(12) INTERNATIONAL APPLICATION PUBLISHED UNDER THE PATENT COOPERATION TREATY (PCT)

(19) World Intellectual Property Organization
International Bureau

(43) International Publication Date
19 April 2007 (19.04.2007)

PCT

(10) International Publication Number
WO 2007/044293 A2

(51) International Patent Classification:
E04F 13/08 (2006.01)

(21) International Application Number:
PCT/US2006/038379

(22) International Filing Date: 3 October 2006 (03.10.2006)

(25) Filing Language: English

(26) Publication Language: English

(30) Priority Data:

60/723,578	4 October 2005 (04.10.2005)	US
60/733,686	4 November 2005 (04.11.2005)	US
11/432,873	12 May 2006 (12.05.2006)	US

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(81) Designated States *(unless otherwise indicated, for every kind of national protection available)*: AE, AG, AL, AM, AT, AU, AZ, BA, BB, BG, BR, BW, BY, BZ, CA, CH, CN, CO, CR, CU, CZ, DE, DK, DM, DZ, EC, EE, EG, ES, FI, GB, GD, GE, GH, GM, HN, HR, HU, ID, IL, IN, IS, JP, KE, KG, KM, KN, KP, KR, KZ, LA, LC, LK, LR, LS, LT, LU, LV, LY, MA, MD, MG, MK, MN, MW, MX, MY, MZ, NA, NG, NI, NO, NZ, OM, PG, PH, PL, PT, RO, RS, RU, SC, SD, SE, SG, SK, SL, SM, SV, SY, TJ, TM, TN, TR, TT, TZ, UA, UG, US, UZ, VC, VN, ZA, ZM, ZW.

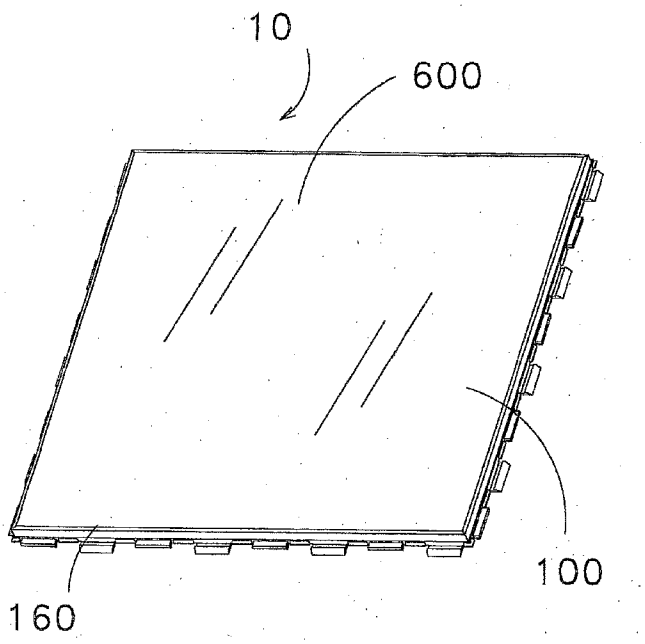
(84) Designated States *(unless otherwise indicated, for every kind of regional protection available)*: ARIPO (BW, GH, GM, KE, LS, MW, MZ, NA, SD, SL, SZ, TZ, UG, ZM, ZW), Eurasian (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, MD, RU, TJ, TM), European (AT, BE, BG, CH, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, HU, IE, IS, IT, LT, LU, LV, MC, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, TR), OAPI (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GQ, GW, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).

Published:

— *without international search report and to be republished upon receipt of that report*

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(54) Title: MODULAR FLOORING ASSEMBLIES



(57) Abstract: A modular flooring assembly 10 including a flooring component 600 adhered to a tray substrate 100 is described. The modular flooring assembly 10 may be interconnected with additional modular flooring assemblies to form a modular floor suitable for most flooring applications. The flooring component 600 may be tile or wood or other materials commonly used in flooring applications. Convention fill-in grout or a snap-in grout may be used with the modular flooring assemblies 10. One suitable snap-in grout is a right angle grout member 400. Another suitable snap-in grout is an interconnecting grout system 510.

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For two-letter codes and other abbreviations, refer to the "Guidance Notes on Codes and Abbreviations" appearing at the beginning of each regular issue of the PCT Gazette.

MODULAR FLOORING ASSEMBLIES

Field of the Invention

[0001] The present invention relates to a modular flooring assembly including a flooring component adhered to a tray substrate.

Background of the Invention

[0002] Installing a conventional tile floor is a complicated procedure requiring expertise and craftsmanship. First, the existing flooring may have to be removed. Next, a concrete backer board is attached to the sub floor using permanent fixing means, such as screws or nails. Then, a grout compound is applied to the backer board. Tiles must then be immediately and precisely laid on the grout compound. After the grout on the backer board holding the tiles is hardened, additional grout must be applied between the tiles. This process may require several hours or days of drying time, during which time the floor must not be used.

[0003] Some previous attempts at modular flooring have not been fully successful. Some prior art modular flooring assemblies do not provide a full supporting structure for the flooring material. This may lead to failure of the flooring assembly as the flooring material may break or bend. Other prior art modular flooring assemblies do not securely hold the flooring material. Some prior art modular flooring systems allow the tiles to shift or migrate resulting in unacceptable performance.

Summary of the Invention

[0004] The present invention relates to a modular flooring assembly including a flooring component adhered to a tray substrate. The modular flooring assembly may be interconnected with additional modular flooring assemblies to form a modular floor suitable for most flooring applications. The flooring component may comprise tile or wood or other materials commonly used in flooring applications. Convention fill-in grout or a snap-in grout may be used with the modular flooring assemblies. One suitable snap-in grout is a right angle grout member. Another suitable snap-in grout is an interconnecting grout system.

Brief Description of Drawings

[0005] Figure 1 shows a perspective view of the modular flooring assembly.

[0006] Figure 2 shows a partial view of the tray.

[0007] Figure 3 shows a perspective, partial view of the tray.

[0008] Figure 4 shows a perspective, partial view of the top surface of the tray.

[0009] Figure 5 shows a perspective view of the flooring component.

[0010] Figure 6 shows a close-up view of the upward tab.

[0011] Figure 7 shows a close-up view of the downward tab and the upward tab.

[0012] Figure 8 shows a perspective view of the right angle grout member.

[0013] Figure 9 shows a view of the end of the right-angle grout member.

[0014] Figure 10 shows a close-up view of the insert.

[0015] Figure 11 shows an outside view of the corner of the right-angle grout member.

[0016] Figure 12 shows a close-up view of the corner of the right-angle grout member.

[0017] Figure 13 shows an inside view of the corner of the right-angle grout member.

[0018] Figure 14 shows a partial view of the right-angle grout member attached to the tray.

[0019] Figure 15 shows a partial, side view of the right-angle grout member attached to the tray.

[0020] Figure 16 shows a modular floor constructed of the modular flooring assemblies.

[0021] Figure 17 shows a view of the modular floor with the flooring components removed.

[0022] Figure 18 shows a close-up view of the junction of the three modular flooring assemblies.

[0023] Figure 19 shows another close-up view of the junction of the three modular flooring assemblies.

[0024] Figure 20 shows a perspective view of the bottom of the tray with the padding in place.

[0025] Figure 21 shows a perspective view of the bottom of the tray with the padding removed.

[0026] Figure 22 shows a perspective view of the padding.

[0027] Figure 23 shows a side view of the tray with grout holes.

[0028] Figure 24 shows a bottom view of the tray with grout holes.

[0029] Figure 25 show a perspective view of the grout for the tray with grout holes.

[0030] Figure 26 shows another perspective view of the grout for the tray with grout holes.

[0031] Figure 27 shows an end view of the grout for the tray with grout holes.

[0032] Figure 28 shows a top view of the grout for the tray with grout holes.

[0033] Figure 29 shows a view of the tray substrate with the sloped vertical edges.

[0034] Figure 30 shows another view of the tray substrate with the sloped vertical edges.

[0035] Figure 31 shows a view of the upwards and the downwards tab of the tray with the sloped vertical edges.

[0036] Figure 32 shows another view of the upwards and the downwards tabs of the tray with the sloped vertical edges.

[0037] Figure 33 shows another end view of the right-angled member with the curved transition.

[0038] Figure 34 shows another view of the flooring component having grooves and depressions.

[0039] Figure 35 shows a view of the interconnecting grout system.

[0040] Figure 36 shows views of the top grout member.

[0041] Figure 37 shows views of the bottom grout member.

[0042] Figures 38(a) and 38(b) show a view of the placement of the bottom and top grout members with respect to the remainder of the flooring assembly.

[0043] Figure 39 shows a view of the top grout member positioned over the bottom grout member.

[0044] Figure 40 shows a view of top and bottom grout members with numerous flooring components.

Detailed Description of Preferred Embodiments

[0045] The present invention relates to a modular flooring assembly including a flooring component adhered to a tray substrate. The modular flooring assembly may be interconnected with additional modular flooring assemblies to form a modular floor suitable for most flooring applications. The flooring component may comprise tile or wood or other materials commonly used in flooring applications. The tray substrate comprises tabs, which provide for the tray substrates to interlock with tabs from an adjacent tray substrate. The fully assembled modular floor provides the appearance of a conventional floor. Fill-in grout or a snap-in grout may be used with the modular flooring assemblies. One suitable snap-in grout is a right angle grout member. The right angle grout member comprises inserts that are received by grout slots formed between the tabs. Another suitable snap-in grout is an interconnecting grout system.

[0046] Importantly, the modular floor may be assembled by individuals, who may lack the training and expertise to install a conventional floor. Also, the modular floor, according to certain embodiments of the present invention utilizing snap-in grout, may be installed without waiting for certain grout products to dry. Also, the modular floor may be quickly disassembled and does not damage the sub floor, as the modular floor is not typically attached to the sub floor by adhesives, grout compounds, or other fastening means. Further, the modular floor may be installed over an existing sub floor without the installation of a concrete backer board, which is commonly used in ceramic tile installation.

[0047] The tray substrate holds the flooring component on its tray surface. The tray surface is an upward facing horizontal surface with vertical tray edges which protrude upward around the perimeter of the tray surface.

[0048] The tray surface may be generally flat, or may contain a pattern designed to enhance adhesive performance between the tray surface and the flooring component. The tray surface pattern may be designed to complement the bottom of the flooring component; for example, tiles may have different mold patterns on their bottom depending upon the manufacturer's design. The tray surface may also be solid, or may have holes therein. The holes may be added in appropriate locations to aid in moisture evaporation without compromising adhesive performance.

[0049] The vertical tray edges are designed to ensure exact alignment of the flooring component with the tray surface, and provide a barrier to ensure adhesive can be applied over the entire bottom of the flooring component without the adhesive being pushed or flowing into the tab areas. If adhesive is allowed to enter the tab areas, their interlocking connection may be physically impaired by adhesive residue. The vertical tray edges preferably run the entire perimeter of the tray substrate.

[0050] By their vertical orientation, the tray edges positionally hold the flooring component and, in combination with the adhesive, reduce lateral movement. Importantly, the tray edges provide a further surface for the adhesive to adhere the flooring component. The tray surface joins to the bottom of the flooring component via the adhesive and the tray edges join to the sides of the flooring component via the adhesive. The combination of the adhesive on the tray surface and the adhesive on the tray edges provide a secure hold for the flooring component. This insures that the flooring component is locked down to the tray substrate, and the flooring component does not slip or move.

[0051] The size of the tray substrate and the flooring component are strictly controlled to insure that the flooring component fits securely in the tray substrate. The flooring component should just fit onto the tray surface and rest snugly against the vertical edges. The flooring component should be slightly smaller than the tray surface defined by the vertical tray edges.

[0052] The present invention achieves significant advantages. The tray has four vertical tray edges, which improve the structural rigidity of the tray. The four tray edges prevent adhesive from pushing into the interlocking tabs. In other systems, the adhesive can push into the tab area causing interference with the other tile. The four tray edges help align the flooring component to the tray, which improves assembly ease and quality. In other systems, the flooring surface is not constrained and therefore must be held in place until the adhesive has cured.

[0053] Snap-in grout may be used with the present invention. The snap-in grout is a solid material that fits in between the modular flooring assemblies. A preferred snap-in grout includes the right-angled grout member. The right-angle grout member includes a first leg integrally connected with a second leg at a right angle. Two such right-angle grout members are needed to fit around each modular flooring assembly. The right-angle grout member includes a plurality of inserts that are fitted into slots formed by the tabs. The inserts may have a triangle or arrow-shaped portion that is connected to the right angle grout assembly via a narrower transition region. The triangular-shaped portion may temporarily deform as it is inserted into the slot where it snaps into place.

[0054] The right-angle grout member provides many advantages. First, only two right-angles grout members are needs to fill in around one modular flooring assembly. This reduces the number of seams between the grout members and improves appearance. Secondly, the right-angle grout member provides a corner that wraps around the corner of the modular flooring assembly. This provides stability to the modular flooring system. Third, the right angle member is easier to install than straight linear strips of grout material since there are less grout pieces to work with.

[0055] The tabs are on the outside perimeter of the tray substrate. The tabs interlockingly connect the tray substrates. There are upward and downward facing tabs. The upward and downward tabs alternate on each edge of the tray substrate. For most flooring applications, the use of 6, 8, or 10 tabs per edge, half of each orientation, provide satisfactory performance. In other embodiments, there may be fewer or additional tabs.

[0056] The modular flooring assembly is designed such that even if one or more tabs are broken on a given side, the tray substrates will still interlock. This also allows the modular flooring assemblies to be cut to a specific size and to still interlock.

[0057] The interlocking tabs may be positioned such that the modular flooring assemblies are offset supporting various decorative patterns.

[0058] The interlocking tabs on one modular flooring assembly need not be perfectly aligned with the other modular flooring assembly to allow "fine-tuning" of the relative tile position.

[0059] The bottom of the tray, i.e., opposite of the tray surface, is designed as the foundation of the system. The bottom may include structural webbing to strengthen the tray bottom ensuring the tray surface remains relatively flat.

[0060] The bottom of the tray may also include an optional non-skid and noise deadening padding of an over-molded, rubber-like material, such as thermoplastic rubber or thermoplastic elastomer. A particularly preferred thermoplastic elastomer is Santoprene. The padding provides a cushion for the flooring system. The padding also provides a non-skid element that prevents the flooring system from sliding on the underlying flooring material. The padding also provides some level of flex in the presence of underlying floor surface imperfections or heavy surface loads. The padding also helps reduce vibration transmission, thus providing a sound-deadening function.

[0061] As described above, various type of grout may be used in the present invention, including the snap-in grout or a fill-in grout compound that is spread into the gaps between neighboring trays.

[0062] The snap-in grout includes a snap-in locking mechanism. The snap-in grout is preferably made from thermoplastic elastomer, thermoplastic rubber, or other compressible, pliable, sealing material designed to fit between the tray substrates and provide a dust and moisture barrier.

[0063] In some embodiments, the snap-in grout fits into slots created by the interlocking tabs. Grout holders on the perimeter of the tray substrate may also be used in receiving the snap-in grout and in forming the slots.

[0064] In other embodiments, the snap-in grout is designed to fit into grout holes formed in the interlocking tabs. Both the upward and downward tabs have grout holes. When the tabs are interconnected, the grout holes overlap and provide a combined grout hole to receive the snap-in grout. The snap-in grout is locked into place with the snap-in locking

mechanism. The snap-in grout may fit into grout holes on each tab, or in every other tab, or in a pre-defined pattern. The grout hole is generally positioned in the middle area of each tab and is designed to accommodate the snap-in grout line. When the upward and downward tabs are aligned, the grout component fits through the hole and then slides into place locking the grout line down and helping to secure the relative position of the tiles. The bottom of the grout hole may have a serrated surface matching to a serrated surface on the grout material.

[0065] Fill-in grouts may also be used with the trays. Fill-in grouts may be packaged in a powdered or granular form. The user mixes the powder or granules with a liquid to form a plastic material that is spread in between the modular flooring assemblies. Other fill-in grout compounds are packaged in a ready to spread form. The modular flooring assemblies are snapped together, and the fill-in grout material is used to fill the space between the modular flooring assembly. The fill-in grout material must remain semi-flexible once cured since the floor "floats." The separate grout material must also have good adhesive qualities to ensure the material adheres to the sides of the modular flooring assemblies.

[0066] Several different combinations of grout and methods of use may utilized with the modular flooring assemblies, including:

[0067] A snap-in grout, which is received by grout holes on each tab or in grout slots between the tabs.

[0068] A fill-in grout compound used with tabs having grout holes or forming grout slots. This embodiment provides manufacturing efficiencies since the same tray substrate can be used for both snap-in grouts and fill-in grouts.

[0069] A fill-in grout compound used with tabs without grout holes. Without the grout holes, the tabs are incrementally stronger – for applications where a fill-in grout compound will be applied, there is no reason to have the grout holes.

[0070] Snap-in grout with reduced number of grout holes or slots. In this alternative, the tabs with grout slots are reduced.

[0071] The flooring component may comprise tile, stone, marble, wood, or other conventional flooring materials. The flooring component could be a ceramic or porcelain tile, a natural stone product like marble or granite, or could be a wooden product.

[0072] The flooring component is adhered to the tray surface and tray edges using a variety of commercially available adhesives. Suitable adhesives for use with the present invention include a two-part epoxy using a methacrylate material. Other urethane adhesives may also be utilized. The specific selection of the adhesive will depend on the nature and

properties of the flooring component. The methacrylate adhesive is preferred for ceramic tile. The tray edges define a space to receive the flooring component.

[0073] The present invention, by using a snap-in grout that is not permanently integrated with the tray, achieves advantages. The consumer may choose from among many different snap-in grout colors. Damaged snap-in grout can be easily replaced. Snap-in grout may also be changed to reflect different decorating tastes. Finally, flexibility is provided to either use snap-in grout or a fill-in grout.

[0074] The tray may be made using injection molding of a suitable plastic resin. High impact polystyrene is preferred, but other plastic resins including polypropolene and ABS may be used.

[0075] The padding of the non-skid and noise deadening material may be a thermoplastic rubber, thermoplastic elastomer, or other softer plastic material including Santoprene. The padding is over-molded to the base of the tray. An adhesive is applied between the tray surface and the bottom of the flooring surface.

[0076] Multiple adhesive materials and application patterns can be used depending upon the combination of plastic resin used for the tray, the flooring material, and the profile of the flooring material. For tile application, adhesive is applied to the ridgelines on the bottom of the tile to maximize contact with the tray surface. Robotics may be used to improve the precision and efficiency of the assembly process. Robotics may also be used to package and palletize the finished products.

[0077] The modular flooring assemblies of the present invention may be used in 6-inch, 6½-inch, 12-inch, and 13-inch embodiments. The modular flooring assemblies have a square or rectangular shape. The square shaped modular flooring assemblies have four sides of equal length. Other sizes may be used, however these sizes are generally used in the flooring industry. Further, a combination of the 6-inch and 12-inch modular flooring assemblies may be used in combination to provide a unique appearance. The present invention may be further modified to include other combinations of different sized modular flooring assemblies.

[0078] During use of the present invention, the modular flooring assemblies are snapped together to form an overall flooring surface. The fill-in grout material may be applied between the modular flooring assemblies, or the snap-in grout may be installed. In order to accommodate different rooms of varying sized and shapes, the modular flooring assemblies

can be cut using a wet saw if tile or stone is the flooring component or using a table or a circular saw for wooden flooring components.

[0079] The underlying flooring surface should be free of major surface variations, but need not be in perfect condition. No special floor preparation is required to ensure the tiles are fixed since the interlocking modular flooring assemblies will "float" and flex. The system can be installed directly on top of finished wood, linoleum, other tile, concrete, plywood, or a variety of other flooring systems. The modular flooring assemblies can be installed on top of padding or other underlayment material if an additional measure of insulation or padding is desired. The modular flooring assemblies can be installed on top of radiant-type heating systems as well.

