varied somewhat independently by selecting both a particular confinement region and the divergence distribution within that confinement region (because each confinement region may include a divergence structure). The adjusted divergence of the beam is conserved in fiber 2100, which is configured to deliver the adjusted beam to the process head, another optical system, or the workpiece. Forming the divergence structures 2114 and 2118 with a graded or non-constant index enables tuning of the divergence profile of the beam propagating in fiber 2100. An adjusted beam characteristic such as a radiance profile and/or divergence profile may be conserved as it is delivered to a process head by the second fiber. Alternatively, an adjusted beam characteristic such as a radiance profile and/or divergence profile may be conserved or further adjusted as it is routed by the second fiber through a fiber-to-fiber coupler (FFC) and/or fiber-to-fiber switch (FFS) and to a process fiber, which delivers the beam to the process head or the workpiece.

[0101] FIGS. 26 – 28 are cross-sectional views illustrating examples of fibers and fiber RIPs configured to enable maintenance and/or confinement of adjusted beam characteristics of a beam propagating in an azimuthally asymmetric second length of fiber, wherein the beam characteristics are adjusted responsive to perturbation of a first length of fiber coupled to the second length of fiber and/or perturbation of the beam by a perturbation device 110. These azimuthally asymmetric designs are merely examples and are not an exhaustive recitation of the variety of fiber RIPs that may be used to enable maintenance and/or confinement of adjusted beam characteristics within an azimuthally asymmetric fiber. Thus, claimed subject matter is not limited to the examples provided herein. Moreover, any of a variety of first lengths of fiber (e.g., like those described above) may be combined with any azimuthally asymmetric second length of fiber (e.g., like those described in FIGS. 26 – 28).

[0102] FIG. 26 illustrates RIPs at various azimuthal angles of a cross-section through an elliptical fiber 2600. At a first azimuthal angle 2602, fiber 2600 has a first RIP 2604. At a second azimuthal angle 2606 that is rotated 45° from first azimuthal angle 2602, fiber 2600 has a second RIP 2608. At a third azimuthal angle 2610 that is rotated another 45° from second azimuthal angle 2606, fiber 2600 has a third RIP 2612. First, second, and third RIPs 2604, 2608, and 2612 are all different.

[0103] FIG. 27 illustrates RIPs at various azimuthal angles of a cross-section through a multicore fiber 2700. At a first azimuthal angle 2702, fiber 2700 has a first RIP 2704. At a second azimuthal angle 2706, fiber 2700 has a second RIP 2708. First and second RIPs 2704 and 2708 are different. In an example, perturbation device 110 may act in multiple planes in order to launch the adjusted beam into different regions of an azimuthally asymmetric second fiber.

[0104] FIG. 28 illustrates RIPs at various azimuthal angles of a cross-section through a fiber 2800 having at least one crescent shaped core. In some cases, the corners of the crescent may be rounded, flattened, or otherwise shaped, which may minimize optical loss. At a first azimuthal angle 2802, fiber 2800 has a first RIP 2804. At a second azimuthal angle 2806, fiber 2800 has a second RIP 2808. First and second RIPs 2804 and 2808 are different.

[0105] FIG. 22A illustrates an example of a laser system 2200 including a VBC fiber assembly 2202 configured to provide variable beam characteristics. VBC fiber assembly 2202 comprises a first length of fiber 104, a second length of fiber 108,

and a perturbation device 110. VBC fiber assembly 2202 is disposed between feeding fiber 2212 (i.e., the output fiber from the laser source) and VBC delivery fiber 2240. VBC delivery fiber 2240 may comprise second length of fiber 108 or an extension of second length of fiber 108 that modifies, maintains, and/or confines adjusted beam characteristics. Beam 2210 is coupled into VBC fiber assembly 2202 via feeding fiber 2212. Fiber assembly 2202 is configured to vary the characteristics of beam 2210 in accordance with the various examples described above. The output of fiber assembly 2202 is adjusted beam 2214, which is coupled into VBC delivery fiber 2240. VBC delivery fiber 2240 delivers adjusted beam 2214 to a free-space optics assembly 2208, which then couples beam 2214 into a process fiber 2204. Adjusted beam 2214 is then delivered to process head 2206 by process fiber 2204. The process head can include guided wave optics (such as fibers and fiber coupler), free space optics (such as lenses, mirrors, optical filters, diffraction gratings), and/or beam scan assemblies (such as galvanometer scanners, polygonal mirror scanners, or other scanning systems) that are used to shape the beam 2214 and deliver the shaped beam to a workpiece.

[0106] In laser system 2200, one or more of the free-space optics of assembly 2208 may be disposed in an FFC or other beam coupler 2216 to perform a variety of optical manipulations of an adjusted beam 2214 (represented in FIG. 22A with different dashing from that of beam 2210). For example, free-space optics assembly 2208 may preserve the adjusted beam characteristics of beam 2214. Process fiber 2204 may have the same RIP as VBC delivery fiber 2240. Thus, the adjusted beam characteristics of adjusted beam 2214 may be preserved all the way to process head 2206. Process fiber 2204 may comprise a RIP similar to any of the second lengths of fiber described above, including confinement regions.

[0107] Alternatively, as illustrated in FIG. 22B, free-space optics assembly 2208 may change the adjusted beam characteristics of beam 2214 by, for example, increasing or decreasing the divergence and/or the spot size of beam 2214 (e.g., by magnifying or demagnifying beam 2214) and/or otherwise further modifying adjusted beam 2214. Furthermore, process fiber 2204 may have a different RIP than VBC delivery fiber 2240. Accordingly, the RIP of process fiber 2204 may be selected to preserve additional adjustment of adjusted beam 2214 made by the free-space optics of assembly 2208 to generate a twice adjusted beam 2224 (represented in FIG. 22B with different dashing from that of beam 2214).

[0108] FIG. 23 illustrates an example of a laser system 2300 including VBC fiber assembly 2302 disposed between a feeding fiber 2312 and a VBC delivery fiber 2340. During operation, a beam 2310 is coupled into VBC fiber assembly 2302 via feeding fiber 2312. Fiber assembly 2302 includes a first length of fiber 104, a second length of fiber 108, and a perturbation device 110 and is configured to vary characteristics of beam 2310 in accordance with the various examples described above. Fiber assembly 2302 generates an adjusted beam 2314 output by VBC delivery fiber 2340. VBC delivery fiber 2340 comprises a second length of fiber 108 of fiber for modifying, maintaining, and/or confining adjusted beam characteristics in a fiber assembly 2302 in accordance with the various examples described above (see FIGS. 17 – 21, for example). VBC delivery fiber 2340 couples adjusted beam 2314 into a beam switch (FFS) 2332, which then couples its various output beams to one or more of multiple process fibers 2304, 2320, and 2322. Process fibers 2304, 2320, and 2322 deliver adjusted beams 2314, 2328, and 2330 to respective process heads 2306, 2324, and 2326.

[0109] In an example, beam switch 2332 includes one or more sets of free-space optics 2308, 2316, and 2318 configured to perform a variety of optical manipulations of adjusted beam 2314. Free-space optics 2308, 2316, and 2318 may preserve or vary adjusted beam characteristics of beam 2314. Thus, adjusted beam 2314 may be maintained by the free-space optics or adjusted further. Process fibers 2304, 2320, and 2322 may have the same or a different RIP as that of VBC delivery fiber 2340, depending on whether it is desirable to preserve or further modify a beam passing from the free-space optics assemblies 2308, 2316, and 2318 to respective process fibers 2304, 2320, and 2322. In other examples, one or more beam portions of beam 2310 are coupled to a workpiece without adjustment, or different beam portions are coupled to respective VBC fiber assemblies so that beam portions associated with a plurality of beam characteristics can be provided for simultaneous workpiece processing. Alternatively, beam 2310 can be switched to one or more of a set of VBC fiber assemblies.

[0110] Routing adjusted beam 2314 through any of free-space optics assemblies 2308, 2316, and 2318 enables delivery of a variety of additionally adjusted beams to process heads 2206, 2324, and 2326. Therefore, laser system 2300 provides additional degrees of freedom for varying the characteristics of a beam, as well as

switching the beam between process heads (“time sharing”) and/or delivering the beam to multiple process heads simultaneously (“power sharing”).

[0111] For example, free-space optics in beam switch 2332 may direct adjusted beam 2314 to free-space optics assembly 2316 configured to preserve the adjusted characteristics of beam 2314. Process fiber 2304 may have the same RIP as that of VBC delivery fiber 2340. Thus, the beam delivered to process head 2306 will be a preserved adjusted beam 2314.

[0112] In another example, beam switch 2332 may direct adjusted beam 2314 to free-space optics assembly 2318 configured to preserve the adjusted characteristics of adjusted beam 2314. Process fiber 2320 may have a different RIP from that of VBC delivery fiber 2340 and may be configured with divergence altering structures as described with respect to FIGS. 20 and 21 to provide additional adjustments to the divergence distribution of beam 2314. Thus, the beam delivered to process head 2324 will be a twice adjusted beam 2328 having a different beam divergence profile from that of adjusted beam 2314.

[0113] Process fibers 2304, 2320, and/or 2322 may comprise a RIP similar to any of the second lengths of fiber described above, including confinement regions or a wide variety of other RIPs, and claimed subject matter is not limited in this regard.

[0114] In yet another example, free-space optics switch 2332 may direct adjusted beam 2314 to free-space optics assembly 2308 configured to change the beam characteristics of adjusted beam 2314. Process fiber 2322 may have a different RIP from that of VBC delivery fiber 2340 and may be configured to preserve (or alternatively further modify) the new further adjusted characteristics of beam 2314. Thus, the beam delivered to process head 2326 will be a twice adjusted beam 2330 having different beam characteristics (due to the adjusted divergence profile and/or intensity profile) from those of adjusted beam 2314.

[0115] In FIGS. 22A, 22B, and 23, the optics in the FFC or FFS may adjust the spatial profile and/or divergence profile by magnifying or demagnifying the beam 2214 before launching into the process fiber. They may also adjust the spatial profile and/or divergence profile via other optical transformations. They may also adjust the launch position into the process fiber. These methods may be used alone or in combination.

[0116] FIGS. 22A, 22B, and 23 merely provide examples of combinations of adjustments to beam characteristics using free-space optics and various

combinations of fiber RIPs to preserve or modify adjusted beams 2214 and 2314. The examples provided above are not exhaustive and are meant for illustrative purposes only. Thus, claimed subject matter is not limited in this regard.

[0117] FIG. 24 illustrates various examples of perturbation devices, assemblies or methods (for simplicity referred to collectively herein as “perturbation device 110”) for perturbing a VBC fiber 200 and/or an optical beam propagating in VBC fiber 200 according to various examples provided herein. Perturbation device 110 may be any of a variety of devices, methods, and/or assemblies configured to enable adjustment of beam characteristics of a beam propagating in VBC fiber 200 in response to application of one or more of various states of perturbation. Some examples of various states of perturbation that may be applied to VBC fiber 200 include, but are not limited to, amount or direction of bending, lateral mechanical stress, acoustic wave oscillation-induced mechanical pressure, temperature variation, piezo-electric transducer displacement, and varying periodicity or amplitude of refractive grating. A variation in one or more states establishes a different state of perturbation. To vary one or more of these states, perturbation device 110 may be a mandrel 2402, a micro-bend 2404 in the VBC fiber, flexible tubing 2406, an acousto-optic transducer 2408, a thermal device 2410, a piezo-electric device 2412, a grating 2414, a clamp 2416 (or other fastener), or the like, or any combination thereof. These are merely examples of perturbation devices 100 and not an exhaustive listing of perturbation devices 100, and claimed subject matter is not limited in this regard.

