Polymer-Based 3-D Printed Ku-Band Steerable Phased-Array Antenna Subsystem

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ABSTRACT This paper introduces the first fully 3-D printed tunable microwave subsystem, consisting of 26 circuit elements. Here, a polymer-based 3-D printed Ku-band 4-element steerable phased-array antenna with fully integrated beam-forming network is demonstrated. Polyjet was adopted for fabricating the main body of the subsystem, as it is capable of producing a geometrically complex structure with high resolution over a large volume. Low-cost fused deposition modeling was chosen to manufacture the dielectric inserts and brackets for the phase shifters. The measured radiation pattern revealed that the phased-array antenna subsystem has total beam steering angles of 54° and 52° at 15 GHz and 17 GHz, respectively. Excellent input return loss behavior was observed across the optimum operational frequency range of 15 to 17 GHz, with a worst-case measured return loss of 12.9 dB. This work clearly shows the potential of using 3-D printing technologies for manufacturing fully integrated subsystems with complex geometric features.

INDEX TERMS Additive manufacturing, 3-D printing, Polyjet, fused deposition modeling (FDM), ABS, PLA, Ku-band, rectangular waveguide, phased-array antenna.

I. INTRODUCTION

Phased array antennas are widely used for many applications, such as in modern radar and space communications systems. Phased-array antennas have many identical stationary antenna elements that form a steerable beam. It requires multiple sets of highly customized components, such as transmission lines or guided-wave structures, power splitters, phase shifters, feed networks and radiating elements [1]. Because these components are usually produced in small batches, perhaps requiring expensive bespoke manufacturing tools and lengthy turn-around times, the high fabrication cost is a major disadvantage when conventional subtractive manufacturing techniques are used (e.g., milling and machining).

Metal-pipe rectangular waveguides (MPRWGs) are widely used due to their low loss characteristics. However, as the structure gets smaller and more complicated, the manufacturing costs become a significant drawback. Over the past few years, various 3-D printing technologies have been studied as alternative fabrication methods for rectangular waveguides and other associated radio frequency components [2]–[13]. Polymer-based 3-D printing technologies allow significant reductions in fabrication time, weight and cost, while ensuring near-comparable RF performance to their conventionally machined counterparts.

With conventional MPRWGs, components are manufactured as separate parts and assembled together to make a complete subsystem, requiring many waveguide flange connections; each contacting pair introducing a degradation in performance. In contrast, 3-D printing technologies allow more complex 3-D structures to be manufactured. Also, the number of parts can be significantly reduced with 3-D printing, minimizing the number of flanges.

The potential of using 3-D printing and surface metallization for microwave, millimeter-wave and terahertz applications have been demonstrated by several proof-of-principle devices. X- and W-band rectangular waveguides have been successfully developed with fused deposition modeling (FDM) and stereolithography (SLA) [2]. At Ku-band (12 to 18 GHz), different types of antennas,
such as corrugated conical horn [4] and spline-profiled smooth horn antennas [5], were demonstrated using industrial FDM and SLA technologies, respectively. Using Polyjet 3-D printing, a G-band waveguide, standard gain horn antenna and parabolic mirror have been manufactured giving measured performances close to their commercial counterparts [6]. 3-D printed MPRWGs has also been demonstrated at terahertz frequencies, requiring micrometer-level precision [7].

There is growing interest in utilizing the dielectric properties of polymer-based 3-D printed materials [8]. The dielectric properties of the polymers are easily tunable with composite filling materials and by varying infill densities. For example, using FDM 3-D printers, an X-band (8 to 12 GHz) termination has been manufactured and tested using a carbon filled polymer [14], while a broadband microwave gradient-index lens with varying infill density has also been demonstrated [15].

Polymer-based 3-D printing has been used to demonstrate relatively complex devices with repeating features, such as waveguide slot arrays [16], [17]. A linear 10-element dielectric-filled millimeter-wave horn antenna array was fabricated using SLA, in 2008, and showed an operational bandwidth from 35.0 to 39.5 GHz [18]. A more complicated antenna array, which includes components such as a flange, E-plane dividers and horn antennas, has been developed using SLA [19]. Similarly, a $2 \times 2$ antenna array with complicated waveguide feed network and conical horn antennas was developed to operate at Ka-band (26.5 to 40 GHz) [20].

