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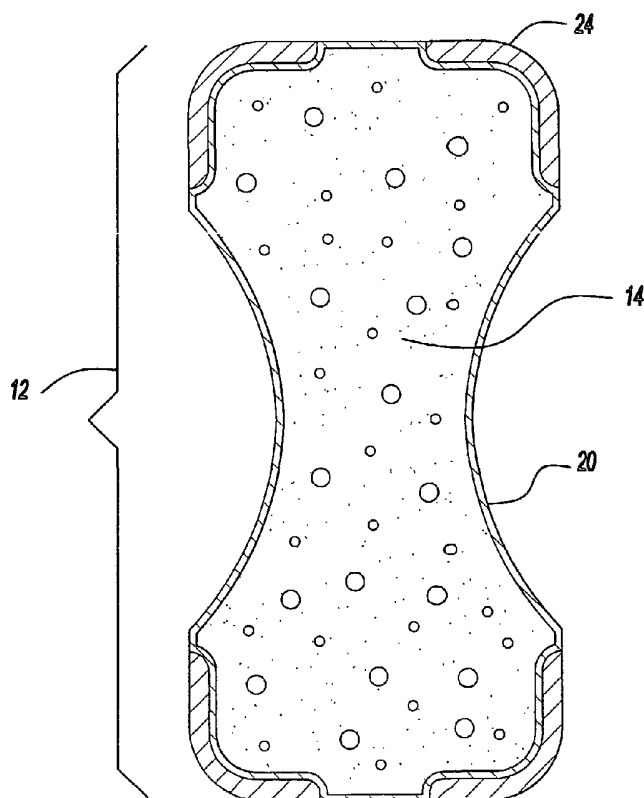
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(54) Title: METHOD FOR REINFORCING STRUCTURAL MEMBERS AND REINFORCEMENT SYSTEM UTILIZING A HOLLOW CARRIER



(57) Abstract: A system and method for reinforcing at least a portion of a structural member (16), including at least one hollow carrier (12), having an exterior shell (20) and an interior portion, which substantially conforms to the dimensions and geometry of the structural member (16) being reinforced; and a lightweight, low density material (14) for filling the interior portion of one or more of the carriers (12). The material (14) filling one or more of the carriers (12) of the present invention can be a reinforcement material, self-curing material, or a heat activated expandable material. The carrier (12) can be produced by blow molding or rotational molding and has an adhesive material (24) disposed along at least a portion of the exterior shell (20) used to place, adhere, and affix the carrier (12) to a targeted portion of the structural member (16) selected to be structurally reinforced.



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METHOD FOR REINFORCING STRUCTURAL MEMBERS AND REINFORCEMENT SYSTEM UTILIZING A HOLLOW CARRIER

CLAIM OF BENEFIT OF FILING DATE

The present application claims the benefit of the filing date of U.S. Provisional
5 Application Serial No. 60/377,126 (filed April 30, 2002), hereby incorporated by reference.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

10 The present invention relates to a hollow carrier reinforcement system wherein the hollow carrier can receive and retain a volume of fill material for reinforcing a portion of a structural member. More particularly, the present invention relates to a hollow carrier produced by blow molding, rotational molding or other method to produce a hollow structure suitable for retaining a rigid material, preferably
15 of low density, for placement within a structural member. The system comprises a least one hollow carrier suitable for receiving and retaining a rigid material such as foamed polyurethane, epoxy, thermoplastic, ceramic, metallic, metallic foam, concrete, or other material which may provide structural reinforcement, noise and vibration damping, sealing, stress-strain reduction, or other desired physical
20 characteristics to the structural member, as well as any combination of the foregoing.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Prior art methods and systems used for reinforcing a portion of a structural
25 member utilize either a foamable material placed in contact with the selected structural member or a combination carrier and foamable material, which can be placed or attached to targeted portions of a structural member to achieve structural reinforcement and enhance structural rigidity. Although such prior art methods and systems work well and are advantageous in many applications, the structural nature,
30 weight, or cost of the carrier may limit the effectiveness for which the system could be used. For instance, the structure, location, and geometric volume of the structural member being reinforced can make it difficult or place constraints on the ability to insert a carrier. In addition, the weight of the carrier itself may cause additional issues of economic efficiencies in the manufacturing process, particularly when used
35 to reinforce structural members having large interior volumes, such as an automotive

frame or rail member. Thus, this method provides an alternative system and method that will provide structural reinforcement utilizing lightweight reinforcement components which can be introduced to the vehicle at various stages throughout the manufacturing or assembly process concerning the member being reinforced.

