**Low-Energy VLSI Architectures**

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**Abstract:**
This project has explored novel circuit architectures for low-energy VLSI systems. The investigation has focused on charge-recovering (a.k.a. adiabatic) circuits, leading to the discovery of novel low-overhead charge-recovering logic and memory circuitry, which achieves high energy efficiency at relatively high operating frequencies. The results of this research have been validated through experimental silicon prototypes. For three of the inventions related to this project, the University of Michigan has filed patent applications with the United States Patent and Trademark Office.

In addition to charge-recovering circuits, this project has also explored tools and architectures for conventional low-energy CMOS design. The focus has been on design automation tools that can provide quick and accurate estimates of power dissipation from register-transfer level descriptions of programmable digital systems. Low-power signal processing architectures for communication applications have also been explored.
Low-Energy VLSI Circuit Architectures

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1 Statement of the problems studied

This project has investigated novel circuit architectures for low-energy VLSI systems. Its primary focus has been on charge-recovering (a.k.a. adiabatic) circuits. By steering currents across devices with low voltage drops and by recycling undissipated energy, these circuits can operate more efficiently than their conventional digital counterparts. Early investigations into adiabatic circuits have yielded very complex designs that are impractical for high-speed design. This project has led to the discovery of extremely simple charge-recovering circuits which achieve very high energy efficiency at relatively high operating frequencies. The results of this research have been validated through experimental silicon prototypes. For three of the inventions that came out of this project, the University of Michigan has filed patent applications with the United States Patent and Trademark Office.

In addition to charge-recovering circuits, this project has also explored tools and architectures for conventional low-energy CMOS design. The focus has been on design automation tools that can provide quick and accurate estimates of power dissipation from register-transfer level descriptions of programmable digital systems. Low-power signal processing architectures for communication applications have also been explored.

2 Summary of the most important findings

The main contributions of this research project were the following.

- Novel source-coupled adiabatic logic family (SCAL). The proposed circuit family operates with a single-phase power-clock waveform. In Hspice simulations, arithmetic units designed in SCAL achieve up to 10 times higher energy efficiency than their conventional counterparts with 0.5 \( \mu \)m process parameters and operating speeds exceeding 200MHz. An 8-bit multiplier chip designed in SCAL received the First Prize in the Operational Category of the VLSI Design Contest of the 2001 ACM/IEEE Design Automation Conference.

- Charge recovering flip-flop and associated resonant clock generator: This circuitry enables the recovery of charges from the clock distribution network, providing near-zero energy consumption when the input data is not switching and yielding the power savings of clock gating approaches without the additional complexity of implementing clock gating in the design.

- Low-power charge-recovering static memories (SRAMs): The proposed SRAMs rely on a novel driver to recover charges from the bit/word lines, thus reducing the power consumption associated with driving substantial capacitive loads.

- Low-power dynamic memories (DRAMs): To reduce the power associated with refreshing memory cells too often, these DRAMs perform refreshing on a block (rather than an entire row) basis and in conjunction with multiple refresh periods.

- A reconfigurable pipeline architecture for energy-efficient multimedia processing. These pipelines adapt their performance and dissipation to the required data rates.
(rather than the worst-case ones) by disabling and bypassing a select subset of pipeline registers.

- Low-power design methodology for high-throughput large-state Viterbi decoders.
- System-level power estimation methodology for VLSI systems consisting of intellectual property (IP) components.

The remainder of this section provides more details about each of our main contributions.

2.1 Source-coupled adiabatic logic

Adiabatic circuit architectures reduce energy dissipation by steering currents across devices with low voltage differences and by recycling the energy stored in their capacitors [1, 6]. Broadly speaking, the efficient operation of these designs is yet another manifestation of energy-speed trade-offs. Consequently, adiabatic circuits that operate very efficiently at low operating frequencies stop functioning at high data rates. On the other hand, adiabatic circuits with broad operating ranges tend to be dissipative at low frequencies.