Over the past two years, 3-D printed steerable antennas have been reported [21]–[23]. One was an S-band 6-element linear dipole array, made using multiple SLA-printed parts and needing six separate external feeds to provide steering [21]. Another was the electromagnetic simulation-only of a Ku-band frequency scanning slot array, having a scan angle of between $-15.2^\circ$ to $+15.4^\circ$ [22]. Finally, a resonant slot array has been demonstrated that employs mechanically moveable dielectric inserts to perform beam steering, employing SLA and FDM printing, respectively [23]. In that paper, the total beam steering angle is only 0 to 8.5°, using a conventionally manufactured metal screw-spring mechanism, over a 1% fraction bandwidth at 21.5 GHz, having a worst-case VSWR of 2.9.

This paper describes in detail the design, manufacture and measured results of a fully 3-D printed 4-element steerable phased-array antenna subsystem [24]. Here, 26 circuit elements ($1 \times$ flange, $6 \times$ mitred bends, $3 \times$ power splitters, $4 \times$ tunable delay lines, $4 \times 90^\circ$ waveguide twists, $4 \times$ bent interconnects and $4 \times$ H-plane sectoral horn antennas) are manufactured as a fully integrated, complete, subsystem. In addition, fully 3-D printed variable-position dielectric insertion mechanisms have been developed to implement tunable delay lines. All the measurements are performed by the UK’s National Physical Laboratory, with reference to the UK’s primary national measurement standards.

II. DESIGN

The beamforming network and individual horn antennas have been designed as a fully-integrated phased-array subsystem. The basic block diagram of the beam-forming network and antenna array is shown in Fig. 1. The subsystem consists of 7 different types of MPRWG components: flange, bends, power splitters, tunable delay lines, twists, interconnects and horn antennas. All the waveguide components are based on conventional WR-62 waveguide, operating at Ku-band, having internal cross-sectional dimensions of $a = 15.799$ mm and $b = 7.899$ mm. The design has been optimized for operation between 15 and 17 GHz.

With the 4-element phased-array antenna, having a single input waveguide port, three symmetrical power splitters were introduced to create a 4-way corporate feed. Ideally, the conventional 3 dB power splitter design employs a thin metallic septum to achieve optimal performance. However, a 3-D printed thin vertical polymer wall is not structurally stable. Moreover, it may exhibit warping during the electroplating processes. Therefore, the septum was replaced by a 0.85 mm diameter cylindrical stainless-steel pin, with the use of electromagnetic software simulations to determine the optimal location. The two designs for the 3 dB power splitter are illustrated in Fig. 2.

A phase shifter is a control device found in many microwave communications, radar and measurement systems. There are subtle differences between the two main
With phased-array antennas, phase steering and time steering are implemented by employing true phase shifters and true delay lines, respectively, as defined by the following:

**True phase steering:**

\[ \Delta \phi = \Delta \phi(f) \text{ and } \phi(f) = \sin^{-1} \left( \frac{\lambda}{d} \cdot \frac{\Delta \phi}{360} \right) \]  

(1)

**True time steering:**

\[ \Delta \phi(f) = \int \frac{f}{\phi_i} \Delta \phi(f_i) \text{ and } \phi = \sin^{-1} \left( \frac{\lambda}{d} \cdot \frac{\Delta \phi(f)}{360} \right) \]  

(2)

where, \( \Delta \phi = \phi_i - \phi_{i-1} \) represent the difference in phase between the \( i \)-th and \( i-1 \)-th antenna elements, \( \theta \) is the steering angle from broadside boresight, \( f \) is the frequency, \( \lambda \) is the corresponding wavelength in free-space and subscript ‘\( o \)’ refers to the center frequency of the band of operation.

The authors recently published a 3-D printed MPRWG variable phase shifter that exploits a moveable dielectric flap insert, operating across X-band [13]. Its frequency behavior resembles a true phase shifter in the lower third of the band and a true delay line in the upper third of the band, with an undefined characteristic mid-band.