5 The present invention obviates and overcomes the drawbacks found in the prior art by providing a hollow carrier that is formed through either a blow molding, rotational molding, or other processes to create a hollow structure that fit within the contours of an inner portion of the chosen structural member upon insertion into the structural member. The system may comprise one or more carriers that can be filled
10 with a rigid, low density material specifically selected for characteristics that include reduced weight and reinforcement capabilities in addition to low overall cost. The hollow carrier, although preferably rigid, can also be flexible and has an inner volume having a variety of geometric dimensions and expansion volumes. The hollow carrier is suitable and capable of receiving a variety of materials, which may or may not be
15 expandable or heat-activatable, that can be pumped, placed, pellet-fed, extruded, retained, or otherwise disposed within the carrier for structural reinforcement, damping, and/or sealing of the member without allowing unwanted spillage or leakage of the material to portions of the structural member such as tooling holes and other hardware needed in the manufacturing process. It should be understood
20 that in certain applications filling is not necessary. The carrier is further defined by an exterior shell or surface, which can be placed directly into contact with the selected portion of the structural member targeted for reinforcement. A heat-activated structural material, psa, bonding agent, or other adhering material is applied to at least a portion of the exterior shell or surface of the carrier to bond and
25 adhere the now filled carrier in place to the structural member during exposure to the cure ovens and other operations typically encountered in an automotive manufacturing facility.

30 SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

 The present invention is directed to a filled hollow carrier reinforcement system for use within selected portions of a structural member to effectuate structural reinforcement, noise and vibration damping, and/or sealing without interfering with or comprising other portions of the member or the manufacturing assembly process.
35 The system includes at least one hollow carrier, having an interior portion, which may

receive and retains a volume of rigid material, preferably a low density material, which may receive in the form of a solid, liquid, pelletized, foam, foamable, or any combination thereof, preferably lightweight material suitable for providing structural reinforcement to at least a portion of the structural member. The carrier or plurality of
5 carriers of the present invention may be produced by either blow molding, rotational molding and thermoplastic materials such as nylon, polypropylene, polysulphone, etc. utilizing to form either a box-like carrier of any desired geometric shape, form, or dimension having an exterior shell or surface defining a inner volumetric space suitable for receiving and retaining an amount of rigid material for lightweight
10 reinforcement of the selected structural member. It is further contemplated that the carrier can be formed into a hollow structure by a machine or tool to conform and shape to the pre-defined dimensions and contours of an inner portion of the chosen structural member. The carrier may comprise a polymeric material, such as nylon, an injection molded polymer, graphite, carbon, or a molded metal such as aluminum, magnesium, or titanium as well as an alloy derived from the materials or a foam
15 derived from the materials or other metallic foam.

The material disposed, placed, filled, extruded, or pumped into the carrier disclosed in the present invention is preferably a rigid, low density material such as foamed polyurethane, epoxy, thermoplastic, ceramic, metallic, metallic foam, foamed
20 concrete, or other material which may harden by curing, cooling, or some other method to produce a preferably lightweight, but rigid, interior defined within the inner portion of the carrier. It is contemplated that the use of lightweight reinforcing materials, such as polyurethane foams, may allow distortion without encapsulation within the hollow carrier. Further, the selected material may be in pelletized form or
25 other loose material that can fuse together when exposed to heat encountered in the manufacturing process to create the interior reinforcement within the hollow carrier. In addition, any number of materials may be selected for placement within the interior portion of the hollow carrier. Such materials may be cured at ambient temperatures found in a standard manufacturing environment, may be a self-curing material with or
30 without a resulting exothermic reaction, may be capable of chemical activation depending upon application parameters, or may capable of expansion from 0-2000% when exposed to heat typically encountered in an automotive paint operation, such as e-coat and other paint cycles in a vehicle assembly plant. Although the selected material need not be foamable or expandable, in one embodiment the material is
35 heat expandable and at least partially fills the carrier. In another embodiment, the

material is a melt flowable material, which upon the application of heat will spread within the interior of the hollow carrier or otherwise occupy the volume of the carrier. The selected material may also provide a variety of characteristics including structural reinforcement, stress-strain reduction, vibrational damping, noise
5 reduction, or any combination thereof. However, it is contemplated that the material of the present invention need not be either expandable or heat-activatable, and may consist of an ambient temperature-curing material, which reacts with or without an exothermic response to fill the volume of the hollow carrier and reinforce the chosen structural member. Once filled with the selected material, a heat activated structural
10 material, psa, bonding material, or other adhering material is applied to at least a portion of the exterior shell or surface of the filler or unfilled hollow carrier to bond the carrier in place to the selected structural member during the manufacturing process and exposure to paint ovens.

In yet another embodiment, the present invention further serves to reduce
15 health, cleanliness, and maintenance issues encountered through the use of "wet" chemical technology in either a pre-assembly facility or a vehicle assembly plant since the material can be extruded, molded, placed, or filled, or "mini-application" bonded directly into the at least one carrier in either a pre-production setting, such as a stamping facility, or during the final assembly operation. The carrier, and the
20 material, can be installed or placed into an inner portion of the selected structural member prior to the e-coat or paint operation processing. Hence, the present invention provides flexibility in the manufacturing process since it can be utilized by either the manufacturer/supplier of the structural member, such as the frame, rail, pillar, or door assembly, or the final vehicle manufacturer with reduced labor, capital
25 expense, maintenance requirements, and floor space demand. Once the material bonds and/or cures within the carrier within the inner portion of the structural members, distortion of the structural member may be inhibited or managed during an impact event or any other application of force to the vehicle structure.