This project has led to the discovery of SCAL, a cross-coupled adiabatic logic family that achieves very low power dissipation across a wide range of operating frequencies. High speed is ensured by activating a sense-amplifier structure in a nonadiabatic manner. High energy efficiency across a broad frequency range is achieved by providing each gate with a current source that can be tuned by transistor sizing to achieve optimal charging rates for its operating conditions. In addition to low energy consumption and broad operating spectrum, SCAL features include true single-phase operation, balanced clock loading, functional completeness, and straightforward cascading.

![Figure 1: (a) A PMOS and (b) an NMOS inverter in SCAL.](image)

SCAL is a partially-adiabatic logic family that is clocked by a single-phase power-clock. Low energy operation is achieved across a broad operating range by tuning a current source attached to each gate. The basic structure of a SCAL PMOS gate is shown in the PMOS inverter of Figure 1(a). This inverter comprises a pair of cross-coupled latches (MP1 and MP2), a pair of current control switches (MP3 and MP4), two function blocks (MP5 and MP6) and a current source (MP7). This current source is the main structural characteristic that differentiates SCAL from TSEL, its closest adiabatic relative. The charge flow rate through the current source is controlled by the \( W/L \) ratio of MP7. The constant
voltage supply $V_{dd}$ is required for activating the cross-coupled latches. The port PCLK is used to apply a sinusoidal power-clock $\Phi$.

A PMOS SCAL gate operates in two phases: discharge and evaluate. The energy stored in the node $\text{out}$ or $\overline{\text{out}}$ is recovered during discharge. The new output of a PMOS gate is computed during evaluate. SCAL cascades are built by stringing together alternating PMOS and NMOS gates. The only signal required for controlling a SCAL cascade is the power-clock $\Phi$.

In simulations from layout with $0.5\mu$m CMOS process parameters, 4-bit pipelined carry-lookahead adders (CLAs) developed in SCAL functioned correctly for operating frequencies ranging from below 10MHz up to 280MHz. In comparison with 2N-2P and TSEL [16, 18], adiabatic families that use a similar cross-coupled latch structure and are capable of high-speed operation, our logic was consistently less dissipative. In comparison with PAL [22, 28], a very energy efficient family at low frequencies, our logic was 50% more dissipative at 10MHz and less dissipative for operating frequencies exceeding 100MHz. In comparison with their static CMOS counterparts, our designs dissipated about one third as much energy at 280MHz. At 10MHz their dissipation was lower than CMOS by more than an order of magnitude.

To demonstrate the robustness, efficiency, and practicality of SCAL, we used a diode-based variant of its basic topology to design an 8-bit unsigned multiplier chip. The chip included built-in self-test logic, an integrated resonant clock generator, and circuits for converting between adiabatic and CMOS signaling conventions. With its 11,854 transistors, our design was sufficiently large and complex to enable a thorough exploration of several issues that are central to adiabatic chip design.

In comparison with a voltage scaled, pipelined, static CMOS multiplier, the adiabatic multiplier dissipates less energy. At 200MHz, it is roughly 4 times more energy efficient than its CMOS counterpart, dissipating only 130pJ per operation with a 2.7V peak supply. While operating in self-test mode at a clock rate of 100MHz, it dissipates approximately 91pJ per operation with a 2.2V peak supply. These efficiencies were obtained without relying on any optimization tools and despite our conservative design approach that was primarily aimed at obtaining a working chip and thus ignored substantial energy optimization potential.

Figure 2: Microphotograph of test chip.

The multiplier chip was awarded First Prize in the Operational Category of the VLSI
Design Contest of the 2001 ACM/IEEE Design Automation Conference. It was fabricated in a standard 3-metal, 1-poly, 0.5μm CMOS process through MOSIS. A microphotograph of the chip is shown in Figure 2. Correct chip operation was experimentally validated at frequencies up to 130MHz, limited by the bandwidth of the off-chip interface. For operating speeds up to 130MHz, power dissipation measurements correlate well with simulation results under identical operating conditions. The correct operation of the integrated clock generator at frequencies over 140MHz has also been experimentally validated, although a similar measurement bandwidth problem prevented accurate combined power measurements at these frequencies.