[0118] Mandrel 2402 may be used to perturb VBC fiber 200 by providing a form about which VBC fiber 200 may be bent. As discussed above, reducing the bend radius of VBC fiber 200 moves the intensity distribution of the beam radially outward. In some examples, mandrel 2402 may be stepped or conically shaped to provide discrete bend radii levels. Alternatively, mandrel 2402 may comprise a cone shape without steps to provide continuous bend radii for more granular control of the bend radius. The radius of curvature of mandrel 2402 may be constant (e.g., a cylindrical form) or non-constant (e.g., an oval-shaped form). Similarly, flexible tubing 2406, clamps 2416 (or other varieties of fasteners), or rollers 250 may be used to guide and control the bending of VBC fiber 200 about mandrel 2402. Furthermore, changing the length over which the fiber is bent at a particular bend radius also may modify the intensity distribution of the beam. VBC fiber 200 and mandrel 2402 may be configured to change the intensity distribution within the first fiber predictably

(e.g., in proportion to the length over which the fiber is bent and/or the bend radius). Rollers 250 may move up and down along a track 2442 on a platform 2434 to change the bend radius of VBC fiber 200.

[0119] Clamps 2416 (or other fasteners) may be used to guide and control the bending of VBC fiber 200 with or without a mandrel 2402. Clamps 2416 may move up and down along a track 2442 or a platform 2446. Clamps 2416 may also swivel to change bend radius, tension, or direction of VBC fiber 200. A controller 2448 may control the movement of clamps 2416.

[0120] In another example, perturbation device 110 may be flexible tubing 2406 and may guide bending of VBC fiber 200 with or without a mandrel 2402. Flexible tubing 2406 may encase VBC fiber 200. Tubing 2406 may be made of a variety of materials and may be manipulated using piezoelectric transducers controlled by a controller 2444. In another example, clamps or other fasteners may be used to move flexible tubing 2406.

[0121] Micro-bend 2404 in VBC fiber is a local perturbation caused by lateral mechanical stress on the fiber. Micro-bending can cause mode coupling and/or transitions from one confinement region to another confinement region within a fiber, resulting in varied beam characteristics of the beam propagating in a VBC fiber 200. Mechanical stress may be applied by an actuator 2436 that is controlled by controller 2440. However, this is merely an example of a method for inducing mechanical stress in fiber 200 and claimed subject matter is not limited in this regard.

[0122] Acousto-optic transducer (AOT) 2408 may be used to induce perturbation of a beam propagating in the VBC fiber using an acoustic wave. The perturbation is caused by the modification of the refractive index of the fiber by the oscillating mechanical pressure of an acoustic wave. The period and strength of the acoustic wave are related to the acoustic wave frequency and amplitude, allowing dynamic control of the acoustic perturbation. Thus, a perturbation assembly 110 including AOT 2408 may be configured to vary the beam characteristics of a beam propagating in the fiber. In an example, a piezo-electric transducer 2418 may create the acoustic wave and may be controlled by a controller or driver 2420. The acoustic wave induced in AOT 2408 may be modulated to change and/or control the beam characteristics of the optical beam in VBC 200 in real-time. However, this is merely an example of a method for creating and controlling an AOT 2408, and claimed subject matter is not limited in this regard.

[0123] Thermal device 2410 may be used to induce perturbation of a beam propagating in VBC fiber using heat. The perturbation is caused by the modification of the RIP of the fiber induced by heat. Perturbation may be dynamically controlled by controlling an amount of heat transferred to the fiber and the length over which the heat is applied. Thus, a perturbation assembly 110 including thermal device 2410 may be configured to vary a range of beam characteristics. Thermal device 2410 may be controlled by a controller 2450.

[0124] Piezo-electric transducer 2412 may be used to induce perturbation of a beam propagating in a VBC fiber using piezoelectric action. The perturbation is caused by the modification of the RIP of the fiber induced by a piezoelectric material attached to the fiber. The piezoelectric material in the form of a jacket around the bare fiber may apply tension or compression to the fiber, modifying its refractive index via the resulting changes in density. Perturbation may be dynamically controlled by controlling a voltage to the piezo-electric device 2412. Thus, a perturbation assembly 110 including piezo-electric transducer 2412 may be configured to vary the beam characteristics over a particular range.

[0125] In an example, piezo-electric transducer 2412 may be configured to displace VBC fiber 200 in a variety of directions (e.g., axially, radially, and/or laterally) depending on a variety of factors, including how the piezo-electric transducer 2412 is attached to VBC fiber 200, the direction of the polarization of the piezo-electric materials, the applied voltage, etc. Additionally, bending of VBC fiber 200 is possible using the piezo-electric transducer 2412. For example, driving a length of piezo-electric material having multiple segments comprising opposing electrodes can cause a piezoelectric transducer 2412 to bend in a lateral direction. Voltage applied to piezoelectric transducer 2412 by an electrode 2424 may be controlled by a controller 2422 to control displacement of VBC fiber 200. Displacement may be modulated to change and/or control the beam characteristics of the optical beam in VBC 200 in real-time. However, this is merely an example of a method of controlling displacement of a VBC fiber 200 using a piezo-electric transducer 2412 and claimed subject matter is not limited in this regard.

[0126] Gratings 2414 may be used to induce perturbation of a beam propagating in a VBC fiber 200. A grating 2414 can be written into a fiber by inscribing a periodic variation of the refractive index into the core. Gratings 2414 such as fiber Bragg gratings can operate as optical filters or as reflectors. A long-period grating can

induce transitions among co-propagating fiber modes. The radiance, intensity profile, and/or divergence profile of a beam comprised of one or more modes can thus be adjusted using a long-period grating to couple one or more of the original modes to one or more different modes having different radiance and/or divergence profiles. Adjustment is achieved by varying the periodicity or amplitude of the refractive index grating. Methods such as varying the temperature, bend radius, and/or length (e.g., stretching) of the fiber Bragg grating can be used for such adjustment. VBC fiber 200 having gratings 2414 may be coupled to a stage 2426. Stage 2426 may be configured to execute any of a variety of functions and may be controlled by a controller 2428. For example, stage 2426 may be coupled to VBC fiber 200 with fasteners 2430 and may be configured to stretch and/or bend VBC fiber 200 using fasteners 2430 for leverage. Stage 2426 may have an embedded thermal device and may change the temperature of VBC fiber 200.

[0127] FIG. 25 illustrates an example process 2500 for adjusting and/or maintaining beam characteristics within a fiber without the use of free-space optics to adjust the beam characteristics. In block 2502, a first length of fiber and/or an optical beam are perturbed to adjust one or more optical beam characteristics. Process 2500 moves to block 2504, where the optical beam is launched into a second length of fiber. Process 2500 moves to block 2506, where the optical beam having the adjusted beam characteristics is propagated in the second length of fiber. Process 2500 moves to block 2508, where at least a portion of the one or more beam characteristics of the optical beam are maintained within one or more confinement regions of the second length of fiber. The first and second lengths of fiber may be comprised of the same fiber, or they may be different fibers.

[0128] FIG. 29 shows a beam shaper system 2900 implemented with an optical beam delivery device 2902 in the form of a VBC fiber 2906, which is constructed in accordance with the disclosed paradigm represented by example VBC fiber 100 (see e.g., FIG. 1 for additional details). For conciseness, some previously described details of FIG. 1 are further simplified and, therefore, not reproduced in FIG. 29. Note also that subscripts "A," "B," "C," and "D" represent different selectable configurations of beam shaper system 2900, which are explained in the following paragraphs.

[0129] A laser source 2910 emits optical beam 102 (FIG. 1) propagating in a first length of fiber 2912, which corresponds to first length of fiber 104 (FIG. 1). Optical beam 102 is incident on VBC fiber 2906. Perturbation device 110 operating in

combination with, and applying different states (e.g., different amounts or directions) of perturbation to, VBC fiber 2906 directs the fiber mode to different corresponding confinement regions of a second length of fiber 2920, which corresponds to second length of fiber 108 (FIG. 1).

[0130] As described previously with reference to FIG. 24, a controller 2930 enables beam shaper system 2900 to selectively move the fiber mode, i.e., the intensity distribution, of optical beam 102 to different areas at an input of second length of fiber 2920. In some embodiments, controller 2930 comprises a computer workstation having input–output (I/O) devices suitable for establishing a signal interface with perturbation device 110 so as to signal states of perturbation that correspond to desired beam shapes indicated through, e.g., user input. Skilled persons will appreciate that controller 2930 may include a central processing unit (CPU), field-programmable gate array (FPGA), or other control devices suitable for performing logic operations. Controller 2930 may also include a non-transitory machine readable storage medium storing instructions thereon that, when executed, cause controller 2930 to perform any methods or operations described in this disclosure.

[0131] In a first “A” configuration, controller 2930 signals perturbation device 110 to apply a first state of perturbation to VBC fiber 2906 and thereby establish a first selected intensity profile 2940_A at an output end of second length of fiber 2920. An output beam having first selected intensity profile 2940_A is then delivered by a process head 2950 to a workpiece 2960.

[0132] In a subsequent “B” configuration, controller 2930 signals perturbation device 110 to apply a second state of perturbation, different from the first state, to VBC fiber 2906 and thereby establish a second selected intensity profile 2940_B, different from first selected intensity profile 2940_A, at the output end of second length of fiber 2920. Thus, perturbation device 110, in response to control signals from controller 2930, applies to VBC fiber 2906 a selected amount or direction of bend that shifts the fiber mode to a different area of confinement regions (c.f., different areas shown in FIGS. 7A, 8A, 9A, and 10A) and thereby provides a means of establishing, at an output of second length of fiber 2920, different selectable intensity profiles 2970.

[0133] Different intensity profiles 2970 are selectable based on different material properties. According to some embodiments, a change from one perturbation state

to another state is configured indirectly, e.g., in response to a selected change 2980 in either a type of material to be processed or an indirectly related calibration setting for material of the same or different types than that of workpiece 2960. In other embodiments, a change from one perturbation state to another state is configured directly, e.g., by a direct selection 2990 of a desired beam shape (i.e., potentially irrespective of material). Thus, a user may simply select a material or a beam shape through a selection interface 2996 provided by, e.g., controller 2930, so as to dynamically change beam shape. The change may also be made fully or partly autonomously. For conciseness, a resulting intensity profile selected directly or indirectly is simply referred to as a selected intensity profile. Furthermore, skilled persons will appreciate that a selection of an intensity distribution is equivalent to a selection of an intensity profile—particularly since, in an azimuthally symmetric set of confinement regions, a given intensity profile is generally the same across any radial cross-sectional position among of the set of confinement regions.

[0134] Having described and illustrated the general and specific principles of examples of the presently disclosed technology, it should be apparent that the examples may be modified in arrangement and detail without departing from such principles. We claim all modifications and variation coming within the spirit and scope of the following claims.

CLAIMS

1. An optical beam delivery device configured to generate, from an optical beam, selectable intensity profiles, the optical beam delivery device comprising:

a first length of fiber having a first refractive index profile (RIP), the first RIP enabling, in response to an applied perturbation, modification of the optical beam to form an adjusted optical beam, the adjusted optical beam defining, at an output end of the first length of fiber, different intensity distributions based on different states of the applied perturbation; and

a second length of fiber having an input end coupled to the output end of the first length of fiber, the second length of fiber formed with coaxial confinement regions defining a second RIP that is different from the first RIP, the coaxial confinement regions arranged to confine at least a portion of the adjusted optical beam, the confined portion corresponding to an intensity distribution of the different intensity distributions, and in which the intensity distribution is established by a corresponding state of the different states of the applied perturbation such that the confined portion is configured to provide, at an output of the second length of fiber, a selected intensity profile of the selectable intensity profiles.

2. The optical beam delivery device of claim 1, in which the selected intensity profile is a Gaussian intensity profile.

3. The optical beam delivery device of claim 2, in which the corresponding state of the different states of the applied perturbation establishing the Gaussian intensity profile includes an unperturbed state of the first length of fiber.

4. The optical beam delivery device of claim 2, in which a central core of the coaxial confinement regions is configured to provide the confined portion having the Gaussian intensity profile.

5. The optical beam delivery device of claim 1, in which the selected intensity profile is a super-Gaussian intensity profile.

6. The optical beam delivery device of claim 1 or 5, in which the coaxial confinement regions comprise a central core and an annular region encompassing the central core, and in which the corresponding state of the different states of the applied perturbation is that which shifts, expands, or simultaneously shifts and expands the optical beam in forming the adjusted optical beam so that the intensity

distribution which results at the input of the second length of fiber spatially overlaps adjacent portions of the central core and the annular region.

7. The optical beam delivery device of claim 1, in which the selected intensity profile is a flat-top intensity profile.

8. The optical beam delivery device of claim 1, in which the selected intensity profile is a saddle-shaped intensity profile.