30

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The features and inventive aspects of the present invention will become more apparent upon reading the following detailed description, claims, and drawings, of which the following is a brief description:

Figure 1 is a cross-section showing the hollow carrier system formed in accordance with the teachings of this invention.

Figure 2 shows an exploded cross-section of the hollow carrier reinforcement system formed in accordance with the teachings of this invention.

5 Figure 3 illustrates the application of the hollow carrier system formed in accordance with the teachings of this invention placed within a structural member of an automotive vehicle.

10 Figure 4 illustrates another view of the hollow carrier reinforcement system of the present invention placed and retained within a structural member of an automotive vehicle.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

15 The hollow carrier reinforcement system of the present invention generally includes at least one carrier defined by an exterior shell and an interior or inner hollow cavity. This cavity may be filled with a lightweight and low density material retained by or disposed within at least a portion of the interior hollow cavity, and a bonding material disposed along at least a portion of the exterior shell of the carrier to retain the potentially filled hollow carrier in place to the selected structural member
20 chosen for structural reinforcement. In general application, the system can be used to reinforce a portion of a structural member of automotive, aerospace, and marine vehicles, such as an automotive frame or rail member, having either an open or closed center by blow molding, rotational molding, or other method to produce a hollow structure carrier, or a plurality of carriers, within the interior or along an inner
25 portion of the structure or structural member to be reinforced. At least one carrier may be a solid structure for formed placement within the inner portion of a structural member or a flexible carrier capable of volumetric expansion, which will generally come into contact with, and conform and shape to the geometry and dimensions of, the inner portion of the structural member.

30 In a particular preferred embodiment, the carrier is a blow-molded or rotational molded structure having an exterior shell and interior or inner hollow portion, which can be configured in any shape, design, or thickness corresponding to the dimensions of the chosen structural member to be reinforced. Once the carrier is formed for placement within the structural member through physical placement,
35 gravity placement, sealing material, adhesive material, mechanical retention means,

or otherwise attached, affixed, or adhered to the structural member, a material having preferably lightweight and low-density characteristics, such as a polymer-based liquid, solid, semi-solid, or pelletized material, may be received, filled, or disposed into the interior or inner hollow cavity of the hole or port extending through the exterior portion or membrane of the compartment or chamber. It is also contemplated that the material of the present invention can be filled or otherwise disposed into the compartment or chamber, such as a blow-molded receptacle, prior to placement within the selected structural member. Examples of material which can be utilized to fill the chamber or compartment of the present invention may include rigid, low density materials such as aluminum or other metallic foam, including alloys or composites thereof, concrete, foamed polyurethane, epoxy, thermoplastic, ceramic, metallic, metallic foam, or other material which may harden by curing, cooling, or some other method to produce a preferably lightweight, but rigid, interior defined within the interior or inner hollow cavity of the carrier. In one embodiment, the carrier of the present invention consists of a blow-molded structure having an interior portion suitable for receiving the material which can be placed within the blowmolded structure either before or after insertion and placement within the chosen structural member. It is contemplated that the carrier would also have an exterior shell or portion suitable for receiving an application of sealant, bonding, or adhesive material so that the carrier adheres and affixes to a selected portion of the chosen structural member targeted for reinforcement.

It is contemplated that the carrier could comprise a polyamide (e.g., nylon), poly sulfone, or other polymeric material as set forth in commonly owned U.S. Patent No. 6,103,341, expressly incorporated by reference herein, as well as injection molded, extruded, blow-molded, reaction injection molded, die cast, or machined chamber comprising materials such as nylon, PBI, or PEI. The carrier may also be selected from materials consisting of extruded aluminum, aluminum foam, magnesium, magnesium alloys, molded magnesium alloys, titanium, titanium alloys, molded titanium alloys, polyurethanes, polyurethane composites, low density solid fillers, and formed SMC and BMC and may be further utilized with a sealant or adhesive disposed along an exterior portion of the compartment or chamber so that the compartment or chamber adheres to the chosen structural member and remains in a designated position

In a non-limiting embodiment, the system of the present invention can be used to reinforce a portion of a structural member having a hollow center.

Alternatively, the present invention can be utilized to reinforce selected portions of a chosen structural member which may or may not have a hollow center.

The system 10 includes at least one carrier 12 that is produced by blow molding or rotational molding having an exterior shell or surface 20 and an interior or
5 inner hollow cavity 22 suitable for receiving a low density reinforcement material 14 that is disposed, filled, pumped, or placed within the inner hollow cavity 22 of the carrier 12.

