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CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Mechatronics System Design and Applications

Title	Conference	Page
Automation of Pump Test Rig System <i>Ahmad Faris Ismail, Iskandar Al Thani Mahmood, and Tasneem Pervez</i>	ICOM'01	3
Auto Cruise System: A System to Assist During Traffic Congestion <i>Taufik Yunahar, Ahmad Imran Ibrahim, Asan Gani</i>	ICOM'05	17
Low Cost SCADA System With Auto Fault Detection Using Micro Controller <i>M. Azman Shah, Khalid A. S. Al-Khateeb, And M. F. Mohammad</i>	ICOM'05	24
Traffic Light Sequencing - An Element Of Adaptability <i>Sheroz Khan, Othman O Khalifa And Azuki Abdul Salam</i>	ICOM'05	32
Thermal Shock in Periodic Edge-Cracked Plate Supported by Elastic Foundation <i>Abd El-Fattah A. Rizk</i>	ICOM'05	38
Design and Development of an Automatic Car Door Opening and Locking System <i>Md. Ataur Rahman, A.K.M Mohiuddin, Irwan, Azoa and Adly</i>	ICOM'08	48
Development Of Unmanned Vehicle Utilizing GPS System <i>M. H. Ali, S.B Abdul Hamid, M. A. Rahman</i>	ICOM'08	53
Design Of An Autopilot For An Autonomous Unmanned Aerial Vehicle <i>M. Idres and R. Kafafy</i>	ICOM'08	59

CHAPTER TWO: Modelling and Simulation

Title	Conference	Page
Finite Element Study of Composite Cones Under Axial Compression Loading <i>Asad A. Khalid, Ahmad F. Ismail and Nurul Amin A. K. M</i>	ICOM'01	69
Design and Analysis of a Solar Still Using Finite Element Method <i>M. I. Ahmed, Y. A. Abakar, T. Pervez and A. F. Ismail</i>	ICOM'01	79
Anisotropic Laminated Composite Theory for Delamination Analysis of Curved Bar <i>T. Pervez and M. I. Ahmad</i>	ICOM'01	90
Free Vibration of Variable Thickness Plates Using Characteristic Orthogonal Polynomial Strip Functions Subjected to Different Combinations of Boundary Conditions <i>Abd El-Fattah A. Rizk, Ahmed S. Ashour</i>	ICOM'01	101
Using Spline Path in Real Time Navigation Simulations Systems, in Continuous Space <i>Ahmed Mustafa, Aisha-Hassan A. Hashim and Othman Khalifa</i>	ICOM'08	112
Semi-Active Suspension System for Off-Road Vehicles <i>Zohir BenLahcene, Waleed F Faris, MD Raisuddin Khan and S.I. Ihsan</i>		119

CHAPTER THREE: Intelligent Systems

Title	Conference	Page
Intelligent Keystroke Pressure-Based Typing Biometrics Authentication System using Multilayer Feed-forward Network <i>A. Sulong, Wahyudi and M.U. Siddiqi</i>	ICOM'08	131

Proposed Intelligent Algorithm for IC Marking Image Inspection <i>Yasser H. and M. J. E. Salami</i>	ICOM'08	138
The Role of Intelligent Systems in Mechatronics Engineering <i>Nahrul Khair Alang Md Rashid</i>	ICOM'08	144

CHAPTER FOUR: Instrumentation, Dynamics and Control

Title	Conference	Page
Hardware Implementation of Intelligent Braking System <i>S. N. Sidek and M. J. E. Salami</i>	ICOM'01	151
Design And Implementation of Dsp-Based Hybrid Controller for Some Motion Applications <i>Yusuf I. Bulale, M.J.E Salami</i>	ICOM'01	156
Fuzzy Logic Based Controller for Maintaining Human Comfort within Intelligent Building System <i>Nasrodin .T. Mustapha, Momoh J. E. Salami, Nazim M. Nasiri</i>	ICOM'05	167
Design and Implementation of Fuzzy Logic Controller for Intelligent Gantry Crane System <i>Wahyudi and J. Jalani</i>	ICOM'05	173
The Use of Scanning Electron Microscope in Evaluating Insulation Property <i>A.G..E. Sutjipto , Afzeri , R. Muhida , I. Sopyan 1 & E. Haruman</i>	ICOM'05	180
A Maximum Power Point Tracking for Photovoltaic System Using Temperature Compensator Method <i>Riza Muhida, Wahyudi Martono, Afzeri, Esa Haruman, Iis Sopyan , Abdul Gani Albagul and Agus Geter Edy Sutjipto</i>	ICOM'05	187
Neural Network Controlled of an Active Engine Mounting System Using a Nonlinear Electromagnetic Actuator <i>Fadly J.D., Wahyudi M. and Waleed F. Faris</i>	ICOM'08	194

