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MEMS capacitive pressure sensor monolithically integrated with CMOS readout circuit by using post CMOS processes

Munseon Jang and Kwang-Seok Yun*

Abstract

In this paper, we presents a MEMS pressure sensor integrated with a readout circuit on a chip for an on-chip signal processing. The capacitive pressure sensor is formed on a CMOS chip by using a post-CMOS MEMS processes. The proposed device consists of a sensing capacitor that is square in shape, a reference capacitor and a readout circuitry based on a switched-capacitor scheme to detect capacitance change at various environmental pressures. The readout circuit was implemented by using a commercial 0.35 µm CMOS process with 2 polysilicon and 4 metal layers. Then, the pressure sensor was formed by wet etching of metal 2 layer through via hole structures. Experimental results show that the MEMS pressure sensor has a sensitivity of 11 mV/100 kPa at the pressure range of 100–400 kPa.

Keywords: Pressure sensor, Capacitive sensor, Post-CMOS, MEMS sensor, CMOS MEMS

Background

As the technologies of micro electromechanical systems (MEMS), micromachining, and nano-processes have been advanced, it becomes more important to accurately control and process the noisy signal from the MEMS-based precise sensors, improve the performance, reduce cost, and finally realize the system-on-chip concept [1]. These benefits could be obtained by the monolithic integration of MEMS sensors with electronics, which has been applied to commercially available products such as accelerometers, bolometers, digital mirror displays, and so on [2–5].

The fabrication of MEMS structures using standard complementary metal oxide semiconductor (CMOS) device with minimal post processes has been exploited for several years, enabling the monolithic integration of MEMS structures and signal processing circuitry with just a few further steps after the CMOS process [6, 7]. To date, various CMOS–MEMS devices have been implemented by using post-CMOS process such as inertial sensors, magnetometers and pressure sensors, etc. [8–11].

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The capacitive MEMS pressure sensors are one of the most widely used transducers of the various types of MEMS pressure sensors since they offer excellent noise performance, low power consumption, and easy integration with processing circuitry [9, 10, 12]. Narducci et al. reported a capacitive pressure sensor using aluminum metal layers of a commercial CMOS process as sensing electrodes [10]. Cheng et al. improved the sensitivity by using multiple metal layers to form mechanical structure of a CMOS-based pressure sensor [9].

In this paper, we present the fabrication of a capacitive pressure sensor based on post-CMOS process and its characterization by using monolithically integrated circuitry.

Design

Pressure sensor

Figure 1 shows the top and cross-sectional view of the proposed pressure sensor having diaphragm in square shape. The electrodes for the capacitive sensor were formed by the aluminum layers. The top electrode was supported by the silicon dioxide and Parylene layers. When an external pressure is applied to the sensor membrane, the gap distance between two metal electrodes decreases. Then, the pressure can be monitored

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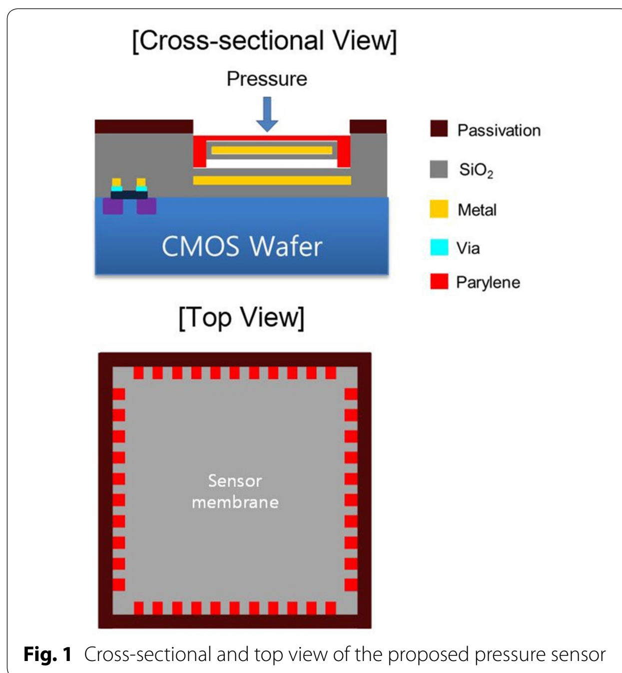

Fig. 1 Cross-sectional and top view of the proposed pressure sensor

by measuring the capacitance between the electrodes through on-chip circuitry.

