

Chapter 5

Powder Bed Fusion Processes

5.1 Introduction

Powder bed fusion (PBF) processes were among the first commercialized AM processes. Developed at the University of Texas at Austin, USA, Selective Laser Sintering (SLS) was the first commercialized powder bed fusion process. Its basic method of operation is schematically shown in Fig. 5.1, and all other PBF processes modify this basic approach in one or more ways to enhance machine productivity, enable different materials to be processed, and/or to avoid specific patented features.

All PBF processes share a basic set of characteristics. These include one or more thermal sources for inducing fusion between powder particles, a method for controlling powder fusion to a prescribed region of each layer, and mechanisms for adding and smoothing powder layers.

The SLS process was originally developed for producing plastic prototypes using a point-wise laser scanning technique. As described in this chapter, this approach has been extended to metal and ceramic powders; additional thermal sources have been utilized; and variants for layer-wise fusion of powdered materials now exist. As a result, PBF processes are widely used world-wide, have a broad range of materials (including polymers, metals, ceramics and composites) which can be utilized, and are increasingly being used for direct digital manufacturing of end-use products, as the material properties are comparable to many engineering-grade polymers, metals, and ceramics.

5.2 SLS Process Description

In order to provide a baseline description of powder fusion processes, Selective Laser Sintering will be described as the paradigm approach to which the other powder bed fusion processes will be compared. As shown in Fig. 5.1, SLS fuses thin

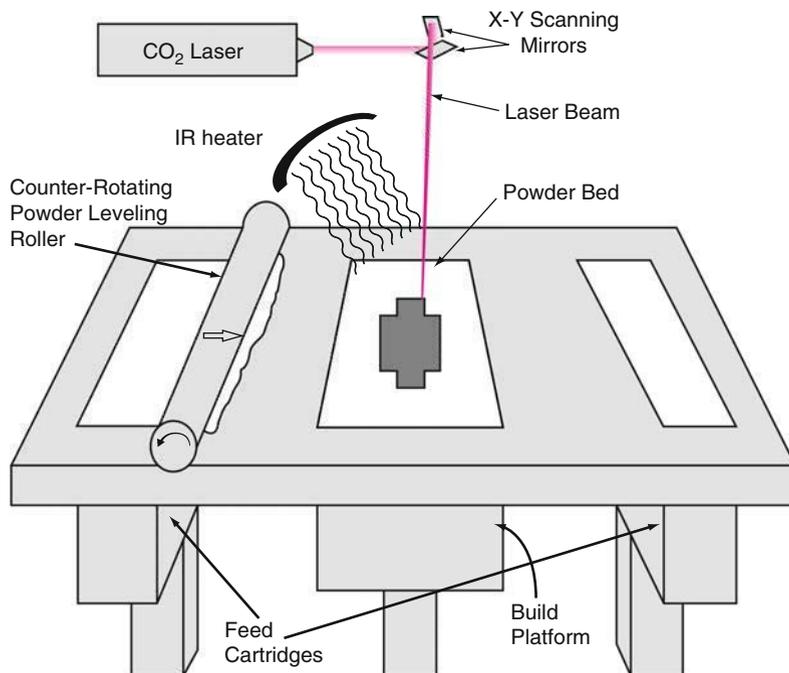


Fig. 5.1 Schematic of the Selective Laser Sintering process

layers of powder (typically ~ 0.1 mm thick) which have been spread across the build area using a counter-rotating powder leveling roller. The part building process takes place inside an enclosed chamber filled with nitrogen gas to minimize oxidation and degradation of the powdered material. The powder in the build platform is maintained at an elevated temperature just below the melting point and/or glass transition temperature of the powdered material. Infrared heaters are placed above the build platform to maintain an elevated temperature around the part being formed; as well as above the feed cartridges to pre-heat the powder prior to spreading over the build area. In some cases, the build platform is also heated using resistive heaters around the build platform. This pre-heating of powder and maintenance of an elevated, uniform temperature within the build platform is necessary to minimize the laser power requirements of the process (when pre-heating, less laser energy is required for fusion) and to prevent warping of the part during the build due to nonuniform thermal expansion and contraction (curling).

Once an appropriate powder layer has been formed and preheated, a focused CO_2 laser beam is directed onto the powder bed and is moved using galvanometers in such a way that it thermally fuses the material to form the slice cross-section. Surrounding powder remains loose and serves as support for subsequent layers, thus eliminating the need for the secondary supports which are necessary for photopolymer vat processes. After completing a layer, the build platform is lowered by one layer thickness and a new layer of powder is laid and leveled using the counter-rotating

roller. The beam scans the subsequent slice cross-section. This process repeats until the complete part is built. A cool-down period is typically required to allow the parts to uniformly come to a low-enough temperature that they can be handled and exposed to ambient temperature and atmosphere. If the parts and/or powder bed are prematurely exposed to ambient temperature and atmosphere, the powders may degrade in the presence of oxygen and parts may warp due to uneven thermal contraction. Finally, the parts are removed from the powder bed, loose powder is cleaned off the parts, and further finishing operations, if necessary, are performed.

5.3 Powder Fusion Mechanisms

Since the introduction of SLS, each new powder bed fusion technology developer has introduced competing terminology to describe the mechanism by which fusion occurs, with variants of “sintering” and “melting” being the most popular. However, the use of a single word to describe the powder fusion mechanism is inherently problematic as multiple mechanisms are possible. There are 4 different fusion mechanisms which are present in PBF processes [1]. These include solid-state sintering, chemically-induced binding, liquid-phase sintering, and full melting. Most commercial processes utilize primarily liquid-phase sintering and melting. A brief description of each of these mechanisms and their relevance to AM follows.

5.3.1 *Solid-state Sintering*

The use of the word sintering to describe mechanisms for fusing powders as a result of thermal processing predates the advent of AM. Sintering, in its classical sense, indicates the fusion of powder particles without melting (i.e., in their “solid state”) at elevated temperatures. This occurs at temperatures between one half of the absolute melting temperature and the melting temperature. The driving force for solid-state sintering is the minimization of total free energy, E_s , of the powder particles. The mechanism for sintering is primarily diffusion between powder particles.

Surface energy E_s is proportional to total particle surface area S_A , through the equation $E_s = \gamma_s \times S_A$ (where γ_s is the surface energy per unit area for a particular material, atmosphere, and temperature). When particles fuse at elevated temperatures (see Fig. 5.2), the total surface area decreases, and thus surface energy decreases.

As the total surface area of the powder bed decreases, the rate of sintering slows. To achieve very low porosity levels, long sintering times or high sintering temperatures are required.