9. The optical beam delivery device any one of claim 1, 5, or 8, in which the coaxial confinement regions comprise a central core and an annular region encompassing the central core, and in which the intensity distribution spatially overlaps an outer portion of the central core and an inner portion of the annular region.

10. The optical beam delivery device of claim 1, in which the selected intensity profile is a donut-shaped intensity profile.

11. The optical beam delivery device of any one of claim 1, 8 or 10, in which the selected intensity profile includes a local minimum between bimodal local maxima.

12. A beam shaper system, comprising:
a laser source to provide an optical beam;
a variable beam characteristics (VBC) fiber including first and second lengths of fiber coupled to each other and having, respectively, first and second refractive index profiles (RIPs) that are different from each other, the first RIP enabling, in response to perturbation applied to the VBC fiber, modification of the optical beam to form an adjusted optical beam exhibiting at an input of the second length of fiber an intensity distribution that is adjustable based on different states of the perturbation applied, and the second RIP defined by coaxial confinement regions arranged to confine at least a portion of the adjusted optical beam that corresponds to the intensity distribution; and

a controller operatively coupled to the VBC fiber and configured to control the different states of the perturbation so as to establish different selectable intensity profiles that the confined portion of the adjusted optical beam is configured to provide at an output of the second length of fiber.

13. The beam shaper system of claim 12, in which one of the different selectable intensity profiles is a Gaussian intensity profile.

14. The beam shaper system of claim 12, in which one of the different selectable intensity profiles is a super-Gaussian intensity profile.

15. The beam shaper system of claim 12, in which one of the different selectable intensity profiles is a saddle-shaped intensity profile.

16. The beam shaper system of claim 12, in which one of the different selectable intensity profiles is a donut-shaped intensity profile.

17. A method of generating, from an optical beam, different beam shapes defined by selectable intensity profiles, comprising:

receiving the optical beam at a variable beam characteristics (VBC) fiber including first and second lengths of fiber coupled to each other and having, respectively, first and second refractive index profiles (RIPs) that are different from each other, the first RIP enabling, in response to a selected state of perturbation applied to the VBC fiber, modification of the optical beam to form an adjusted optical beam that is adjustable based on the selected state of applied perturbation, and the second RIP defined by coaxial confinement regions arranged to confine at least a portion of the adjusted optical beam;

applying a first state of perturbation to the VBC fiber to establish a first selected intensity profile at an output end of the second length of fiber; and

applying a second state of perturbation, different from the first state, to the VBC fiber to establish a second selected intensity profile, different from the first selected intensity profile, at the output end of the second length of fiber.

18. The method of claim 17, in which the first selected intensity profile is a generally Gaussian intensity profile, and the second intensity profile is a generally super-Gaussian profile.

19. The method of claim 17, in which the second state of perturbation is a magnitude of perturbation that is greater than that of the first state.

20. The method of claim 17, in which the first selected intensity profile is a generally saddle-shaped intensity profile, and the second intensity profile is a generally donut-shaped intensity profile.

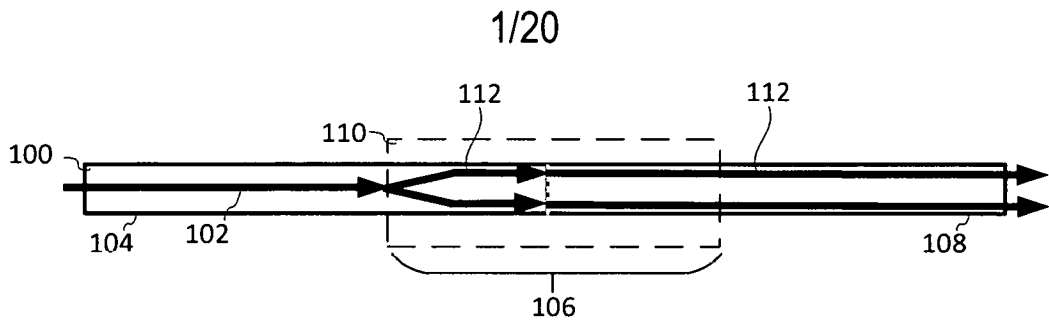


FIG. 1

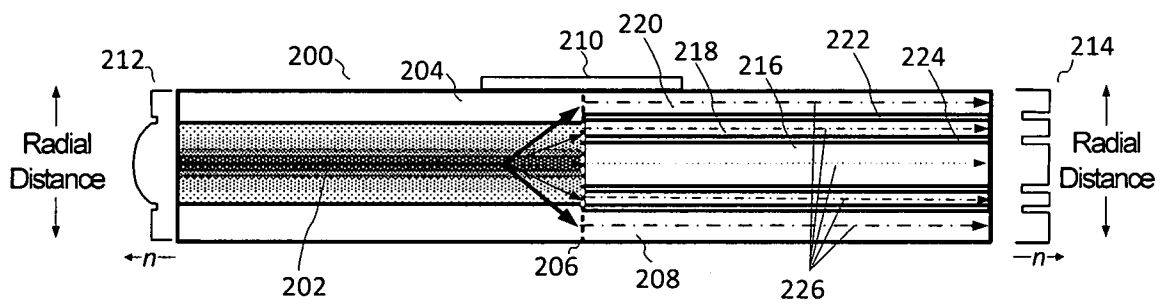


FIG. 2

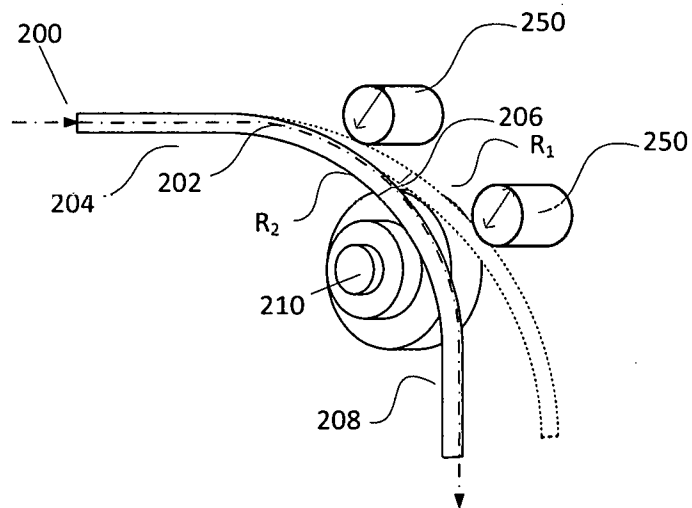


FIG. 3

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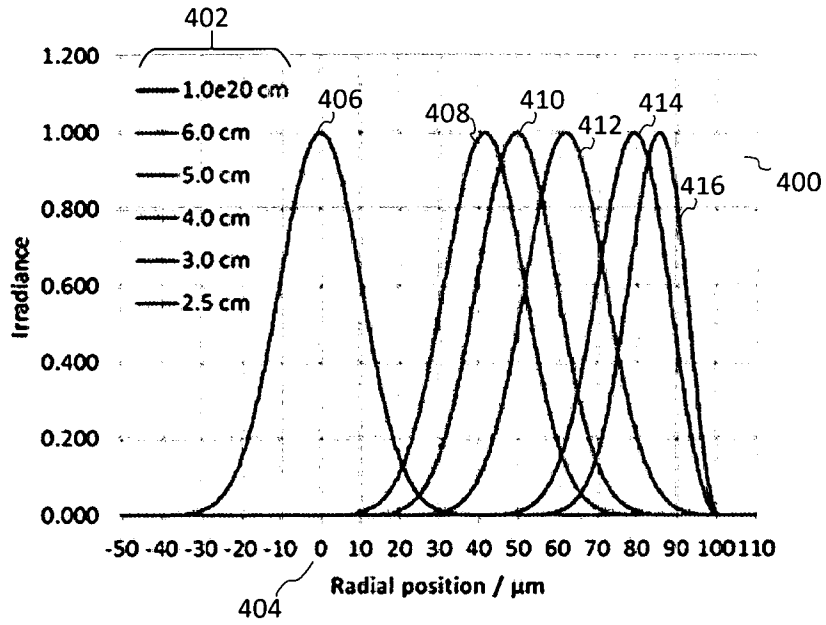


FIG. 4

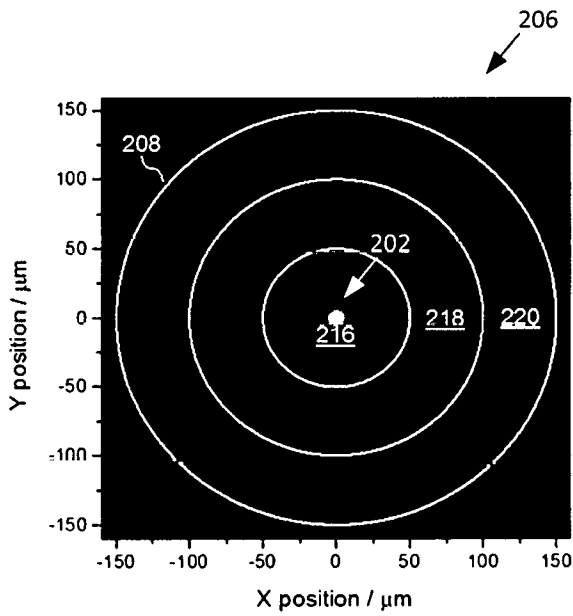


FIG. 5

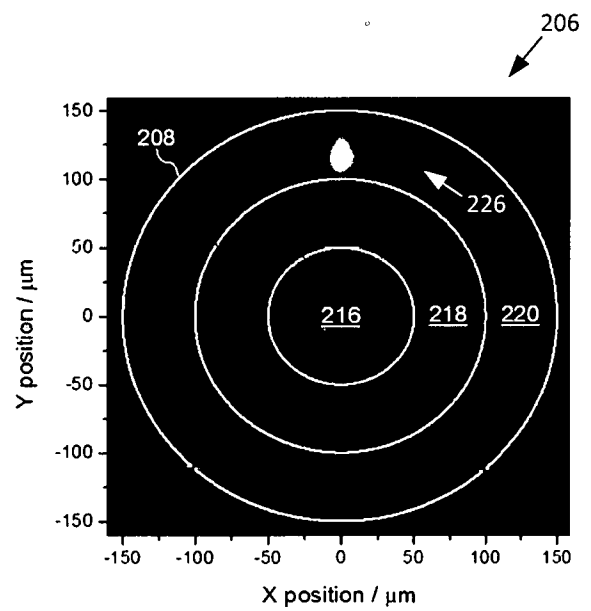


FIG. 6

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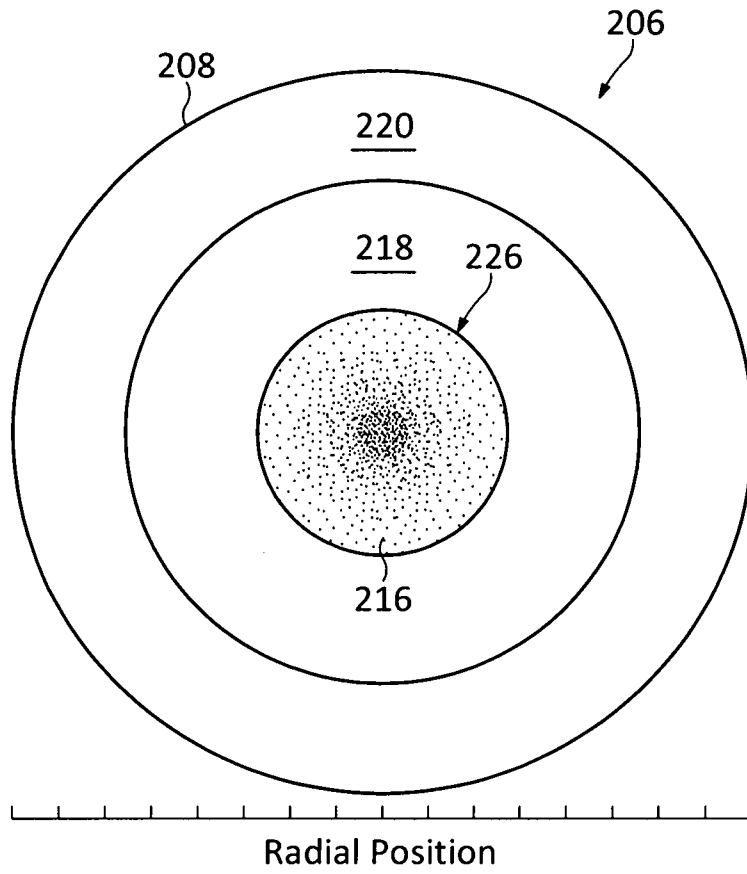