With the Ku-band design adopted in this work, the dielectric insert taper profile and insertion mechanism were completely redesigned to improve RF performance, structural stability and control. The dielectric insert was designed to be FDM 3-D printed using acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS), with Formfutura’s Premium ABS (Frosty White), having X-band values of dielectric constant \( \varepsilon_r = 2.31 \) and loss tangent \( \tan \delta = 20 \times 10^{-4} \) [8]. The guided wavelength,

\[ \lambda_g = \frac{\lambda}{\sqrt{\varepsilon_{\text{reff}} - \left( \frac{\delta}{\lambda} \right)^2}} \]  

(3)

is dependent on the effective relative permittivity within the section of waveguide containing the dielectric insert \( \varepsilon_{\text{reff}} \) (with \( 1 < \varepsilon_{\text{reff}} < \varepsilon_r \)). When the dielectric insert penetrates the region of maximum electric field for the dominant TE\(_{10}\) mode, with more fractional volume filling the waveguide section, \( \varepsilon_{\text{reff}} \) increases and \( \lambda_g \) decreases [26]. As a result, transmission phase within the fixed length of delay line increases.

To achieve the maximum relative phase shift, and minimum losses, the dielectric inserts were designed to have a rectangular shape with elliptically tapered edges on both front and rear ends. 3-D printed brackets were designed to have a 3-D printed calibrated screw mechanism that inserts and extracts the dielectric pieces linearly and evenly through the slots. A pair of guide rails were added on each bracket to add extra stability. The computer-aided design (CAD) rendered drawing of a dielectric insert, bracket and screw mechanism are shown in Fig. 3(a).

Electromagnetic (EM) simulations were performed on the delay line section using ANSYS HFSS to optimize the size and shape of the tapered edges of the dielectric inserts. Simulated scattering (S-)parameter results are shown in Fig. 3(b), which clearly show that the elliptical taper shape has superior return and insertion loss behavior across Ku-band. With the dielectric insert at maximum depth, relative phase shifts of 262° and 288° are predicted at 15 and 17 GHz, respectively.

Figure 4 shows the predicted phase shifter performance for different levels of dielectric insert penetration depth \( g \). The relative phase shift (when referenced to a non-penetrating dielectric insert) exhibits complicated features across the waveguide band; approximating to a true phase shifter at the lowest band edge frequency, a true delay line at the upper band edge frequency and an undefined mid-band region. This is because a MPRWG is inherently a very frequency dispersive transmission medium. This resulting frequency behavior can also be seen in the X-band proof of principle [13]. The two phase shifting boundaries, seen in Fig. 4(a), are defined here by a 1° deviation from either true phase shifter or true delay line characteristics, for the reference level having \( g = 0 \).

It can be seen, between 15 GHz and 17 GHz, the phase shifter resembles a true delay line for low levels of relative phase shift, but the undefined region extends further up in frequency with higher levels of relative phase shift.
Figure 4(b) shows the corresponding differential-phase group delay frequency responses for the phase shifter between 15 GHz and 17 GHz. Clearly, the phase shifter exhibits true delay line characteristic in the region identified in Fig. 4(b), with this approximation being poorer in the transition region.

The independent tunable phase shifters are followed by 90° twists, followed by bent waveguide interconnects required to feed the individual H-plane sectoral horn antennas, while maintaining equal delay paths when there is no steering from the broadside boresight. For optimal performance, the distance between each array element \( d \) is set to half the free-space wavelength \( \lambda = 20 \text{ mm} \) at 15 GHz (i.e., \( d = \lambda/(15 \text{ GHz})/2 = 10 \text{ mm} \)). A WR-62 based H-plane sectoral horn antenna is ideal for achieving this, as its E-plane height dimension is sufficiently smaller than the operational free-space wavelength (i.e., \( b < \lambda/(15 \text{ GHz})/2 \)). The internal dimensions for the H-plane sectoral horn antenna design are shown in Fig. 5.