[0080] The present invention will now be described with reference to the Figures:

[0081] A first embodiment using a snap-in grout is shown in Figures 1-22. A modular flooring assembly **10** is shown in Figure 1. The modular flooring assembly **10** includes a tray **100** with a flooring component **600** adhered thereto. Figures 2-4 show a partial view of the tray **100** with the flooring component **600** removed. The tray **100** has a tray surface **110** and a tray bottom **120**. The tray surface **110** receives the flooring component **600**, which in this embodiment is a ceramic tile.

[0082] Figure 5 shows the flooring component **600**. A top surface **605** of the flooring component **600** forms the floor surface. A bottom surface **610** of the flooring component **600** is adhered to the tray surface **110** by an adhesive. Although in this embodiment the flooring component **600** is a ceramic tile, the flooring component may be made from any conventional flooring material.

[0083] Raised edges **160** of the tray surface **110** help secure the flooring component **600** and prevent adhesive from leaking from the tray surface **110**. The raised edges **160** are shorter than the height of the flooring component **600**. Preferably the raised edges **160** completely surround the flooring component **600**.

[0084] A perimeter of the tray **100** is provided with a plurality of upward tabs **200** and a plurality of downward tabs **300**. The upward tabs **200** interact with downward tabs **300**, and the downward tabs **300** interact with the upward tabs **200** on an adjacent modular flooring assemblies **10**. This provides the interconnection between adjacent modular flooring assemblies **10**.

[0085] In this embodiment, the tray **100** is provided with a total of eight upward tabs **200** and downward tabs **300** per side of the tray **100**. The tray **100** is designed to form a 12-inch

flooring assembly, and more or less tabs may be utilized in larger modular flooring assemblies **10** and smaller modular flooring assemblies **10**.

[0086] As shown in Figure 6, the upward tab **200** includes a convex surface **210** and a valley **220**. As shown in Figure 7, the downward tab **300** includes a concave surface **310** and a lip **320**. As the downward tab **300** is urged against the upward tab **200**, the downward tab **300** flexes as the lip **320** slides over the convex surface **210** and into the valley **220**, such that the lip **320** snaps into the valley **220** and the concave surface **310** presses over the convex surface **210**. This provides a connection with sufficient rigidity to create a composite floor made of multiple modular flooring assemblies **10**.

[0087] Moreover, the interlocking connection between the downward tab **300** and the upward tab **200** may be separated such that the composite floor may be disassembled. This allows the user to change flooring as desired. Generally, the application of the modular flooring assemblies **10** will not harm the sub floor.

[0088] A right angle grout member **400** is shown in Figures 8-13. The grout member **400** includes a first leg **410** and a second leg **420**. The first leg **410** and the second leg **420** are integrally connected at a right angle. Preferably, the grout member **400** is a single piece of material molded into its shape.

[0089] Turning to Figure 9, a view of one end **405** of the right angle grout member **400** is shown. The right angle grout member **400** includes a central portion **450**. A fluted top **460** is the uppermost portion of the right angle grout member **400**. The fluted top **460** provides a finished appearance to the installed modular floor. The fluted top **460** is complementary to the edges of the flooring component **600**. An angled portion **480** connects to the central region by a narrow portion **470**. The narrow portion **470** and the angled portion **480** form a groove **475**. As the angled portion **480** is pushed into a grout slot **250** (partially shown in Figure 7 and fully shown in Figure 19), it slightly deforms and snaps into place with a top surface **485** of the angled portion **480** physically resting against a bottom surface **275** of the grout holder **270**. This provides a secure connection for the right angle grout member **400** to the modular flooring assembly **10**.

[0090] Both the first leg **410** and the second leg **420** include a plurality of inserts **430**, which are received by the grout slots **250** formed by the combination of upward tabs **200**, the downward tabs **300**, and the grout holder **270**. As shown in Figure 10, the insert **430** includes an insert ridge **435** that cooperates with a grout holder **270** on the perimeter of the tray **100**.

[0091] The tray **100** includes a plurality of the grout holders **270**. The grout holders **270** are located between the alternating upwards tabs **200** and the downward tabs **300**. The grout holders **270** generally have an angled shape that widens towards the bottom of tray **120**.

[0092] The grout holders **270** receive the groove **475** formed by the grout member **400**. The top surface **485** of the angled portion **480** rests against the bottom surface **275** of the grout holder **270**.

[0093] In this embodiment, the grout holder **270** is separated into two sections by a grout holder separation **280** that receives the insert ridge **435** of the insert **430**. This interaction between the insert ridge **435** and the grout holder separation **280** assists in stabilizing the grout member **400**. This interaction allows the grout member **400** to be attached to the tray **100** before the tray **100** is connected to another tray **100**. The insert ridge **435** and the grout holder separation **280** are optional features. A grout holder of a single component will provide satisfactory performance.

[0094] As shown in Figure 15, the grout member **400** partially rests on top of the raised edges **160**. Specifically, a rim **490** of the grout member **400** rests on a top edge **165** of the raised edges **160**. Thus, the rim **490** resting on the top edge **165** resists a pulling force created by the top surface **485** urged against the bottom surface **275** of the grout holder. This interaction also provides a positive installation for the grout member **400**. The grout member **400** is prevented from moving in a vertical or a horizontal plane.

[0095] A corner section **438** of the grout member **400** also interconnects to a corner grout holder **290** (shown in Figure 2). In this embodiment, the corner grout holder **290** does not have an insert ridge **435**. The corner grout holder assists in aligning the grout member **400**.

[0096] Figure 11 shows an outside view of the right angle grout member **400** at the corner section. Figure 12 shows a close-up, outside view of the corner section of the right angle grout member **400**. Figure 13 shows an inside view of the corner section of the right angle grout member **400**.

[0097] Figure 14 shows a view of the right angle grout member **400** connected to the tray **100**. In Figure 14, the flooring component **600** is removed to show the connection between the right angle grout member **400** and the tray **100**.

[0098] Figure 15 shows the connection of the right angle grout **400** member to the tray **100**.

[0099] Figures 16-19 show various views of a modular floor **550**. Figure 16 shows the modular floor **550** including modular flooring assemblies **10(a)**, **10(b)** and **10(c)**. In Figure

16, there is no right angle grout member **400** shown installed around flooring component **600(a)** in a channel **700**. Modular flooring assembly **10(c)** is shown with a flooring component **600(c)** and a right angle grout member **400(c)**. A modular flooring assembly **10(b)** is shown with a flooring component **600(b)** and a right angle grout member **400(b)**.

[0100] In Figure 17, the modular floor **550** is shown with the flooring component **600(a)**, **600(b)**, and **600(c)** removed. The right angle grout member **400(c)** is also removed.

[0101] Figure 18 shows a view of the junction of trays **100(a)**, **100(b)**, and **100(c)**. The right angle grout member **400(b)** is shown.

[0102] Figure 19 is another view of the junction.

[0103] An optional padding **500** is shown in Figures 20 and 21. The padding **500** may be over-molded to the tray bottom **120**. Figure 21 shows the padding removed. The tray bottom **120** may include a series of channels. This provides a positive connection between the optional padding **500** and the tray bottom **120**.

[0104] Figures 23-28 illustrate an embodiment in which snap-in grout is designed to fit into grout holes formed in the interlocking tabs. A tray **800** is shown in Figure 23. The tray **800** interlocks with other trays **800** to form a modular floor. The tray **800** is shown without a flooring component. The tray **800** includes upward tabs **810** and downward tabs **820**. The upward tabs **810** have grout holes **815**. The downward tabs **820** have grout holes **825**. When the upward tabs **810** and downward tabs **820** are interconnected, the grout holes **815** and the grout holes **825** overlap and provide a combined grout hole to receive a snap-in grout **900**.

[0105] The snap-in grout **900** is shown in Figures 25-28. The snap-in grout **900** is locked into place with a slide locking mechanism. The snap-in grout **900** has a plurality of legs **910**. The legs **910** expand into a barb portion **930**. A top surface **931** of the barb portion **930** includes an optional serrated surface **935**. The barb portion **930** is larger in cross-sectional area than the leg **910**.

[0106] Sides **932** of the barb portion **930** are angled such that the barb portion **930** is pointed, i.e., a bottom surface **933** of the barb portion **930** is smaller than the top surface **931** of the barb portion **930**. This snaps the barb portion into the combined grout hole and helps the barb portion **930** anchor the snap-in grout **900** into the combined grout hole. A bottom of the grout hole **815** has an optional serrated surface **835** matching to the serrated surface **935** on the snap-in grout **900**.

[0107] The snap in grout **900** includes a grout portion **950** with a channel **960** to receive an additional grout member. The grout portion **950** ends in a point **952** formed by a 90

degree angle. When other grout portions **950** meet at an intersection of four modular flooring assemblies, the points **952** fill the intersection.

[0108] The periphery of the grout hole **815** includes a lower bracket region **855** and the periphery of the grout hole **825** includes an upper bracket region **865**. The lower bracket region **855** and the upper bracket region **865** extend into the grout hole **815** and the grout hole **825**, respectively. When the upward tabs **810** and downward tabs **820** are interconnected, the lower bracket region **855** and the upper bracket region **865** overlap. This provides a wider region **880** and **885** on either side of the overlapping bracket regions **855** and **865** that receives the barb portion **930**. Then, the user laterally moves snap-in grout **930** until the barb portion **830** is underneath the overlapping lower bracket region **855** and the upper bracket region **865**. Once the barb portion **930** is underneath, it is secured in place.

[0109] Another tray embodiment of the present invention is shown in Figures 29-32. A tray **1000** is illustrated with vertical edges **1010** rising from a bottom surface **1005** from the tray **1000**. The vertical edges **1010** extend around the entire perimeter of the tray **1000**. The vertical edges **1010** have a sloped surface **1020**.

[0110] The sloped surface **1020** angles inward and downward, i.e. toward a middle of the bottom surface **1005**. The sloped surface **1020** provides several advantages. First, the sloped surface **1020** creates an adhesive moat to capture any excess adhesive. When a flooring component is pressed into the tray **1000**, the adhesive has a place to pool, which improves the bond between the flooring component and the tray **1000**, and further reduces the likelihood that the adhesive will spill over the vertical edge **1010** and contaminate the interlocking tabs. The sloped surface **1020**, due to its inward and downward edge, also helps guide the flooring component into the tray **1000** during assembly.

[0111] The vertical edge **1010** also includes a generally flat upper surface **1030** that transitions into the sloped surface **1020**. The grout member may rest on the upper surface **1030**.

[0112] In this embodiment, the tray **1000** includes grout holders **1050**. The grout holders **1050** are a solid body without the grout holder separation as shown in some of the other embodiments of the present invention. The grout holder **1050** is positioned between downward tabs **1060** and upward tabs **1070**.

[0113] Figure 33 shows another right-angle grout member of the present invention. A right-angle grout member **1100** includes a curved transition **1150**. The curved transition **1150** provides a compressible seal that is forgiving to the edge of the flooring component. The

right angle grout member **1100** further includes inserts **1110** that lack the insert ridge **435** of other embodiments of the present invention. The inserts **1110** provide sufficient connectivity between the inserts **1110** and the interlocking trays with reduced manufacturing and production costs.

[0114] Figure 34 shows a flooring component **1200** of the present invention. The flooring component **1200** is a ceramic tile having depressions **1205** and grooves **1210** therein. A bottom surface **1220** of the flooring component **1200** is shown. By including the depressions **1205** and the grooves **1210**, the adhesive is provided more surface area to contact the flooring component **1200**. Further, joint starvation is reduced since adhesive is not squeezed away from regions of the bottom surface **1220** of the flooring component **1200**. If the bottom of the flooring component **1200** includes ridges or protrusions, then adhesive may be pushed away in from these areas leading to joint starvation resulting in an inferior bond between the bottom of the flooring component and the surface of the tray.

[0115] Another embodiment of a snap-in grout includes an interconnecting grout system, which may also be used with the trays **100**, the flooring component **600**, and the modular flooring assemblies **10** herein described. The interconnecting grout system comprises a bottom grout member that is snap-fitted into the channel **700** between connected trays **100**. The interconnecting grout system further comprises a top grout member that is installed over the bottom grout member and also snap-fitted into the channel **700** between the connected trays **100**. The bottom grout member and the top grout member are snap-fitted in a generally perpendicular arrangement, for example, the bottom grout members may be generally perpendicular to the top grout members or vice versa. The top grout member and the bottom grout member include a plurality of inserts for attaching the grout members to the trays. The inserts are similar in shape and function to the inserts **430** described for the right angle grout member **400**. Similarly, the inserts of the interconnecting grout system are snap-fitted into the slots formed by the tabs from the trays **100**.

[0116] The interconnecting grout system provides many advantages. The interconnecting grout system provides a grout system with a reduced number of grout members. Notably, a single bottom grout member or a single top grout member may be positioned in the channel **700** between numerous pairs of connecting modular body assemblies **10**. For example, an eight feet length of bottom grout member may be positioned between eight pairs of connected twelve-inch trays. This provides efficiency and labor savings during the installation process.

This also provides a more finished appearance to the eventual modular floor, as there are minimal joints in the grout component.

[0117] The combination of the top grout member and the bottom grout member forms the interconnecting grout system. A joint region where the top grout member and the bottom grout member overlaps produces a flush or continuous appearing surface to the interconnecting grout system.

[0118] Both the top grout member and the bottom grout member have a generally linear shape. Both the top grout member and the bottom grout member include a plurality of the inserts. The number of inserts per grout member will depend upon the type and size of the tray. Generally, larger trays will have more inserts than smaller trays.

[0119] Preferred embodiments include approximately three to approximately twelve inserts per linear foot of both the top grout member or the bottom grout member. The top grout member and the bottom grout member may be cut to a specific length needed to fill in the junction region between interconnecting tray substrates. For example, the top grout member and the bottom grout member may be supplied in lengths of approximately four feet to approximately eight feet, and the user may cut down the grout members as needed for their specific tiling project. Of course, embodiments of the present invention include larger lengths of the top grout member and the bottom grout member, such as approximately ten, twelve, sixteen, etc. feet.

[0120] The top grout member and the bottom grout member are preferably made from a thermal plastic elastomer, thermal plastic rubber, or other compressible, pliable material designed to fit between the tray substrates and provide a dust and moisture barrier. The top grout member and the bottom grout member provide a durable grout system with the ability to easily remove both the top grout member and the bottom grout member. This provides flexibility to the user of the flooring system, since the flooring system may be removed and reused without the destruction of the tile and grout system.

[0121] Turning now to Figures 35-40, an example of an interconnecting grout system **510** is shown. A bottom grout member **520** and a top grout member **540** are shown in Figures 35-37. Both the bottom grout member **520** and the top grout member **540** include a central portion **541** and a fluted top **560** in the upper portion of the respective grout member **520**, **540**. The fluted top **560** provides a finish appearance to the installed modular floor. The bottom grout member **520** and the top grout member **540** further include a plurality of inserts **531** connected to the bottom of the grout member **520** and the bottom of the top grout

member **540**. The inserts **531** are generally similar in structure and function to the inserts **430** previously described, i.e., an angled portion **581** connects to the central portion **541** by a narrow portion **571**. The narrow portion **571** and the angled portion **581** form a groove **575**. As the angled portion **581** is pushed into the grout slot **250**, it slightly deforms and snaps into place.

[0122] The bottom grout member **520** further includes one or more recesses **570**. The recesses **570** are spaced along the bottom grout member **540** such that the recesses are positioned in the channel **700** between connected modular flooring assemblies **10**. The recesses **570** receive recesses **580** of the top grout member **540**. The recesses **580** are into a top surface of the top grout member **540** and are further into the central portion **541** of the top grout member **540**. The recesses **580** are positioned in the top grout member **540** to match the channel **700** between connected tray substrates **100**.

[0123] As shown in Figures 38-40, the recesses **580** of the top grout member **540** overlap with the recesses **570** of the bottom grout member **520** and form a joint region **595** interconnecting the grout members **520** and **540**. The joint may be in the shape of a lap joint. This overlapping joint provides an efficient method to install the grout members **520** and **540**, as the overlapping aids in positioning the grout members **520** and **540**. The overlapping also provides strength to the grout system. The overlapping also provides a clean and smooth appearance to the grout system, since the joints of the grout are precisely matched during the manufacturing process. The user is not required to cut the grout members **520** and **540** to form a joint or to later attempt to conceal the joint.

[0124] The recesses **570** and **580** are shown in the Figures as having a squared, box-like shape. In other embodiments of the present invention, the recesses **570** and **580** may have an arcuate, rectangular, triangular or other geometric or non-geometric shape.

[0125] The top grout member **540** further includes one or more split inserts **532**. The split inserts **532** include insert portions **532a** and **532b**. The insert portions **532a** and **532b** are on either side of the recess **580**. The insert portions **532a** and **532b** assist in forming walls **582** of the recess **580**. The walls **582** assist in guiding recess **580** of the top grout member **540** into the recess **570** of the bottom grout member **520**. The recess **580** includes a bottom surface **581**. The recess **570** also includes walls **572** and a bottom surface **571**. The bottom surface **571** and the bottom surface **581** are in contact when the grout member **520** and **540** are joined.

[0126] The depth of the recesses **570** and **580** may vary. Preferably, the combined depth of the recess **570** and the recess **580** should approximately equal the depth of grout members **520** and/or **540**. This assists in providing a flush or continuous grout surface. The depth of the recess **570** and the recess **580** may be approximately 10 to approximately 90 percent of the depth of the grout members **520** and **540**. More preferably, the depth of the recess **570** and the recess **580** is approximately 30 percent to approximately 70 percent of the depth of the grout members **520** and **540**. Although embodiments are shown having an approximately equal depth for both of the recess **570** and the recess **580**, embodiments wherein, for example, the depths of the recesses **570**, **580** are different are included in the present invention. In certain embodiments, for example, the recess **570** has a depth of approximately 40 percent and the depth of the recess **580** has a depth of approximately 60 percent.

[0127] The interconnecting grout system **510** provides a durable and lasting grout system. The joint region **595** formed by the combination of the top grout member **540** and the bottom grout member **520** is firmly affixed to the tile substrates **100** since the split insert **532** of the top grout member **540** is in close proximity to the insert **531** the bottom grout member **520** at the joint region **595**. The split insert **532** and the insert **531** at the joint region **595** securely affix grout members **520** and **540** to the tray substrates **100** by the inserts **531**, **532** snapping to the trays **100** immediately below the joint region **595**.

[0128] The bottom grout member **520** and the top grout member **540** include a flattened portion **590** at one end of their structure. The flattened portion **590** provides clearance in the channel **700** between the trays **100** for an oppositely disposed grout member to be inserted.

[0129] As is evident from the foregoing description, certain aspects of the present invention are not limited by the particular details of the examples illustrated herein, and it is therefore contemplated that other modifications and applications, or equivalents thereof, will occur to those skilled in the art. It is accordingly intended that the claims shall cover all such modifications and applications that do not depart from the spirit and scope of the present invention.

What is claimed:

1. A modular flooring assembly, comprising:

a tray substrate comprising a flooring component; and

the tray substrate having upward tabs and downward tabs that are interconnected with upward and downward tabs of a second tray substrate to form a modular floor;

the interconnection of the upwards and downwards tabs forming a slot between the tray substrates to receive a portion of a grout member.

2. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 1, wherein padding is molded to a bottom of the tray substrate.

3. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 1, wherein a right angle grout member comprises inserts that are received by the slots formed between the tabs.

4. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 1, wherein the tray substrate comprises vertical tray edges.

5. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 4, wherein the vertical tray edges align the flooring component with the tray surface.

6. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 4, wherein the vertical tray edges form a barrier to prevent an adhesive from being pushed or from flowing into the tabs.

7. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 4, wherein the vertical tray edges extend around the entire perimeter of the tray substrate.

8. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 1, wherein a right-angle grout member includes a first leg integrally connected with a second leg at a right angle.

9. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 1, wherein a right-angle grout member includes a plurality of inserts that are fitted into the slots formed by the tabs, wherein the inserts may have a triangle or arrow-shaped portion that is connected to the right angle grout member via a narrower transition region.

10. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 1, wherein the upward tabs includes a convex surface and a valley, wherein the downward tab includes a concave surface and a lip.

11. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 10, wherein as the downward tab is urged against the upward tab, the downward tab flexes as the lip slides over the convex surface and into the valley, such that the lip snaps into the valley and the concave surface presses over the convex surface.

12. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 1, wherein a right-angle grout member includes a central region, an angled portion connected to the central region by a narrow portion, and the narrow portion and the angled portion forming a groove.

13. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 1, wherein a right-angle grout member includes a central region, an angled portion connected to the central region by a narrow portion, wherein a top surface of the angled portion urges against a bottom surface of a grout holder.

14. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 1, wherein the tray includes a grout holder on its perimeter.

15. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 14, wherein the grout holder is located between upwards tabs and the downward tabs.

16. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 14, wherein the grout holder has an angled shape that widens towards a bottom of the tray.

17. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 15, wherein a right-angle grout member includes a central region, an angled portion that connects to the central region by a narrow portion, and the narrow portion and the angled portion form a groove, wherein the grout holders receive the groove.

18. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 1, wherein the tray substrate comprises vertical tray edges that align the flooring component with a surface of the tray, wherein the flooring component has a bottom surface comprising grooves or depressions that receive an adhesive, and the bottom surface is connected to the surface of the tray via the adhesive.

19. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 1, wherein the tray substrate comprises grout holders; the grout member comprising a first leg integrally connected with a second leg at a right angle, wherein the first leg and the second leg include a plurality of inserts; and, the upward tabs, the downward tabs, and the grout holders forming grout slots, wherein the grout slots receive the inserts.

20. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 1, the tray substrate comprising vertical tray edges, and a grout member partially rests on top of the vertical edges.

21. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 20, wherein a rim of the grout member rests on a top edge of the vertical edges.

22. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 20, wherein the grout member includes a central region, an angled portion connected to the central region by a narrow

portion, wherein a top surface of the angled portion urges against a bottom surface of a grout holder on the perimeter of the tray.

23. A modular floor comprising a plurality of the modular flooring assemblies according to Claim 1.

24. The modular floor according to Claim 23, wherein the floor floats on a sub-floor.

25. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 1, wherein the modular flooring assembly further comprises a fill-in grout.

26. A grout member, comprising:

a first leg integrally connected with a second leg at a right angle,

the first leg and the second leg having a plurality of inserts that are received by a tray substrate.

27. The grout member according to Claim 26, wherein the inserts have a portion with an angled shape.

28. The grout member according to Claim 26, wherein the inserts have a triangle shaped or an arrow shaped portion.

29. The grout member according to Claim 26, wherein the grout member is made of a thermoplastic elastomer or a thermoplastic rubber.

30. The grout member according to Claim 26, wherein the grout member is made of a solid material.

31. The grout member according to Claim 26, wherein the grout member comprises a central portion, an angled portion of the grout member connects to the central portion of the grout member via a narrow portion of the grout member, wherein the narrow portion and the angled portion form a groove.

32. A method of forming a modular floor, comprising:

interconnecting modular flooring assemblies, wherein the modular flooring assemblies comprise a tray substrates and a flooring component, wherein the tray substrate has upward tabs and downward tabs that may be interconnected with upward and downward tabs of another tray substrate; and

inserting a right angle grout member in between the modular flooring assemblies to form the modular floor.

33. A modular flooring assembly, comprising:

a tray substrate comprising a flooring component;

the tray substrate having upward tabs and downward tabs that may be interconnected with upward and downward tabs of a second tray substrate to form a modular floor; and

the upwards and the downward tabs comprising a plurality of grout holes that receive a grout member.

34. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 33, wherein the grout holes of the upwards tabs and the grout holes of the downward tabs overlap when the tray substrate interconnects with the second tray substrate.

35. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 33, wherein the grout holes of the upwards tabs comprise a bracket, and the grout holes of the downward tabs comprise a bracket.

36. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 33, wherein the grout member comprises a plurality of legs that expand into a plurality of barbs, wherein the grout holes receive the barbs.

37. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 33, wherein the grout holes of the upwards tabs comprise a bracket, and the grout holes of the downward tabs comprise a bracket; wherein the grout member comprises a plurality of legs that expand into a plurality of barbs; wherein the grout holes receive the barbs; and the barbs slide beneath the brackets.

38. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 33, wherein the grout member ends in a point formed by a 90 degree angle.

39. A modular flooring assembly, comprising:

a tray substrate comprising a flooring component,

the tray substrate interconnects to a second tray substrate to form a modular floor,

the tray substrate comprises vertical tray edges around the perimeter of the tray substrate; wherein the vertical tray edges comprises a sloped surface, wherein the sloped surface angles inward and downward.

40. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 39, wherein the sloped surface angles toward a middle of the tray substrate.

41. A modular flooring assembly, comprising:

a tray substrate comprising a flooring component;

the tray substrate having upward tabs and downward tabs that are interconnected with upward and downward tabs of a second tray substrate to form a modular floor; and

the interconnection of the upwards and downwards tabs forming slots between the tray substrates to receive a portion of an interconnecting grout system.

42. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 41, wherein the interconnecting grout system comprises a bottom grout member and a top grout member.

43. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 42, wherein the bottom grout member and the top grout member comprises inserts that are received by the slots formed between the tabs.

44. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 41, wherein the tray substrate comprises vertical tray edges.

45. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 44, wherein the vertical tray edges extend around the entire perimeter of the tray substrate.

46. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 41, wherein the interconnecting grout system comprises a bottom grout member and a top grout member, wherein the bottom grout member comprises a plurality of recesses and the top grout member comprises a plurality recesses.

47. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 46, wherein the recesses of the bottom grout member receive the recesses of the top grout member.

48. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 46, wherein the recesses of the top grout member overlap with the recesses of the bottom grout member and form a joint region interconnecting the top grout member and the bottom grout member.

49. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 46, wherein the top grout member further includes one or more split inserts on either side of the recess in the top grout member.

50. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 41, wherein the interconnecting grout system include a plurality of inserts that are fitted into the slots formed by the tabs, wherein the inserts have a triangle or arrow-shaped portion that is connected to the interconnecting grout system via a narrower transition region.

51. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 41, wherein the upward tabs includes a convex surface and a valley, wherein the downward tab includes a concave surface and a lip.

52. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 51, wherein as the downward tab is urged against the upward tab, the downward tab flexes as the lip slides over the convex surface and into the valley, such that the lip snaps into the valley and the concave surface presses over the convex surface.

53. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 41, wherein the interconnecting grout system comprises a bottom grout member and a top grout member, and the bottom

grout member and the top grout member include a central region, an angled portion connected to the central region by a narrow portion, and the narrow portion and the angled portion forming a groove.

54. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 53, wherein a top surface of the angled portion urges against a bottom surface of a grout holder.

55. The modular flooring assembly according to Claim 41, the tray substrate comprising vertical tray edges, and the interconnecting grout system partially rests on top of the vertical edges.

56. A modular floor comprising a plurality of the modular flooring assemblies according to Claim 41.

57. The modular floor according to Claim 56, wherein the floor floats on a sub-floor.

58. An interconnecting grout system, comprising:

a bottom grout member and a top grout member, wherein the bottom grout member comprises a plurality of recesses and the top grout member comprises a plurality of recesses, the bottom grout member and the top grout member including a central region, an angled portion connected to the central region by a narrow portion, and the narrow portion and the angled portion forming a groove, wherein the angled portion is received by slots formed by tabs from interconnecting tray substrates.

59. The grout member according to Claim 58, wherein the recesses of the top grout member overlap with the recesses of the bottom grout member and form a joint region interconnecting the top grout member and the bottom grout member.

60. The grout member according to Claim 58, wherein the top grout member further includes one or more split inserts on either side of the recess in the top grout member.

61. A method of forming a modular floor, comprising:

interconnecting modular flooring assemblies, wherein the modular flooring assemblies comprise a tray substrate and a flooring component, wherein the tray substrate has upward tabs and downward tabs that may be interconnected with upward and downward tabs of another tray substrate; and

inserting an interconnecting grout system comprising a bottom grout member and a top grout member between the modular flooring assemblies to form the modular floor.