FIG. 7A

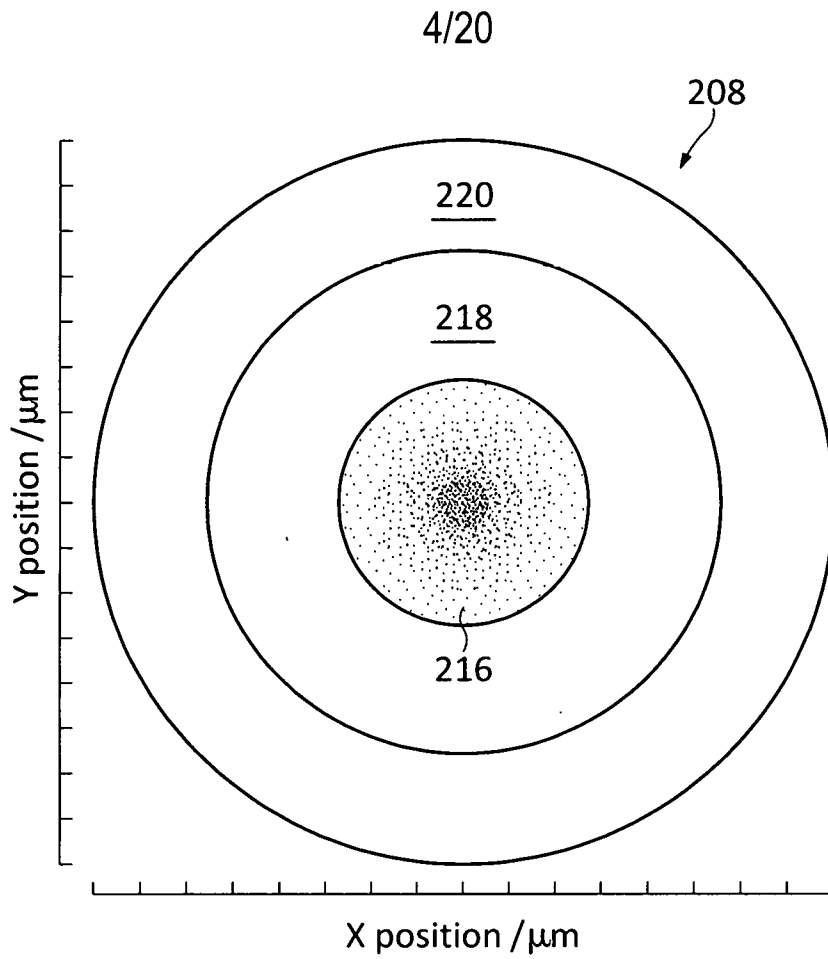


FIG. 7B

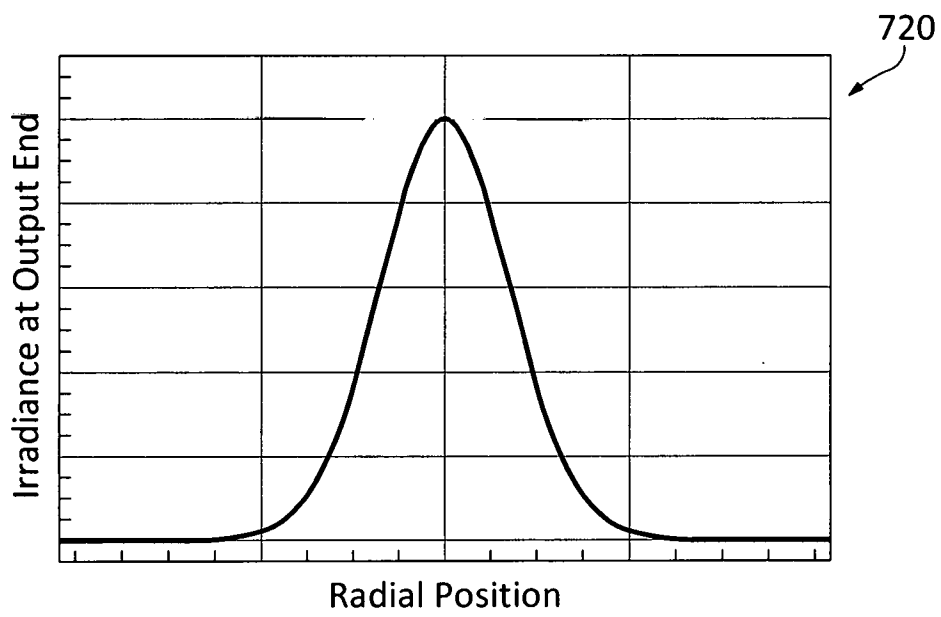


FIG. 7C

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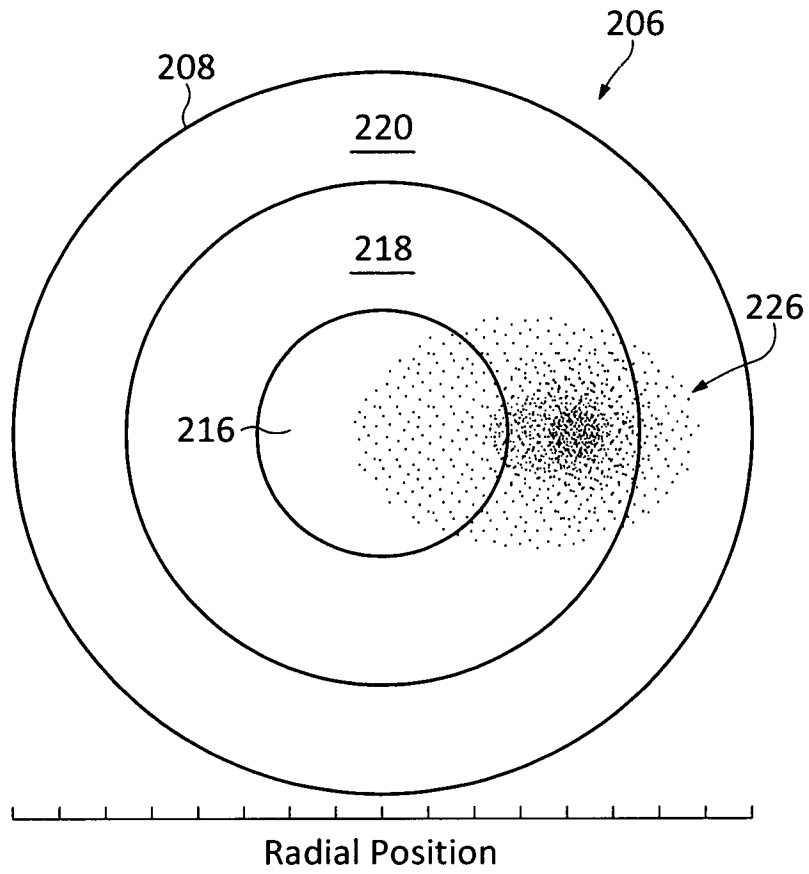