Turning now to the embodiment shown in Figure 1, the carrier 12 can be a solid structure, such as a rigid box-like compartment, produced by blow molding or
10 rotational molding having an exterior surface or shell 20, an interior portion or hollow cavity 22 with a defined volume, that can be formed and shaped to conform with the geometric dimensions of the structural member 16 selected for reinforcement. In the embodiment of Figure 1, the carrier 12 includes an interior hollow cavity which occupies a volume or space within a hollow portion 26 of the structural member 16 to
15 be reinforced. The carrier 12 may have a porous, flexible, solid, or rigid outer membrane or exterior shell 20. The exterior surface or shell 20 permits the carrier 12 to conform to the shape of the area being reinforced as defined by the dimensions of the structural member 16. The carrier 12 can also include at least one access hole or port 30 for the ingress, intake, or introduction of a material 14, such as a
20 lightweight low density material, which may be self-curing or an expandable material, into the interior hollow cavity 22 of the carrier 12. The system of the present invention may further utilize an integral neck portion 32 having an end portion 34 for coupling the carrier 12 to an outside filling apparatus 36 for filling an amount of material 14 into the interior hollow cavity 22 of the carrier 12.

25 As shown in Figure 2, the exterior surface or shell 20 of the carrier 12 can include an adhesive or bonding material 24 disposed along at least a portion of the exterior shell 20 of the chamber 12 having adhesion and bonding characteristics to allow the carrier 12, now filled with material 14, to be affixed, placed and adhered directly to the selected portion of the structural member 16 to be reinforced as shown
30 in FIGS 3 and 4. The adhesive or bonding material 24 used to adhere the carrier 12 to the structural member 16 may be a heat activated structural material such as that commercially offered by L&L Products, Inc. of Romeo, Michigan, a pressure sensitive adhesive (PSA), or other bonding material suitable for adhering and affixing the carrier 12 to the chosen structural member 16 during the automotive manufacturing
35 process. Alternatively, the exterior shell 20 of the carrier 12 may be made of a

structural adhesive that is flexible, such that the carrier 12 itself would come into contact and adhere directly.

The above described embodiments of the carrier 12 merely illustrate the various forms in which the carrier can be constructed and used to reinforce structural members typically found in automotive, aerospace, and marine vehicles. One of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that many other configurations and constructions of the barrier carrier 12 may be used in practicing the invention. For instance, the carrier 12 could be a reservoir for retaining the material 14 within defined portions of a structural member 16, or the carrier 12 could be used to meter/control flow of the material 14 past the boundary of the carrier 12 to allow the material 14 to come into contact and adhere with targeted areas of the inner portion of the structural member.

As set forth herein, the carrier 12 of the present invention can be a blow molded or rotational molded polymeric material such as an elastomer, polyethylene, ethylene-vinyl acetate copolymer, plasticized polyvinyl chloride film, polyamide, polysulfone, or various olefinic copolymer or terpolymer materials. One of skill in the art will appreciate that the system 10 can be used for a wide variety of applications for a variety of transportation and consumer related products that can benefit from structural reinforcement. Thus, the choice of material selected to comprise the carrier 12 will depend upon the environmental conditions under which the carrier 12 will be used, including how the carrier will be inserted and retained within the chosen structural member 16.

In a particular embodiment, the carrier 12 can be used to reinforce a portion of a structural member found in automotive vehicles, such as an automobile frame or rail, during initial assembly of the vehicle or in the automobile after market in body or paint shop applications during repair operations. In the aforementioned applications, the carrier 12 can be exposed to temperatures ranging from approximately 93 °C. (200 °F.) to approximately 204 °C. (400 °F.). In still another embodiment, the carrier 12 can be used in low temperature operations, including applications at subzero temperatures. Thus, the material selected for forming the carrier 12 should possess thermal properties that will permit the carrier 12 to maintain its structural integrity at a predetermined temperature or over a predetermined temperature range.

One of skill in the art will also appreciate that the size and specific physical dimensions of the barrier compartment or chamber 12 will vary depending on the physical dimensions of the area to be reinforced.

Turning now to a discussion of the material 14 for use in the present invention, the material 14 can be any material that can be dispensed as a liquid, solid, or semi-solid material and later reacted or cured to create a substantially fused member. Further, the material of the present invention may comprise a rigid, low density material such as foamed polyurethane, epoxy, thermoplastic, ceramic, metallic, metallic foam, foamed concrete, or other material which may harden by curing, cooling, or some other method to produce a preferably lightweight, but rigid, interior defined within the inner portion of the carrier 12. The material 14 may further comprise a palletized form which can fuse together when exposed to heat sources typically encountered in automotive manufacturing operations. Other materials that can be used to form the material 14 include, but are not limited to, epoxy, polyurethane, polyester, and acrylic based materials, which when compounded with appropriate ingredients may expand and cure in a reliable and predictable manner upon application of a curing stimulus. One of skill in the art will appreciate that various olfenic materials, elastomers, fluropolymers or other materials may be used to formulate the material 14.

Although the material 14 of the present invention does not need to be either heat-activatable or expandable, a number of epoxy-based structural reinforcing foams are known in the art and may also be used to produce the material 14 of the present invention. A typical structural foam includes a polymeric base material, such as an epoxy resin or ethylene-based polymer which, when compounded with appropriate ingredients (typically a blowing agent, a curing agent, and perhaps a filler), typically expands and cures in a reliable and predictable manner upon the application of heat or another activation stimulus. The resulting material has a low density and sufficient stiffness to impart desired rigidity to a supported article. From a chemical standpoint for a thermally-activated material, the structural foam is usually initially processed as a thermoplastic material before curing. After curing, the structural foam typically becomes a thermoset material that is fixed and incapable of flowing.