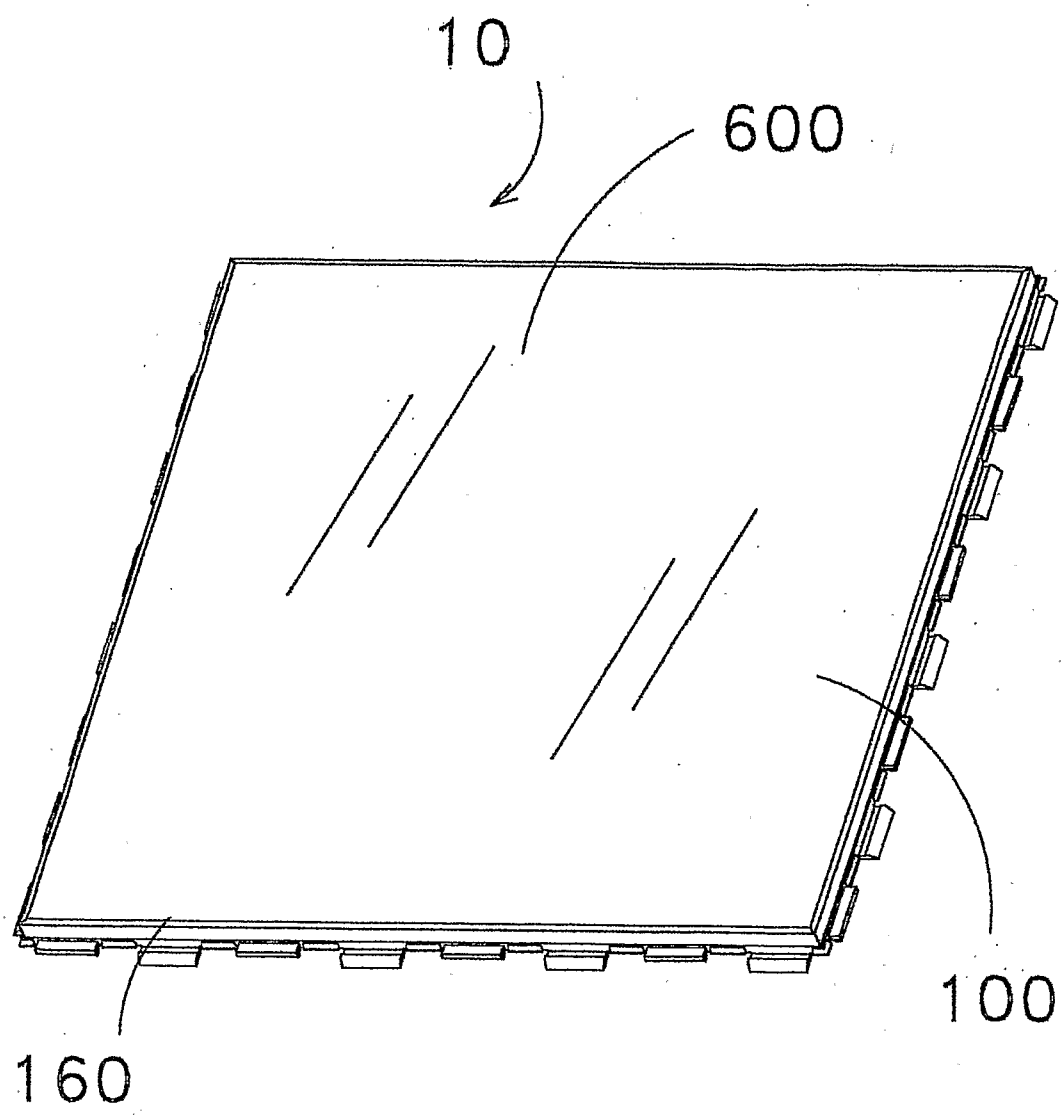


FIG. 1

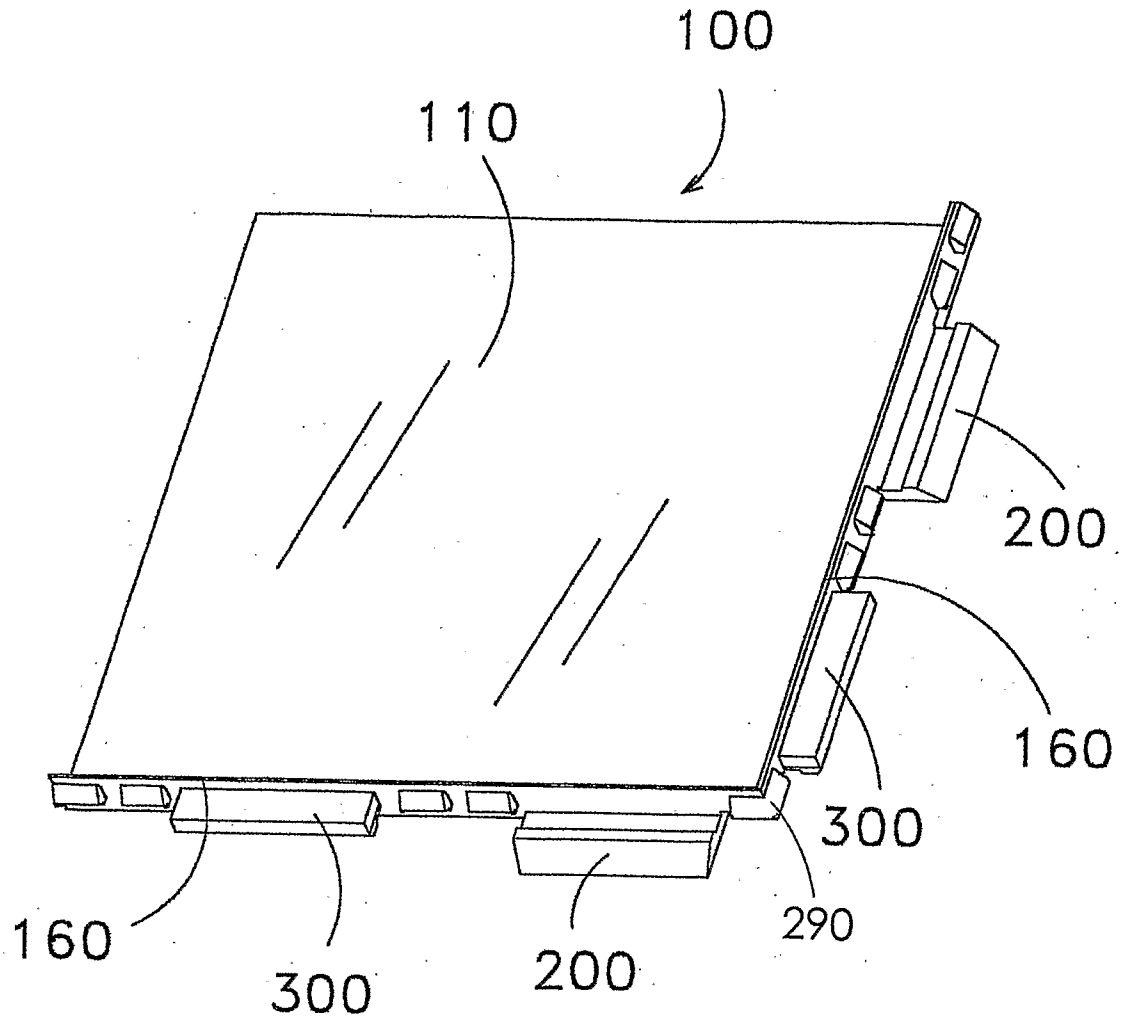


FIG. 2

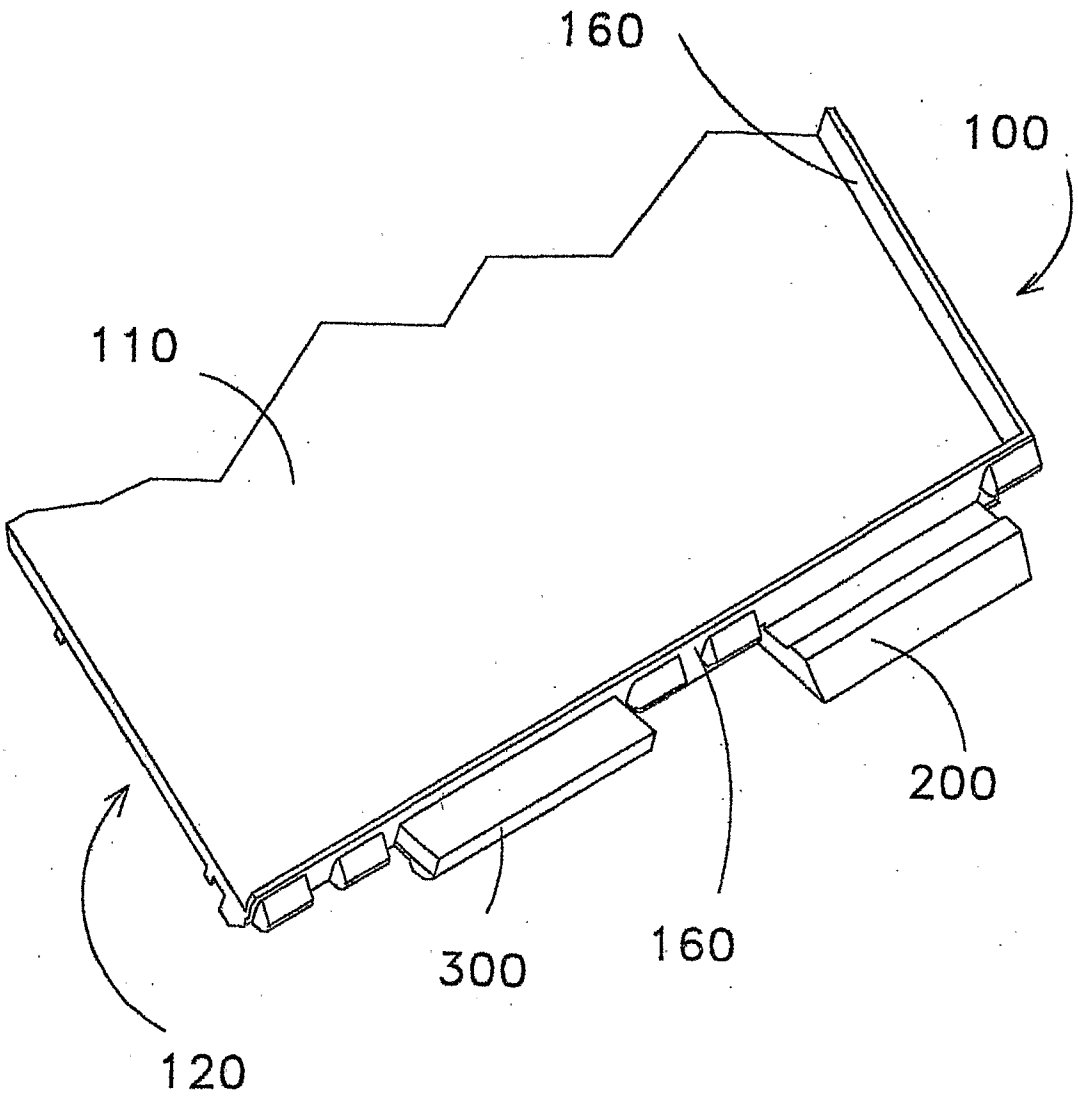


FIG. 3

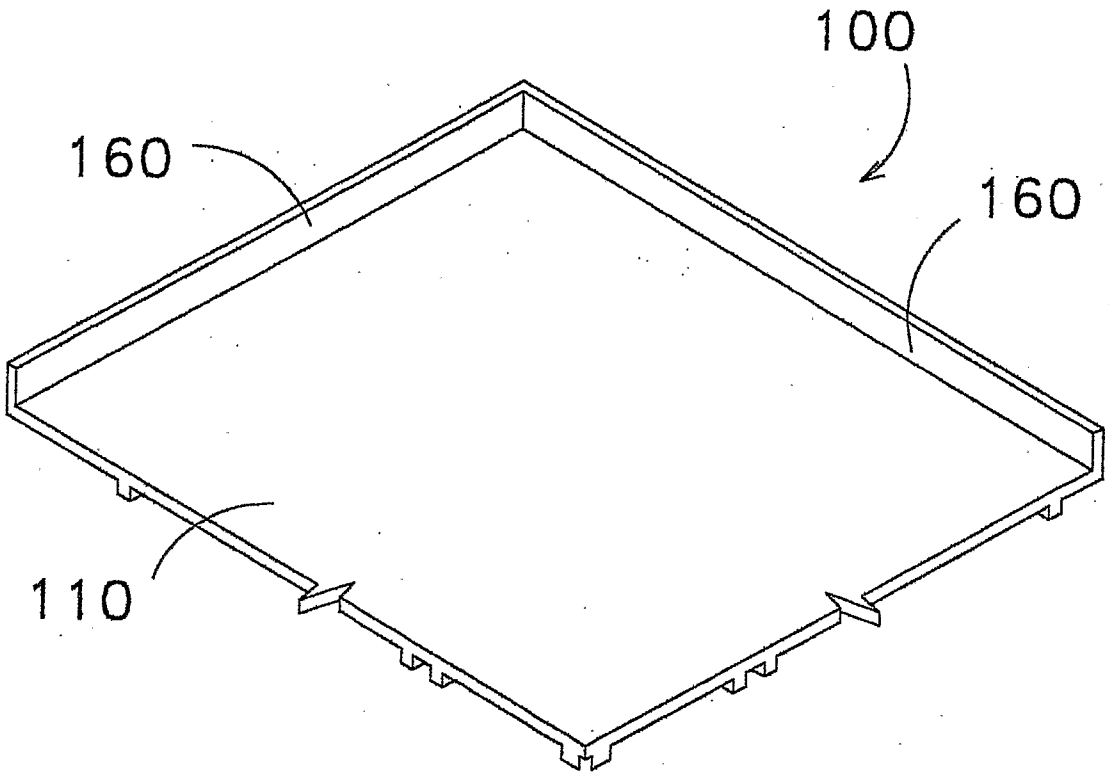


FIG. 4

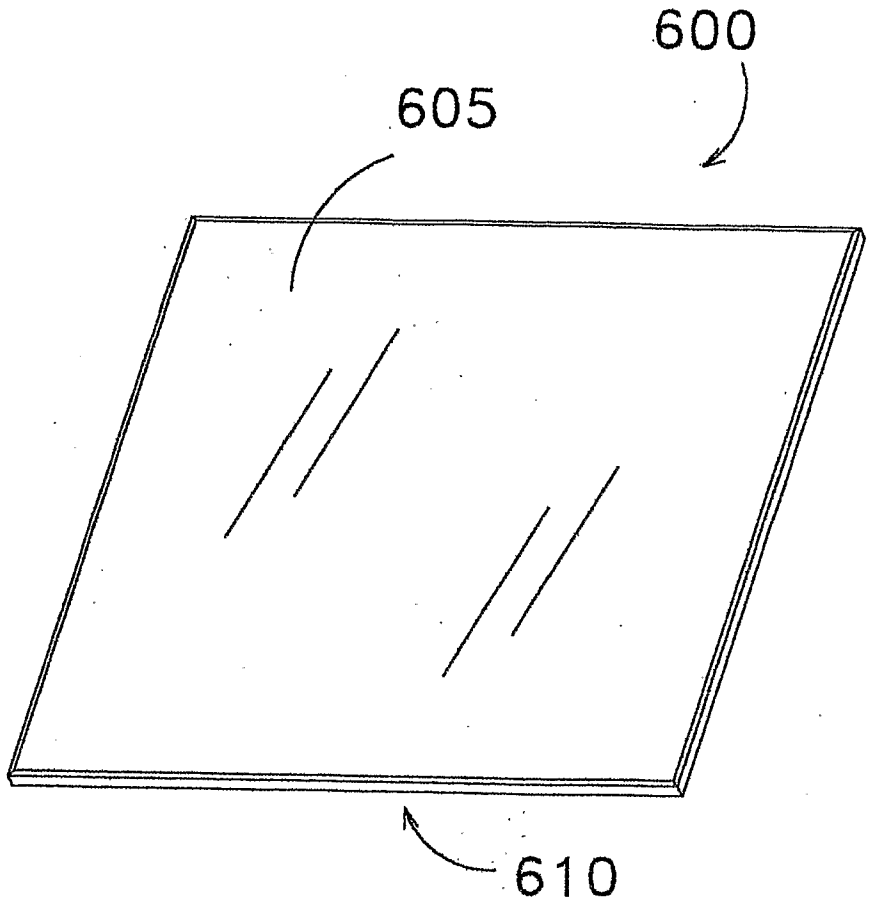


FIG. 5

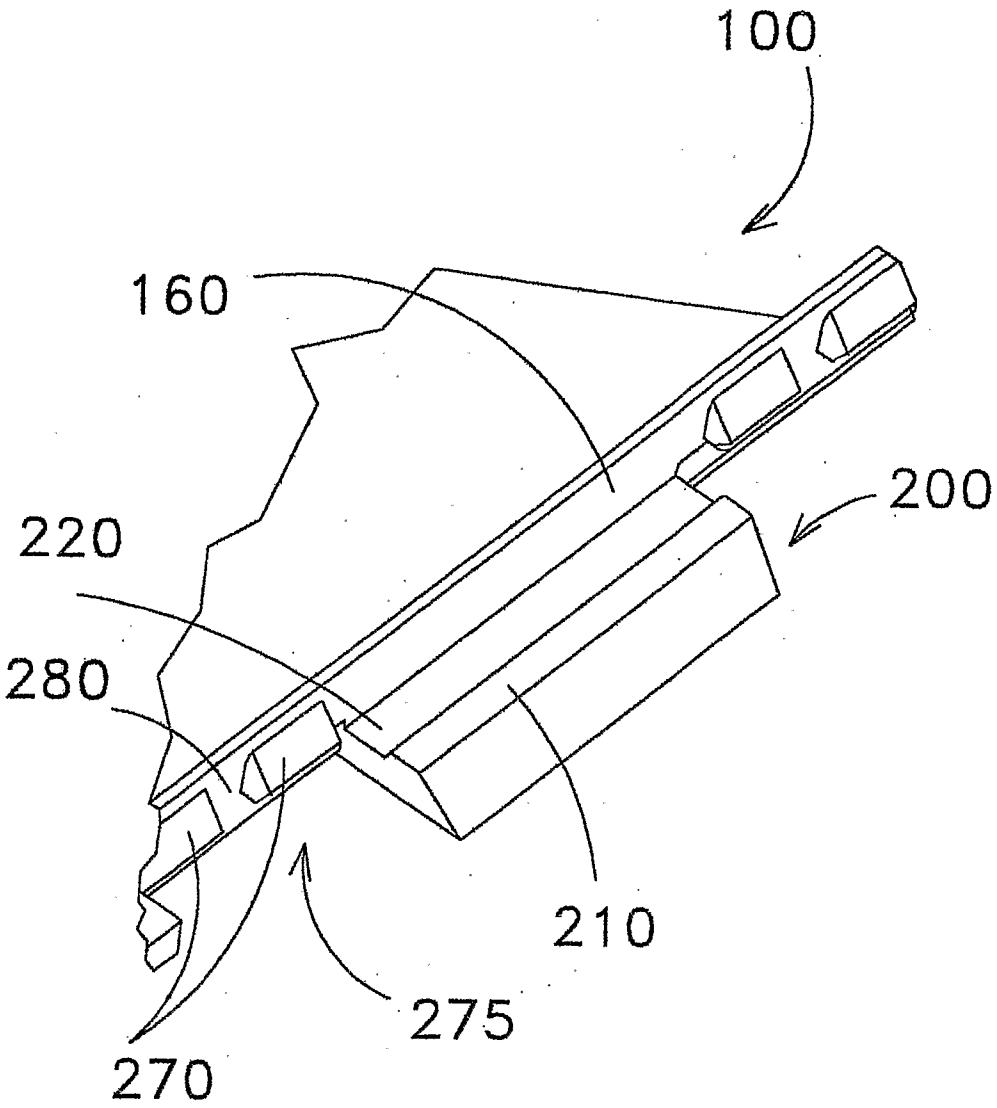


FIG. 6

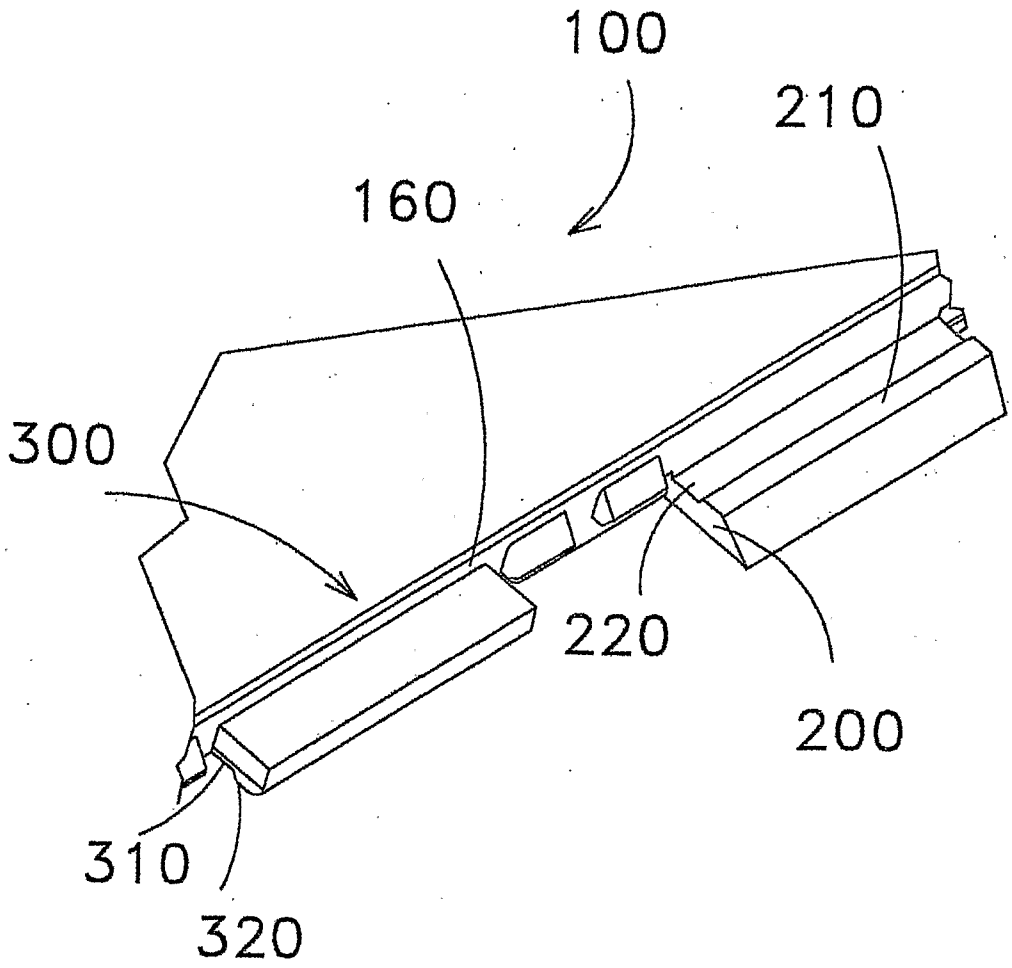


FIG. 7

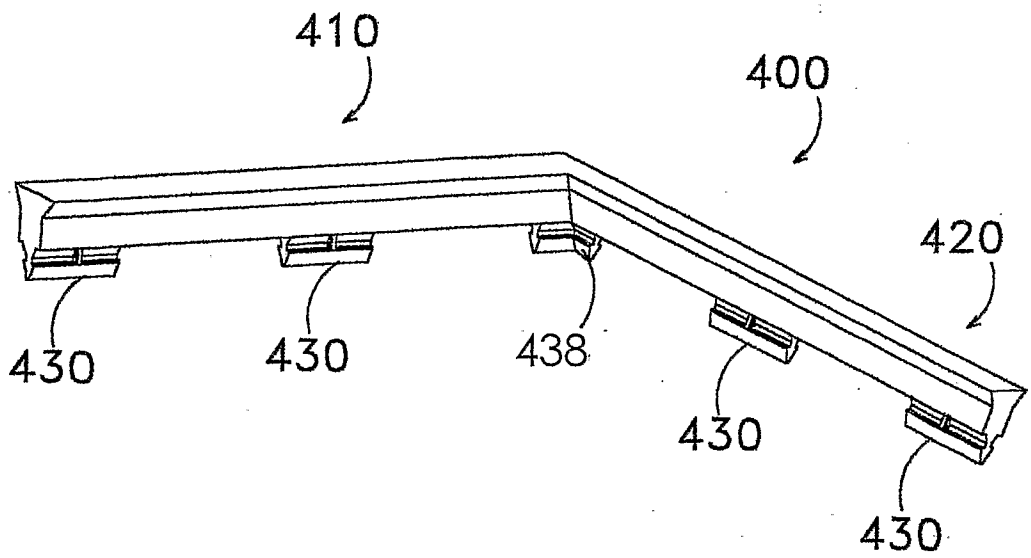


FIG. 8