The mechanical properties of the materials composing diaphragm are listed in Table 1. In this work, the target pressure range is around 100–500 kPa which is general pressure range for vehicle applications, bio medical devices, and some industrial applications such as tire pressure monitoring, blood pressure measurement, and pneumatic control equipments. To operate the sensor in those pressure ranges, the side length of the square membrane is designed as 56 μm. The resonance frequency calculated with these membrane dimensions is about 1.3 MHz, which is high enough for the pressure sensor in most applications [14]. We designed total 9 capacitors in parallel connection to have initial capacitance value of 200 fF.

Readout circuit

The readout circuit for the proposed capacitive pressure sensor is based on a switched-capacitor scheme employing reference capacitors and sensing capacitors. We used fully differential scheme to suppress a signal drift by temperature variation and an error caused by the capacitance mismatch between reference and sensing capacitors.

Table 1 The mechanical properties of the materials composing diaphragm

Material	Thickness (μm)	Young's modulus (GPa)	Poisson's ratio
SiO_2	0.85	69	0.17
Aluminum	0.7	70	0.3
Parylene	1.5	3.2	0.4

Figure 2 shows the sample-hold circuit and its timing diagram to measure the capacitance of sensing capacitor. Then, the output voltage is given by

$$\frac{V_{out}^{+} - V_{out}^{-}}{V_{in}^{-} - V_{in}^{+}} = \frac{C_s}{C_{ref}}, \tag{1}$$

where V_{in}^{-} and V_{in}^{+} are input voltage on negative and positive terminal, V_{out}^{+} and V_{out}^{-} are output signal from positive and negative output terminal, and C_s and C_{ref} are sensing and reference capacitance, respectively.

Figure 3 shows a layout of the entire chip and magnified view of the processing circuit. The reference capacitor formed by nine capacitors in parallel connection is designed to have a capacitance of 128 fF. The processing