As total surface area in a powder bed is a function of particle size, the driving force for sintering is directly related to the surface area to volume ratio for a set of particles. The larger the surface area to volume ratio, the greater the free energy driving force. Thus, smaller particles experience a greater driving force for necking

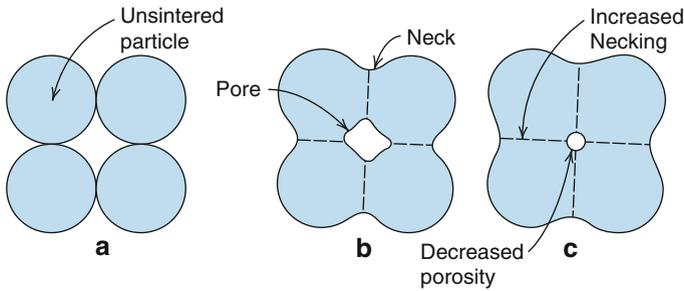


Fig. 5.2 Solid-State Sintering. (a) Closely packed particles prior to sintering. (b) Particles agglomerate at temperatures above one half of the absolute melting temperature, as they seek to minimize free energy by decreasing surface area. (c) As sintering progresses, neck size increases and pore size decreases

and consolidation, and thus, smaller particles sinter more rapidly and initiate sintering at lower temperature than larger particles.

As diffusion rates exponentially increase with temperature, sintering becomes increasingly rapid as temperatures approach the melting temperature, which can be modeled using a form of the Arrhenius equation. However, even at temperatures approaching the melting temperature diffusion-induced solid-state sintering is the slowest mechanism for selectively fusing regions of powder within a PBF process.

For AM, the shorter the time it takes to form a layer, the more economically competitive the process becomes. Thus, the heat source which induces fusion should move rapidly and/or induce fusion quickly to increase build rates. Since the time it takes for fusion by sintering is typically much longer than for fusion by melting, few AM processes use sintering as a primary fusion mechanism.

Sintering, however, is still important in most thermal powder processes, even if sintering is not the primary fusion mechanism. There are 3 secondary ways in which sintering affects a build.

1. If the loose powder within the build platform is held at an elevated temperature, the powder bed particles will begin to sinter to one another. This is typically considered a negative effect, as agglomeration of powder particles means that each time the powder is recycled the average particle size will increase. This changes the spreading and melting characteristics of the powder each time it is recycled. One positive effect of loose powder sintering, however, is that the powder bed will gain a degree of tensile and compressive strength, thus helping to minimize part curling.
2. As a part is being formed in the build platform, thermally-induced fusing of the desired cross-sectional geometry causes that region of the powder bed to become much hotter than the surrounding loose powder. If melting is the dominant fusion mechanism (as is typically the case) then the just-formed part cross-section will be quite hot. As a result, the loose powder bed immediately surrounding the fused region heats up considerably, due to conduction from the part being formed. This region of powder may remain at an elevated

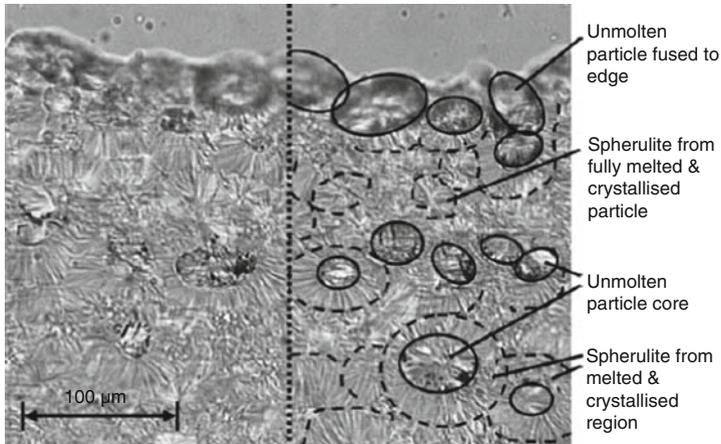


Fig. 5.3 Typical SLS microstructure for nylon polyamide (MATERIALS SCIENCE & ENGINEERING. A. STRUCTURAL MATERIALS : PROPERTIES, MICROSTRUCTURE AND PROCESSING by Zarringhalam, H., Hopkinson, N., Kamperman, N.F., de Vlieger, J.J. Copyright 2006 by Elsevier Science & Technology Journals. Reproduced with permission of Elsevier Science & Technology Journals in the format Textbook via Copyright Clearance Center.) [2]

temperature for a long time (many hours) depending upon the size of the part being built, the heater and temperature settings in the process, and the thermal conductivity of the powder bed. Thus, there is sufficient time and energy for the powder immediately next to the part being built to fuse significantly due to solid-state sintering, both to itself and to the part. This results in “part growth,” where the originally scanned part grows a “skin” of increasing thickness the longer the powder bed is maintained at an elevated temperature. This phenomenon can be seen in Fig. 5.3 as unmolten particles fused to the edge of a part. For many materials, the skin formed on the part goes from high density, low porosity near the originally scanned region to lower density, higher porosity further from the part. This part growth can be compensated for in the build planning stage by offsetting the laser beam to compensate for part growth or by offsetting the surface of the STL model. In addition, different post-processing methods will remove this skin to a different degree. Thus, the dimensional repeatability of the final part is highly dependent upon effectively compensating for and controlling this part growth. Performing repeatable post-processing to remove the same amount of the skin for every part is thus quite important.

3. Rapid fusion of a powder bed using a laser or other heat source rarely results in 100% dense, porosity-free parts. Thus, a feature of most parts built using PBF techniques is distributed porosity throughout the part. This is typically detrimental to the intended part properties. However, if the part is held at an elevated temperature after scanning, solid-state sintering combined with other high-temperature phenomena (such as grain growth in metals) causes the % porosity

in the part to decrease. Since lower layers are maintained at an elevated temperature while additional layers are added, this can result in lower regions of a part being denser than upper regions of a part. This uneven porosity can be controlled, to some extent, by carefully controlling the part bed temperature, cooling rate and other parameters. Electron beam melting, in particular, often makes use of the positive aspects of elevated-temperature solid-state sintering and grain growth by purposefully maintaining the metal parts that are being built at a high enough temperature that diffusion and grain growth cause the parts being built to reach 100% density.

5.3.2 Chemically-induced Sintering

Chemically-induced sintering involves the use of thermally-activated chemical reactions between two types of powders or between powders and atmospheric gases to form a by-product which binds the powders together. This fusion mechanism is primarily utilized for ceramic materials. Examples of reactions between powders and atmospheric gases include: laser processing of SiC in the presence of oxygen, whereby SiO₂ forms and binds together a composite of SiC and SiO₂; laser processing of ZrB₂ in the presence of oxygen, whereby ZrO₂ forms and binds together a composite of ZrB₂ and ZrO₂; and laser processing of Al in the presence of N₂, whereby AlN forms and binds together the Al and AlN particles.