2.2 Charge-recovering flip-flop and clock generator

A popular approach to low-energy, high-throughput VLSI system design is voltage-scaled static CMOS with aggressive pipelining. This approach is often combined with clock gating to reduce the dissipation of idle flip-flops and branches of the clock tree. In these systems, due to the large number of state elements (flip-flops) and loading of the clock tree, clock tree and flip-flop power consumption can often be a substantial fraction of total system dissipation.

![Figure 3: Schematic of charge-recovering flip-flop.](image)

This project has led to the discovery of a novel low-power design methodology that relies on charge recovery in conjunction with a novel flip-flop and a novel single-phase resonant clock generator to reduce the power dissipation associated with clock distribution. The charge-recovering flip-flop, shown in Figure 3, has several properties that make it well suited for deeply pipelined low-voltage static CMOS systems. First, it exhibits near zero energy consumption while idle (i.e., when the data input switching activity is zero). This property eliminates the need for clock-gating logic, yielding similar savings as fine-grained clock gating at every flip-flop in the design. With constant input data, flip-flop dissipation is a remarkable 4.9fJ/cycle at 500MHz/1.5V, or 1.8fJ/cycle at 200MHz/1.0V in a 0.25μm process. Second, the energy consumption of the proposed flip-flop for unit switching activity is 75fJ/cycle at 200MHz, making it competitive with other low-energy, high-speed flip-flops [17, 30, 37]. Third, the proposed flip-flop is very compact, containing only 14 transistors in its minimal configuration, or 18 transistors with an embedded two-input XOR gate, for example. It is furthermore capable of operating with several different
charge-recovering power-clock waveforms.

![Resonant power-clock generator](image)

Figure 4: Resonant power-clock generator.

The substantial reduction in power dissipation achieved by the proposed flip-flop is enabled by the charge-recovering power-clock generator shown in Figure 4. The proposed resonant generator has several features making it particularly suitable for driving systems containing the charge-recovering flip-flop. First, its topology enables the large resonant currents to bypass the main power switch, allowing it to be much smaller than topologies where the entire current is conducted by the switch. Second, the gate drive of the main switch uses an efficient dynamic circuit that optimizes the turn-on and turn-off rates to minimize dissipation. Third, a compact and fast control circuit enables the clock generator to decide, on a cycle by cycle basis, whether or not to replenish the resonating power-clock energy. This capability allows the clock generator to maintain a stable power-clock amplitude while consuming as little energy as possible.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed energy recovering design methodology, a conventional ASIC design was re-implemented using the energy recovering flip-flop and resonant clock generator. A direct power comparison was enabled by combining a conventional static CMOS flip-flop with the charge-recovering flip-flop through a multiplexer. A conventional buffered clock tree was used for the static CMOS flip-flops, while a wide metal distribution network driven by the resonant power-clock generator was used for the pTERF flip-flops. Our simulation results of this voltage-scaled system indicate greater than 4 fold savings for low switching activity (when the state elements dominates dissipation) and a 20% savings for high switching activity (when the combinational logic dominates dissipation).

2.3 Charge-recovering SRAMs

SRAMs are used extensively in modern processors as on-chip memories due to their large storage density and small access latency. Low power on-chip memories have become the topic of substantial research as they can account for almost half of total CPU dissipation, even for extremely power-efficient designs [13].

Charge recovery is a particularly attractive approach to the reduction of power dissipation in high-density memories with large switching capacitance. Energy recovery schemes
reduce energy dissipation by limiting voltage differences across conducting devices and by recovering charges from the load capacitors. This controlled mode of operation is typically accomplished through the coordination of time-varying voltage waveforms, called power-clocks. Previous energy recovery approaches for static memories achieved considerable energy savings over conventional SRAMs [29, 33, 24, 2, 19, 25, 34]. These schemes required multiple-phase power-clocks, however, and experienced a variety of drawbacks, including relatively low operating frequencies, long latencies, non-trivial area overheads, and access-pattern dependent energy savings.

This project has resulted in the design of a novel low-power charge recovering SRAM. With its fast operation and low overhead, this SRAM is suitable for on-chip caches, providing single-cycle latency read and write operations, and avoiding the shortcomings of previous energy recovering approaches. It is powered by a single-phase sinusoidal power-clock to minimize power-clock generator dissipation, coupling noise, and area overhead.