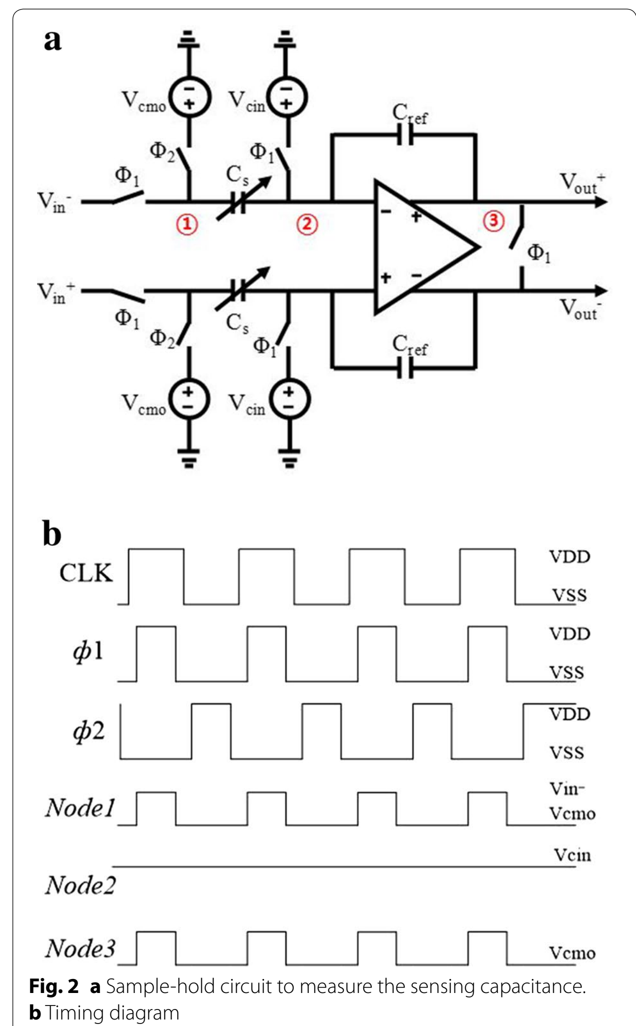

Fig. 2 **a** Sample-hold circuit to measure the sensing capacitance. **b** Timing diagram

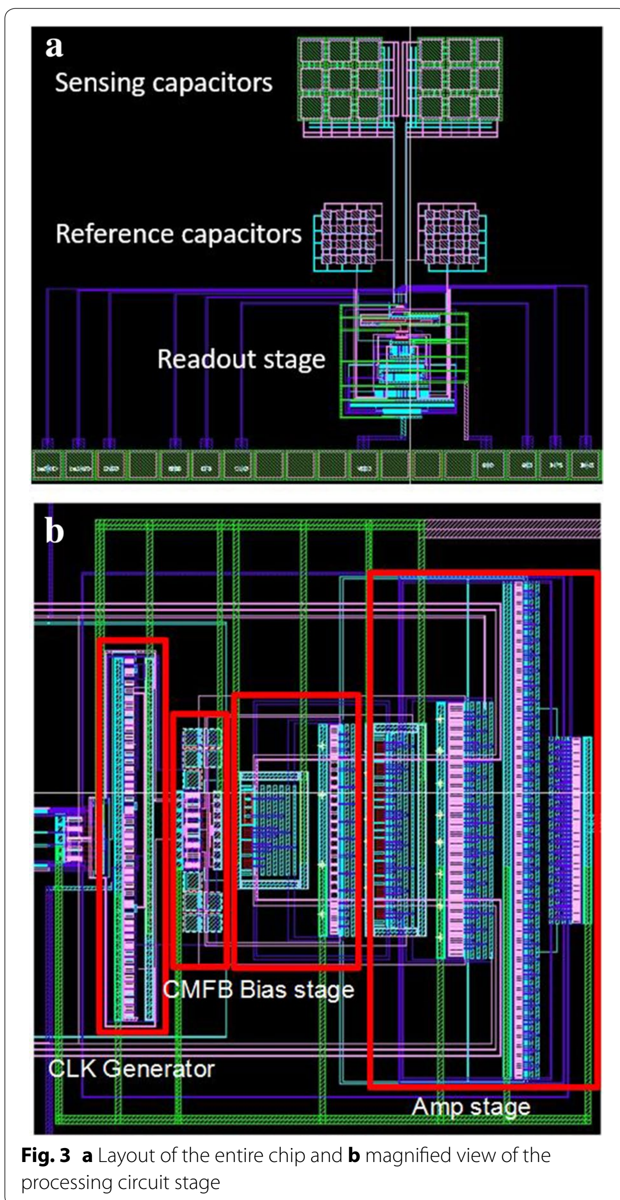

Fig. 3 **a** Layout of the entire chip and **b** magnified view of the processing circuit stage