FIG. 8A

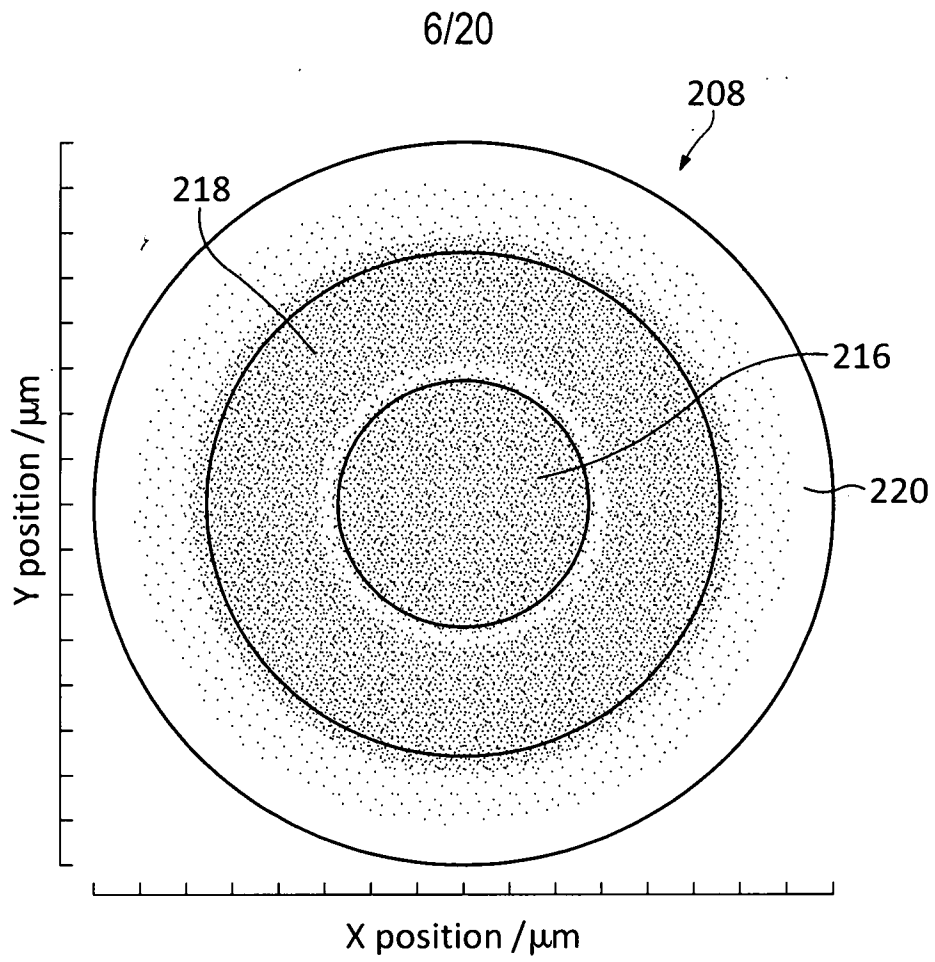


FIG. 8B

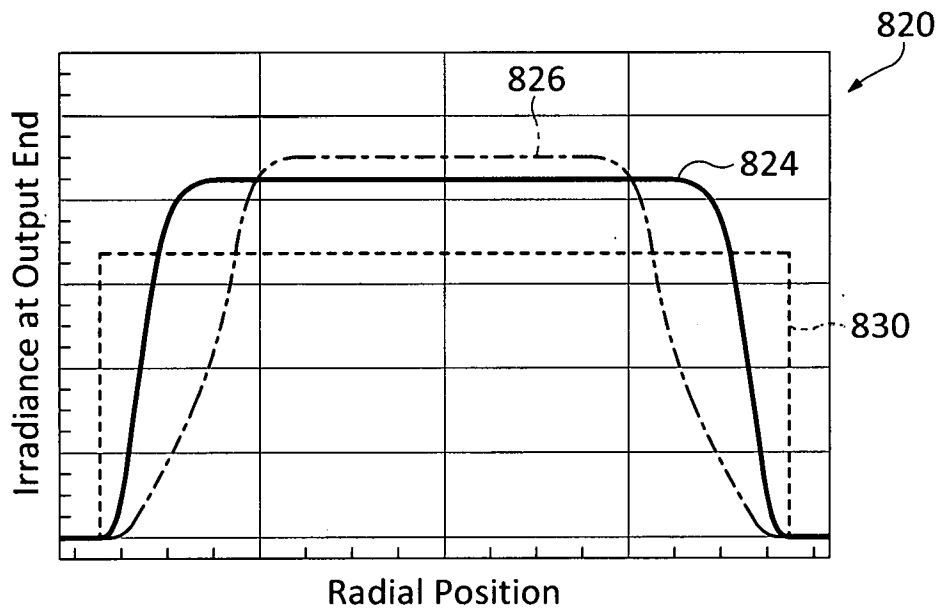


FIG. 8C

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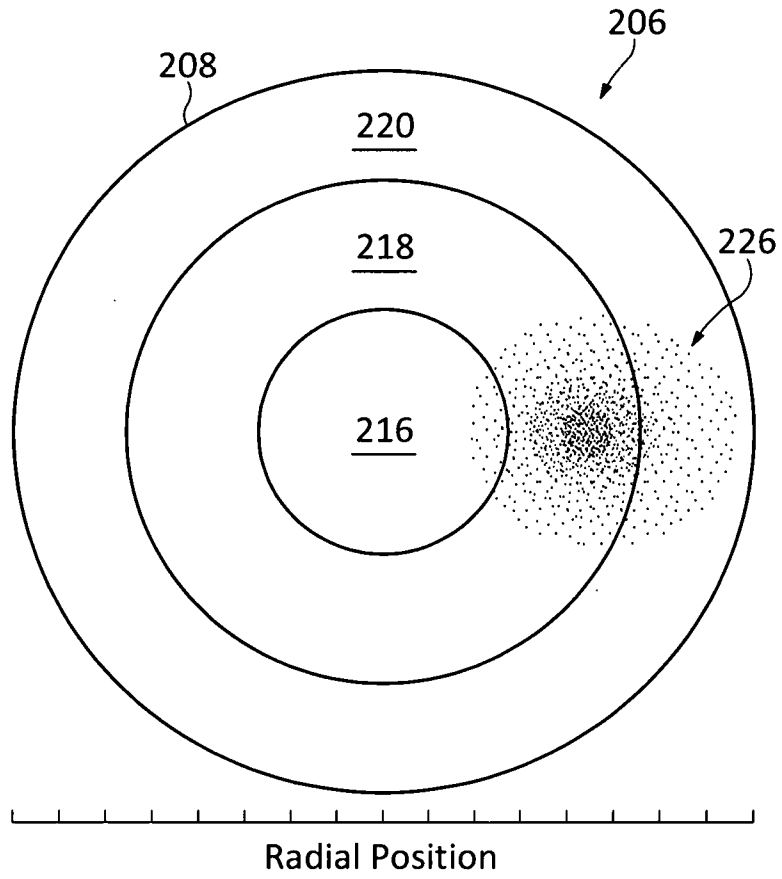


FIG. 9A

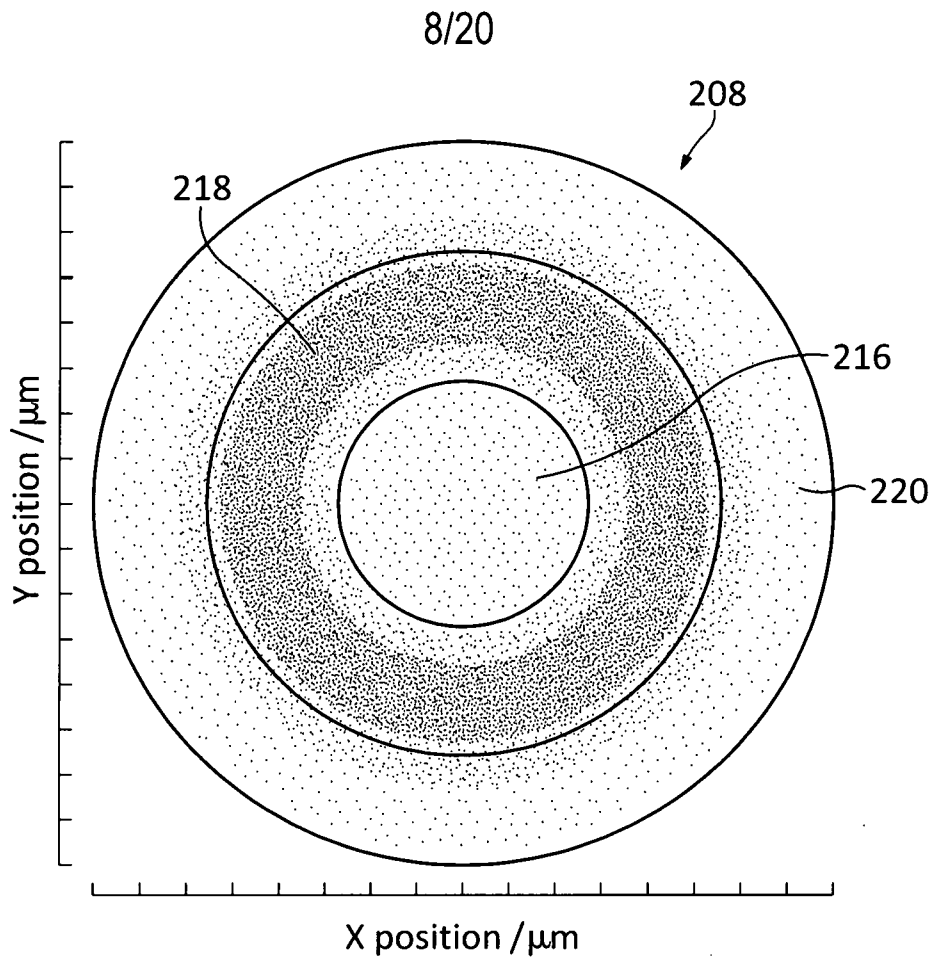


FIG. 9B

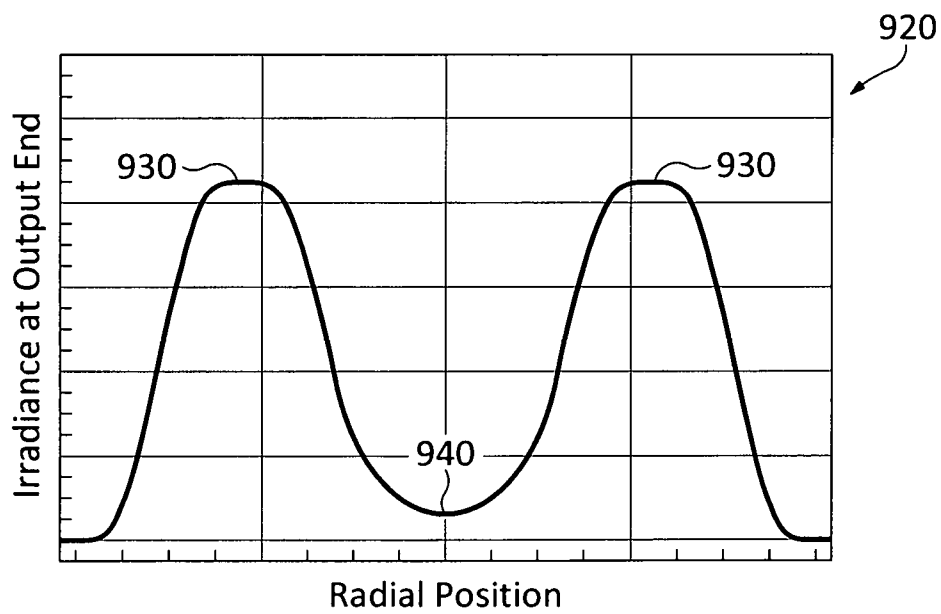


FIG. 9C

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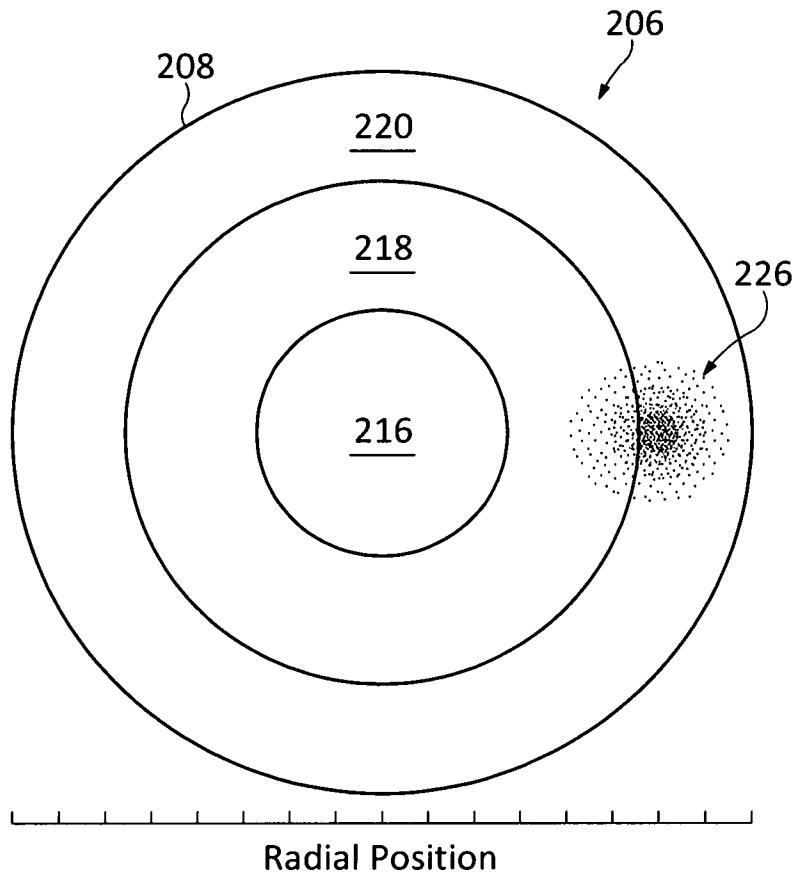