The material 14 may also comprise a heat-activated epoxy-based resin having foamable characteristics upon activation through the use of heat typically encountered in an e-coat or other automotive paint oven operation. As the material 14 is exposed to heat, it generally expands, cross-links, and structurally bonds to adjacent surfaces. An example of a preferred formulation is an epoxy-based material that may include polymer modifcicis such as an ethylene copolymer or terpolymer that

is commercially available from L&L Products, Inc. of Romeo, Michigan, under the designations L-5204, L-5206, L-5207, L-5208, L-5209, L-5214, and L-5222. One advantage of the preferred structural foam materials over prior art materials is the preferred materials can be processed in several ways. Possible processing techniques for the preferred materials include injection molding, blow molding, thermoforming, direct deposition of pelletized materials, extrusion, extrusion with a mini-applicator extruder, or heat bonding. This enables the creation of part designs that exceed the design flexibility capability of most prior art materials. In essence, any foamable material that imparts structural reinforcement characteristics may be used in conjunction with the present invention. The choice of the material used will be dictated by performance requirements and economics of the specific application and requirements and may not necessarily include a heat-activated expandable material. Generally speaking, these automotive vehicle applications may utilize technology and processes such as those disclosed in U.S. Patent Nos. 4,922,596, 4,978,562, 5,124,186, and 5,884,960 and commonly owned, co-pending U.S. Application Serial Nos. 09/502,686 filed February 11, 2000, 09/524,961 filed March 14, 2000, 60/223,667 filed August 7, 2000, 60/225,126 filed August 14, 2000, 09/676,443 filed September 29, 2000, 09/676,335 filed September 29, 2000, 09/676,725 filed September 29, 2000, and particularly, 09/459,756 filed December 10, 1999, all of which are expressly incorporated by reference.

Additional foamable or expandable materials that could be utilized in the present invention include other materials which are suitable as bonding, energy absorbing, or acoustic media and which may be heat activated foams which generally activate and expand to fill a desired cavity or occupy a desired space or function when exposed to temperatures typically encountered in automotive e-coat curing ovens and other paint operation ovens. Though other heat-activated materials are possible, a preferred heat activated material is an expandable or flowable polymeric formulation, and preferably one that can activate to foam, flow, adhere, or otherwise change states when exposed to the heating operation of a typical automotive assembly painting operation. For example, without limitation, in one embodiment, the polymeric foamable material may comprise an ethylene copolymer or terpolymer that may possess an alpha-olefin. As a copolymer or terpolymer, the polymer is composed of two or three different monomers, i.e., small molecules with high chemical reactivity that are capable of linking up with similar molecules. Examples of particularly preferred polymers include ethylene vinyl acetate, EPDM, or

a mixture thereof. Without limitation, other examples of preferred foamable formulations commercially available include polymer-based materials available from L&L Products, Inc. of Romeo, Michigan, under the designations as L-2018, L-2105, L-2100, L-7005, L-7101, L-7102, L-2411, L-2420, L-4141, etc. and may comprise
5 either open or closed cell polymeric base material.

Further, it is contemplated that the material 14 of the present invention may comprise acoustical damping properties which, when activated through the application of heat, can also assist in the reduction of vibration and noise in the overall automotive chassis, frame, rail, and/or body of the vehicle. In this regard, the
10 now reinforced and vibrationally damped frame or front rail will have increased stiffness which will reduce natural frequencies, that resonate through the automotive chassis thereby reducing transmission, blocking or absorbing noise through the use of the conjunctive acoustic product. By increasing the stiffness and rigidity of the frame or front rail, the amplitude and frequency of the overall noise/vibration that
15 occurs from the operation of the vehicle and is transmitted through the vehicle can be reduced.

Although the use of such impact absorbing materials and members are directed to structural members such as an automotive frame or rail, it is contemplated that the present invention can be utilized in other areas of an automotive vehicles
20 that are used to ensure ingress and egress capability to the vehicle by both passengers as well as cargo, such as closures, fenders, roof systems, and body-in-white (BIW) applications which are well known in the art.

In applications where a heat activated, thermally expanding material is employed, an important consideration involved with the selection and formulation of
25 the material comprising the structural foam is the temperature at which a material reaction or expansion, and possibly curing, will take place. In most applications, it is undesirable for the material to activate at room temperature or the ambient temperature in a production line environment. More typically, the structural foam becomes reactive at higher processing temperatures, such as those encountered in
30 an automobile assembly plant, when the foam is processed along with the automobile components at elevated temperatures. While temperatures encountered in an automobile assembly body shop ovens may be in the range of 148.89 °C to 204.44 °C (300 °F to 400 °F), and paint shop oven temps are commonly about 93.33 °C (215 °F) or higher. If needed, various blowing agent activators can be

incorporated into the composition to cause expansion at different temperatures outside the above ranges.