The main feature of the proposed SRAM is a charge recovering driver that reclaims energy from the capacitors of the bit/word lines. A small control circuit embedded to the driver keeps its operation in synchrony with the power-clock. Through the use of feedback from the driver output to the control circuit, the operation of our driver remains efficient, independent of the operation sequence. To provide single-cycle read with a single-phase power-clock, a precharge-low scheme is employed in conjunction with a current-mode sense amplifier that is modified to operate efficiently near $V_{SS}$. With the exception of the energy recovering drivers and the modified sense amplifiers, the structure of our static memory is identical to that of conventional SRAMs.

In Hspice simulations of a 256x256 SRAM in 0.35μm TSMC process, our energy recovering memory achieves energy savings in excess of 2.6x in comparison with a conventional counterpart at 3V, 300MHz. Our SRAM functions correctly over a wide range of supply voltages and operating frequencies. Maximum operating frequency ranges from 1MHz at 0.7V to over 500MHz at 2.75V.

2.4 Low-power DRAMs

Conventional DRAMs use a single refresh waveform whose period is dictated by the minimum data-retention time of the memory cells. To ensure that the state of all cells is correct at any time, the refresh period $t_{REF}$ must not exceed the shortest data-retention time $t_{REF}$. For the majority of DRAM cells, however, data retention times are significantly longer than $t_{REF}$. Refreshing these cells with a period $t_{REF}$ is therefore unnecessary and results in excessive power dissipation.

This project has investigated a novel scheme for reducing data-retention power in DRAMs by using multiple refresh periods and refreshing on a block basis. Through the introduction of multiple refresh periods, cells with long data-retention times can be refreshed less often than leaky cells with short ones. Moreover, since the number of leaky cells is typically small [31], by refreshing cells in relatively small groups, as opposed to entire rows, the refresh period of each block is increased. To further extend the refresh periods of refresh blocks, a swap cell is introduced to provide a replacement for the most leaky cell in each block.

To compute an optimal set of refresh periods that minimizes refresh power dissipation,
a novel polynomial-time algorithm has been designed. Specifically, given an integer $K$ and the data retention times of the refresh blocks in the memory, this algorithm determines in $O(KN^2)$ steps a set of $K$ refresh periods that minimize the power dissipation due to refreshing. In simulations of a 16Mb DRAM, the proposed block-based multi-period refresh reduces power dissipation by a multiplicative factor of 4 with an area overhead of at most 6%.

Numerous approaches have been investigated for reducing data retention power in DRAMs. Schemes that reduce leakage current by optimizing process conditions or by controlling the potential of various nodes in the cell have been reported in [9, 8, 7]. Schemes for dynamically controlling the refresh period through a limited number of temperature or current sensors have been reported in [11, 26]. The use of memory access history for reducing the number of refreshes to previously accessed rows has been proposed in [27]. The use of Error Correcting Codes (ECCs) to control the number of errors below a required level while setting the refresh period to a higher value was reported for mass storage media in [12]. The introduction of a second refresh period for rows with long data retention times was proposed in [10, 32]. These papers focus on implementation issues, however, and do not present systematic techniques for the optimal selection of the second period.

2.5 Reconfigurable pipelining

Pipelining enables the realization of high-speed, high-efficiency CMOS datapaths by allowing the reduction of supply voltages at the lowest possible levels, while still satisfying throughput constraints. In deep pipelines, however, registers and corresponding clock trees are responsible for an increasingly large fraction of total dissipation, no matter how efficiently they may have been implemented [21, 23, 30, 35]. For example, the power consumed by the registers of a PVQ decoder described in [23] amounts to 90% of total datapath dissipation. In general, these registers latch their inputs unconditionally, even if input data do not change, and thus consume significant power no matter how efficiently they may have been implemented [21, 35, 30].