For chemically-induced sintering between powders, various research groups have demonstrated that mixtures of high-temperature structural ceramic and/or intermetallic precursor materials can be made to react using a laser. In this case, raw materials which exothermically react to form the desired byproduct are pre-mixed and heated using a laser. By adding chemical reaction energy to the laser energy, high-melting-temperature structures can be created at relatively low laser energies.

One common characteristic of chemically-induced sintering is part porosity. As a result, post-process infiltration or high-temperature furnace sintering to higher densities is often needed to achieve properties that are useful for most applications. This post-process infiltration may involve other reactive elements, forming new chemical compounds after infiltration. The cost and time associated with post-processing have limited the adoption of chemically-induced sintering in commercial machines.

5.3.3 Liquid-phase Sintering and Partial Melting

Liquid-phase sintering (LPS) is arguably the most versatile mechanism for PBF. Liquid-phase sintering is a term used extensively in the powder processing industry to refer to the fusion of powder particles when a portion of constituents within a

collection of powder particles become molten, while other portions remain solid. In LPS, the molten constituents act as the glue which binds the solid particles together. As a result, high-temperature particles can be bound together without needing to melt or sinter those particles directly. LPS is used in traditional powder metallurgy to form, for instance, cemented carbide cutting tools where Co is used as the lower-melting-point constituent to glue together particles of WC.

There are many ways in which LPS can be utilized as a fusion mechanism in AM processes. For purposes of clarity, the classification proposed by Kruth et al. [1] has formed the basis for the distinctions discussed in the following section and shown in Fig. 5.4.

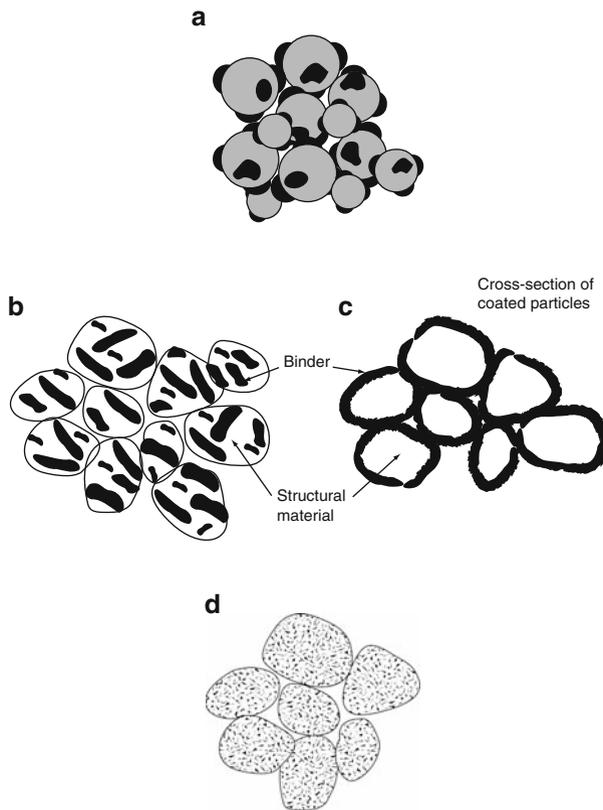


Fig. 5.4 Liquid Phase Sintering variations used in powder bed fusion processing: (a) separate particles, (b) composite particles, (c) coated particles, and (d) indistinct mixtures. Darker regions represent the lower-melting-temperature binder material. Lighter regions represent the high-melting-temperature structural material. For indistinct mixtures, microstructural alloying eliminates distinct binder and structural regions

5.3.3.1 Distinct Binder and Structural Materials

In many LPS situations, there is a clear distinction between the binding material and the structural material. The binding and structural material can be combined in three different ways: as separate particles, as composite particles or as coated particles.

Separate Particles

A simple, well-mixed combination of binder and structural powder particles is sufficient in many cases for LPS. In cases where the structural material has the dominant properties desired in the final structure, it is advantageous for the binder material to be smaller in particle size than the structural material. This enables more efficient packing in the powder bed and less shrinkage and lower porosity after binding. The dispersion of smaller-particle-size binder particles around structural particles also helps the binder flow into the gaps between the structural particles more effectively, thus resulting in better binding of the structural particles. This is often true when, for instance, SLS is used to process steel powder with a polymer binder (as discussed more fully in 5.5 below). This is also true when metal-metal mixtures and metal-ceramic mixtures are directly processed without the use of a polymer binder.

In the case of LPS of separate particles, the heat source passes by quickly, and there is typically insufficient time for the molten binder to flow and surface tension to draw the particles together prior to resolidification of the binder unless the binder has a particularly low viscosity. Thus, composite structures formed from separate particles typically are quite porous. This is often the intent for parts made from separate particles, which are then post-processed in a furnace to achieve the final part properties. Parts held together by polymer binders which require further post-processing (e.g., to lower or fill the porosity) are termed as “green” parts.

In some cases, the density of the binder and structural material are quite different. As a result, the binder and structural material may separate during handling. In addition, some powdered materials are most economically manufactured at particle sizes that are too small for effective powder dispensing and leveling (*see* Sect. 5.4). In either case, it may be beneficial for the structural and/or binder particles to be bound together into larger particle agglomerates. By doing so, composite powder particles made up of both binder and structural material are formed.

Composite Particles

Composite particles contain both the binder and structural material within each powder particle. Mechanical alloying of binder and structural particles or grinding of cast, extruded or molded mixtures into a powder results in powder particles that are made up of binder and structural materials agglomerated together. The benefits

of composite particles are that they typically form higher density green parts and typically have better surface finish after processing than separate particles [1].

Composite particles can consist of mixtures of polymer binders with higher melting point polymer, metal or ceramic structural materials; or metal binders with higher melting point metal or ceramic structural materials. In all cases, the binder and structural portions of each particle, if viewed under a microscope, are distinct from each other and clearly discernable. The most common commercially available composite particle used in powder bed fusion processes is glass-filled nylon. In this case, the structural material (glass beads) is used to enhance the properties of the binding material (nylon) rather than the typical use of LPS where the binder is simply a necessary glue to help hold the structural material together in a useful geometric form.

Coated Particles

In some cases, a composite formed by coating structural particles with the binder material is more effective than random agglomerations of binder and structural materials. These coated particles can have several advantages; including better absorption of laser energy, more effective binding of the structural particles, and better flow properties.