Generally, prior art expandable acoustic foams have a range of expansion ranging from approximately 100 to over 1000 percent. The level of expansion of the material may be increased to as high as 1500 percent or more, but is typically
5 between 0% and 300%. In general, higher expansion will produce materials with lower strength and stiffness properties.

It is also contemplated that the material 14 could be delivered and placed into contact with the carrier 12 of the present invention through a variety of delivery
10 systems which include, but are not limited to, pumpable systems, extrusion techniques commonly known in the art as well as a mini-applicator technique as in accordance with the teachings of commonly owned U.S. Patent No. 5,358,397 ("Apparatus For Extruding Flowable Materials"), hereby expressly incorporated by reference. In another embodiment, the material 14 is provided in an encapsulated or
15 partially encapsulated form, which may comprise a pellet, which includes an expandable foamable material, encapsulated or partially encapsulated in an adhesive shell, which could then be attached or deposited within the carrier 12 in a desired configuration. An example of one such system is disclosed in commonly owned, co-pending U.S. Application Serial No. 09/524,298 ("Expandable Pre-Formed
20 Plug"), hereby incorporated by reference. In addition, preformed patterns may also be employed such as those made by extruding a sheet (having a flat or contoured surface) and then die cut in accordance with a predetermined configuration.

Once introduced and placed within the carrier 12, the material 14 found in the present invention can be cured by reacting two or more materials that possess
25 chemically reactive functional groups. As discussed above, reaction can also be achieved by heating the material 14 to a desired temperature, heating the material 14 over a desired temperature range or by exposing the material 14 to a predetermined change in ambient conditions. For example, the material 14 can be cured by an induction heating application or by exposure to ambient conditions resulting in a
30 change in atmospheric moisture conditions. In one embodiment, the material 14 can be a thermally activated compound such that it expands upon exposure to a predetermined temperature.

As the material 14 is cured, typically it expands to fill the area, or at least a portion of the area, to which it has been applied, in this case the carrier 12 of the
35 present invention. Although this expansion provides structural benefits, it is not

necessary. Since the material 14 can be cured or caused to become chemically reactive upon exposure to certain environment and ambient conditions, an important consideration in selecting and formulating the material comprising the material 14 is the temperature at which a chemical reaction or expansion, and possibly curing will take place. For instance, in most applications, it is undesirable for the material 14 to become reactive unless triggered by combination of reactive components, application of heat, etc. As previously discussed, the expandable material 14 can be used in an automobile assembly plant or a body shop where it can be exposed to temperatures typically ranging from approximately 93 °C. (200 °F.) to approximately 204 °C. (400 °F.).

Upon curing, the strength and stiffness of the material 14 are increased and the material is no longer capable of flowing. The strength and stiffness of the cured material help to increase the structural properties of article retaining the expandable material 14 without significantly adding to the overall weight of the article. Additionally, in the cured state, the material 14, can have a density that does not add significantly to the weight of the article being reinforced.

USE OF THE BARRIER AND CHAMBER SYSTEM

The system 10 of the present invention can be used to reinforce a structural member or other space or portion of an automotive, aerospace or marine vehicle. Where the system 10 is used with a structural member 16 having a closed center, the method for using the system 10 can include supporting at least one carrier 12 having an exterior shell or surface 20 and an inner portion or interior cavity 22 defining a volume or space along a portion of the structural member 16 and filling the interior cavity 22 of the carrier 12 with a material 14 through at least one access hole or port 30 located on the exterior surface 20 of the chamber 12. An adhesive material 24 is then applied along at least a portion of the exterior surface 20 of the chamber 12 so that the chamber 12, now filled with the material 14, can be placed and affixed directly to the portion of the structural member 16 selected for targeted structural reinforcement, noise/vibrational damping, sealing, stress-strain reduction, or a combination thereof.

The material 14 can be filled, pumped, or injected, using known techniques, into the interior cavity 22 of the carrier 12 through the access hole or port 30. Alternatively, the material 14 may be placed or disposed within the carrier 12 prior to placement of chamber 12 within the structural member 16. The material 14, in liquid

or pellet form, is filled into the interior cavity 22 of the chamber 12. The exterior shell 20 of the carrier 12 is suitable for receiving an adhesive or bonding material 24 along at least a portion of the exterior shell 20 to allow the carrier to be directly affixed to the structural member 16.

5 In any of the embodiments discussed above, it will also be appreciated by one of skill in the art that it is possible that the reaction exotherm of the material 14 during the curing process could the exterior shell 20 of the carrier 12 to melt thereby allowing the material 14 to either bond directly to the inner surface of the structural member 16 or displace to permit adhesion of the material 14 directly to the chosen
10 structural member 16.

Preferred embodiments of the present invention have been disclosed. A person of ordinary skill in the art would realize, however, that certain modifications would come within the teachings of this invention. Therefore, the following claims should be studied to determine the true scope and content of the invention.