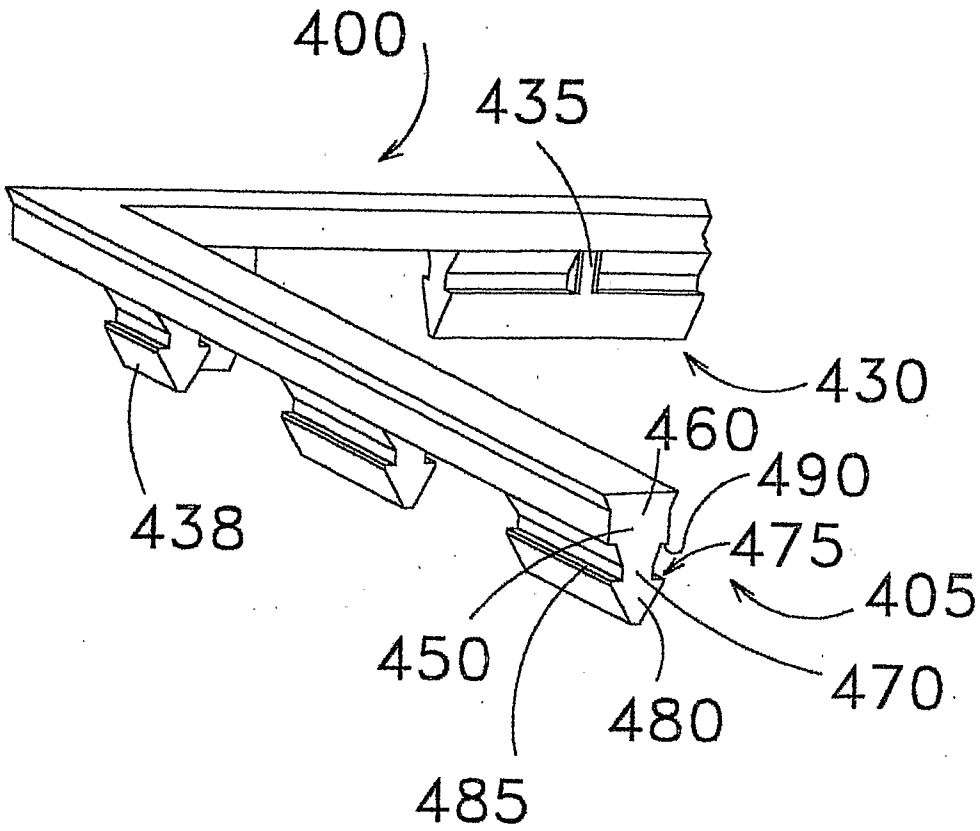


FIG. 9

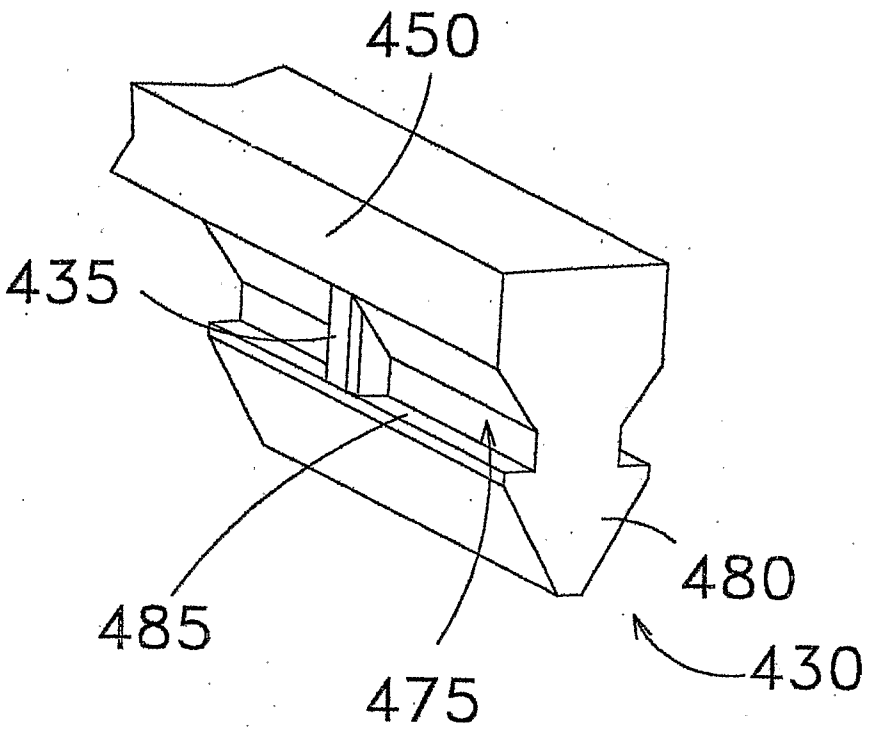


FIG. 10

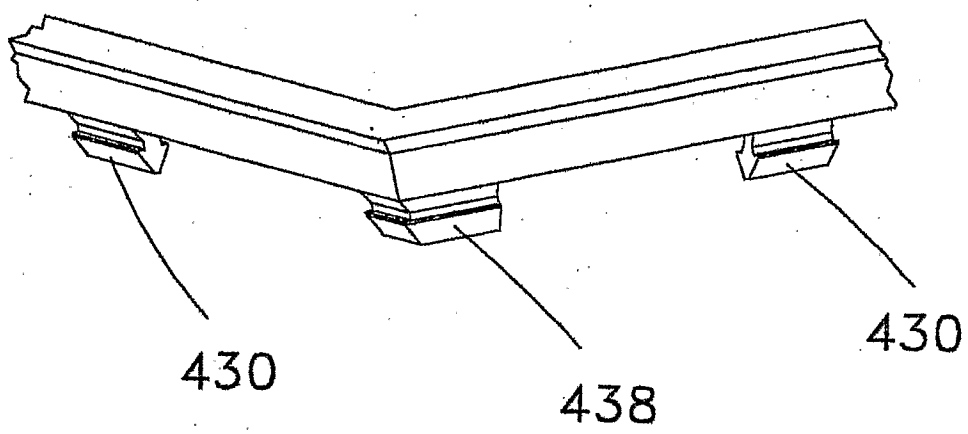


FIG. 11

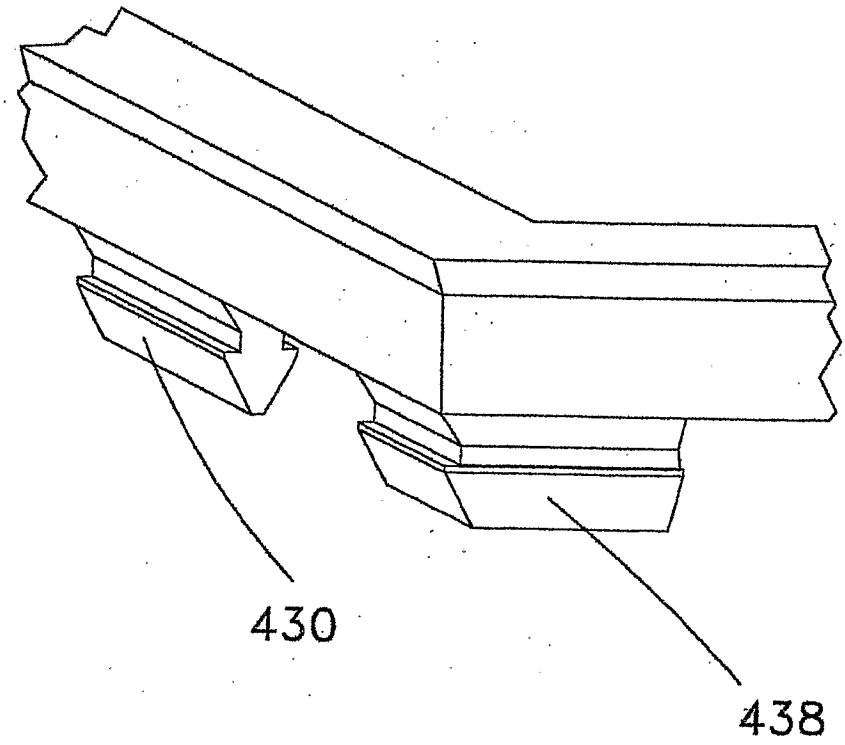


FIG. 12

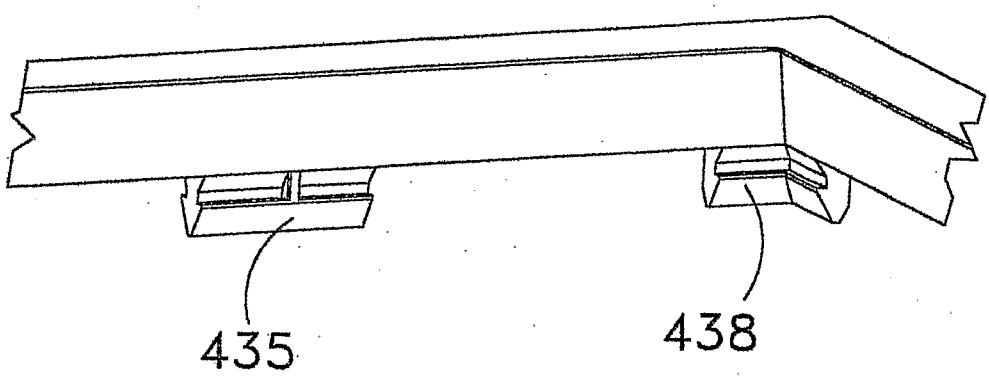


FIG. 13

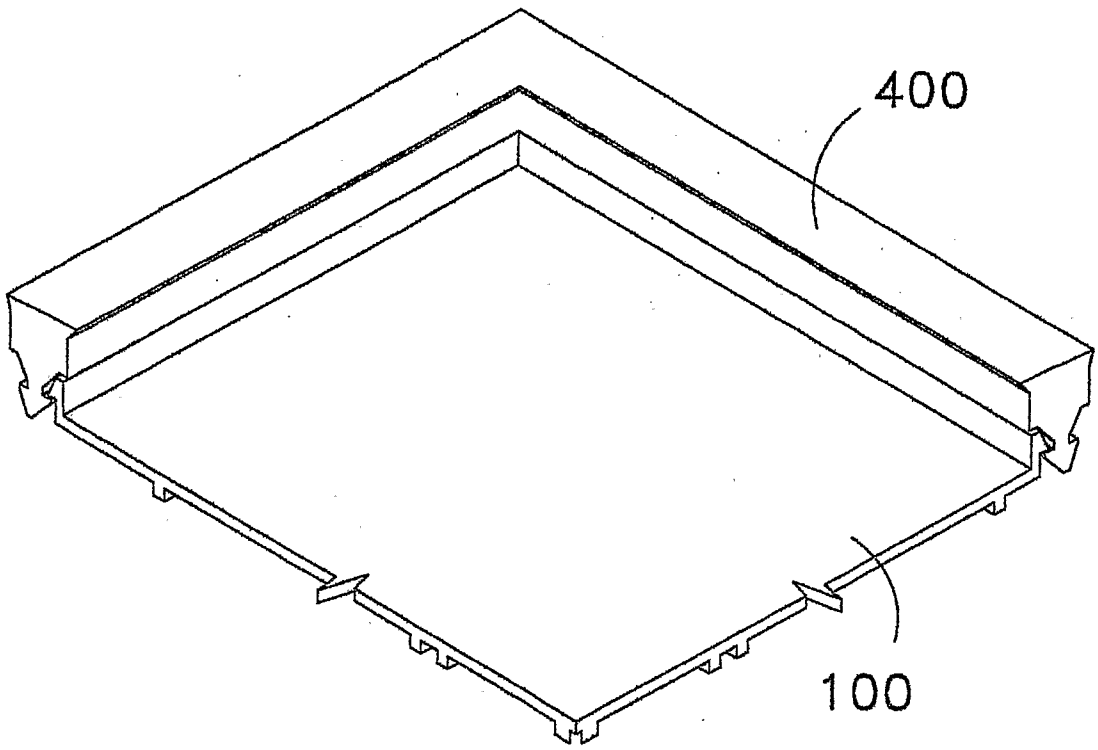


FIG. 14

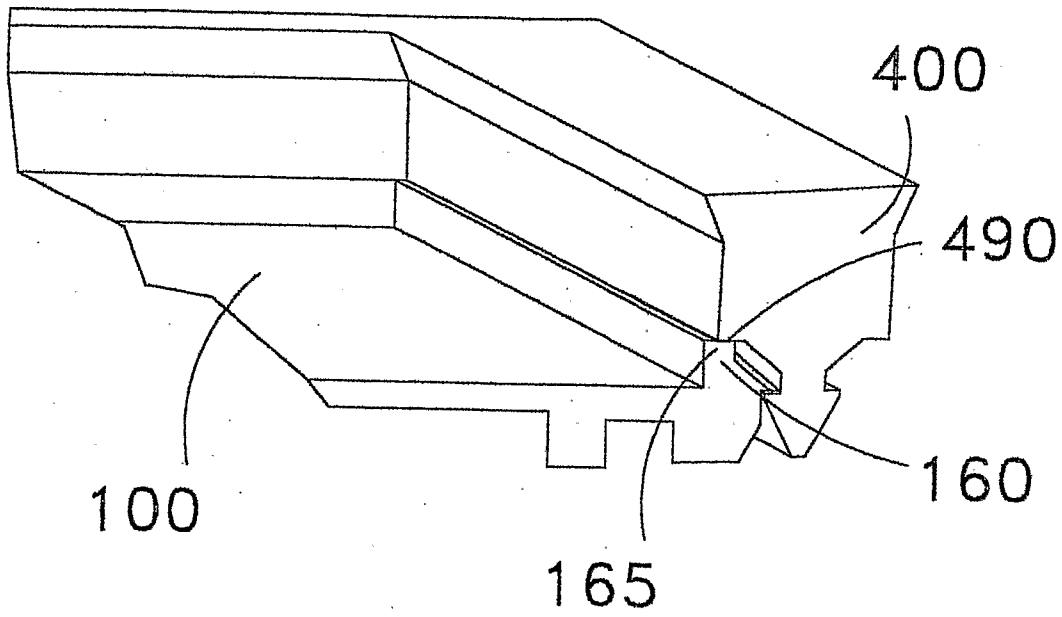


FIG. 15

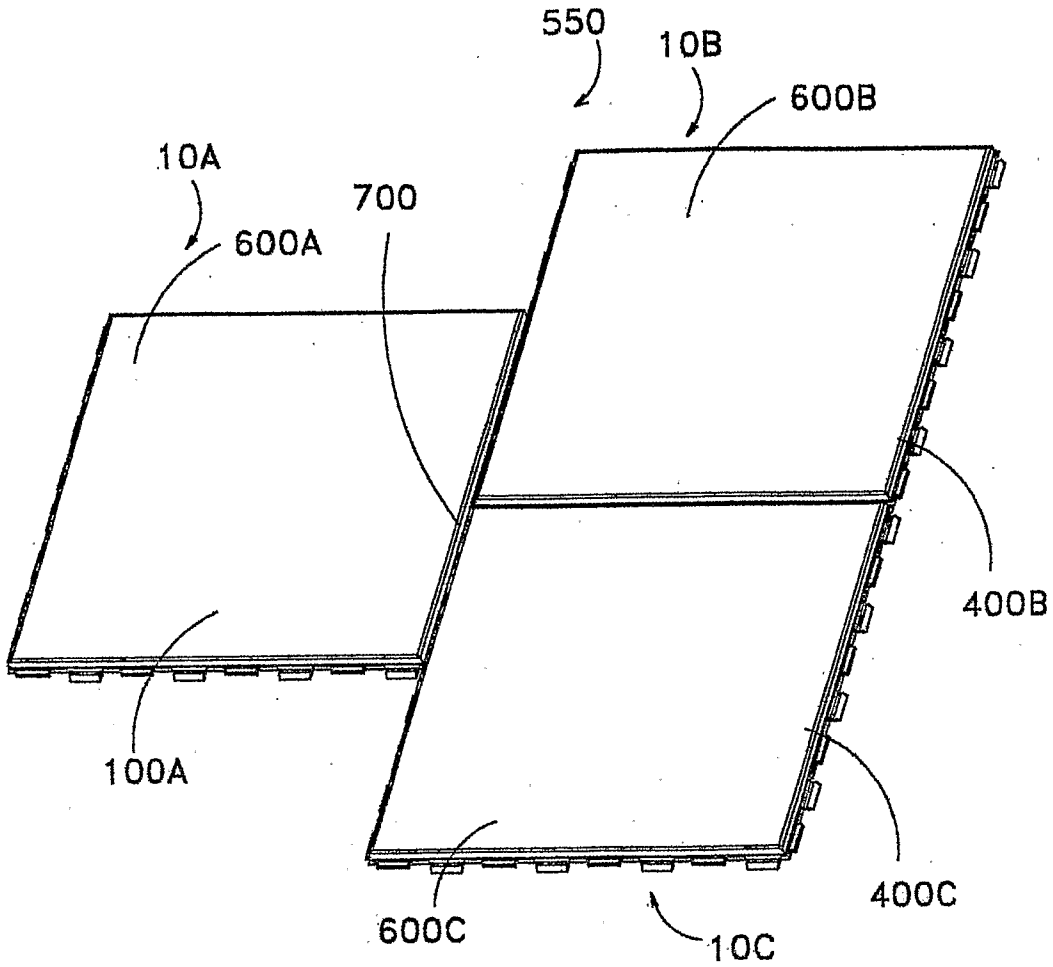


FIG. 16

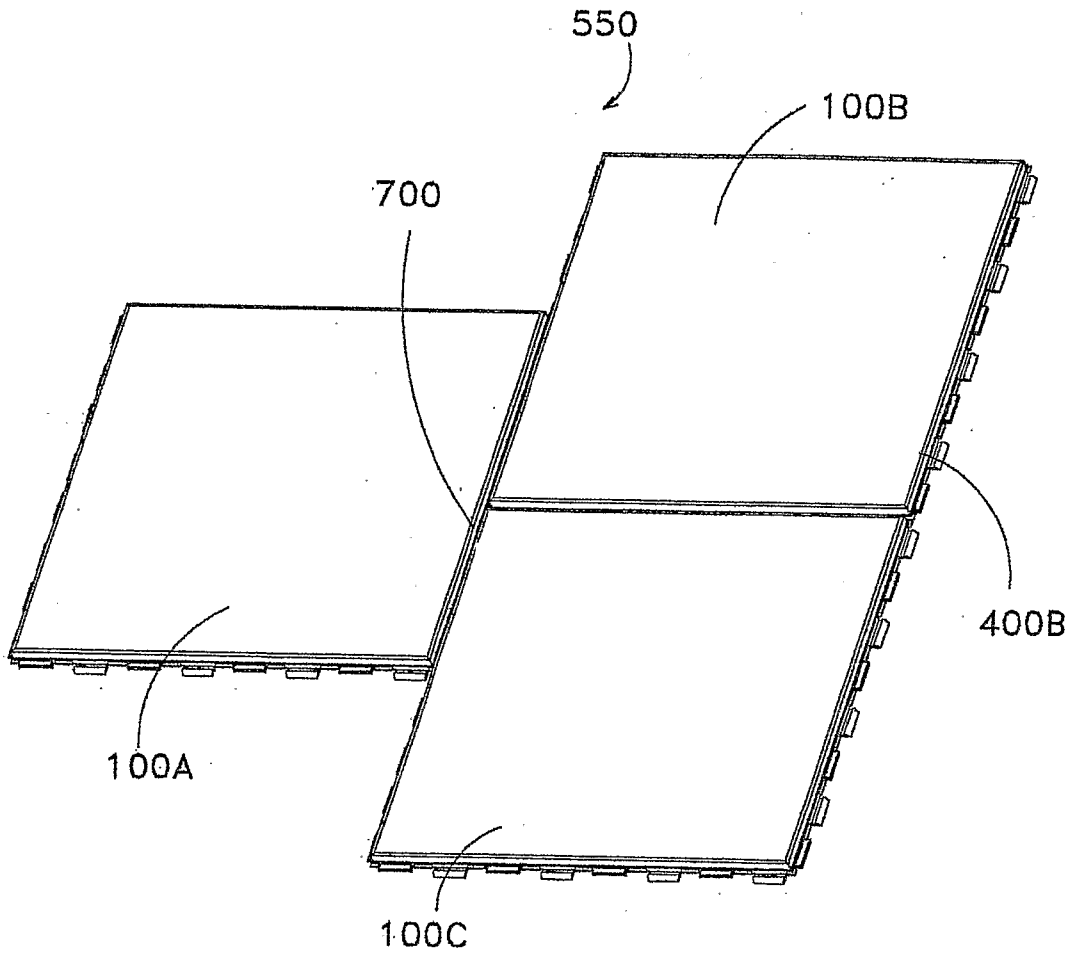