This project has explored a novel methodology for designing fine-grain reconfigurable pipelined datapaths that can adapt their performance and dissipation to required data rates in real time. These datapaths can efficiently cope with the variability of data rate that is commonplace in numerous applications. The proposed reconfiguration methodology reduces energy dissipation by disabling and bypassing a select subset of registers. The number of register stages and corresponding clock trees to be disabled at any interval in the operation of the pipeline is periodically determined by the amount of computation that needs to be performed at the time. Reconfiguration can be performed “on the fly”, while data is streaming through the datapath. The control hardware overhead associated with our approach is very low. For an $n$-stage pipeline, additional hardware is limited to $O(n \log n)$ state bits and $O(n)$ multiplexers.

An application domain that naturally lends itself to the proposed real-time fine-grain reconfiguration scheme is video processing, a key component of multimedia communications and a potentially integral part of next-generation portable devices. Currently, there are several video standards established for different purposes, including MPEG-1, MPEG2, and H.261, and their implementations for mobile systems-on-a-chip (SoC) should provide
substantial computing capabilities at low energy consumption levels [15]. The building blocks of these standards include demanding computations such as the discrete cosine transform (DCT), inverse discrete cosine transform (IDCT), motion estimation, motion compensation, variable-length coding/decoding, quantization, and inverse quantization. Video streams are particularly suitable to low-power processing using our reconfiguration approach, because the required data rates of downstream components can be inferred by observing the output values of upstream components. Due to the real-time reconfiguration capability of our scheme, variable data rates can be accommodated without interrupting the flow of data through the pipeline. In contrast, alternative dynamic adaptation schemes such as voltage scaling would require several cycles to reconfigure the system and thus result in unacceptable latencies for real-time latency-sensitive applications.

To evaluate its efficiency, the proposed methodology was applied to the design of reconfigurable pipelined multipliers that were used in IDCT modules with varying degrees of parallelism. The multipliers were dynamically reconfigured according to the number of nonzero DCT coefficients per block and the picture size. The energy efficiency of the reconfigurable IDCTs was compared with that of statically pipelined IDCTs with identical architecture and peak performance capability. In simulations with a $0.35\mu$m CMOS technology, the reconfigurable pipelined multipliers for the 2-dimensional IDCT achieved relative reductions up to 65% over the non-reconfigurable counterparts.

### 2.6 Low-power Viterbi decoder design

Viterbi decoders (VDs) are widely used in digital wireless communication systems due to their powerful error correction capabilities. The quality of a VD design is mainly measured by three criteria: coding gain, throughput, and power dissipation. High coding gain results in low data transfer error probability. High throughput is necessary for high-speed applications such as 802.11a wireless LAN. The design of VDs with high coding gain and throughput is challenged by the need for low power, however, since VDs are often placed in communication systems running on batteries.

![Figure 5: Performance of various VDs.](image)

Single-chip VD design has been a very active research area for the past 15 years. Figure 5 shows the throughput, power dissipation, and number of states for a large collection
of VD designs [3, 5, 14, 36]. In general, these VDs fall within the region between the two dashed lines. While small-state VDs can have throughput over 1 Gbps, throughput decreases with the increase in the number of states. Consequently, the design of high-throughput large-state VDs, though crucial for applications such as satellite communications [4], has remained largely unexplored.

The main challenge in implementing high-throughput large-state VDs with low power dissipation is the rapid growth in the computational complexity of a VD with the increase in its state count. Although parallel arithmetic processors can be introduced to speed up the computation, they often generate extremely complex interconnect routing problems, degrading both system throughput and power dissipation. Therefore, achieving high speeds using a large-state VD with low power dissipation requires careful consideration of global data transfer and interconnect issues.

![Layout of 256-state Viterbi decoder.](image)

Figure 6: Layout of 256-state Viterbi decoder.

This project has investigated a low-power design methodology for building high-throughput large-state VDs. Furthermore, it has applied this methodology to the design of a 256-state rate-1/3 IS95 VD chip, whose layout is shown in Figure 6. This chip achieves high power efficiency due to our comprehensive design approach that focuses on the reduction of global data transfers, the minimization of global buses, and the maximization of datapath pipeline depths with no data forwarding requirements. The proposed design methodology results in a low-power VD architecture consisting of 8 parallel processors connected by 4 global buses. The VD was synthesized using a 0.25 μm standard cell library. The processors were placed in an array structure manually and then routed automatically. In simulations from layout, the decoder achieves a throughput of 20 Mbps while dissipating only 450 mW. To our knowledge, this dissipation is the lowest among published VDs with the same number of states and throughput.