When composite particles or separate particles are processed, the random distribution of the constituents means that impinging heat energy, such as laser radiation, will be absorbed by whichever constituent has the highest absorptivity and/or most direct “line-of-sight” to the impinging energy. If the structural materials have a higher absorptivity, a greater amount of energy will be absorbed in the structural particles. If the rate of heating of the structural particles significantly exceeds the rate of conduction to the binder particles, the higher-melting-temperature structural materials may melt prior to the lower-melting-temperature binder materials. As a result, the anticipated microstructure of the processed material will differ significantly from one where the binder had melted and the structural material had remained solid. This may, in some instances, be desirable; but is typically not the intent when formulating a binder/structural material combination. Coated particles can help overcome the structural material heating problem associated with random constituent mixtures and agglomerates. If a structural particle is coated with the binder material then the impinging energy must first pass through the coating before affecting the structural material. As melting of the binder and not the structural material is the objective of LPS, this helps ensure that the proper constituent melts.

Other benefits of coated particles exist. Since there is a direct correlation between the speed of the impinging energy in AM processing and the build rate, it is desirable for the binder to be molten for only a very short period of time. If the binder is present at the surfaces of the structural material, this is the most effective location for gluing adjacent particles together. If the binder is randomly mixed with the structural materials, and/or the binder’s viscosity is too high to flow to the contact points during the short time it is molten, then the binder will not be as

effective. As a result, the binder % content required for effective fusion of coated particles is usually less than the binder content required for effective fusion of randomly mixed particles.

Many structural metal powders are spherical. Spherical powders are easier to deposit and smooth using powder spreading techniques. Coated particles retain the spherical nature of the underlying particle shape, and thus can be easier to handle and spread.

5.3.3.2 Indistinct Binder and Structural Materials

In polymers, due to their low thermal conductivity, it is possible to melt smaller powder particles and the outer regions of larger powder particles without melting the entire structure (*see* Fig. 5.3). Whether to more properly label this phenomenon LPS or just “partial melting” is a matter of debate. Also with polymers, fusion can occur between polymer particles above their glass transition temperature, but below their melting temperature. Similarly, amorphous polymers have no distinct melting point, becoming less viscous the higher the temperature goes above the glass transition temperature. As a result, in each of these cases, there can be fusion between polymer powder particles in cases where there is partial but not full melting, which falls within the historical scope of the term “liquid phase sintering.”

In metals, LPS can occur between particles where no distinct binder or structural materials are present. This is possible during partial melting of a single particle type, or when an alloyed structure has lower-melting-temperature constituents. In noneutectic alloys, melting occurs between the liquidus and solidus temperature of the alloy, where only a portion of the alloy will melt when the temperature is maintained in this range. Regions of the alloy with higher concentrations of the lower-melting-temperature constituent(s) will melt first. As a result, it is commonly observed that many metal alloys can be processed in such a way that only a portion of the alloy melts when an appropriate energy level is applied. This type of LPS of metal alloys was the method used in the early EOS Direct Metal Laser Sintering machines (discussed in a following section). Subsequent powder bed fusion processes commercialized by EOS and others for use with metal powders are all designed to fully melt the metal alloys they process.

5.3.4 Full Melting

Full melting is the mechanism most commonly associated with powder bed fusion processing of engineering metal alloys and semi-crystalline polymers. In these materials, the entire region of material subjected to impinging heat energy is melted to a depth exceeding the layer thickness. Thermal energy of subsequent scans of a laser or electron beam (next to or above the just-scanned area) is typically sufficient to re-melt a portion of the previously solidified solid structure; and thus, this type of full melting is very effective at creating well-bonded, high-density structures from engineering metals and polymers.

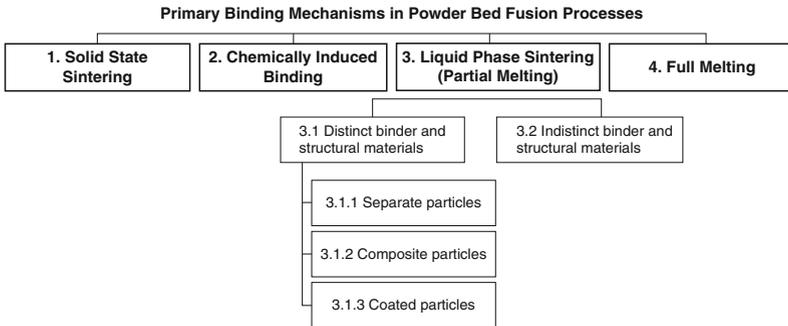


Fig. 5.5 Primary binding mechanisms in Powder Bed Fusion processes (adapted from [1])

The most common material used in powder bed fusion processing is nylon polyamide. As a semi-crystalline material, it has a distinct melting point. In order to produce parts with the highest possible strength, these materials should be fully melted during processing. However, elevated temperatures associated with full melting result in part growth and thus, for practical purposes, many accuracy versus strength optimization studies result in parameters which are at the threshold between full melting and LPS, as can be seen from Fig. 5.3.

For metal powder bed fusion processes, the engineering alloys that are utilized in these machines (Ti, Stainless Steel, CoCr, etc.) are typically fully melted. The rapid melting and solidification of these metal alloys results in unique properties that are distinct from, and can sometime be more desirable than, cast or wrought parts made from identical alloys.

Figure 5.5 summarizes the various binding mechanisms which are utilized in powder bed fusion processes. Regardless of whether a technology is known as “Selective Laser Sintering,” “Selective Laser Melting,” “Direct Metal Laser Sintering,” “Laser Cusing,” “Electron Beam Melting,” or some other name, it is possible for any of these mechanisms to be utilized (and, in fact, often more than one is present) depending upon the powder particle combinations, and energy input utilized to form a part.

5.4 Powder Handling

5.4.1 Powder Handling Challenges

Several different systems for powder delivery in PBF processes have been developed. The lack of a single solution for powder delivery goes beyond simply avoiding patented embodiments of the counter-rotating roller first used in SLS

machines. The development of other approaches has resulted in a broader range of powder types and morphologies which can be delivered.

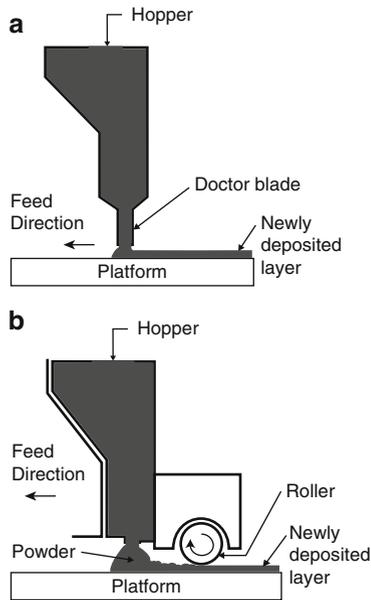
Any powder delivery system for powder bed fusion must meet at least four characteristics.