FIG. 10A

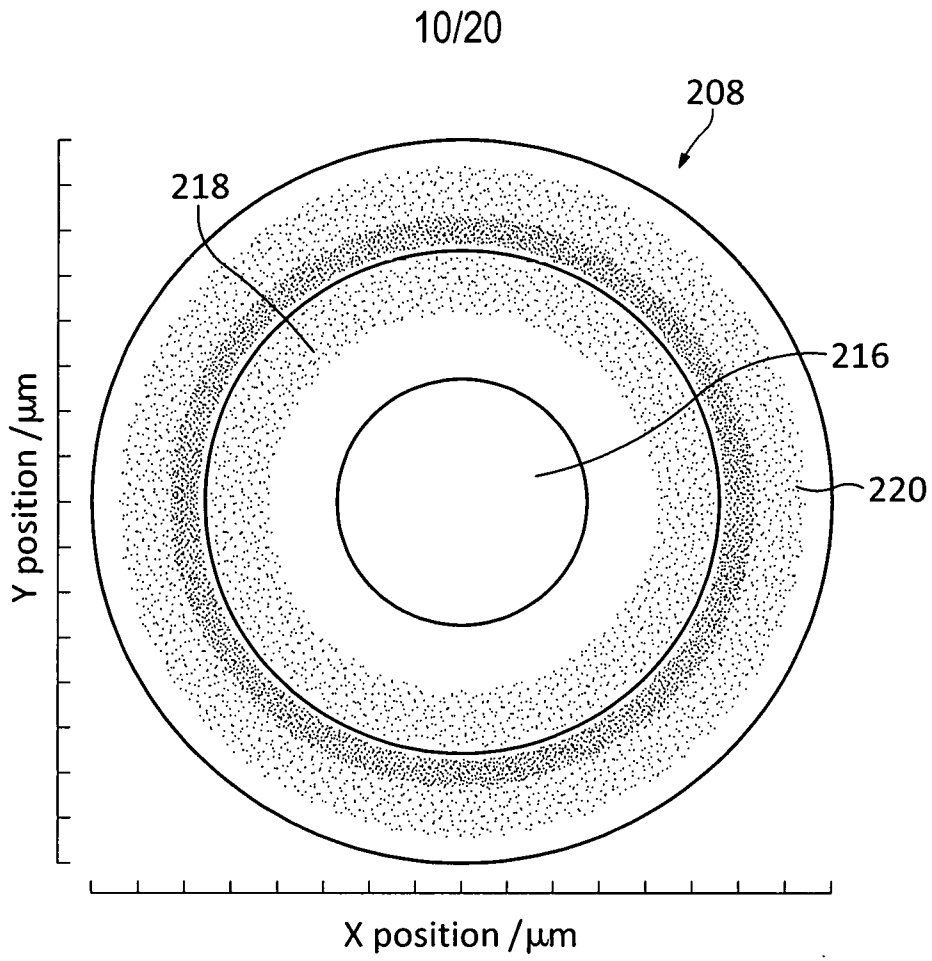


FIG. 10B

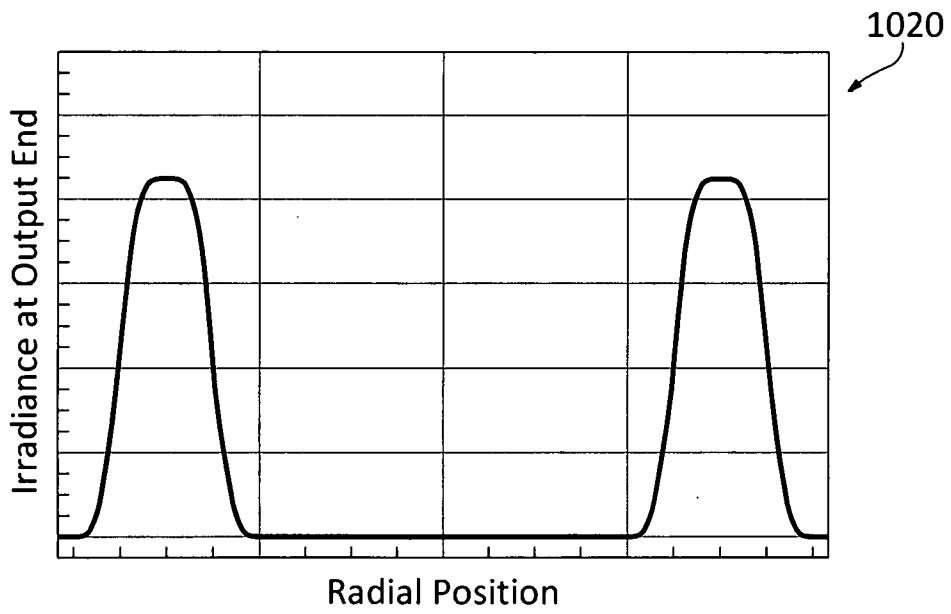


FIG. 10C

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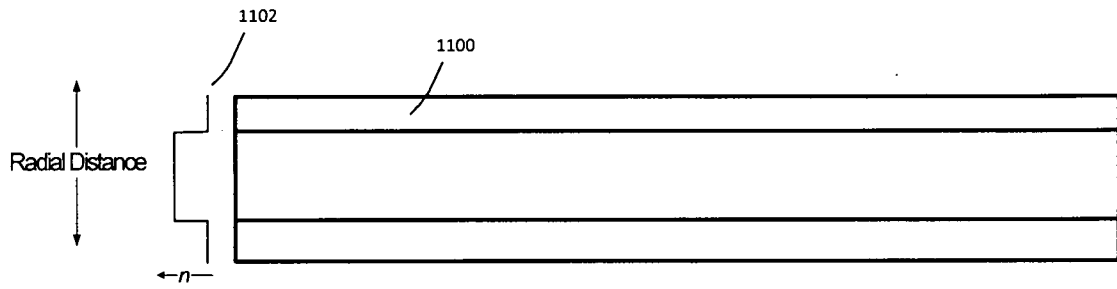


FIG. 11

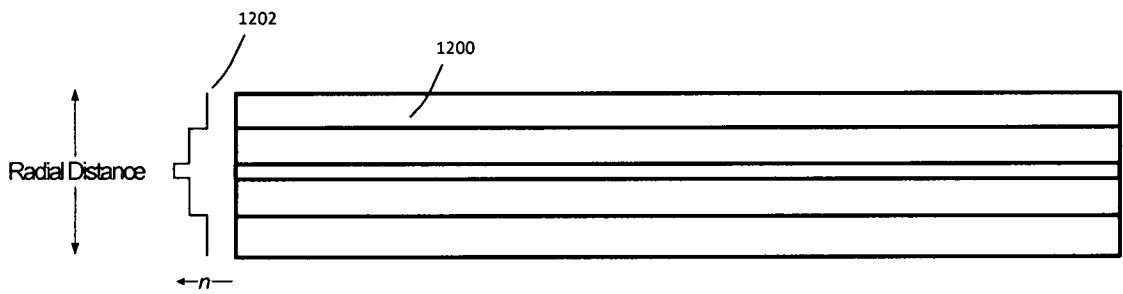


FIG. 12

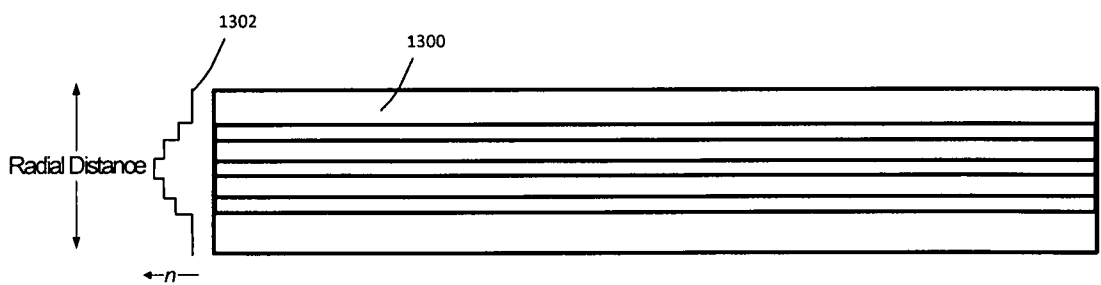


FIG. 13

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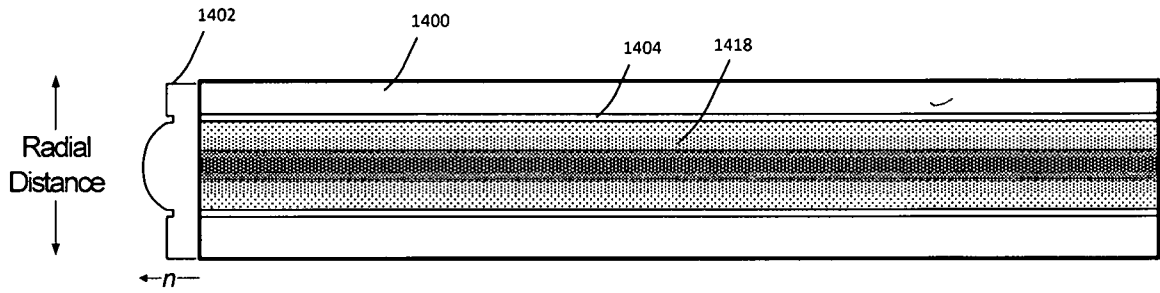