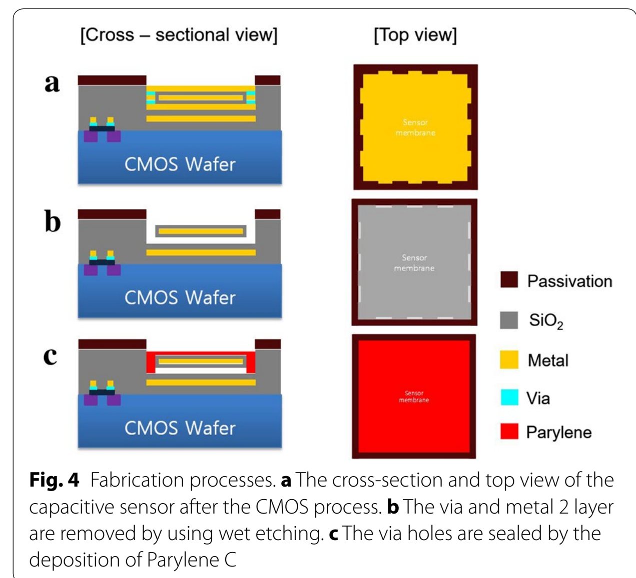

Fig. 4 Fabrication processes. **a** The cross-section and top view of the capacitive sensor after the CMOS process. **b** The via and metal 2 layer are removed by using wet etching. **c** The via holes are sealed by the deposition of Parylene C

circuit is composed of amplifier, clock generator, and common-mode feedback (CMFB) biasing stage [7, 13].

Fabrication

The CMOS chip was fabricated by using commercial foundry of 0.35 µm 2P4M (2 Poly silicon, 4 metal) process. The conductive materials for signal line and via is aluminum and tungsten, respectively. Figure 4 shows the process flow to fabricate the pressure sensor using post-CMOS process. Figure 4a depicts the cross-section and top view of the capacitive sensor after the CMOS process. The metal 3 and metal 1 form the top and bottom electrodes for the sensing capacitor, respectively, and metal 2 is used as a sacrificial layer. Next, the via and metal 2 layer are removed by using wet etching as shown in Fig. 4b. The etchant was a mixture of H_2SO_4 and H_2O_2 in the volume ratio of 2 to 1. Finally, the via holes are sealed by the deposition of Parylene C.

Results and discussions

Figure 5 shows the SEM image of the sensing capacitor after etching of metal 2 as a sacrificial layer. The gap distance is about 0.7 µm. In the magnified view of via region in Fig. 5b, we could verify that the sacrificial metal layers in via and metal 2 have been clearly removed while the top and bottom metal layers were not damaged by the etchant. Figure 5c is the SEM image after Parylene deposition, where the via hole is completely sealed.

Figure 6 shows the photo of fabricated sensor device after chip on board (COB) process on printed circuit board (PCB). The die dimension is 4 mm × 5 mm. The sensor characteristic was measured in a pressure chamber where the pressure was regulated by using a pressurized air tank and a calibrated pressure gauge as shown in Fig. 7. The output signal was measured through an oscilloscope. The bias voltage on VDD terminal is 3.3 V. Also, the voltages on V_{in}^{+},