With infinitesimally thin metal walls made with a perfect electrical conductor (PEC), the theoretical directivity of the single horn antenna \( D_e \) is [27], [28],

\[
D_e(\text{dB}) = 10 \cdot \log_{10} \left\{ \varepsilon_t \varepsilon_{ph} \frac{4\pi}{\lambda^2} \cdot Ab \right\} = \begin{cases} 9.8 & \text{at 15 GHz} \\ 10.5 & \text{at 17 GHz} \end{cases}
\]

(4)

where, the aperture taper efficiency factor \( \varepsilon_t = 8/\pi^2 \) and the phase efficiency factor is given by [27]:

\[
\varepsilon_{ph} = \frac{\pi^2}{64\xi} \cdot \left\{ \left[ C(p_1) - C(p_2) \right]^2 + \left[ S(p_1) - S(p_2) \right]^2 \right\}
\]

(5)

and parameters \( p_1 \) and \( p_2 \) are [28],

\[
p_1, p_2 = \frac{1}{\sqrt{2}} \cdot \left[ \left( 8\xi \right)^{-\frac{1}{2}} \pm \left( 8\xi \right)^{\frac{1}{2}} \right]
\]

(6)

and the Fresnel integrals, \( S(x) \) and \( C(x) \) are a function of the fractional aperture distribution phase error \( \xi \),

\[
\xi = \frac{A^2}{8\lambda R} = \begin{cases} 0.42 & \text{at 15 GHz} \\ 0.47 & \text{at 17 GHz} \end{cases}
\]

(7)

The complete phased-array antenna’s broadside boresight directivity \( D_A \) was calculated using [27]:

\[
D_A(\text{dB}) = D_e(\text{dB}) + D_i(\text{dB}) = \begin{cases} 15.8 & \text{at 15 GHz} \\ 17.1 & \text{at 17 GHz} \end{cases}
\]

(8)

where, the directivity for a broadside linear array of \( N \) uniformly-excited isotropically radiating elements is,

\[
D_i(\text{dB}) = 10 \cdot \log_{10} \left\{ 2N \frac{d}{\lambda_0} \right\} = \begin{cases} 6.0 & \text{at 15 GHz} \\ 6.6 & \text{at 17 GHz} \end{cases}
\]

(9)

Our electromagnetic CAD simulations assume PEC metalization (which represents a good approximation to copper at Ku-band), but with metal wall thicknesses for the horns corresponding to those in the actual prototype antenna array. This dramatically reduces radiation backlobe levels (by reducing the backward radiation leakage caused by knife-edge diffraction that results from infinitesimal thin walls) and, thus, increases predicted antenna gain at boresight beyond that calculated in (8).

CAD drawings for the main body of the phased-array antenna are shown in Fig. 6. To validate the final design of...
FIGURE 6. CAD design of the main body of the phased-array antenna subsystem: (a) rendered 3-D model; and (b) simulation model with radiation boundary.

FIGURE 7. Simulated internal E-field patterns at 15 GHz: (a) with all the dielectric inserts fully inserted; and (b) with dielectric insertion setting for maximum beam steering angle.

FIGURE 8. Assembled phased-array antenna without dielectric insert components: (a) top view; (b) close-up view showing the waveguide port, power splitter pins, and phase shifter slot; and (c) close-up view showing aperture of horn antennas.

the complete phased-array antenna subsystem, simulations were performed using HFSS with PEC waveguide walls (to minimize the computational resources needed for such a large and complicated structure). Fig. 7 shows the simulated internal E-field patterns at 15 GHz, with all the individual components functioning as expected. For example, it can be seen in Fig. 7(b), when a dielectric insert has maximum penetration it accommodates an extra $\sim 3\lambda_g/4$, when compared to zero penetration.

III. MANUFACTURE
To manufacture the complete phased-array antenna subsystem, two types of 3-D printing technologies were employed: (i) Polyjet, an industrial-level process with ultra-high precision; and (ii) low-cost, entry-level desktop FDM.