FIG. 14A

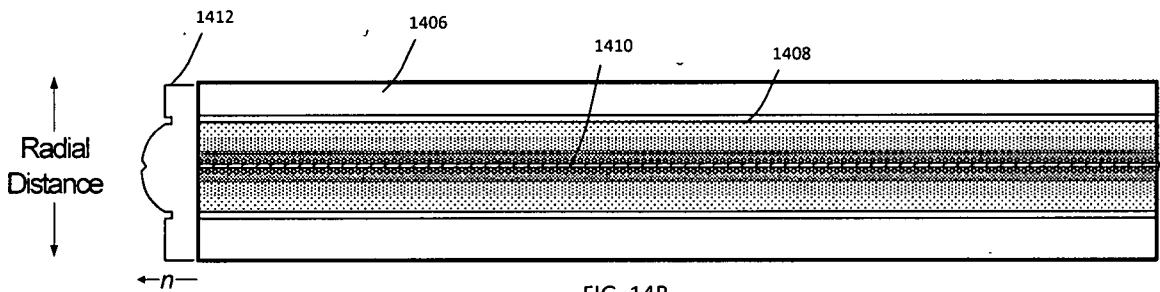


FIG. 14B

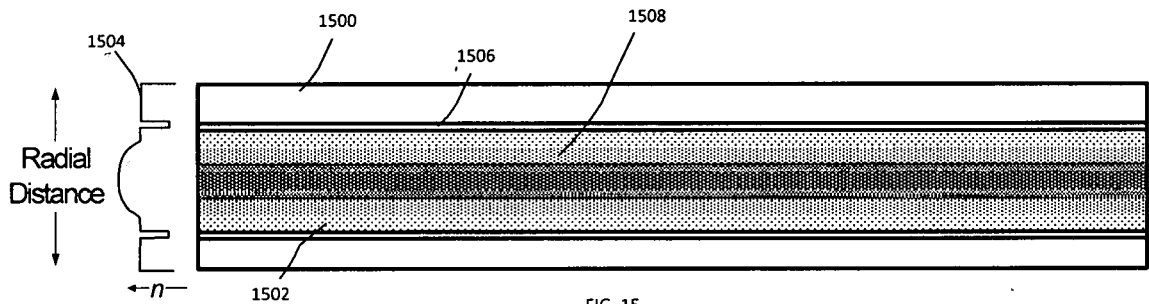


FIG. 15

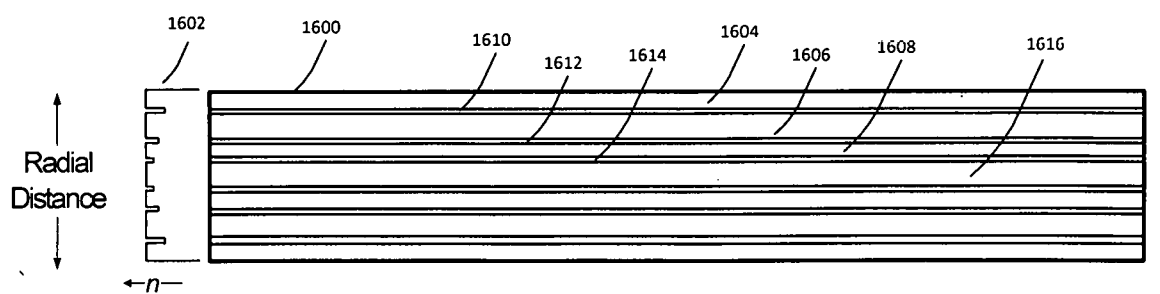


FIG. 16

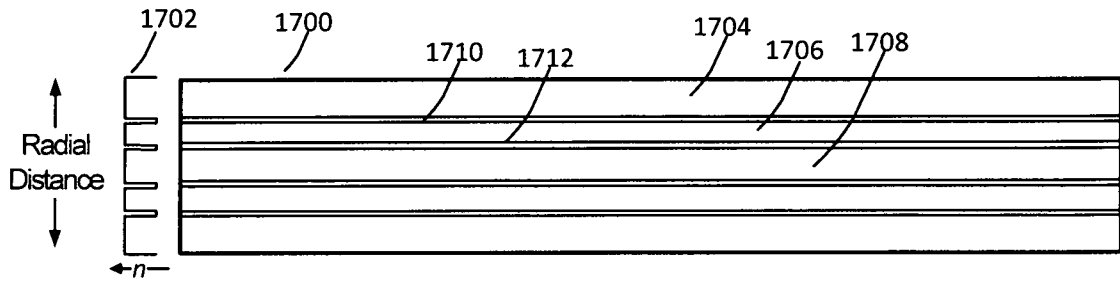


FIG. 17

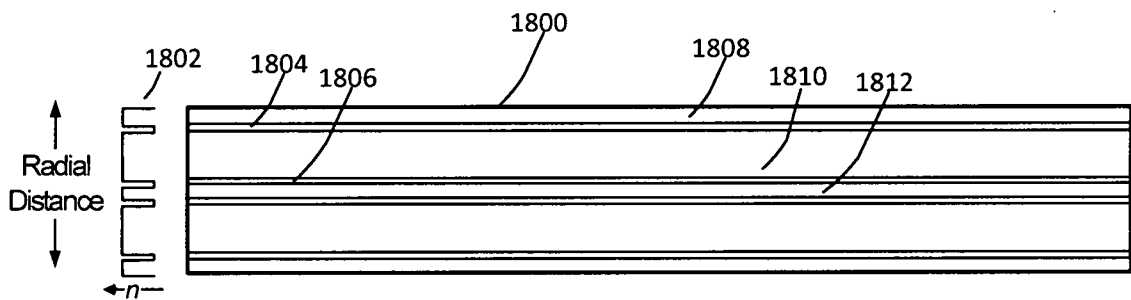


FIG. 18

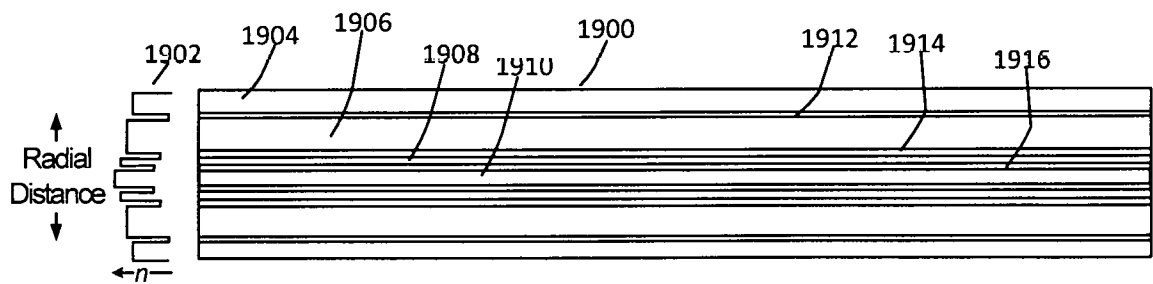


FIG. 19

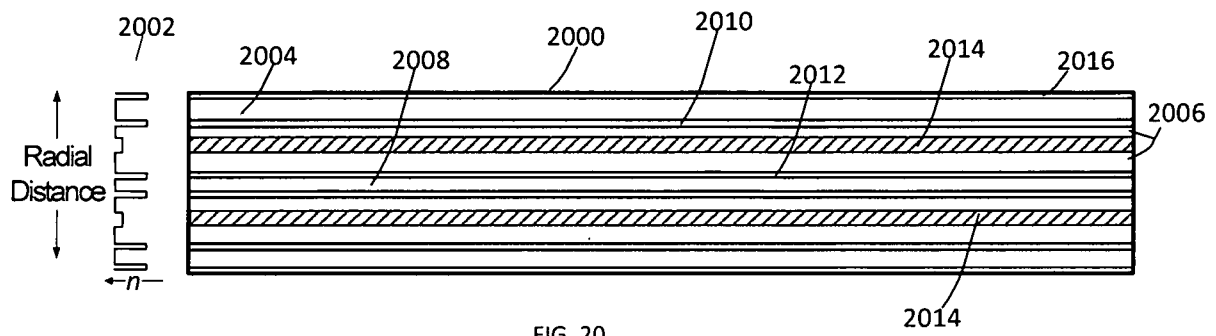


FIG. 20

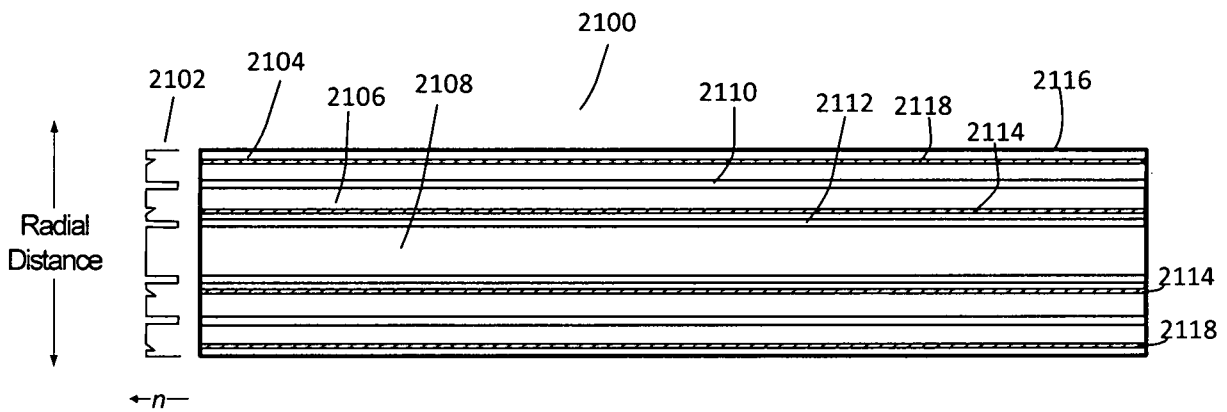


FIG. 21

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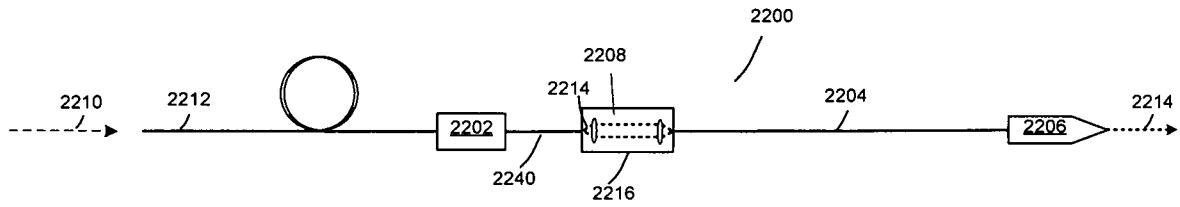


FIG. 22A

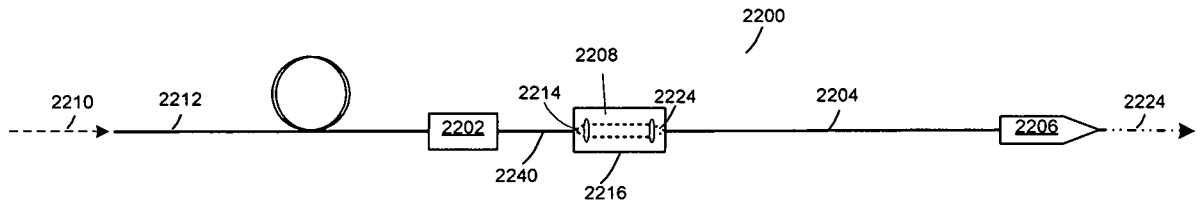


FIG. 22B

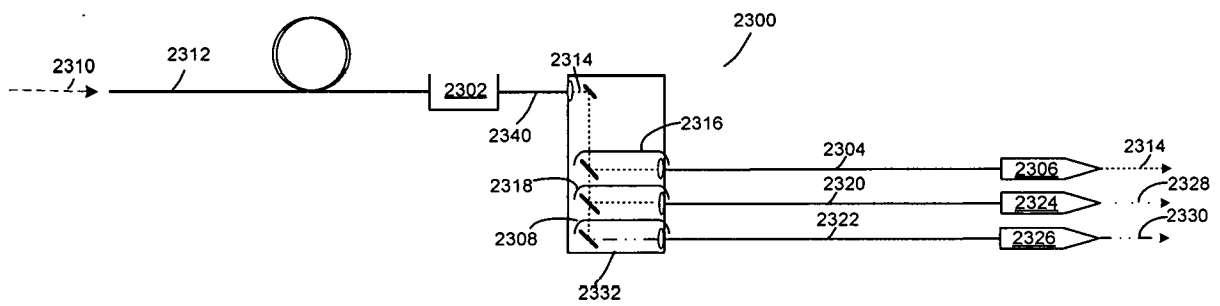


FIG. 23

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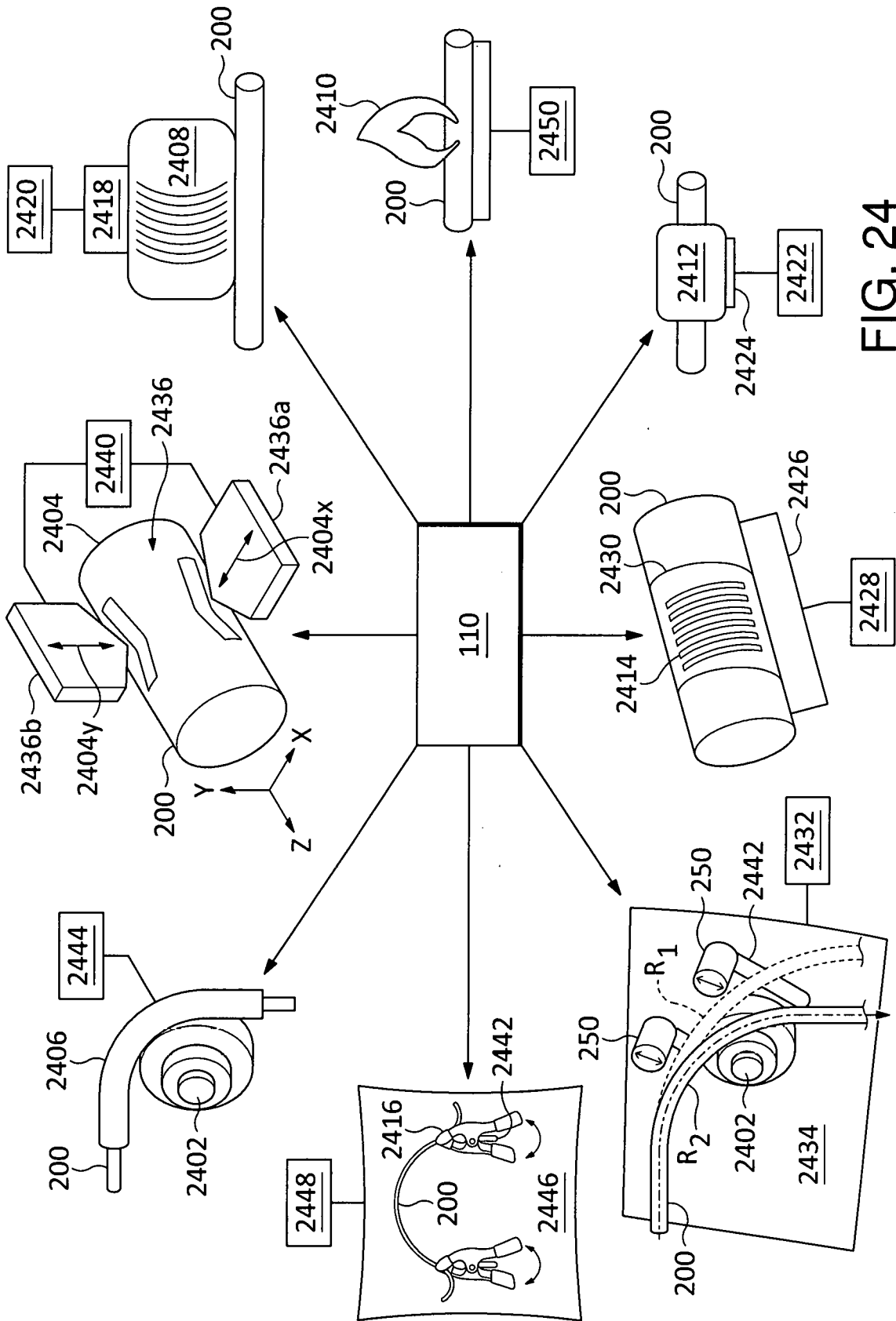