A High Linearity CMOS RF Amplifier for Power Control Module in RFID Reader (ICOM 2008)	ICOM'08	203
<i>M. J. Uddin, M.A. Hasan, M. I. Ibrahimy, A. N. Nordin, M. A. M. Ali and M. B. I. Reaz</i>		
Design and Implementation of Fuzzy Control for Two Link Flexible Manipulator	ICOM'08	209
<i>Waleed F. Faris, Wahyudi Martono and Omar H. J. Hajjaj</i>		
State Feedback Control Tuning for Flexible Joint Manipulator Using PSO with Constraint	ICOM'08	215
<i>Mahmud Iwan S., Andika Aji Wijaya, Wahyudi</i>		
Fuzzy-based NCTF Controller for PTP Positioning: Fuzzy Membership and Rule Based Modifications	ICOM'08	223
<i>Purtojo, Rini Akmelawati and Wahyudi</i>		
Analysis of Magnetorheological Brake System with a Fuzzy Logic Controller	ICOM'08	231
<i>M.M.Rashid, Momoh J. E. Salami, M.A.Abd. Rahim and M.A.Hussain</i>		
Neural-tuned PID Control for Point-to-point (PTP) Positioning System	ICOM'08	237
<i>Wali Ahmad @ Myo Min Htut and Wahyudi</i>		

CHAPTER FIVE: Machine Vision

Title	Conference	Page
Review of Image Processing in Industrial Inspection and Quality Control (ICOM 2005)	ICOM'05	245
<i>Othman O. Khalifa and Sheraz Khan</i>		
Recognition of Handwritten Arabic Characters: Challenges and Prospective (ICOM 2005)	ICOM'05	250
<i>Sarra M. Abd Al-Rahim, Othman O Khalifa</i>		

A Review of Path Detection in Intelligent Video Surveillance	ICOM'08	258
<i>Imran Moez Khan, Yusof Zaw Zaw, Othman O. Khalifa and Lai Weng Kin</i>		

CHAPTER SIX: Speech and Image processing

Title	Conference	Page
Reduction of Motion Artifact in Portable Pulse Oximetry (ICOM 2008)	ICOM'08	267
<i>H. Malek, Othman O. Khalifa and I. Muhammad</i>		
Lossless Audio Compression using Psychoacoustic Model and Wavelet Transform (ICOM 2008)	ICOM'08	274
<i>Othman O. Khalifa, Sering Habib Harding and Aisha-Hassun A. Hasim</i>		
An Isolated Character Segmentation Approach (ICOM 2008)	ICOM'08	283
<i>Assma O. H. Ayyad, Othman O. Khalifa and Aisha Hassan</i>		
A study of Independent Component Analysis Applicability to Fetal Heart Rate Detection Using Photolethysmogarph (ICOM 2008)	ICOM'08	288
<i>H. Malek, Othman O. Khalifa and M. A. Mohd Ali</i>		
Educational Project on a Simple Voice Identification Using Frequency Cepstrum Coefficients and Vector Quantization (ICOM 2008)	ICOM'08	294
<i>H. K. Widhiputranto and R. Akmeliawati</i>		

CHAPTER SEVEN: Robotics and Automation

Title	Conference	Page
Movement Analysis for Building Intelligent Reactive Navigation Behaviours for Legged Robot	ICOM'01	303
<i>Adel Ali S. Al-Jumaily</i>		
Conceptual Design and Kinematic Analysis of Robotic Differential Gripper	ICOM'01	317
<i>Sameh Farag M. Ghobashi, Nazim Mir-Nasiri</i>		