A. POLYJET 3D PRINTING
A Polyjet 3-D printer (Stratasys Objet500 Connex3) was used for fabricating the MPRWG parts of the phased-array antenna subsystem. This printer is capable of printing large models at high resolution (maximum build area of 490 mm $\times$ 390 mm $\times$ 200 mm, with a minimum layer height of 16 $\mu$m) by using its polymer jetting technology. The Polyjet printer jets photopolymer droplets that solidify when cured by an internal ultraviolet (UV) light source. It utilizes wax-like support material that allows the 3-D printer to print complex geometric features, such as curves and twists at the required resolution.

The main body of the phased-array antenna subsystem was printed in only two pieces; the top and bottom half parts were printed separately for ease of cleaning and metallization. A Polyjet resin, VeroWhite, was used for the main body. VeroWhite provides rigid 3D prints that offers high resolution comparable to injection-molded polymer counterparts. The support material was mechanically removed and cleaned with a high-pressure water jet.

B. FDM 3D PRINTING
Fused deposition modeling 3-D printing was used to manufacture the dielectric inserts for the tunable phase shifters, their mounting brackets and calibrated screw mechanisms. The dielectric inserts were fabricated using an Ultimaker 2 printer, with Formfutura’s Premium ABS (White) filament. Using a slicing software, Ultimaker Cura [29], the prints were set for a 100 $\mu$m layer height. The 3-D models of the inserts were orientated perpendicular to the build surface of the printer, in order to minimize the need for support structures. Infill parameters were customized to give a theoretical 100% infill density. The brackets and screw mechanisms were fabricated using an Original Prusa i3 MK3, with polylactic acid (PLA) filaments. The FDM parts were all lightly sanded-down to increase their smoothness for ease in assembly and operation. Moreover, to reduce friction, petroleum jelly was applied to the screws.

C. METAL ELECTROPLATING PLATING
After cleaning, to metalize the main body of the phased-array antenna, a commercial copper-electroplating metallization process was employed. The electroplating process gave a copper layer thickness of 20 $\mu$m, corresponding to 38 skin depths (with $\delta = 0.53 \mu$m at 15 GHz). The skin depth is given by $\delta = \sqrt{\rho_o/(\pi f_{\min}\mu_o)}$, where the resistivity of copper $\rho_o = 1.72 \times 10^{-8} \Omega \cdot m$, $f_{\min}$ is the minimum operating frequency and $\mu_o$ is the permeability of free-space. The electroplated parts were assembled with standard M3 screws and nuts, as shown in Fig. 8. Note that these M3 screws can be 3-D printed, or replaced altogether using conductive adhesive, in order to achieve further weight savings.
TABLE 1. Predicted main body mass comparison (without nuts and bolts) for 3-D printed and conventionally machined phased-array antenna.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manufacturing Method</th>
<th>Total Mass (g)</th>
<th>Conventional / 3-D Printed Mass Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conventional Aluminum</td>
<td>1026*</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventional Copper</td>
<td>3397*</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-D Printed &amp; Electroplated</td>
<td>522</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Predicted values from CAD software (Autodesk Fusion 360).

As weight reduction is one of the most appealing aspects of using polymer-based 3-D printing, the mass of the main body parts of the phased-array antenna was measured after the electroplating process. Predicted masses of conventionally machined solid-copper and aluminium phased-array antennas were obtained using CAD software (Autodesk Fusion 360) for comparison. The results are given in Table 1. As expected, polymer-based 3-D printing offers significant mass reduction when compared to conventional machining. Compared with conventional (i.e., non-3-D printing) commercial waveguide implementation, the mass reduction will be even greater, as multiple flanges are required to connect individual components together.

IV. MEASUREMENTS

Three sets of measurements were made at NPL: (i) input return loss; (ii) phase shift; and (iii) radiation pattern. The first two were taken using a vector network analyzer (Agilent PNA). Calibration standards with traceability to the International System of units (SI), via their mechanical dimensions, were used to provide accurate S-parameter measurements with reference planes at the waveguide test ports. This was achieved by performing a Thru-Reflect-Line (TRL) calibration [30]. This calibration employed Ku-band waveguide standards: Thru – connecting the two VNA test ports together; Reflect – using a flush short-circuit connected, in turn, to each VNA test port; Line – using a $\frac{1}{4}$-wave section of waveguide. The length of the $\frac{1}{4}$-wave line was 6.4 mm, which is the optimum length for calibration (i.e., by providing a phase shift of a $\frac{1}{4}$ of a guided wavelength) in the middle of the waveguide band (i.e., ca. 15 GHz for Ku-band waveguide).