FIG. 17

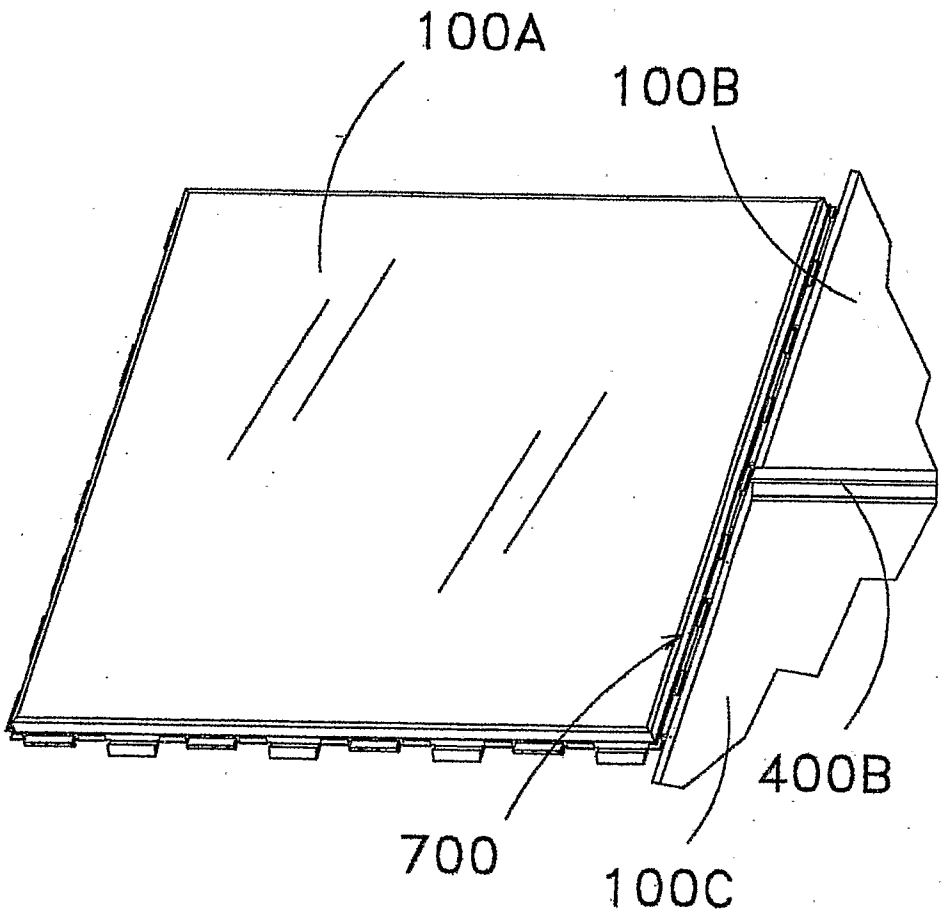


FIG. 18

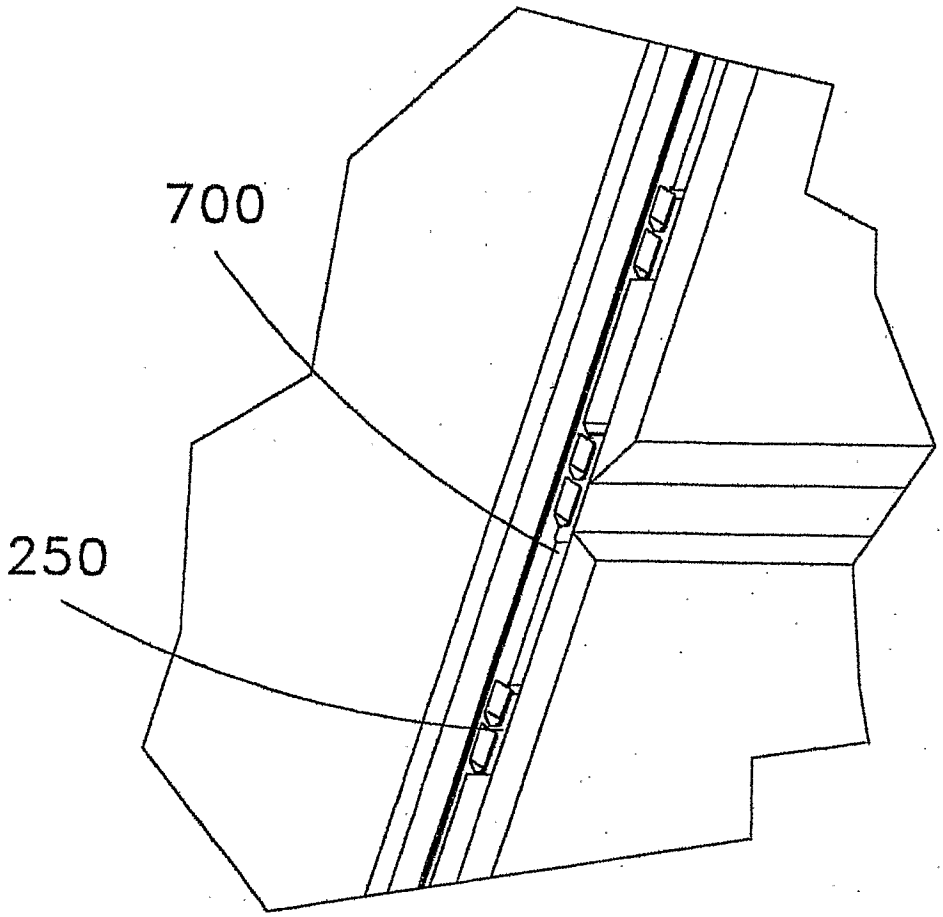


FIG. 19

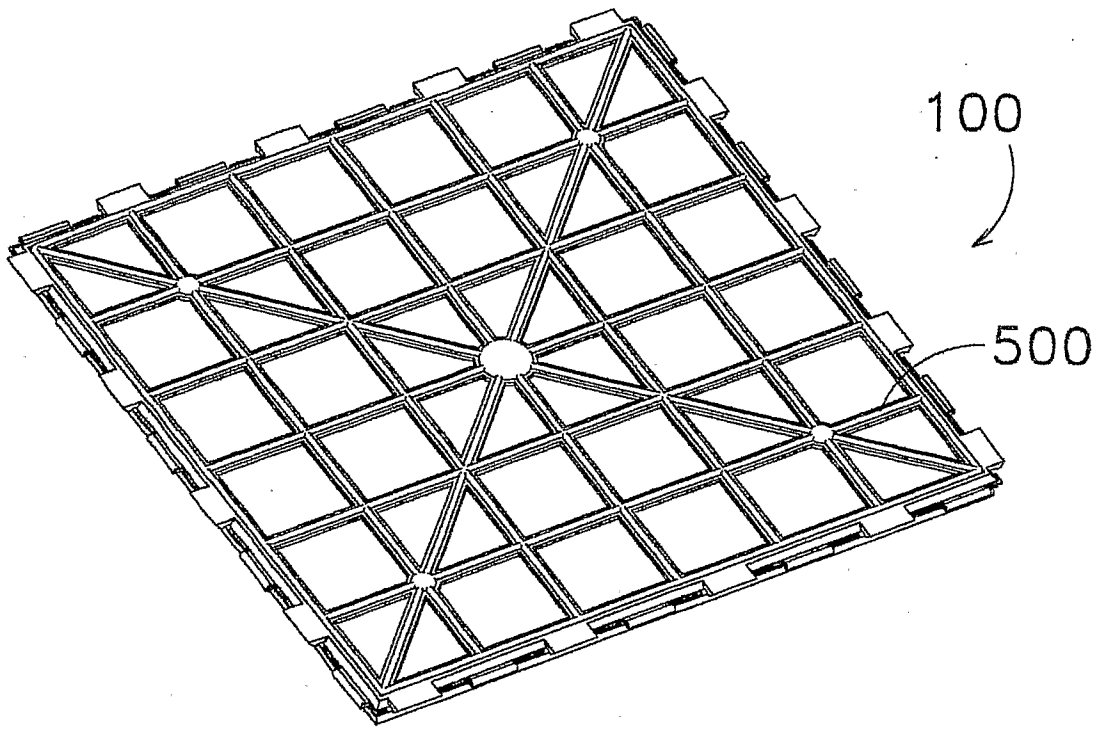


FIG. 20

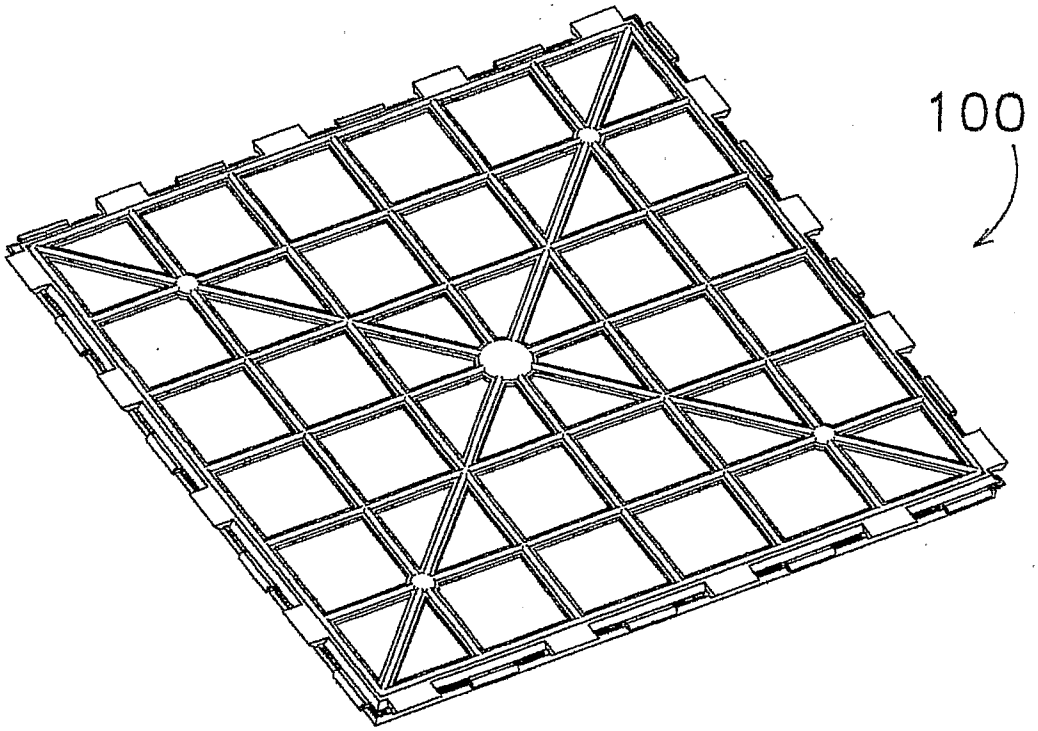


FIG. 21

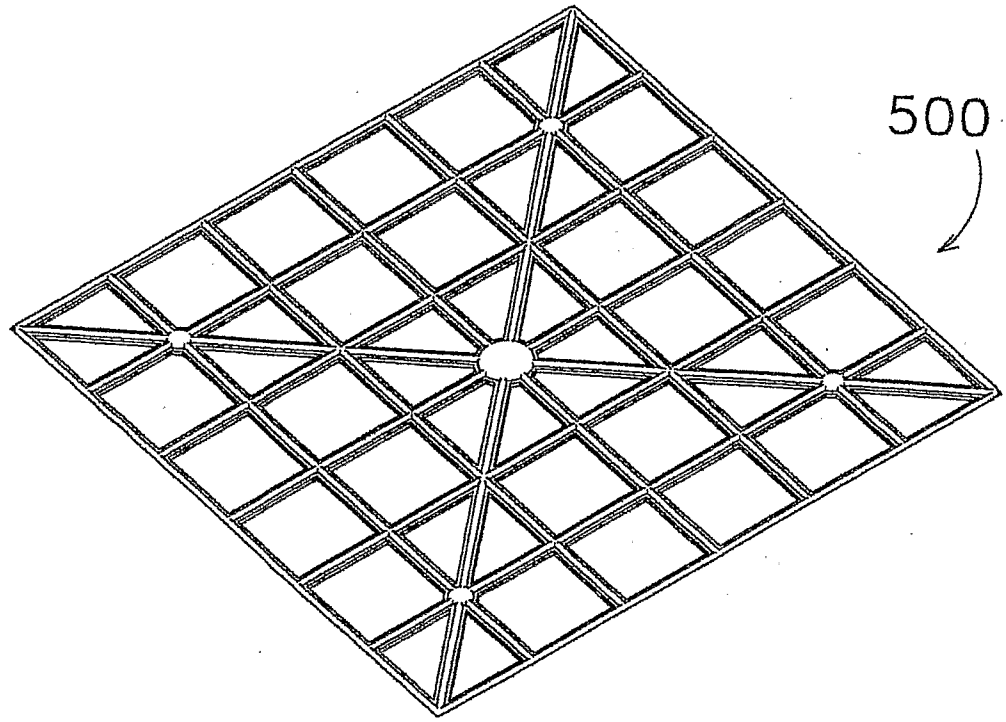


FIG. 22

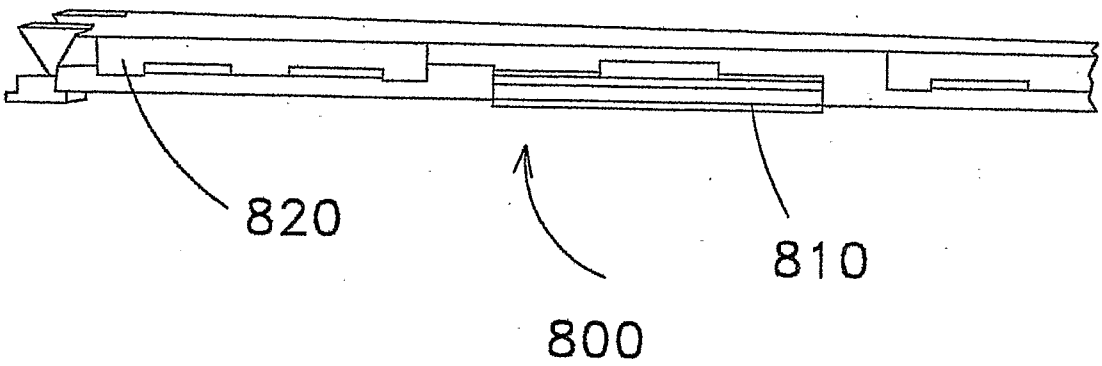


FIG. 23

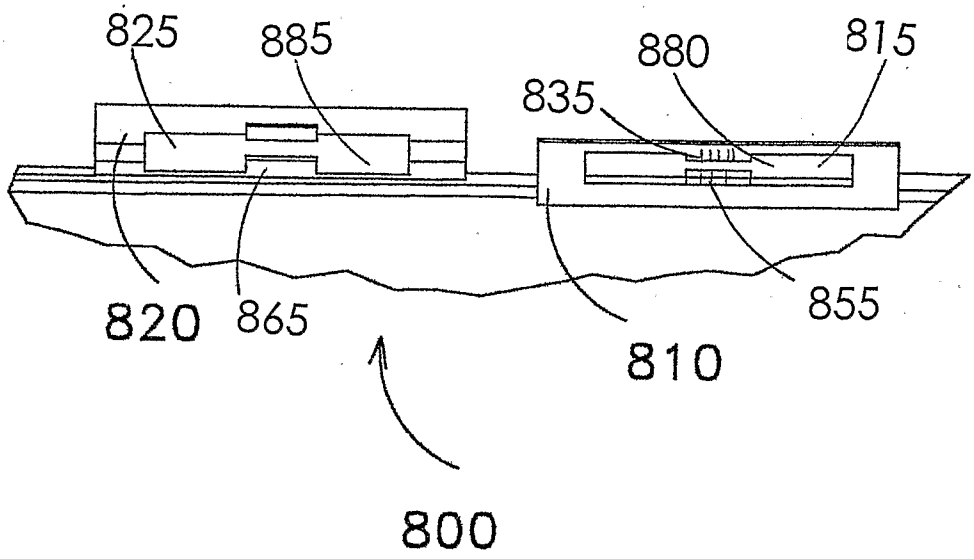


FIG. 24

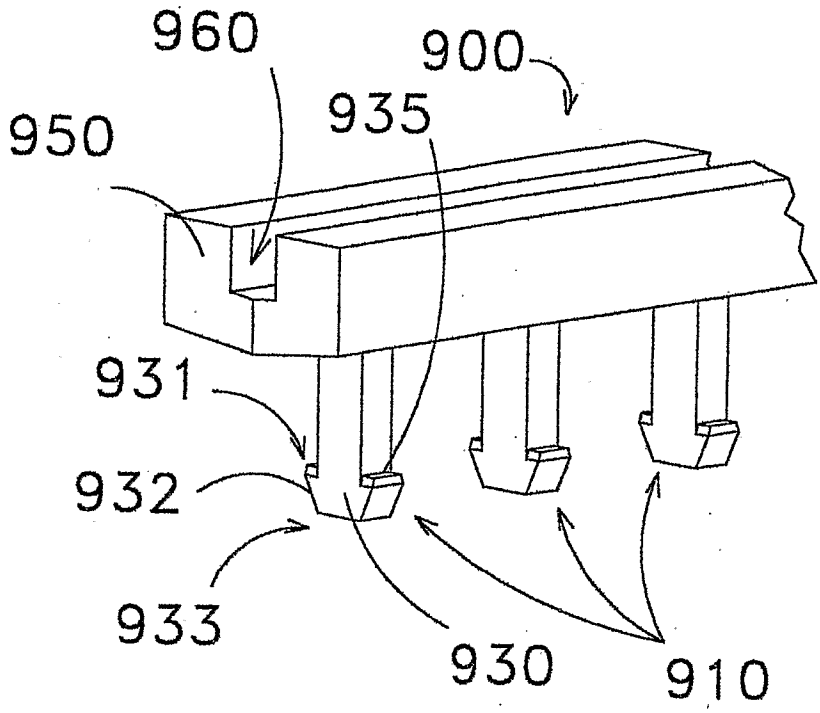