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A method of reinforcing at least a portion of an automotive structural member, the method comprising:
providing a structural member;
supporting at least one carrier having an exterior shell and an interior hollow cavity along a portion of the structural member;
filling the interior hollow cavity of the carrier with a reinforcing material; and
placing an adhesive material along a portion of the exterior shell of the carrier for fixed placement within the structural member.
2. The method as defined in claim 1, wherein the carrier is produced by a blow molding process.
3. The method as defined in claim 1, wherein the carrier is produced by a rotational molding process.
4. The method as defined in any one of claims 1 through 3, wherein the carrier has an exterior surface fabricated of an adhesive material.
5. The method as defined in claim 4, wherein the carrier is fixedly attached to a structural member.
6. The method as defined in any one of claims 1 through 5, wherein the reinforcing material is a heat activated material.
7. The method as defined in any one of claims 1 through 6, wherein the reinforcing material filling the carrier comprises a multiplicity of pellets.

8. The method as defined in any one of claims 1 through 6, wherein the interior hollow cavity of the carrier is inflated by filling the interior portion thereof with a gas or liquid substance.

9. The method as defined in any one of claims 1 through 6, wherein the reinforcing material filling the carrier is a pumpable material.

10. The method as defined in any one of claims 1 through 9, wherein the reinforcing material filling the carrier is a polymeric material.

11. The method as defined in any one of claims 1 through 10, wherein the structural member is an automotive frame member.

12. The method as defined in any one of claims 1 through 11, wherein the reinforcing material filling the carrier is cured by a change in ambient conditions.

13. A method of reinforcing at least a portion of a hollow cavity, the method comprising:

- providing a structure defining a hollow cavity;
- inserting at least one carrier having an interior portion; and
- filling the interior portion of said carrier with a low density material.

14. A method of reinforcing an automotive pillar comprising of the following steps:

inserting a foam polyurethane core, having a heat activated structural adhesive layer, into a portion of an automotive pillar; and

heating the automotive pillar to a temperature typically used during an automotive paint operation such that the heat activated structural material affixes the core to an interior portion of the automotive pillar; and

wherein the resulting reinforced automotive pillar comprises a foamed polyurethane core having a base portion and an extension defined by a pair of arcuate

surfaces spaced about a longitudinal axis which conforms and shapes to the geometry and dimensions of an interior portion of the reinforced automotive pillar.

15. The method as defined in claim 14, further comprising the step of using one or more mechanical retainers for placing the foam polyurethane core material in the automotive pillar.

16. A hollow carrier system for reinforcing at least a portion of a structural member, comprising:

at least one hollow carrier disposed along an inner portion of a structural member to be reinforced which substantially conforms to the geometry of said inner portion of said structural member;

said carrier having an interior portion suitable for receiving and retaining a low density material; and

a low density material for filling said interior portion of said hollow carrier.

17. The carrier system as defined in claim 16, wherein the carrier has an exterior shell, an adhesive material covering at least a portion of said exterior shell of said carrier whereby said carrier can be fixedly secured to said structural member.

18. The carrier system as defined in any one of claims 16 through 17, wherein the structural member being reinforced is a portion of an automotive frame.

19. The carrier system as defined in any one of claims 16 through 17, wherein the structural member being reinforced is a portion of an automotive rail.

20. The carrier system as defined in any one of claims 16 through 17, wherein the structural member being reinforced is a portion of an automotive pillar.

21. The carrier system as defined in any one of claims 16 through 20, wherein the low density material filling said carrier is selected from the group consisting of foamed polyurethane, epoxy, thermoplastic, metallic, and metallic foam.

22. The carrier system as defined in any one of claims 16 through 21, wherein the carrier is formed by blow molding.

23. The carrier system, as defined in any one of claims 16 through 21, wherein the carrier is formed by rotational molding.

24. The carrier system as defined in any one of claims 16 through 23, wherein the low density material is capable of providing structural reinforcement.

25. The carrier system as defined in any one of claims 16 through 24, wherein the low density material is a heat activated material.

26. The carrier system as defined in any one of claims 16 through 25, wherein the structural member is used to support portions of an automotive vehicle.

27. A hollow carrier system for reinforcing at least a portion of a structural member having an open center, comprising:

at least one carrier substantially conforming to the dimensions of an inner portion of a structural member;

said carrier compartment having an interior portion defining a cavity; and

a reinforcing material suitable for placement within said interior portion of said carrier.

28. A reinforcement assembly for an automotive structural member comprising:

a core material having a base portion and an extension, the extension defined by a pair of arcuate surfaces spaced about a longitudinal axis;

a heat activated material located outside of the core material; and

wherein i) the core material is shaped to correspond to the cavity of a vehicle's structural member, and ii) the heat activated material secures the core material to the corresponding structural member.

29. The reinforcement member as defined in claim 28, further comprising one or more mechanical retainers for locating the core material within the structural member.

30. The reinforcement member as defined in any one of claims 28 through 29, further comprising a carrier located between the heat activated material and the core material.

31. The reinforcement member as defined in any one of claims 28 through 30, wherein the exterior shell is made of an adhesive.

32. The reinforcement member as defined in any one of claims 28 through 31, wherein the core material is a foamed polyurethane.