The calibration was performed using an in-house calibration algorithm, employing a seven-term error-correction routine [31]. The complete measurement set-up (i.e., VNA, primary reference standards and calibration algorithm) is referred to as the NPL primary impedance microwave measurement system (PIMMS) [32], [33] and represents the UK’s primary national standard system for S-parameter measurements.

The radiation patterns were measured in one of NPL’s anechoic chambers, which comprises a transmit tower with reference antenna, a phi-over-theta spherical positioner system for the receiving antenna under test and associated RF test equipment operating from 0.5 to 220 GHz [34].

To accurately determine the gain of the antenna under test, it is critical to calibrate the gain of the reference antenna (standard gain horn) with a low uncertainty. Prior to the radiation pattern measurement for the phased-array, the gain of the reference antenna (Narda 639B, having measured gains of 16.39 and 17.32 dBi at 15 and 17 GHz, respectively) was calibrated using the three-antenna extrapolation technique [35] with an uncertainty of 0.05 dB.
A. RETURN LOSS MEASUREMENT

The input return loss for the complete phased-array antenna subsystem was measured as a function of dielectric insert penetration depth, across Ku-band, using the measurement set-up shown in Fig. 9. Radar absorbing material (RAM) was placed in surrounding areas to minimize reflections. The measurement uncertainty for return loss was expected to be $\pm 0.2 \text{ dB}$ at 20 dB.

The EM simulated and measured return loss results across Ku-band are shown in Fig. 10. The phased-array antenna shows excellent return loss behavior between 15 and 17 GHz. It can be seen that the measured return loss without any dielectric inserts is better than 12.9 dB across the 15 and 17 GHz operating frequency range. When the dielectric inserts are at maximum depth, the worst-case return loss is 16.3 dB.

B. PHASE SHIFTER MEASUREMENTS

The relative phase shift of the phased-array antenna is the same as that for the individual phase shifters, when they are all in phase with one another. This was measured at 15 and 17 GHz, using the measurement set-up shown in Fig. 11. The phased-array antenna and a receiving horn antenna were attached to fixed mounts with the boresight of the array aligned with the receiver horn. The separation distance between the two antenna apertures was 0.96 m (below the combined radiating far-field distance of 1.82 m). The measurement uncertainty for transmission phase was expected to be $0.6^\circ$.

Using the screw mechanism, all four dielectric inserts were set to give the same level of penetration for each measurement. Starting from maximum insertion, measurements took place for every 0.5 mm of extraction. A Vernier caliper with resolution of 0.01 mm was used as a calibration reference. There was no significant drift observed between each measurement.

The simulated and measured relative phase shift performance at 15 and 17 GHz is shown in Fig. 12. Despite spatial uncertainty associated with measuring penetration depth and their relative alignments, the simulated and measured results show excellent agreement. From measured insertion phase $\angle S_{21}$, a maximum relative phase shift $\Delta \angle S_{21}(15 \text{ GHz}) = 263^\circ$ and $\Delta \angle S_{21}(17 \text{ GHz}) = 290^\circ$, which are within 0.4% and 0.7% of their respective predicted values.

C. RADIATION PATTERN MEASUREMENTS

The far-field E- and H-plane radiation patterns were measured at NPL’s spherical test range. The spherical test range
FIGURE 14. Measured far-field E-plane radiation patterns at 15 and 17 GHz, normalized to the broadside boresight value: (a) 15 GHz (logarithmic); (b) 15 GHz (linear); (c) 17 GHz (logarithmic); and (d) 17 GHz (linear).

The phased-array antenna subsystem was mounted on a phi-over-theta spherical positioner, illustrated in Fig. 13, with its aperture aligned over the rotation axis of the theta positioner. A WR-62 standard gain horn was used as the source antenna, which was installed on the polarization positioner. The separation distance between the source antenna and the phased-array antenna was 6 m.