FIG. 25

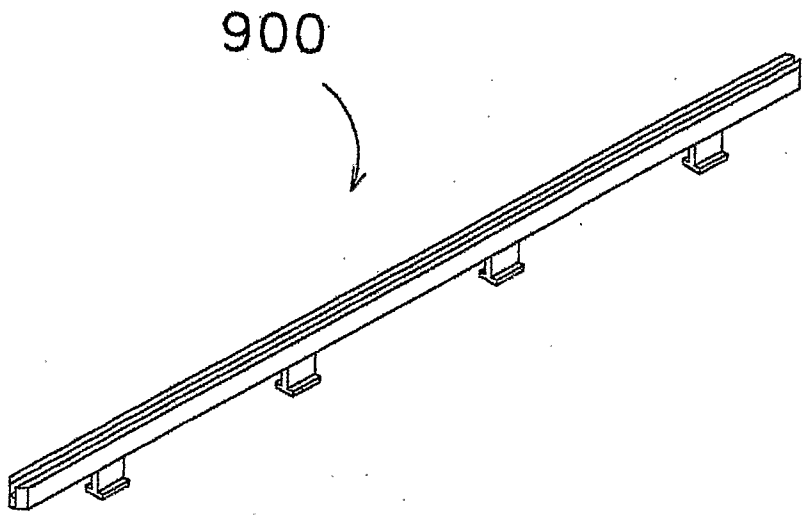


FIG. 26

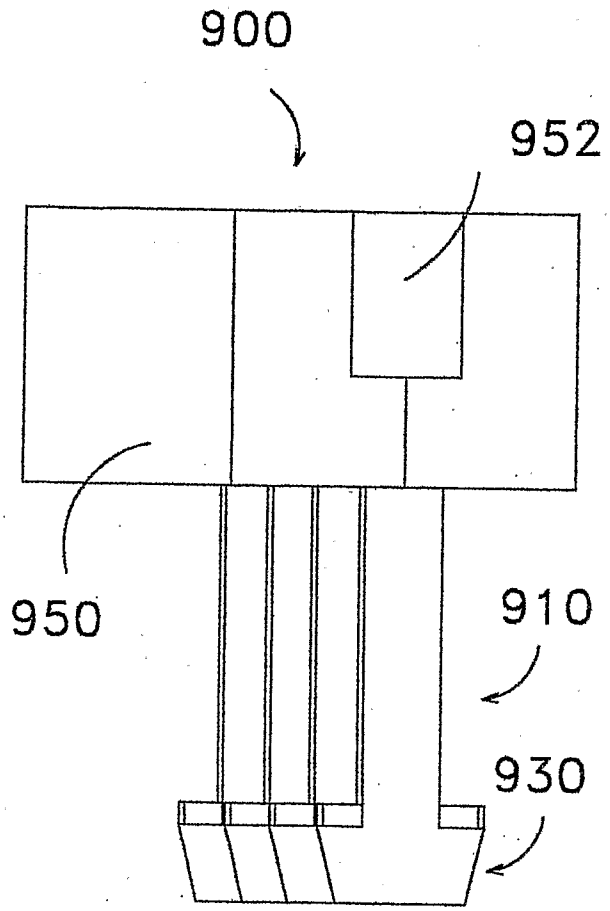


FIG. 27

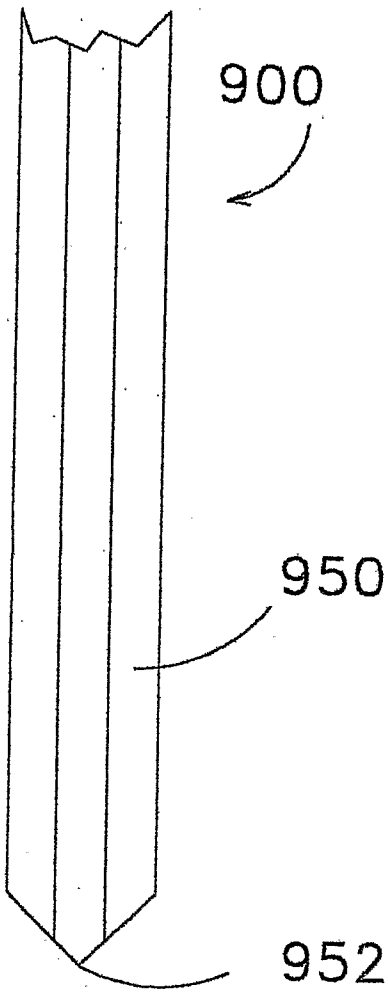


FIG. 28

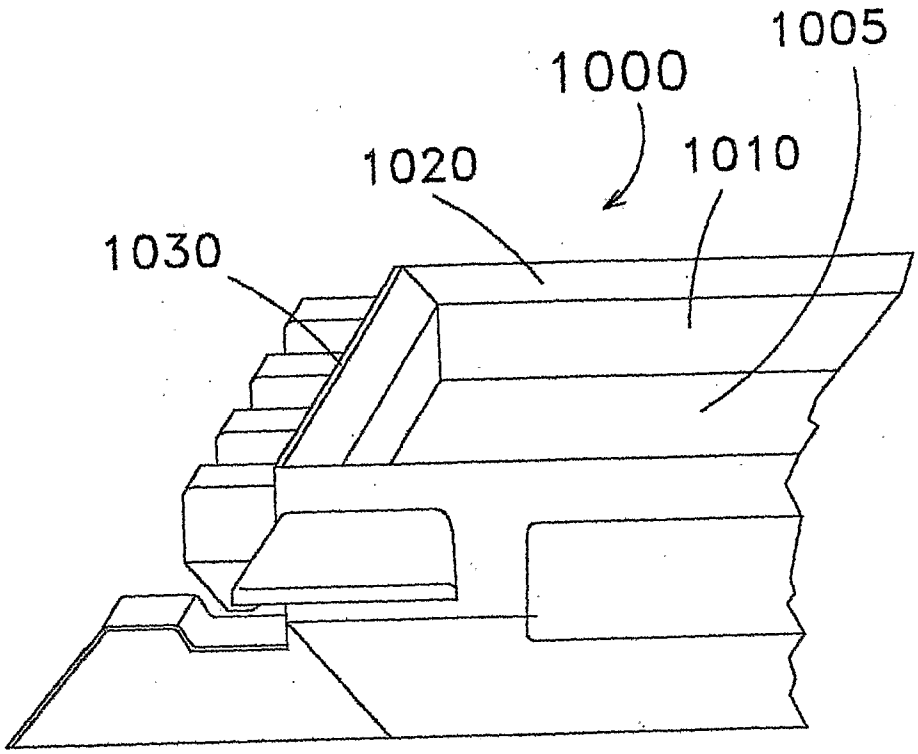


FIG. 29

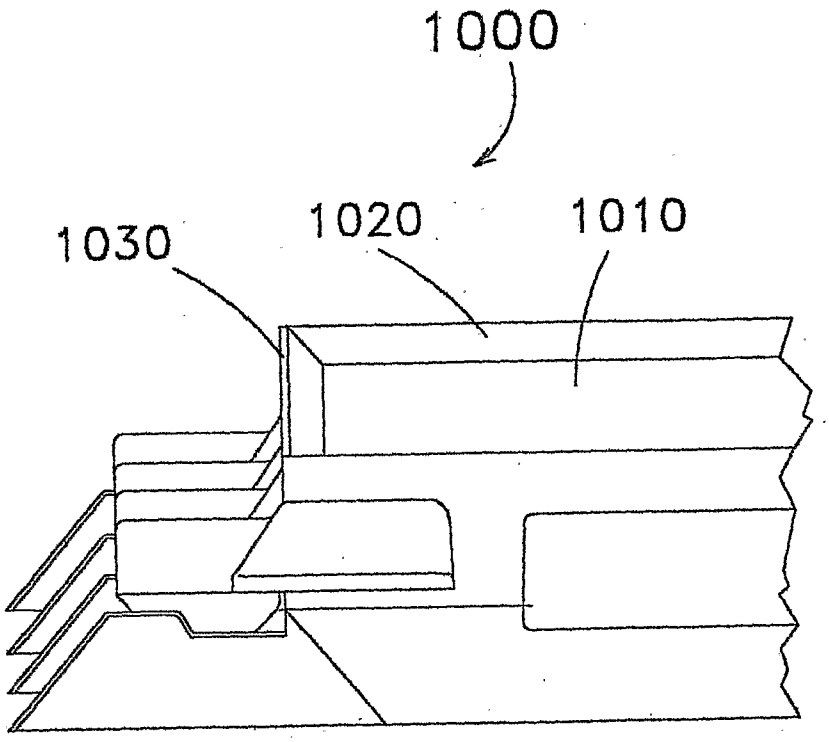


FIG. 30

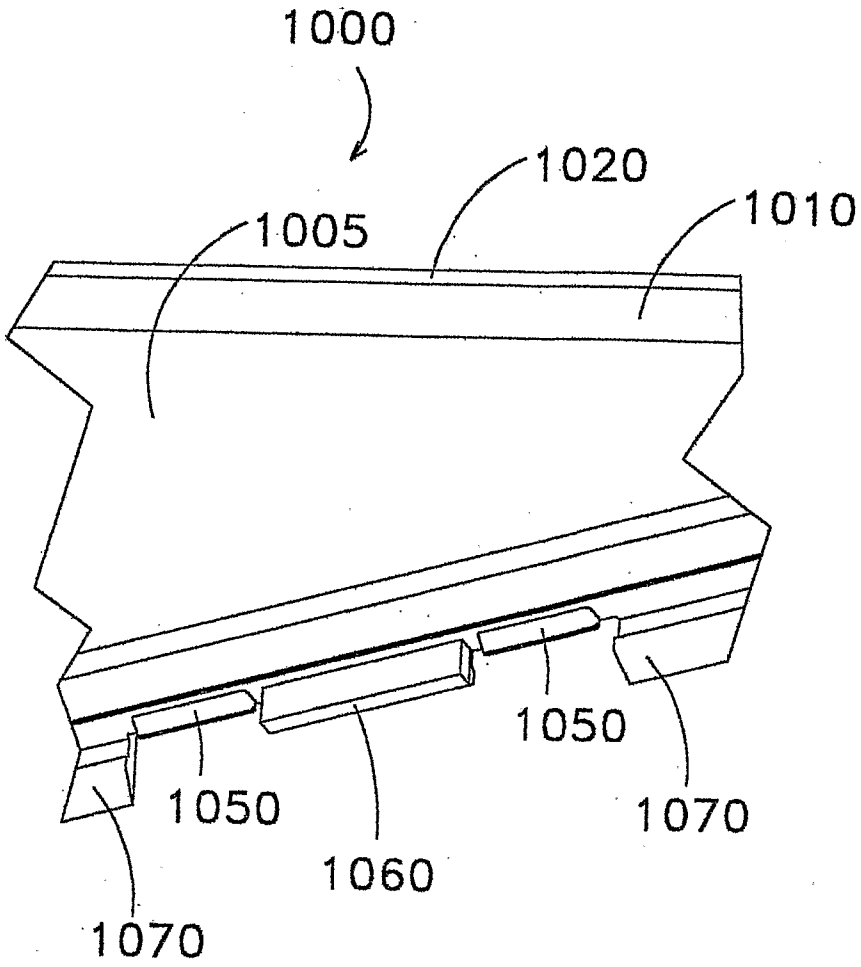


FIG. 31

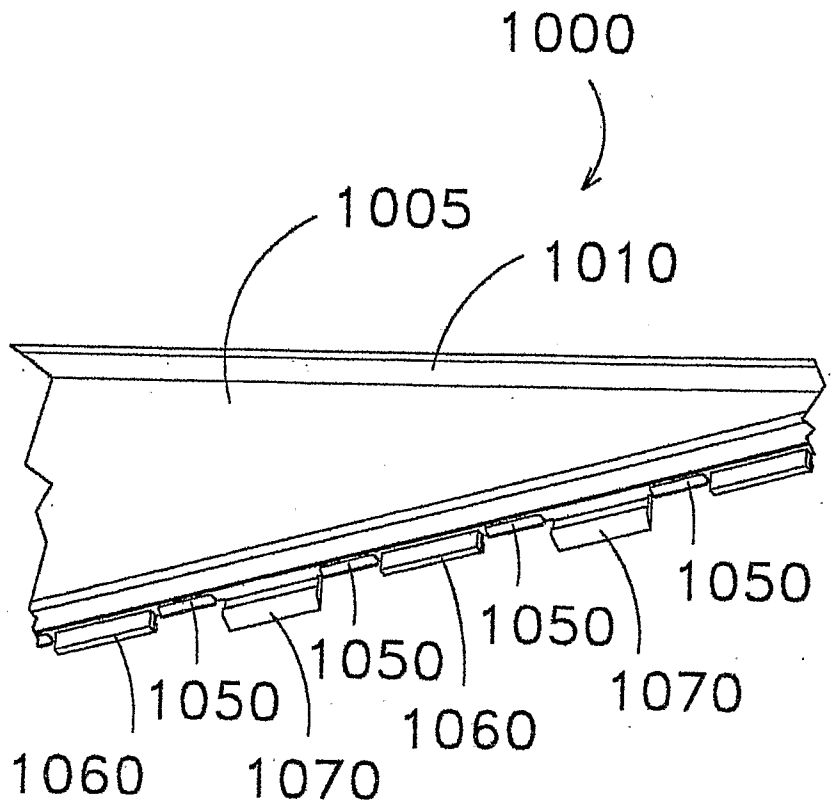


FIG. 32

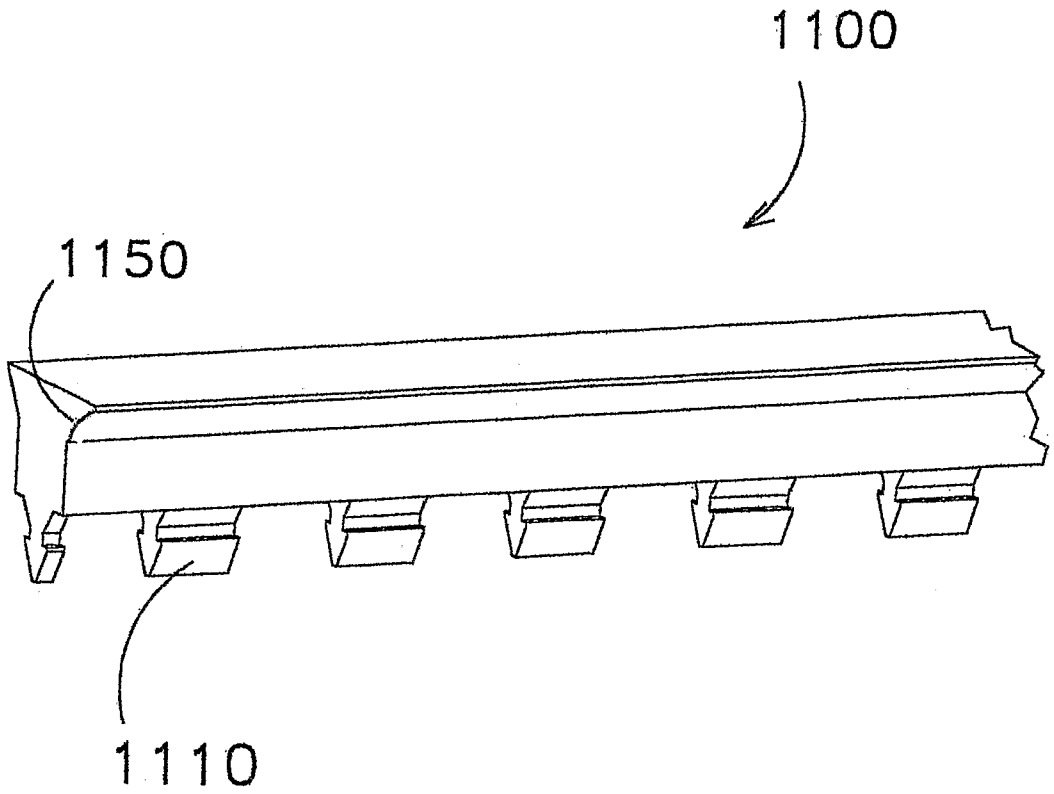