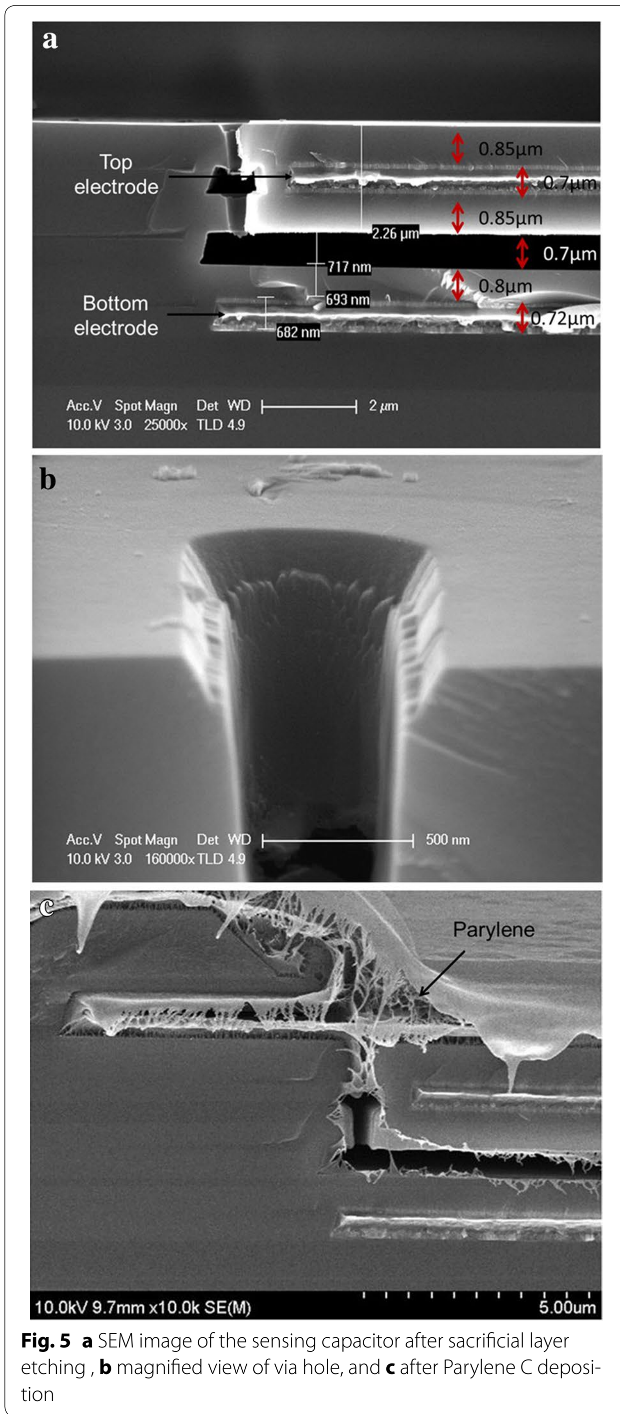

Fig. 5 **a** SEM image of the sensing capacitor after sacrificial layer etching , **b** magnified view of via hole, and **c** after Parylene C deposition

V_{in}^{-}, and V_{cmo} are 1.7, 1.3, and 1.5 V, respectively, to have 1.45 V of a common-mode voltage at the sample and hold stage.

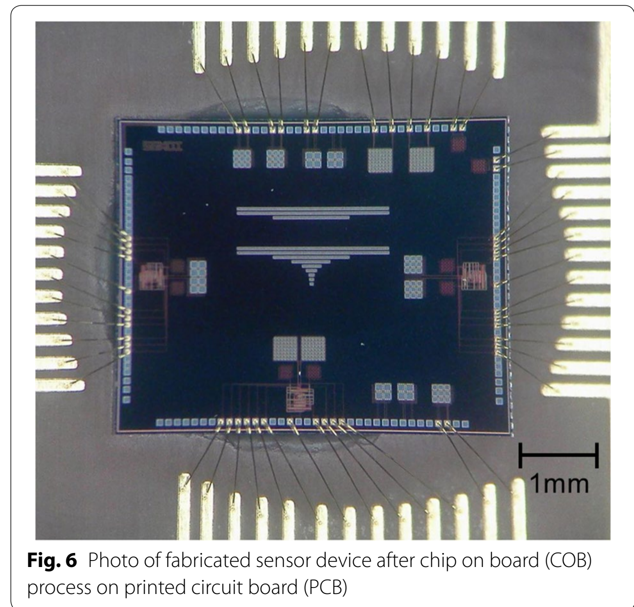

Fig. 6 Photo of fabricated sensor device after chip on board (COB) process on printed circuit board (PCB)