1. It must have a powder reservoir of sufficient volume to enable the process to build to the maximum build height without a need to pause the machine to refill the powder reservoir.
2. The correct volume of powder must be transported from the powder reservoir to the build platform; sufficient to cover the previous layer but without wasteful excess material.
3. The powder must be spread to form a smooth, thin, repeatable layer of powder.
4. The powder spreading must not create excessive shear forces that disturb the previously processed layers.

In addition, any powder delivery system must be able to deal with these universal characteristics of powder feeding.

1. As particle size decreases, interparticle friction and electrostatic forces increase. These result in a situation where powder can lose its flowability. (To illustrate this loss of flowability, compare the flow characteristics of a spoon full of granulated sugar to a spoon full of fine flour. The larger particle size sugar will flow out of the spoon at a relatively shallow angle whereas the flour will stay in the spoon until the spoon is tipped at a large angle; at which point the flour will fall out as a large clump unless some perturbation (vibration, tapping, etc.) causes it to come out a small amount at a time.) Thus, any effective powder delivery system must make the powder flowable for effective delivery to occur.
2. When the surface area to volume ratio of a particle increases, its surface energy increases and becomes more reactive. For certain materials, this means that the powder becomes explosive in the presence of oxygen; or it will burn if there is a spark. As a result, certain powders must be kept in an inert atmosphere while being processed, and powder handling should not result in the generation of sparks.
3. When handled, small particles have a tendency to become airborne and float as a cloud of particles. In PBF machines, airborne particles will settle on surrounding surfaces; which may cloud optics, reduce the sensitivity of sensors, deflect laser beams, and damage moving parts. In addition, airborne particles have an effective surface area greater than packed powders, increasing their tendency to explode or burn. As a result, the powder delivery system should be designed in such a way that it minimizes the creation of airborne particles.
4. Smaller powder particle sizes enable better surface finish, higher accuracy, and thinner layers. However, smaller powder particle sizes exacerbate all the problems just mentioned. As a result, each design for a powder delivery system is inherently a different approach to effectively feed the smallest possible powder particle sizes while minimizing the negative effects of these small powder particles.

Fig. 5.6 Examples of hopper-based powder delivery systems [3]



5.4.2 Powder Handling Systems

The earliest commercialized SLS powder delivery system, illustrated in Fig. 5.1, is one approach to optimizing these powder handling issues. The two feed cartridges represent the powder reservoir; with sufficient material to completely fill the build platform to its greatest build height. The correct amount of powder for each layer is provided by accurately incrementing the feed cartridge up a prescribed amount and the build platform down by the layer thickness. The raised powder is then pushed by the counter-rotating roller over the build platform, depositing the powder. As long as the height of the roller remains constant, layers will be created at the thickness with which the build platform moves. The counter-rotating action of the roller creates a “wave” of powder flowing in front of the cylinder. The counter-rotation pushes the powder up, fluidizing the powder being pushed, making it more flowable for a particular particle size and shape. The shear forces on the previously processed layers created by this counter-rotating roller are small, and thus the previously processed layers are relatively undisturbed.

Another commonly utilized solution for powder spreading is a doctor blade. A doctor blade is simply a thin piece of metal that is used to scrape material across the surface of a powder bed. When a doctor blade is used, the powder is not fluidized. Thus, the shear forces applied to the previously deposited layer are greater than for a counter-rotating roller. This increased shear can be reduced if the doctor blade is ultrasonically vibrated, thus partly fluidizing the powder being pushed.

An alternative approach to using a feed cartridge as a powder reservoir is to use a hopper feeding system. A hopper system delivers powder to the powder bed from

above rather than beneath. The powder reservoir is typically separate from the build area, and a feeding system is used to fill the hopper. The hopper is then used to deposit powder in front of a roller or doctor blade, or a doctor blade or roller can be integrated with a hopper system for combined feeding and spreading. For both feeding and spreading, ultrasonic vibration can be utilized with any of these approaches to help fluidize the powders. Various types of powder feeding systems are illustrated in Fig. 5.6.

In the case of multi-material powder bed processing, the only effective method is to use multiple hoppers with separate materials. In a multi-hopper system, the material type can be changed layer-by-layer. Although this has been demonstrated in a research environment, and by some companies for very small parts; to date, all powder bed fusion technologies offered for sale commercially utilize a single-material powder feeding system.

5.4.3 Powder Recycling

As mentioned in Sect. 5.3.1, elevated temperature sintering of the powder surrounding a part being built can cause particle grains in the loose powder bed to fuse. In addition, elevated temperatures, particularly in the presence of reacting atmospheric gases, will also change the chemical nature of the powder particles. Similarly, holding polymer materials at elevated temperatures can change the molecular weight of the polymer. These combined effects mean that the properties of many different types of powders (particularly polymers) used in PBF processes change their properties when they are recycled and reused. For some materials these changes are small, and thus are considered highly recyclable or infinitely recyclable. In other materials these changes are dramatic, and thus a highly controlled recycling methodology must be used to maintain consistent part properties between builds.

For the most popular PBF polymer material, nylon polyamide, both the effective particle size and molecular weight change during processing. As a result, a number of recycling methodologies have been developed to seek to maintain consistent build properties. The simplest approach to this recycling problem is to mix a specific ratio of unused powder with used powders. An example of a fraction-based mixture might be 1/3 unused powder, 1/3 overflow/feed powder and 1/3 build platform powder. Overflow/feed and loose part-bed powder are handled separately, as they experience different temperature profiles during the build. The re-captured overflow/feed materials are only slightly modified from the original material as they have been subjected to lower temperatures only in the feed and overflow cartridges; whereas, loose part-bed powder from the build platform has been maintained at an elevated temperature, sometimes for many hours.

Part-bed powder is typically processed using a particle sorting method, most commonly either a vibratory screen-based sifting device or an air classifier, before mixing with other powders. Air classifiers seem to be better than simple sifting, as they mix the powders together more effectively and help break up agglomerates;

thus enabling a larger fraction of material to be recycled. However, air classifiers are more complex and expensive than sifting systems. Regardless of the particle sorting method used, it is critical that the material be well-mixed during recycling; otherwise, parts built from recycled powder will have different properties in different locations.

Although easy to implement, a simple fraction-based recycling approach will always result in some amount of mixing inconsistencies. This is due to the fact that different builds have different part layout characteristics and thus the loose part-bed powder being recycled from one build has a different thermal history than loose part-bed powder being recycled from a different build.