### 2.7 System-level power estimation

To support the exploration of the numerous architectural alternatives that arise when designing with intellectual property (IP) components, fast and accurate design automation tools are required to evaluate key design characteristics such as timing, area, and power
dissipation. Although it is possible for IP vendors to capture timing and area using a single number, the characterization of power in a simple manner has remained elusive, since power dissipation is input data dependent [20]. Accurate circuit-level power estimation tools require detailed design simulations and therefore have unacceptably high runtimes for real-time design space exploration. On the other hand, fast high-level power tools suffer from relatively large estimation errors. Thus, efficient and accurate power estimation for IP-based systems remains a challenging task.

This project has explored a novel hybrid power estimation methodology for programmable systems. To obtain fast and accurate estimates, the proposed method combines high-level simulation with analytical macromodeling that abstracts circuit-level characteristics such as switching and leakage power. Given a program and/or a primary input sequence, functional simulation of the system is performed to derive all data signals at the datapath/memory interface as well as all control signals. This simulation does not explicitly use the detailed structure of the datapath. Based on the control signals derived, different possible datapath topologies are identified. For each such topology, or mode, a fixed-point iteration is applied in conjunction with analytical output macromodeling to calculate signal statistics among the various circuit components. These statistics are then applied to analytical power macromodels to obtain the dissipation of the entire datapath and global interconnects. For control and memory, power estimates are obtained using the signals from the high-level simulation.

The proposed methodology relies on a firm theoretical basis and yields fast and accurate power estimates in practice. Sufficient conditions on the macromodel functions have been discovered under which the iterative procedure for computing signal statistics in the datapath is guaranteed to converge to a unique point. Fast runtimes and high estimation accuracies are accomplished through the judicious combination of high-level simulation and macromodeling of circuit-level characteristics. By focusing on the interfaces among control, datapath, and memory, simulation does not consider details of the datapath structure and thus is very fast. At the same time, it accurately captures the control signals that affect the dataflow and, therefore, utilization and power dissipation of hardware.

The proposed hybrid scheme has been implemented in a power estimation tool called HYPE and has been used it to explore several architectural alternatives in two system designs such as the power impact of computation parallelism and loop unrolling on the design of 256-state Viterbi decoders and Rijndael encryptors. The experimental results obtained demonstrate the high effectiveness of the proposed approach. For systems with 100k logic gates, HYPE terminates within seconds. Compared with state-of-the-art industrial gate-level power estimation tools, our methodology is 2 to 3 orders of magnitude faster with 5.4% power estimation deviation on the average.

3 List of publications and technical reports

3.1 Papers published in peer-reviewed journals


### 3.2 Papers published in non-peer-reviewed journals or in conference proceedings


• S. Kim and M. C. Papaefthymiou. Reconfigurable low energy multiplier for multimedia system design. In IEEE Workshop on VLSI, April 2000.


3.3 Papers presented at meetings but not published in conference proceedings

N/A

3.4 Manuscripts submitted but not published


### 3.5 Technical reports submitted to ARO

N/A

### 4 List of all participating research personnel

Prof. Marios C. Papaefthymiou, PI

- Elevated to Senior Member, IEEE, August 2002.
- Director, Advanced Computer Architecture Laboratory, University of Michigan, September 2000–present.

Suhwan Kim, Graduate Research Assistant

- Ph.D., May 2001. Kim joined IBM Research as a Member of the Technical Staff.

Xun Liu, Graduate Research Assistant

- Ph.D., May 2003. Liu joined North Carolina State University as an Assistant Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering.

Conrad Ziesler, Graduate Research Assistant


Joohee Kim, Graduate Research Assistant

Juang-Ying Chueh, Graduate Research Assistant
5 Report of inventions

The University of Michigan filed three patent applications with the US Patent and Trademark Office in connection with the following three inventions.

- Low-power SRAM with energy recovery. File No. 2300, University of Michigan Technology Transfer Office, March 2002.


References