33. The reinforcement member as defined in any one of claims 28 through 31, wherein the core material is an epoxy.

34. The reinforcement member as defined in any one of claims 28 through 33, wherein the core material conforms and shapes to the geometry and dimensions of an interior portion of the structural member.

35. The reinforcement member as defined in any one of claims 28 through 34, wherein the reinforcement member is a vehicle frame.

36. The reinforcement member as defined in any one of claims 28 through 35, wherein the heat activated material bonds to the reinforcement member during an automotive paint operation.

37. The reinforcement member as defined in any one of claims 28 through 36, wherein the heat activated material is extruded and die cut.

38. The reinforcement member as defined in any one of claims 28 through 34, 36 and 37, wherein the structural member being reinforced is a portion of an automotive pillar.

39. The reinforcement member as defined in claim 28, further comprising one or more mechanical retainers for locating the core material within the structural member, and wherein the core material is a foamed polyurethane that conforms and shapes to the geometry and dimensions of an interior portion of the structural member, and wherein the heat activated material is an extruded and die cut adhesive which is placed on the core material and bonds to the reinforcement member during an automotive paint operation.

40. The reinforcement member as defined in any one of claims 28 through 39, wherein the arcuate surfaces spaced about the longitudinal axis are semetrical with respect to the longitudinal axis.

41. A reinforcement assembly for a vehicle frame comprising:
a foam polyurethane core having a base portion and an extension, the extension defined by a pair of arcuate surfaces spaced about a longitudinal axis;
a heat activated adhesive material located outside of the core material; and
wherein i) the core conforms and shapes to the geometry and dimensions of an interior portion of the vehicle frame, and ii) the heat activated adhesive material secures the core material to the vehicle frame during an automotive paint operation.

42. A reinforcement assembly for a vehicle pillar member comprising:
a foam polyurethane core having a base portion and an extension, the extension defined by a pair of arcuate surfaces spaced about a longitudinal axis;
a heat activated adhesive material located outside of the core material;
one or more mechanical retainers for locating the core material within the vehicle frame; and
wherein i) the core conforms and shapes to the geometry and dimensions of an interior portion of the vehicle pillar member, and ii) the heat activated adhesive material

secures the core material to the vehicle pillar member during an automotive paint operation.

43. A reinforced portion of an automotive vehicle, comprising:
- a) an automotive vehicle structural member having a wall structure that defines a cavity; and
 - b) a reinforcement that includes:
 - i) a barrier layer that is conformably adhered to the wall structure after thermal activation at a temperature in the range of 93.33° C or higher; and
 - ii) a polymeric foam reinforcement material within the barrier, wherein foam is configured with a base portion and an extension, the extension defined by a pair of arcuate surfaces spaced about a longitudinal axis.
44. The reinforced portion as defined in claim 43, further comprising mechanical retention means to attach the reinforcement to the structural member.
45. The reinforced portion as defined in any one of claims 43 through 44, wherein the reinforced portion is an automotive frame or rail.
46. The reinforced portion as defined in any one of claims 43 through 44, wherein the structural member is a portion of an automotive pillar.
47. The reinforced portion as defined in any one of claims 43 through 44, wherein the polymeric foam reinforcement material a structural foam.
48. The reinforced portion as defined in any one of claims 43 through 47, wherein the polymeric foam reinforcement material is an epoxy.
49. The reinforced portion as defined in any one of claims 43 through 47, wherein the polymeric foam reinforcement material is a polyurethane.

50. The reinforced portion as defined in any one of claims 43 through 49, wherein the barrier is an injection molded form.

51. The reinforced portion as defined in any one of claims 43 through 49, wherein the barrier is an extruded form.

52. The reinforced portion as defined in any one of claims 43 through 51, wherein the arcuate surfaces spaced about the longitudinal axis are semetrical with respect to the longitudinal axis.

53. The reinforced portion as defined in claim 51, wherein the barrier is extruded and die cut in accordance with a predetermined configuration.

54. The reinforced portion as defined in any one of claims 43 through 53, wherein the barrier partially encapsulates the structural foam.

55. A reinforced portion of an automotive vehicle, comprising:

- a) an automotive vehicle structural member having a wall structure that defines a cavity;
- b) a reinforcement that includes:
 - i) an extruded and die-cut barrier layer that is conformably adhered to the wall structure after thermal activation at a temperature in the range of 93.33° C or higher; and
 - ii) a polymeric structural foam reinforcement material partially encapsulated within the barrier, wherein foam is configured with a base portion and an extension, the extension defined by a pair of arcuate surfaces spaced about a longitudinal axis; and
- c) mechanical retention means to attach the reinforcement to the structural member.

56. The reinforced portion as defined in claim 55, wherein the barrier layer includes a foam.

57. The reinforced portion as defined in claim 55, wherein the barrier layer includes an epoxy.

58. The reinforced portion as defined in any one of claims 55 through 57, wherein the structural foam reinforcement material is an epoxy.

59. The reinforced portion as defined in any one of claims 55 through 57, wherein the structural foam reinforcement material is a polyurethane.

60. The reinforced portion as defined in any one of claims 55 through 59, wherein the barrier layer includes a port.

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