The combined radiating far-field (Fraunhofer) distance
\[ R(17 \text{ GHz}) = \frac{2(D_{STD}^2 + D_{PAA}^2)}{\lambda} = 1.3 \text{ m,} \]
where \( D_{STD} = 71 \text{ mm} \) and \( D_{PAA} = 80 \text{ mm} \) are the maximum aperture size for the standard gain horn and phased-array antennas, respectively. The phase of the phased-array antenna was determined using a transfer method [36], by comparing with that of the commercial standard gain horn antenna. The uncertainty for the antenna gain measurement was expected to be approximately \( \pm 1 \) dB.

The penetration depths of the dielectric inserts were pre-calibrated to scan between the simulated target minimum and maximum beam steering angles \( \theta_{\max, \min} \), in \( 5^\circ \) increments. The phase difference between antenna elements \( \Delta \phi(f)_{\max} \), to achieve the maximum and minimum beam steering angles, was calculated using:
\[
\Delta \phi(f)_{\max} = \frac{\Delta \phi_{21}(f)_{\max}}{3} = \begin{cases} 
\pm 87^\circ & \text{at } 15 \text{ GHz} \\
\pm 96^\circ & \text{at } 17 \text{ GHz}
\end{cases}
\]  
(10)

where, \( \Delta \phi_{21, \max} \) is the simulated relative phase shift, at maximum dielectric penetration \( g = 7.9 \text{ mm} \). The intermediate values of \( \Delta \phi(f) \) for achieving the target beam steering angle \( \theta \) were calculated using the true time steering expression in (2),
\[
\Delta \phi(f) = \frac{d}{\lambda} \cdot \sin \theta \cdot 360^\circ
\]  
(11)

Using \( \Delta \phi(f) \), the relative phase for the \( i^{th} \) phase shifter element was obtained from \( \phi_i(f) = (i - 1) \cdot \Delta \phi(f) \), where \( i \in \{1, 2, 3, 4\} \). The dielectric insert penetration depth corresponding to each value of \( \phi_i(f) \) was interpolated from simulated relative phase shift given in Fig. 12. From Fig. 4(a), it can be seen that the phase shifter approximates to a true time shifter at 17 GHz, while having a transition characteristic at 15 GHz. The calibrated dielectric insert penetration depth settings are shown in Table 2.

To ensure the dielectric inserts are in the right positions, small 3-D printed calibration blocks were placed at the bottom of the rails, on the phase shifter brackets, which prevent the dielectric inserts from penetrating further than the calibrated values during the measurements.

Measured far-field E-plane radiation patterns are shown in Fig. 14. It can be seen that the total beam steering angle is \( 54^\circ \) at 15 GHz and \( 52^\circ \) at 17 GHz. By controlling the dielectric insert penetration depth, the phased-array antenna’s beam angle can be adjusted to scan between \(-27^\circ \) and \( +27^\circ\) at 15 GHz and \(-25^\circ \) and \( +27^\circ\) at 17 GHz.

Figure 15 shows predicted (theoretical and EM simulated) and measured beam steering angles from broadside boresight for each phase shift setting. The theoretical results can be obtained directly using either (1) or (2). For both 15 and 17 GHz, measured results show excellent agreement with the predicted results.

The antenna gains for each target beam steering angle ranges from 14.4 to 15.8 dBi at 15 GHz and from 15.5 to 17.0 dBi at 17 GHz. At broadside boresight, the theoretical prediction and measured results show...
TABLE 2. Calibrated dielectric insert penetration depth settings.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Target Beam Steering Angle, $\theta$ (°)</th>
<th>Phase Difference Between Antenna Elements, $\Delta\phi(f)$ (°)</th>
<th>Required Relative Phase Shift $\Delta\Delta\phi_{11}$ (°) for Individual Phase Shifters</th>
<th>Dielectric Insert Penetration Depth, $g$ (mm)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\phi_1(f)$ (15 GHz)</td>
<td>$\phi_2(f)$ (15 GHz)</td>
<td>$\phi_3(f)$ (17 GHz)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>-87</td>
<td>-96</td>
<td>262</td>
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<td>-25</td>
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<td>53</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 16. EM simulated and measured antenna gains at 15 and 17 GHz against beam steering angle: (a) 15 GHz; and (b) 17 GHz.