In order to overcome some of the build-to-build inconsistencies inherent in fraction-based mixing, a recycling methodology based upon a powder's melt flow index (MFI) has been developed [4]. MFI is a measure of molten thermoplastic material flow through an extrusion apparatus under prescribed conditions. ASTM and ISO standards, for instance, can be followed to ensure repeatability. When using an MFI-based recycling methodology, a user determines a target MFI, based upon their experience. Used powders (part-bed and overflow/feed materials) are mixed and tested. Unused powder is also tested. The MFI for both is determined, and a well-blended mixture of unused and used powder is created and subsequently tested to achieve the target MFI. This may have to be done iteratively if the target MFI is not reached by the first mixture of unused to used powder. Using this methodology, the closer the target MFI is to the new powder MFI, the higher the new powder fraction, and thus the more expensive the part. The MFI method is generally considered more effective for ensuring consistent build-to-build properties than fractional mixing.

Typically, most users find that they need less of the used build platform powder in their mixture than is produced. Thus, this excess build material becomes scrap. In addition, repeated recycling over a long period of time may result in some powder becoming unusable. As a result, the recyclability of a powder and the target MFI or fractional mixing selected by a user can have a significant effect on part properties and cost.

5.5 Approaches to Metal and Ceramic Part Creation

5.5.1 Metal Parts

There are four common approaches for using powder bed fusion processes in the creation of complex metal components: full melting, liquid-phase sintering, indirect processing, and pattern methods. As discussed previously, in the full melting approach a metallic powdered material is fully melted using a high-power laser or electron beam; and in the liquid-phase sintering approach a mixture of two metal powders or a metal alloy is used where a higher-melting-temperature constituent

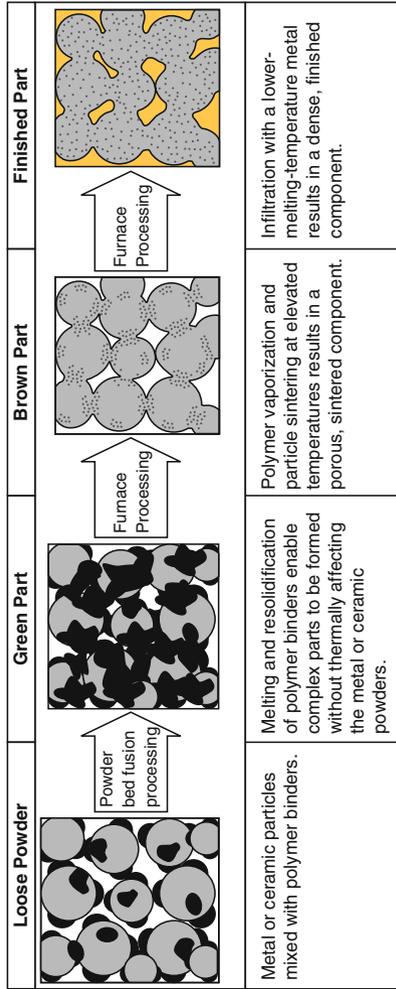


Fig. 5.7 Indirect processing of metal and ceramic powders using PBF

remains solid and a lower-melting-temperature constituent melts. In both of these approaches, a metal part is typically usable in the state in which it comes out of the machine, after separation from a build plate.

In indirect processing, a polymer coated metallic powder or a mixture of metallic and polymer powders are used for part construction. Figure 5.7 shows the steps involved in indirect processing of metal powders. During indirect processing, the polymer binder is melted and binds the particles together, and the metal powder remains solid. The metallic powder particles remain largely unaffected by the heat of the laser. The parts produced are generally porous (sometimes exceeding 50 vol.% porosity). The polymer-bound green parts are subsequently furnace processed. Furnace processing occurs in two stages: (1) debinding and (2) infiltration or consolidation. During debinding, the polymer binder is vaporized to remove it from the green part. Typically, the temperature is also raised to the extent that a small degree of necking (sintering) occurs between the metal particles. Subsequently, the remaining porosity is either filled by infiltration of a lower melting point metal to produce a fully dense metallic part, or by further sintering and densification to reduce the part porosity. Infiltration is easier to control, dimensionally, as the overall shrinkage is much less than during consolidation. However, infiltrated structures are always composite in nature whereas consolidated structures can be made up of a single material type.

The last approach to metal part creation using PBF is the pattern approach. For the previous 3 approaches, metal powder is utilized in the PBF process; but in this final approach, the part created in the PBF process is a pattern used to create the metal part. The two most common ways PBF-created parts are utilized as patterns for metal part creation are as investment casting patterns or as sand-casting molds. In the case of investment casting, polystyrene or wax-based powders are used in the machine; and subsequently invested in ceramic during post-processing, and melted out during casting. In the case of sand-casting molds, mixtures of sand and a thermosetting binder are directly processed in the machine to form a sand-casting core, cavity or insert. These molds are then assembled and molten metal is cast into the mold, creating a metal part. Both indirect and pattern-based processes are further discussed in Chap. 16.

5.5.2 *Ceramic Parts*

Similar to metal parts, there are a number of ways that PBF processes are utilized to create ceramic parts. These include direct sintering, chemically-induced sintering, indirect processing and pattern methods. In direct sintering, a high-temperature is maintained in the powder bed and a laser is utilized to accelerate sintering of the powder bed in the prescribed location of each layer. The resultant ceramic parts will be quite porous and thus are often post-processed in a furnace to achieve higher density. This high porosity is also seen in chemically-induced sintering of ceramics, as described earlier.

Indirect processing of ceramic powders is identical to indirect processing of metal powders (Fig. 5.7). After debinding, the ceramic brown part is consolidated to reduce porosity or is infiltrated. In the case of infiltration, when metal powders are used as the infiltrant then a ceramic/metal composite structure can be formed. In some cases, such as when creating SiC structures, a polymer binder can be selected, which leaves behind a significant amount of carbon residue within the brown part. Infiltration with molten Si will result in a reaction between the molten Si and the remaining carbon to produce more SiC, thus increasing the overall SiC content and reducing the fraction of metal Si in the final part. These and related approaches have been used to form interesting ceramic-matrix composites and ceramic-metal structures for a number of different applications.

5.6 Variants of Powder Bed Fusion Processes

A large variety of powder bed fusion processes have been developed. To understand the practical differences between these processes, it is important to know how the powder delivery method, heating process, energy input type, atmospheric conditions, optics, and other features vary with respect to one another. An overview of commercial processes and a few notable systems under development are discussed in the following section.

5.6.1 *Laser-based Systems for Low-temperature Processing*

There are two major producers of low-temperature laser-based powder bed fusion techniques. These low-temperature machines are designed for directly processing polymers and for indirect processing of metals and ceramics. Both companies sell and service their machines worldwide. Low-temperature PBF machines designed for polymer processing are commonly called either Selective Laser Sintering (SLS) or Laser Sintering (LS) machines.