Design Of Scara-Type Multi-Loop Robotic Arm <i>Nazim Mir-Nasiri</i>	ICOM'01	324
Humanoid Robot Head <i>A. A. Shafie, M.N. Kasyfi, N. I. Taufik Y.</i>	ICOM'08	331
Development of Mobile Photovoltaic Robot for Exploring Disaster Area <i>Riza Muhida, Suhaimi B Mohd Zaid, Wahyudi, Rifki Muhida, Ari Legowo and Akhmad Unggul</i>	ICOM'08	338
Investigation of a Novel Type of Locomotion for a Snake Robot Suited for Narrow Spaces <i>M. Watanabe, M.R. Khan</i>	ICOM'08	346
Cooperative Robot and User Friendly Robot- New Challenge in Robotics (ICOM 2008) <i>Md. Mozasser Rahman and Md. Raisuddin Khan</i>	ICOM'08	353
Inverse Kinematics of a Hyper-Redundant Robotic Manipulator <i>Syed Musrur Ahamad, Md. Raisuddin Khan, Md. Mozasser Rahman</i>	ICOM'08	358
A Gait Transition Method for Hexapod Robots <i>Md. Masum Billah, Dr. Mohiuddin Ahmed, Soheli Farhana</i>	ICOM'08	364

CHAPTER EIGHT: MEMS and Materials

Title	Conference	Page
Quality of Cu Film Electrodeposited on Silicon Wafer Using Different Current Densities <i>Shahjahan Mridha</i>	ICOM'05	373
Trimming of Atomic Force Microscope Probe Tip by Ion Milling <i>M. Y. Ali and B. H. Lim</i>	ICOM'05	381
Selection of Materials and Design Specification for Hip Joint Prosthesis <i>I. Sopyan, E. Haruman, A.G.E. Sutjipto, and R. Muhida</i>	ICOM'05	386

Generalized One-Dimensional Flow Inside Thermo-Electrically Controlled Micronozzle	ICOM'08	394
<i>Amar Hasan H and Raed Kafafy</i>		

CHAPTER NINE: MEMS and Materials

Title	Conference	Page
Intelligent Generator for Semi-Actual Test Data <i>Shihab A.Hameed, Abdul Majid A.Al-Abbasi</i>	ICOM'01	403
Improving Software Testing by Using Statistical Methods to General Multi-Structures Test Data <i>Shihab A.Hameed</i>	ICOM'01	414
Cellular Radio Based Vehicular Location Finding <i>Farhat Anwar</i>	ICOM'01	426
Controlling Electrical Appliances Using Global Mobile System <i>Sheroz Khan, Muhammad Fawzi bin Husin, Mohd Halim bin Mohd Noor</i>	ICOM'05	439
An Autonomous Integrated Architecture for the Next Generation Air Traffic Management and Avionics Systems <i>I Ahmed, M. J Sadiq</i>	ICOM'05	444
Overview of Radio Frequency Microelectromechanical Systems Reconfigurable Antennas <i>A.H.M. Zahirul Alam</i>	ICOM'05	450
Integrated Emergency and Guidance System Based on WiMAX Wireless Technology (IEGSW) <i>S. A. Hameed and B. A. Aliyu</i>	ICOM'05	458
Harmful Data Factors that Affect Internet's Users in Educational Industry <i>Shihab A. Hameed</i>	ICOM'05	466
Web based Documentation System for Dynamic Roadmaps <i>Sajid Hassan, Mohammad Ahsan Chishti, Farhat Anwar, Chandran Elamvazuthi</i>	ICOM'05	472

The Power of Web Portals as a Gateway to Resources and <i>Shihab A. Hameed, Mohammad Ahsan Chishti</i>	ICOM'05	480
Smart Antenna Design: An Overview <i>Zuhani Ismail Khan and Md Rafiqul Islam</i>	ICOM'05	486
Performance Study of Intra-Domain Mobility Management <i>Nazreen Rusli, Fauzana Ridzuan, Aisha Hassan Abdalla Hashim and Sajid Hassan</i>	ICOM'05	493
Performance Evaluation of Hierarchical Mobile IP <i>Aisha Hassan Abdalla, Farhat Anwar, Shaffiah Mohd, Hatina Banun Liyakthulikhhan, Sajid Hassan</i>	ICOM'05	500

CHAPTER TEN: MEMS and Materials

Title	Conference	Page
Machine Condition Monitoring and Fault Diagnosis Using Spectral Analysis Techniques <i>M.J.E. Salami, Asan Gani and T. Pervez</i>	ICOM'01	509
Development of a New Method of Crack Modeling and Prediction Algorithm <i>A. M. Aibinu, A. A. Shafie, M. J. E. Salami, A.F. Salami, I. A. Bamgbopa and W. A. Lawal</i>	ICOM'08	520
An Overview of Pulse Oximetry System for Noninvasive Monitoring <i>Muslim A. Abu-Umar, Liban A. Kassim and Othman O. Khalifa</i>	ICOM'08	528