exceptional agreement; the measured gains of $G(15 \text{ GHz}) = 15.7 \text{ dBi}$ and $G(17 \text{ GHz}) = 17.0 \text{ dBi}$ are both only 0.1 dB lower than the calculated directivities. This is because, in practice, approximately the same amount of energy lost through backward radiation leakage (as a result of knife-edge diffraction and inferred by the theoretical predictions using (8)) is also lost through the dominant transmission losses in the practical demonstrator prototype. The EM simulated (with PEC metallization and no surface roughness or defects) and measured gains for the phased-array antenna are shown in Fig. 16. There are approximately 1.5 dB and 1 dB differences at 15 GHz and 17 GHz, respectively. These discrepancies can be attributed to the finite conductivity of the metallization, surface roughness and small defects [37].

For each target value of $\Delta\phi(f)$, given in Table 2, the EM simulated and measured E-plane field intensities are shown in Fig. 17. The E-field intensity peak represents the location and size of the main lobe and any sidelobes. It can be seen that for both 15 GHz and 17 GHz, simulated and measured...
The EM simulated and measured E-plane radiation pattern properties are shown in Fig. 18. The 3 dB beamwidths for each beam steering angle are shown on Fig. 18(a) and 18(b). The phased-array antenna shows almost identical performance to predictions at 15 GHz and 17 GHz. The maximum measured beamwidths are 29° and 26° at 15 GHz and 17 GHz, respectively. The minimum measured beamwidths are 25° and 23° at 15 GHz and 17 GHz, respectively.

The worst-case sidelobe levels for each beam steering angle are shown on Fig. 18(c) and 18(d). There is close agreement between the simulated and measured sidelobe levels. At 15 GHz, more than half of the measured sidelobe levels are below −10 dB. The worst-case measured sidelobe levels are −7.3 dB and −6.7 dB at 15 GHz and 17 GHz, respectively. The 3 dB beamwidth and sidelobe levels can be reduced by further optimizing the dielectric penetration depth and improving control accuracy of the dielectric insertion mechanism.

Finally, far-field H-plane radiation patterns were measured at broadside boresight without the dielectric inserts. The EM simulated and measured results are shown in Fig. 19. The measured 3 dB beamwidths are 24° and 22° at 15 GHz and 17 GHz, respectively, which are nearly identical to the simulated results. It is interesting to note that the 3 dB beamwidths for the complete phased-array antenna, at broadside boresight, for the H-plane are approximately only 1° less than those for the E-plane.

These results show that even with finite conductivity walls, rough surfaces and defects, the manufactured 3-D printed phased-array’s performance is comparable to that of an ideal model having PEC metallization and no surface roughness or defects.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper has introduced the first fully 3-D printed tunable microwave subsystem. The Ku-band 4-element phased-array antenna was manufactured using polymer-based 3-D printing technologies, consisting of 26 circuit elements, and demonstrated excellent measured performance. A combination of industrial-level Polyjet technology and entry-level FDM was used to print the phased-array antenna. By independently adjusting the depths of the dielectric inserts, the beam was fully steerable from −27° to +27° at 15 GHz and −25° to +27° at 17 GHz. Measured beam profiles and antenna gains show excellent agreement with simulated results.

This work shows that 3-D printing technologies are capable of producing low-cost and high-performance devices, not only at component level but also at subsystem levels. It is evident that with further research, this technology will be able to replace more conventional manufacturing and design methods for RF applications. Possible areas of future research include: (i) wider bandwidth designs; (ii) integrating other tunable components, such as variable attenuators, power splitters and filters; (iii) providing multifunctionality to reduce overall size and mass; (iv) comparing metallization processes (electroplating, drip coating, spray painting, vacuum metallization, etc.); and (v) material characterization for dielectric inserts.

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