The Selective Laser Sintering Sinterstation 2000 machine was the first commercial PBF system, introduced by the DTM Corporation, USA, in 1992. Subsequently, other SLS machine models were commercially introduced, and these systems are currently manufactured and supplied by 3D Systems, USA, which purchased DTM in 2001. Newer machines offer several improvements over previous systems in terms of part accuracy, temperature uniformity, build speed, process repeatability, feature definition and surface finish; but the basic processing features and system configuration remain unchanged from the description in Sect. 5.2. 3D Systems' low-temperature machines are designed to run a large variety of powdered material types. Due to the use of CO₂ lasers and a nitrogen atmosphere with approximately 0.1–3.0% oxygen, these machines are incapable of directly processing pure metals or ceramics, and as such are optimized to process polymer materials, with nylon

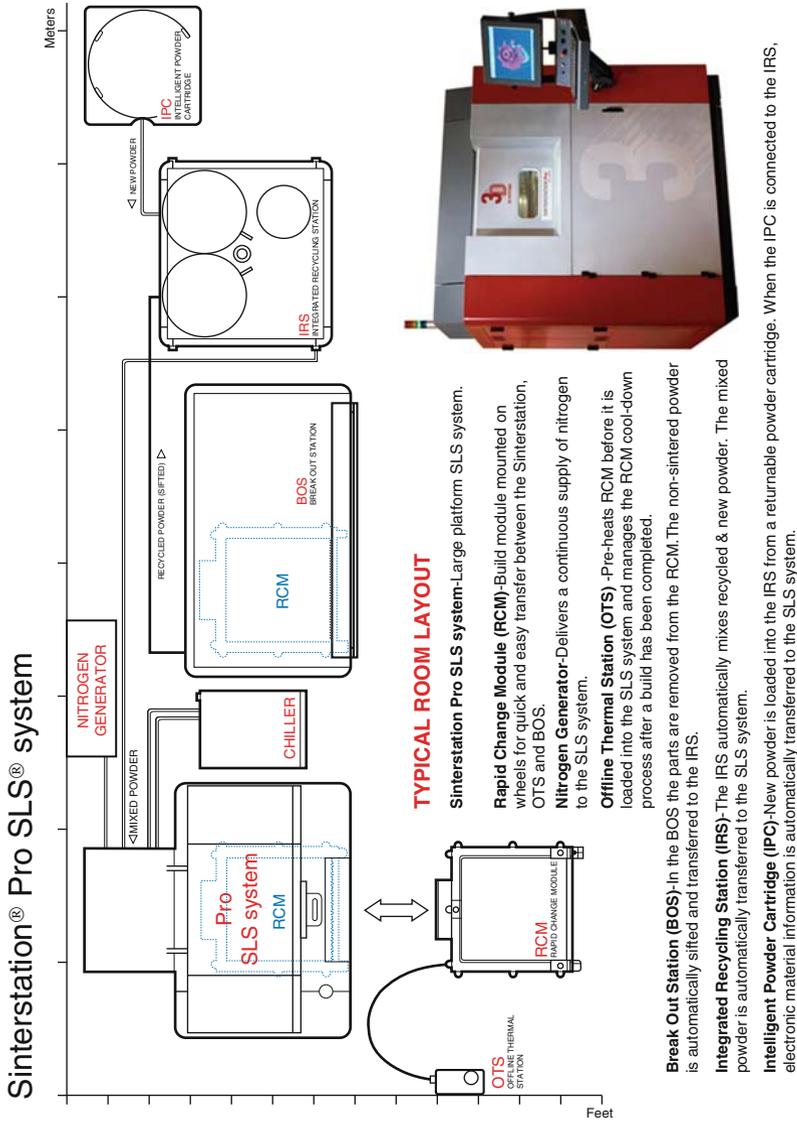


Fig. 5.8 3D Systems Sinterstation Pro and its modular layout (replaced by the sPro Systems in May 2009, courtesy 3D Systems)

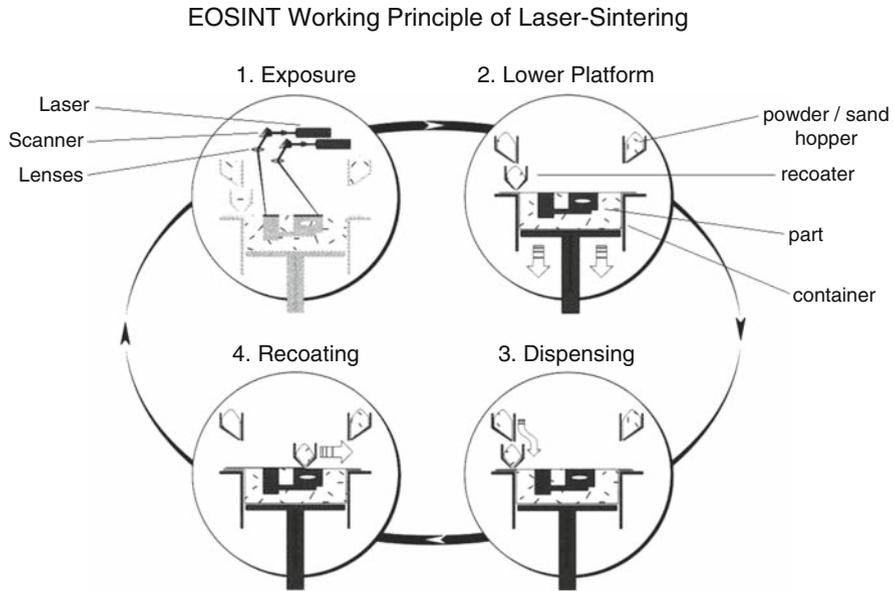


Fig. 5.9 EOSint Laser Sintering Schematic showing the dual-laser system option, hopper powder delivery and a recoater that combines a movable hopper and doctor blade system (courtesy EOS)

polyamide materials being the most popular. They can also process polystyrene-based casting materials and elastomeric materials directly, and they offer indirect processing of metal powders with polymer binders. The most recent, large-platform Sinterstation Pro systems (see Fig. 5.8) use a modular design where: the build platform can be removed to a different location for part cool-down and warm-up, enabling a fresh build platform to be inserted and used with minimal down-time; multiple build platform sizes are available; recycling and feeding of powder material is automated; and there is better closed-loop thermal control than in previous SLS machines.