FIG. 33

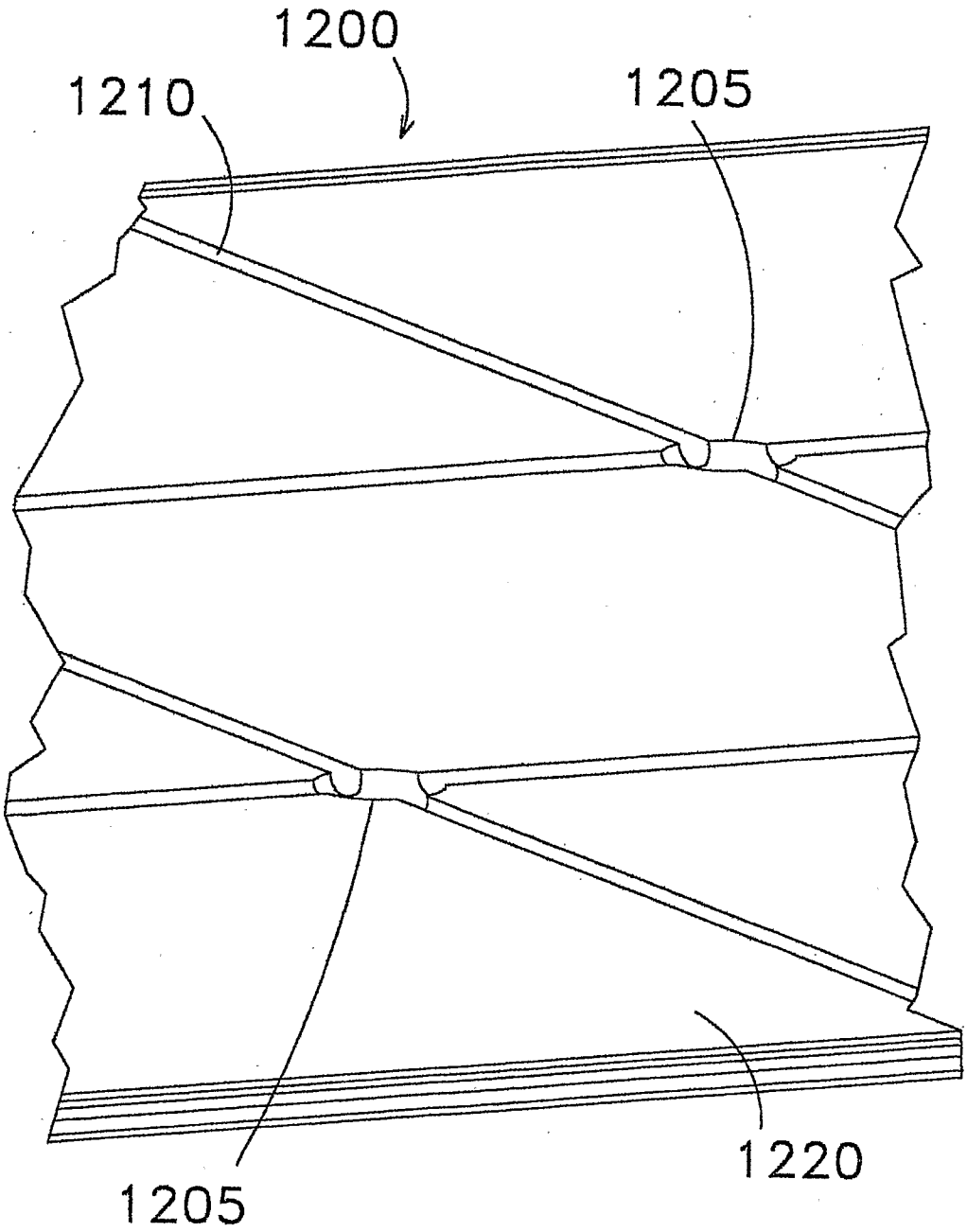


FIG. 34

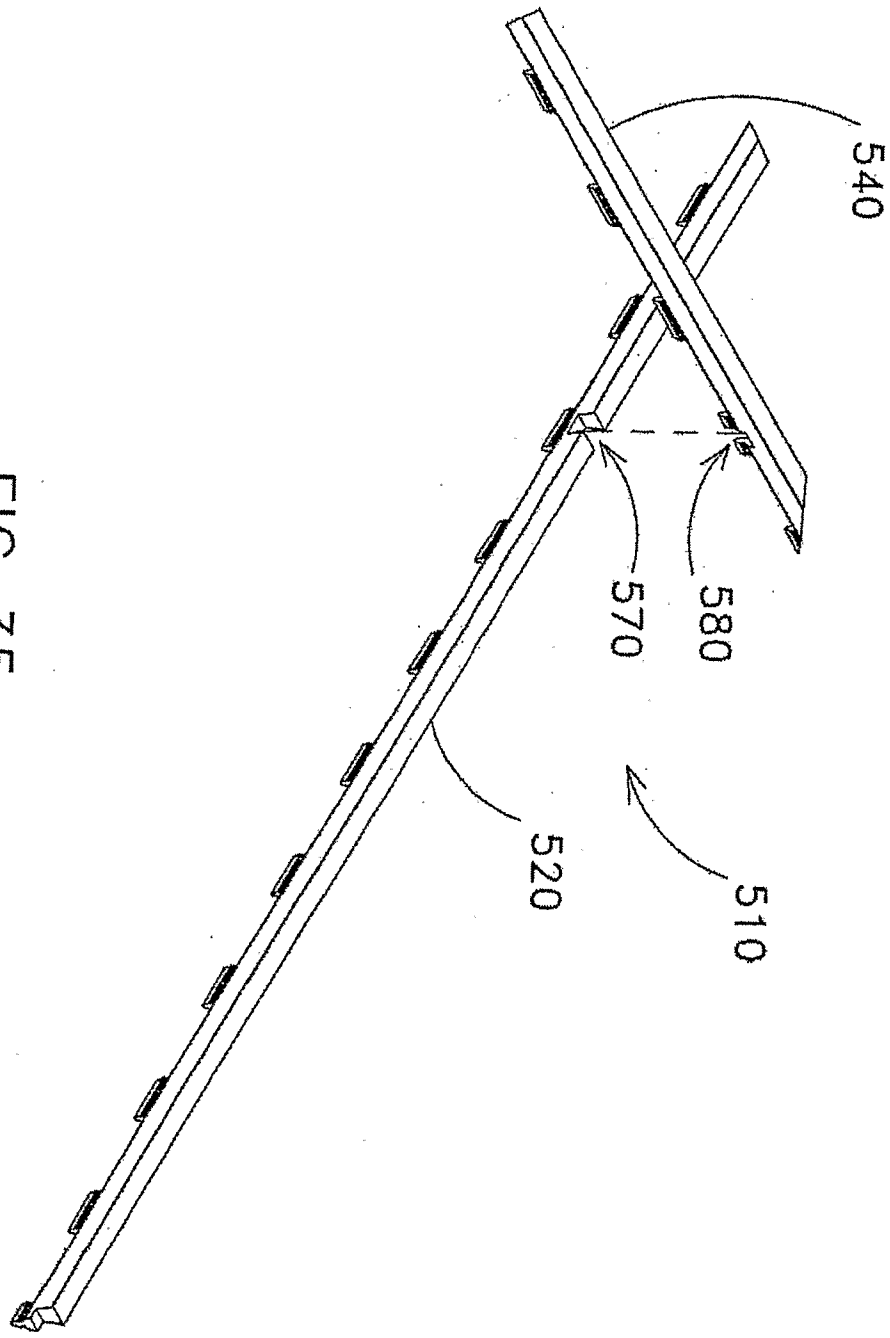


FIG 35

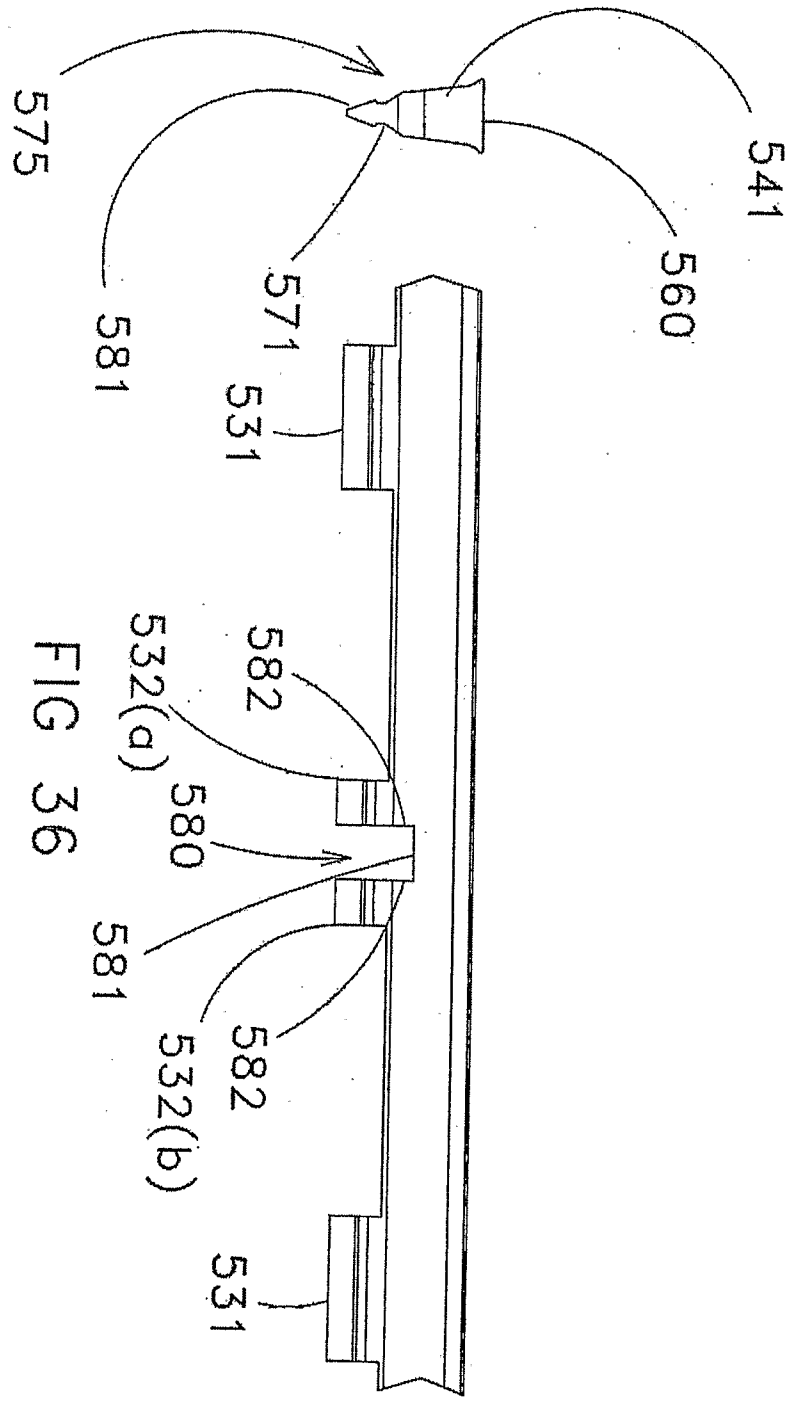


FIG 36

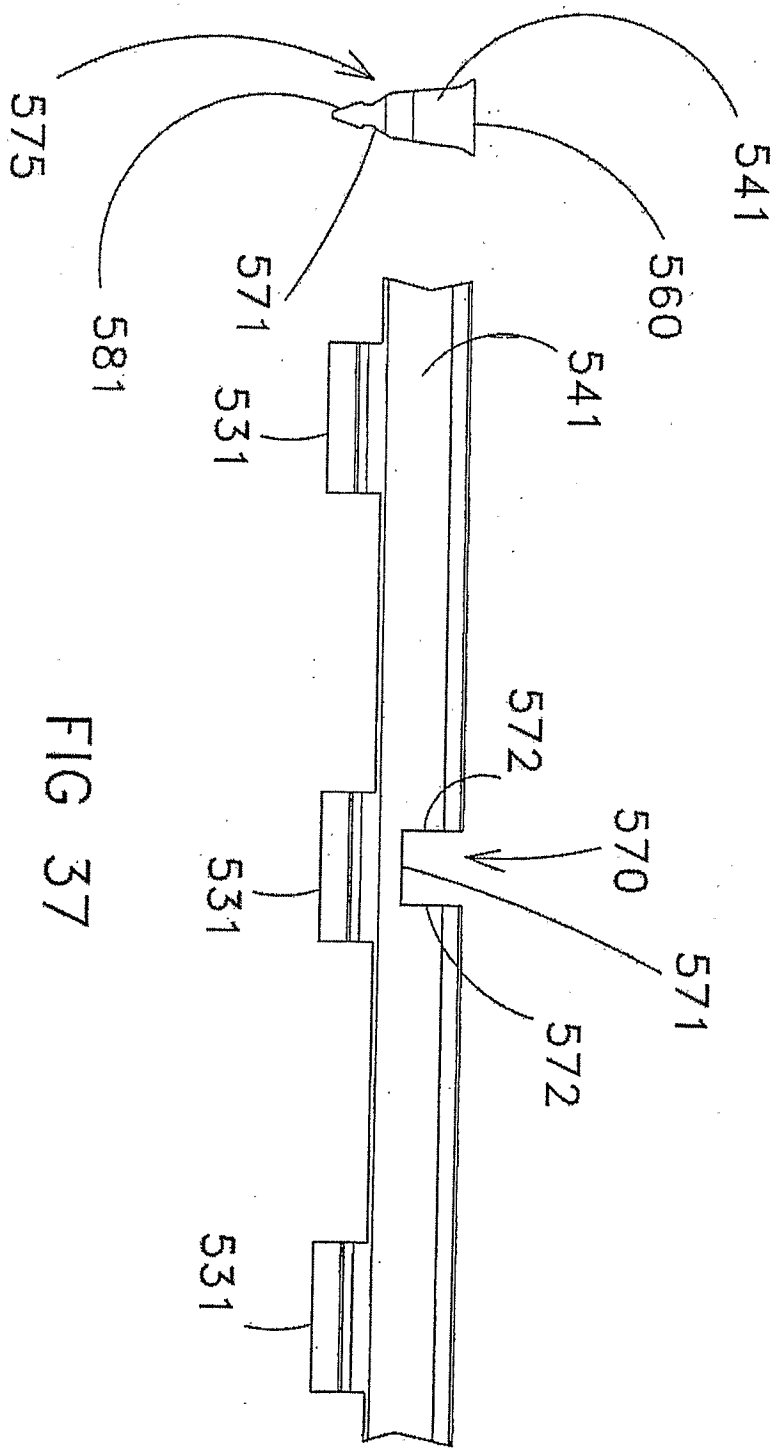


FIG 37

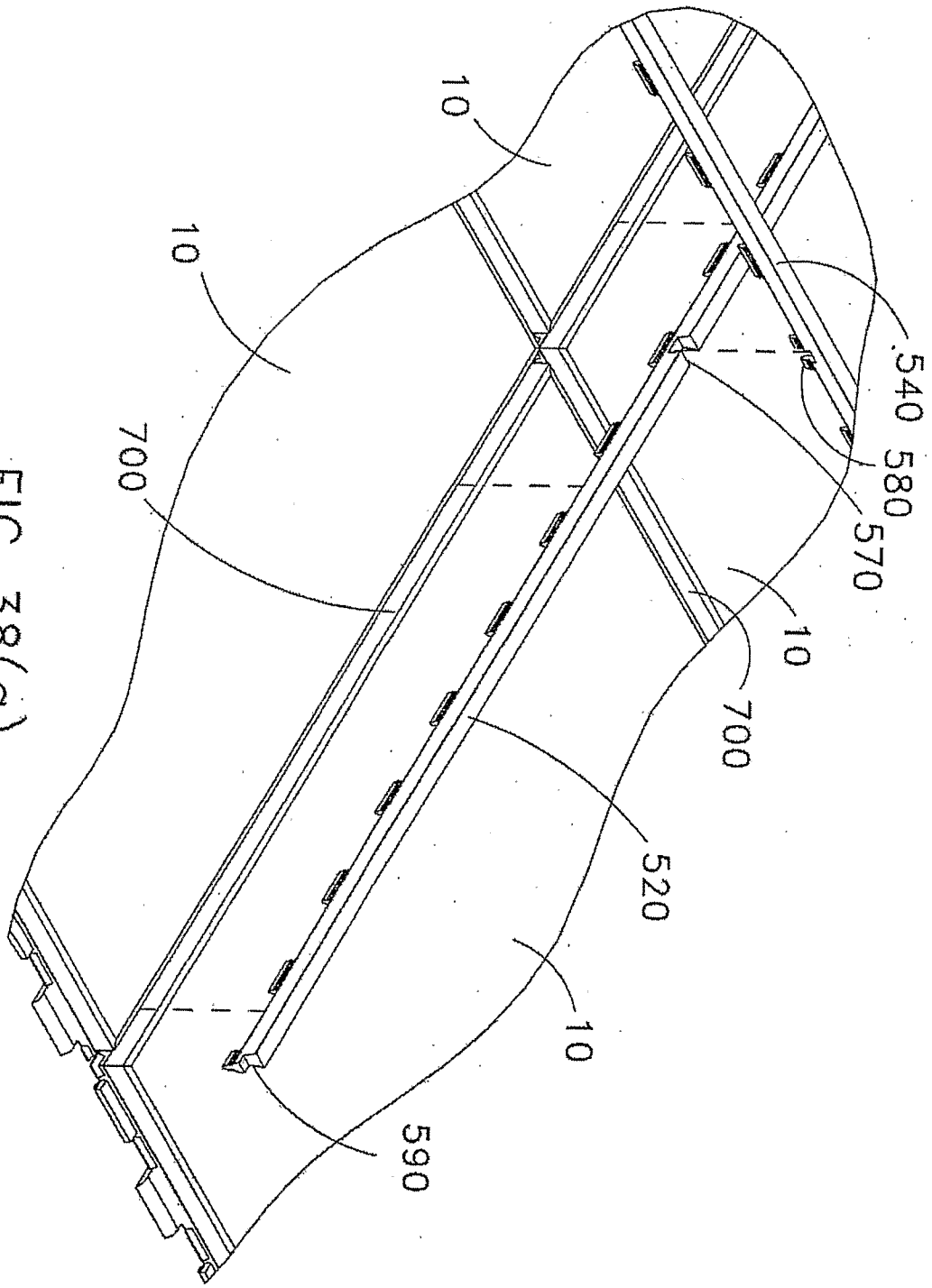


FIG 38(a)

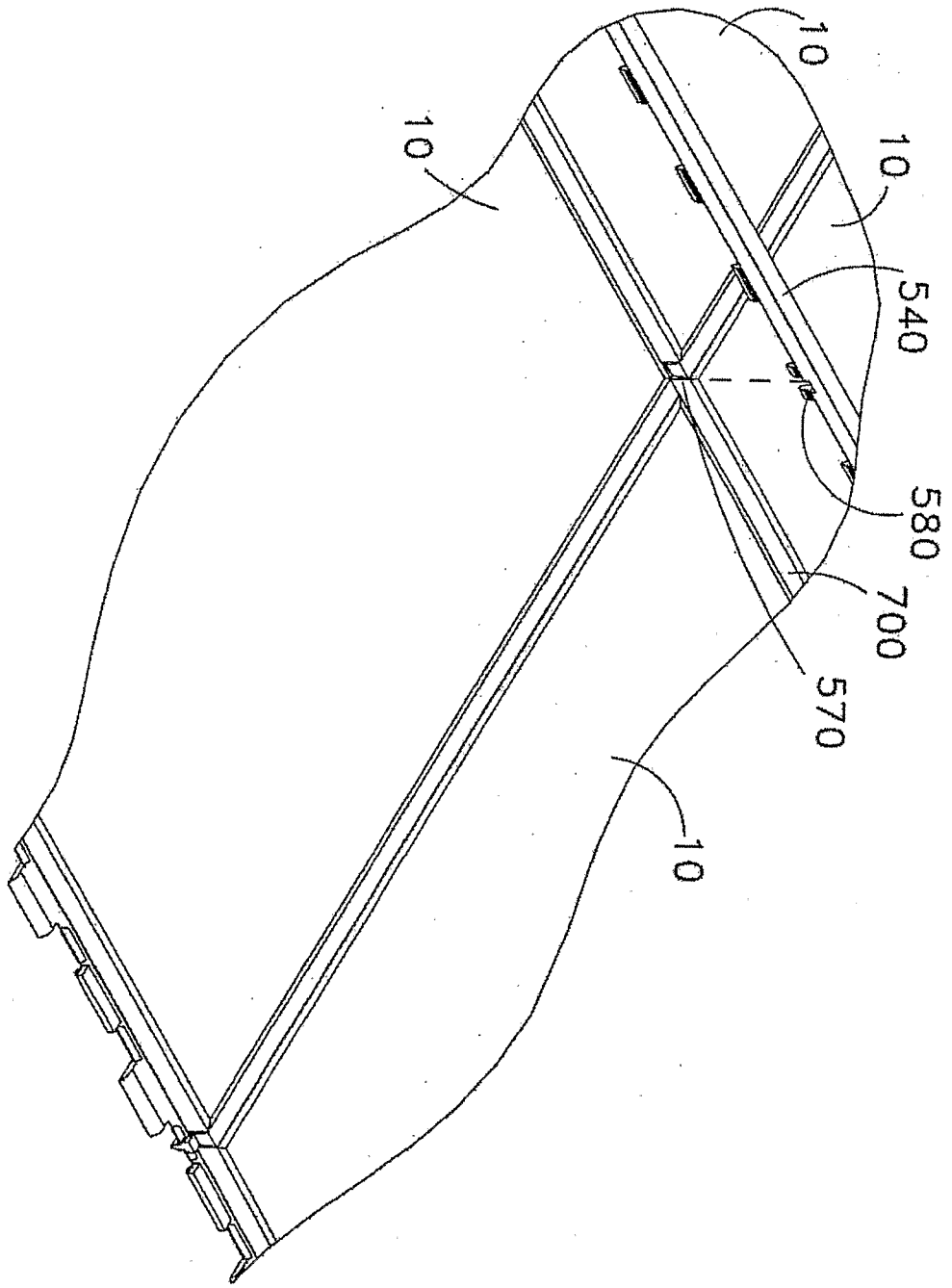


FIG 38(b)

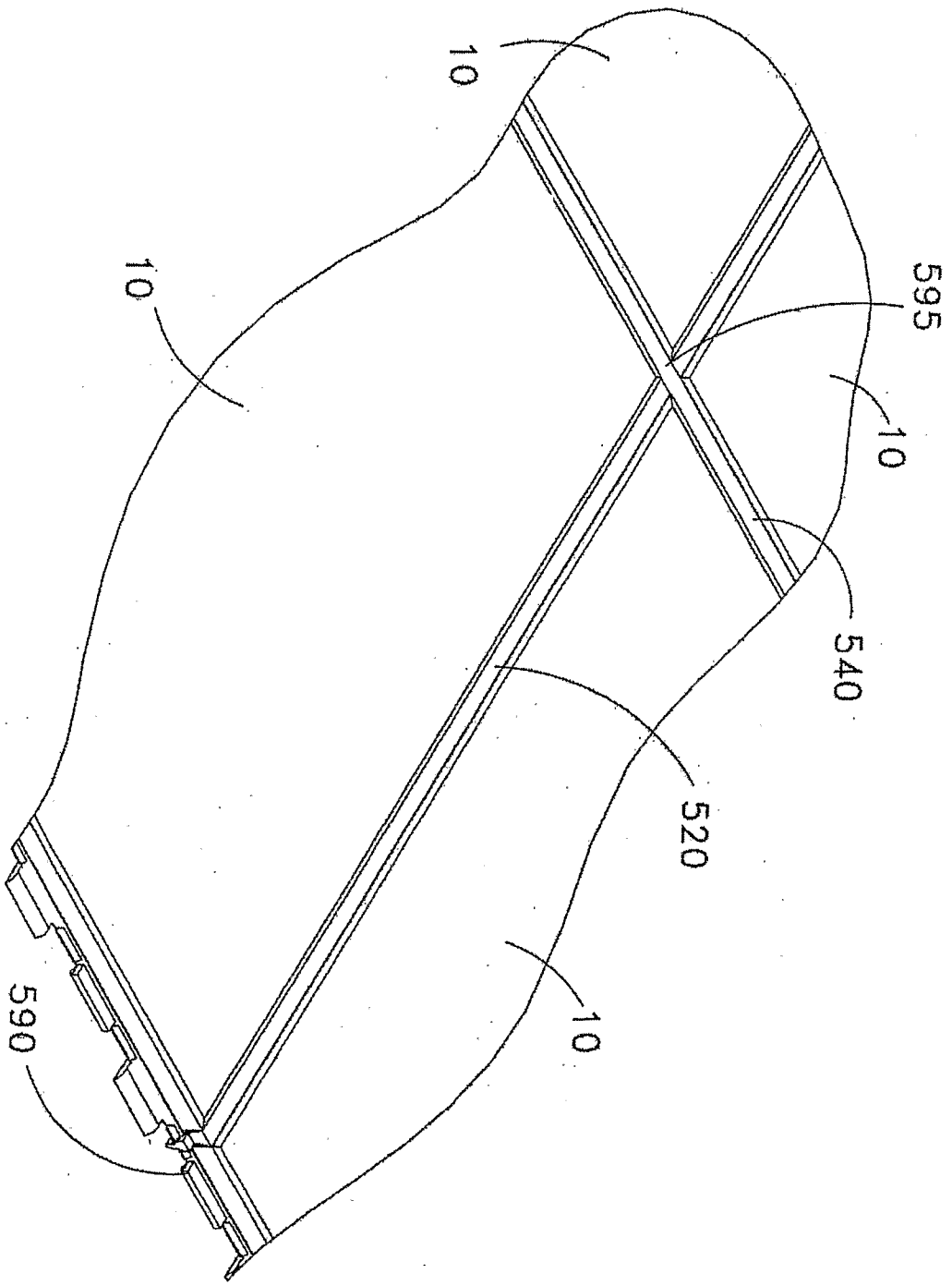


FIG 39

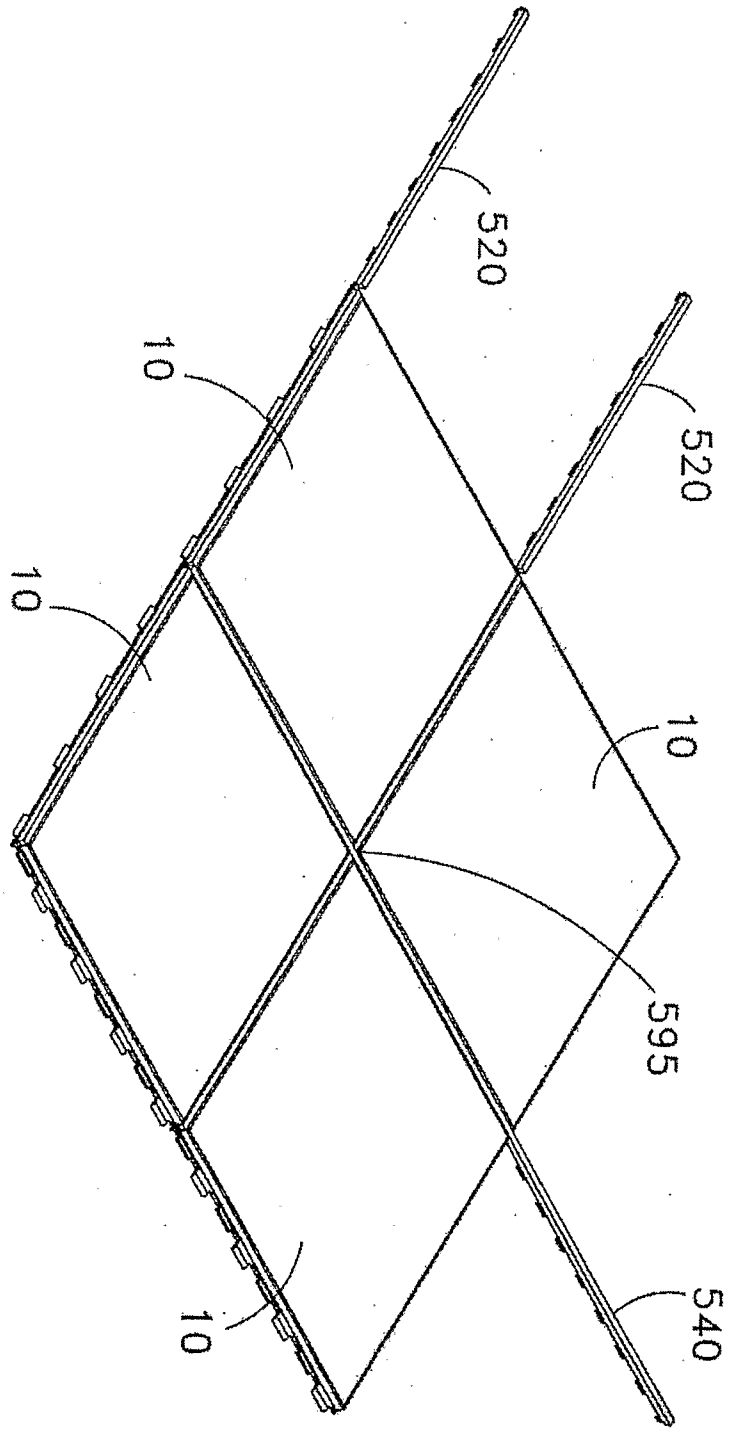


FIG 40