FIG. 24

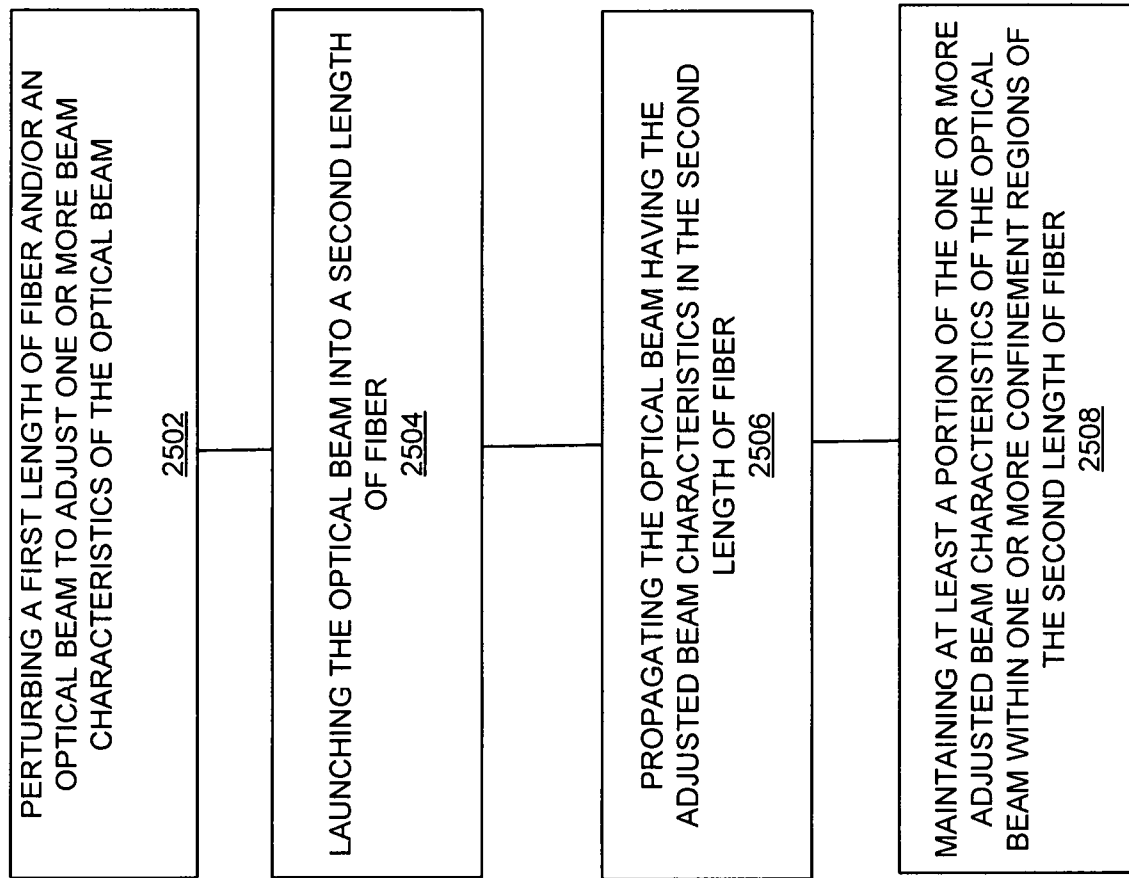


FIG. 25

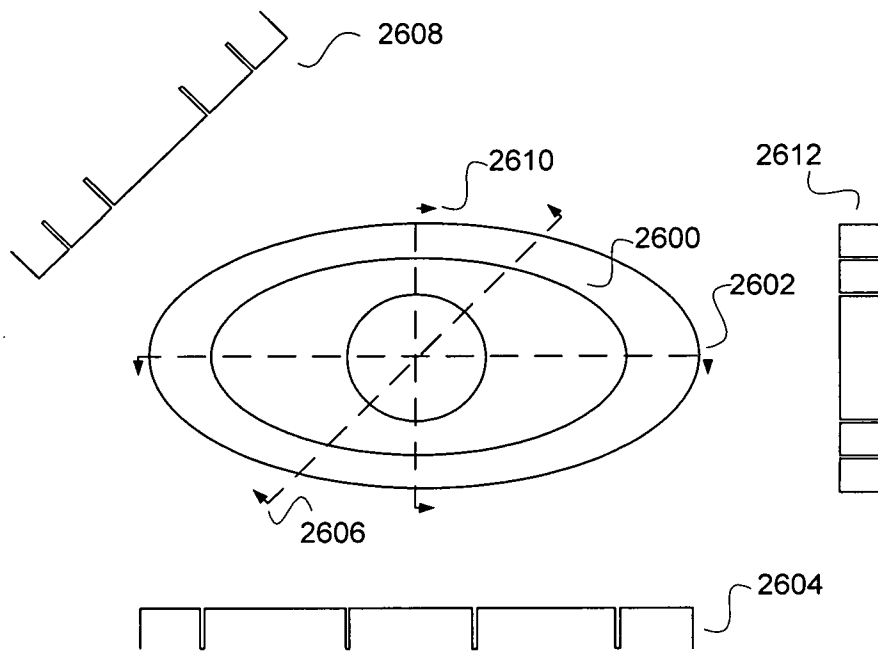


FIG. 26

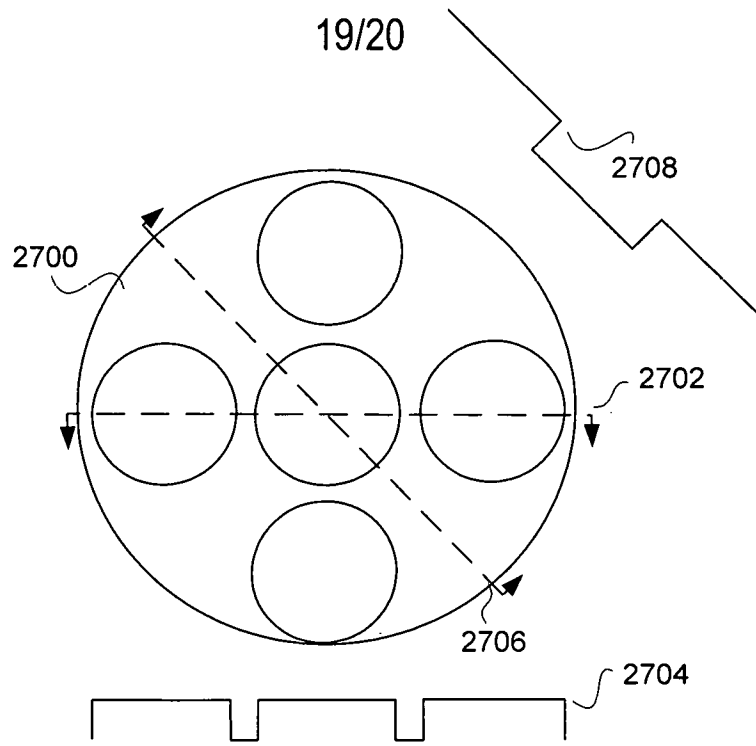


FIG. 27

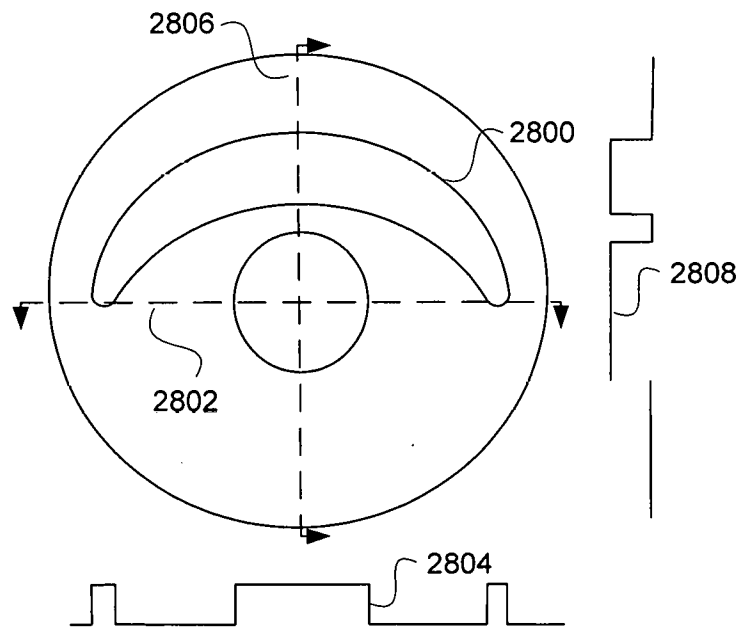


FIG. 28

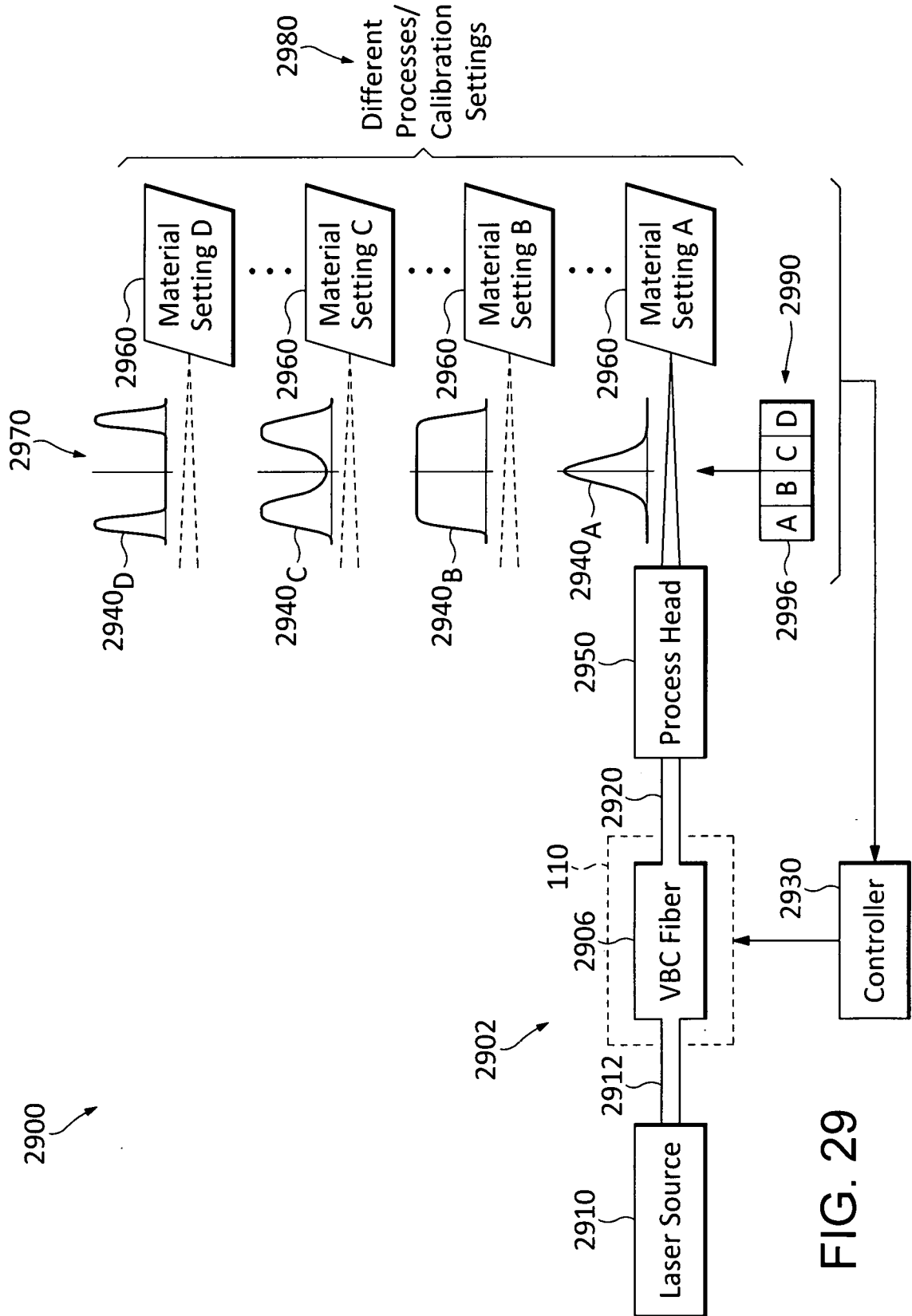


FIG. 29

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US 2018/024953

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

H01S 3/067 (2006.01)**H01S 3/10** (2006.01)**G02B 6/14** (2006.01)

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)

G02B 6/00-6/54, G02F 1/00-1/39, H01S 3/00-3/30

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 practicable, search terms used)

PatSearch, esp@cenet, USPTO, Google

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	US 2016/0116679 A1 (LUMENTUM OPERATIONS LLC et al.) 28.04.2016, paragraphs [0043], [0045], [0059], [0063], [0068]-[0077], fig. 4, 9A-B, 11A-C	1-5, 7-8, 10-11, 17-20
Y		12-16
A		6, 9
Y	US 2015/0372445 A1 (IMRA AMERICA INC) 24.12.2015, paragraph [0049], fig. 5	12-16

 Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C. See patent family annex.

* Special categories of cited documents:	"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
"A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance	"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
"E" earlier document but published on or after the international filing date	"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
"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)	"&" document member of the same patent family
"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	

Date of the actual completion of the international search

02 August 2018 (02.08.2018)

Date of mailing of the international search report

16 August 2018 (16.08.2018)

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