CHAPTER ELEVEN: MEMS and Materials

Title	Conference	Page
Effect of Cooling Rate on Properties of Commercially Pure Aluminium <i>Faisal A. Rahim, Nur Izan Syahriah Bt. Hussein and M. M. Haque</i>	ICOM'01	535

Investigation of Chatter Arising during End Milling Operation on VMC and Quality of Machined Surface <i>A.K.M.N. Amin, M.A. Rizal, M. Razman</i>	ICOM'01	542
Surface Roughness of Carbides Produced by Water Abrasive Jet Machining <i>Ahsan Ali Khan, Mohd Efendee Bin Awang, Ahmad Azwari Bin Annuar</i>	ICOM'05	556
An Integrated Approach of Computer Aided Design, Rapid Prototyping and Investment Casting <i>M. M. Haque, Azdy M. Arshad and Irzal K. Helme</i>	ICOM'05	562
Pin Type Reconfigurable Clamping Ability Evaluation for Setup- Free Technology <i>Afzeri, A.G. E Sutjipto, A.K.M Nurul Amin, Riza Muhida</i>	ICOM'05	569
Workpiece Preheating Approach to Reduce Chatter and Improve Machinability of Titanium Alloy - Ti6Al4V <i>A. K. M. Nurul Amin, K. Kamaruddin, M. Abdelgadir</i>	ICOM'05	576
Effect of Processing Force on Architecture And Impact Strength of Glass Fiber Reinforced Epoxy Composites <i>A. Nazrin, S. Mridha and Mohamad A. Rahman</i>	ICOM'05	583
Investigations of the Causes of Chatter in Computer Aided Manufacturing Process during End Milling Operation <i>Md. Anayet U Patwari, A.K.M. Nurul Amin, Waleed Faris, S. Alam</i>	ICOM'08	591

Overview of Radio Frequency Microelectromechanical Systems Reconfigurable Antennas

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ABSTRACT

A review of reconfigurable antennas based on radio frequency microelectromechanical systems (RF MEMS) technology, from the perspective of its design perspective is presented. An overview of designing reconfigurable antennas at different design aspects is presented. The importance of understanding the limitations for realizing the RF MEMS reconfigurable antennas is discussed.

1. INTRODUCTION

The last several years have seen an exponential growth in the development of reconfigurable antennas, i.e., antennas whose aperture can be dynamically modified to enable different functions at different times. The antenna aperture can be specifically tailored to the application at hand, greatly increasing antenna efficiency and signal-processing speed, while maintaining a high degree of flexibility. The development efforts include real-time or even partial reconfigurability using either semiconductor or microelectromechanical switches (MEMS).

Antenna functionality depends on the antenna's radiating elements' parameters, such as the sizes, shapes, and positions of the radiating elements over the aperture. Modifying (i.e., reconfiguring) the parameters of these radiating elements enables using the same antenna aperture for multiple functions [1]–[7].

In the reconfigurable antenna, the structure of the antenna can be changed, for example, by changing the state of switches, to optimize the performance of the antenna for application in different systems. Several approaches have been proposed for implementing the reconfigurable antenna. Most of these approaches make use of either electronic or electromechanical switches. The former includes switches based on the PIN diode or the field-effect transistor (FET), while the latter includes simple relays and a number of different types of microelectromechanical system (MEMS) switches. In some designs, the switches are used to change the length of an antenna element, such as a dipole or a slot, and, thereby, shift the frequency of operation (resonant point) [8]–[14]. Other designs involve structures with multiple layers. Each layer may be an array of antennas optimized to radiate in a particular frequency range or an image plane intended to reflect within a particular frequency range [15], [16]. The switches are then used to change which layer is operative. Other approaches make use of diodes with electronically variable capacitance (varactors) instead of switches. The diodes are incorporated into reflecting surfaces, and the variable capacitance is used to tune or steer the beam of an adjacent antenna [17], [18]. In plasma regions with fairly high electrical conductivity are temporarily created on a silicon substrate [19]. These regions define the antenna structure, and they can be changed to create different antennas.

Radio frequency microelectrical mechanical systems (RF MEMS) is an emerging technology that promises the potential of revolutionizing RF and microwave system implementation for the next generation of telecommunication applications. Its low-power, excellent RF performance, large tuning range, and integration capability are the key characteristics enabling system implementation with potential improvements in size, cost, and increased functionality. An RF MEMS switch is one of the