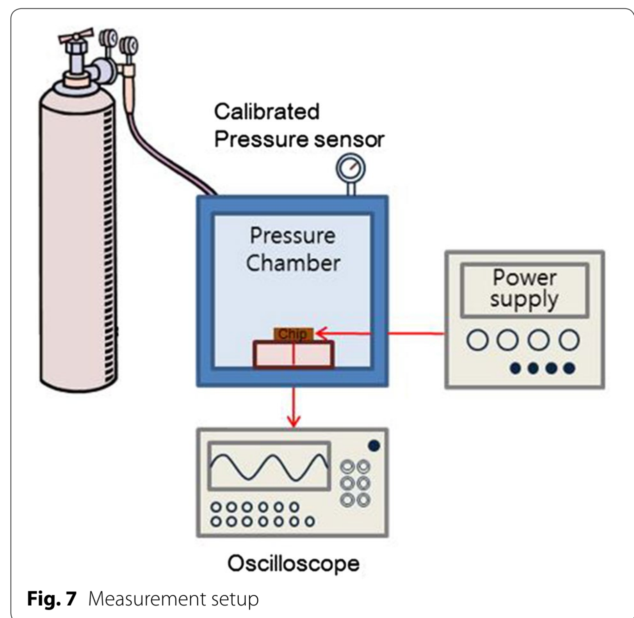

Fig. 7 Measurement setup

The real time output signals at various pressure differences are shown in Fig. 8a. As the pressure increases, the peak voltage of output signal also increases. As shown in Fig. 8b describing the output signal ($V_{out}^{+} - V_{out}^{-}$) versus pressure, the proposed sensor is quite linear in the pressure range from 100 to 400 kPa. The sensitivity of the fabricated device was about 11 mV/100 kPa.

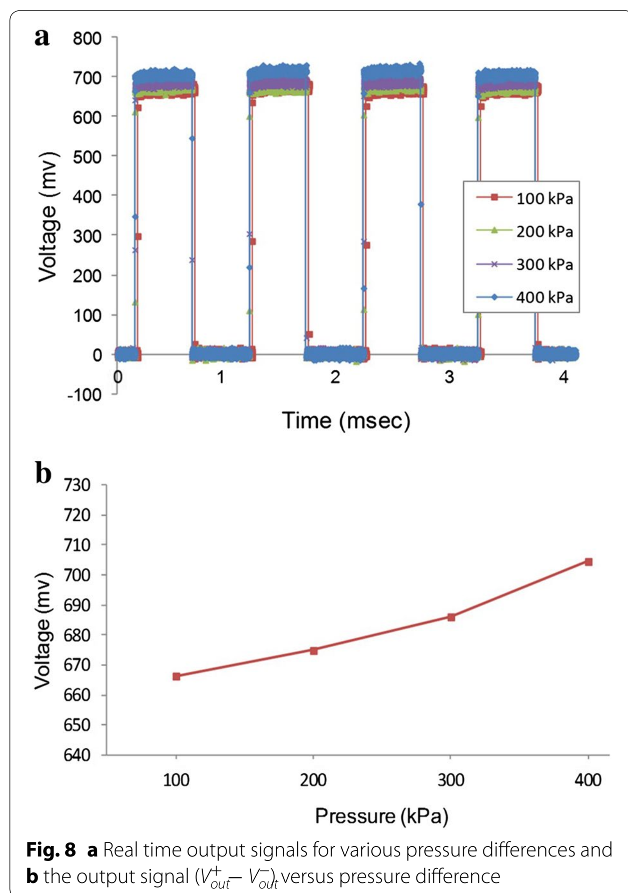

Fig. 8 **a** Real time output signals for various pressure differences and **b** the output signal ($V_{out}^{+} - V_{out}^{-}$) versus pressure difference

Conclusions

In this paper, we reported the fabrication of capacitive pressure sensor using post-CMOS process and measured its response at various applied pressures. The capacitive sensor was monolithically integrated with the CMOS circuitry processed by 0.35 µm foundry process to minimize the parasitic capacitance and electromagnetic interference noise. The readout circuit of fully differential structure based on switched-capacitor scheme was used to monitor the change of the sensing capacitor. The sensitivity of the fabricated sensor was 11 mV/100 kPa in the operation range of 100 to 400 kPa. As a future work, the integration of analog to digital converter and signal mining stage is required to improve the sensitivity and noise performance.

Authors' contributions

MJ participated in design, fabrication, and test the device and drafted the manuscript. KSY conceived of the study, reviewed all test methods and results, and finalized the drafted manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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