EOS GmbH, Germany, has taken a different approach than 3D Systems for the design and marketing of their laser sintering machines. EOS machines are designed to run one material type per machine model. EOS introduced its first EOSINT P machine in 1994 for producing plastic prototypes. In 1995, the company introduced its EOSINT M 250 machine for direct manufacture of metal casting molds from foundry sand. In 1998, the EOSINT M 250 Xtended machine was launched for Direct Metal Laser Sintering (DMLS), which was a liquid-phase sintering approach to processing metallic powders. These early metal machines used a special alloy mixture comprising bronze and nickel powders developed by Electrolux Rapid Prototyping, and licensed exclusively to EOS. The powder could be processed at low temperatures, required no preheating and exhibited negligible shrinkage during processing; however, the end product was porous and was not representative of any

common engineering metal alloys. Subsequently, EOS introduced many other materials and models, which as of 2009, included five different platforms for plastic laser sintering, one platform for foundry sand, and one platform for full melting of metal powders (which will be discussed in the following section). One unique feature of EOS’s large-platform systems for polymers and foundry sand is the use of two laser beams for faster part construction (as illustrated in the $2 \times 1D$ channels example in Fig. 2.6). This multi-machine approach to powder bed fusion has made EOS the market leader in this technology segment. A schematic of an EOS machine illustrating their approach to laser sintering powder delivery and processing for foundry sand is shown in Fig. 5.9.

5.6.2 Laser-based Systems for Metals and Ceramics

There are four companies which make commercially available laser-based systems for direct melting and sintering of metal and ceramic powders: EOS GmbH (Germany), MTT Technologies Ltd (UK), Concept Laser GmbH (Germany), and Phenix System (France). Not all of these companies sell and service machines worldwide. For instance, all four companies sell machines in Europe, whereas EOS and MTT (through a partnership with 3D Systems) actively sell systems in the United States. The most commonly used terminology to describe this category of technologies is Selective Laser Melting (SLM); however the terms Laser Cusing and Direct Metal Laser Sintering are also used by certain manufacturers, as mentioned in the following section. For this discussion, we will use SLM to refer to the technologies in general and not to any particular variant.

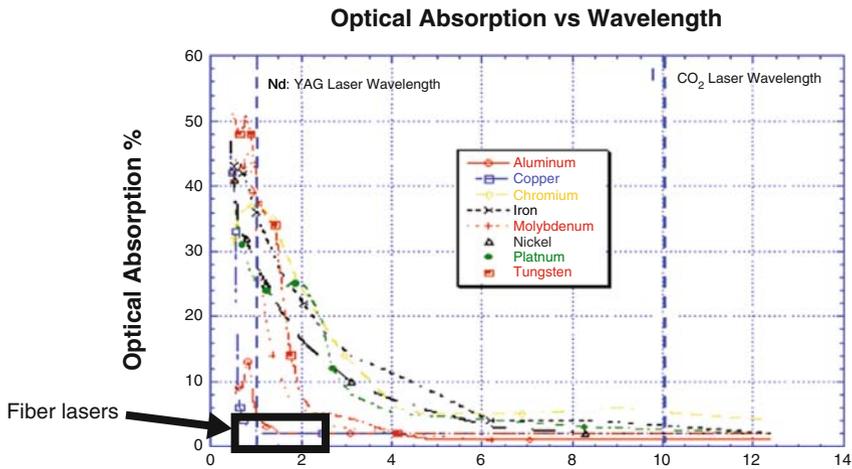


Fig. 5.10 Optical Absorption % (absorptivity) of selected metals vs. wavelength (courtesy Optomec)

SLM research in the late 1980s and early 1990s by various research groups was mostly unsuccessful. Compared to polymers, the high thermal conductivity, propensity to oxidize, high surface tension, and low absorptivity of metal powders make them significantly more difficult to process than polymers. Today, commercially available SLM systems are variants of the Selective Laser Powder Remelting (SLPR) approach developed by the Fraunhofer Institute for Laser Technology, Germany. Their research developed the basic processing techniques necessary for successful laser-based, point-wise melting of metals. The use of lasers with wavelengths better tuned to the absorptivity of metal powders was one key for enabling SLM of metals. Fraunhofer used an Nd-YAG laser instead of the CO₂ laser used in SLS, which resulted in a much better absorptivity for metal powders (*see* Fig. 5.10). Subsequently, almost all SLM machines today have transitioned to fiber lasers, which in general are cheaper to purchase and maintain, more compact, energy efficient, and have better beam quality than Nd:YAG lasers. The other key enablers for SLM, compared to SLS, are different laser scan patterns (discussed in the following section), the use of f-theta lenses to minimize beam distortion during scanning, and low oxygen, inert atmosphere control.

One common practice amongst SLM manufacturers is the rigid attachment of their parts to a base plate at the bottom of the build platform. This is done to keep the metal part being built from distorting due to residual stresses. This means that the design flexibility for parts made from SLM are not quite as broad as the design flexibility for parts made using laser sintering of polymers, due to the need to remove these rigid supports using a machining or cutting operation.

F&S Stereolithographietechnik GmbH, Germany, was involved with the development of the Fraunhofer research machine and commercialized their technology in 2002. Subsequently, the technology was sold and is now owned and marketed by MTT Technologies, UK. Their current machines are available in different platform size configurations and laser powers. Through a marketing agreement with 3D Systems their machines are sold in the United States and elsewhere as the Sinterstation Pro SLM machines. Unlike most producers of AM machines, MTT seems more interested in selling machines than materials. As such their machines give users more control over the process parameters than a typical commercial AM machine, so that customers can experiment with any material of interest to them. Experimentation with new powders, however, poses some safety risks if those powders are explosive and/or flammable in the presence of oxygen. As a result, MTT machines have additional safety features to help minimize this risk.

EOS GmbH has quickly become the world-leader in SLM technology. The introduction of their M270 Direct Metal Laser Sintering machine in 2004 established EOS as the world's most successful metal PBF provider. EOS has spent considerable time tuning their machine process parameters and scanning strategies for specific materials which they sell to their customers. Their current material offerings include steel alloys, Ti 6-4 and CoCrMo; the latter two also come in medical-grade versions. M270 strengths include well-developed, repeatable, turn-key machine/material combinations from a company that sells and service machines worldwide.

Concept Laser GmbH makes machines that they market using the term “Laser Cusing,” a term derived from cladding and fusing. Their parent company, the Hoffman Innovation Group, is a plastics processing company with significant injection mold-making expertise. As such, they have extensive experience utilizing SLM for the production of injection molds and tooling. They sell three different laser cusing platforms and their M3 Linear machine has a unique interchangeable design that allows the laser and scanning system to be used for SLM, laser engraving and laser marking. Concept Laser has focused on the development of stainless and hot-work steel alloys suitable for injection mold and die cast tooling. In addition, they also have developed process parameters for aluminum alloys.

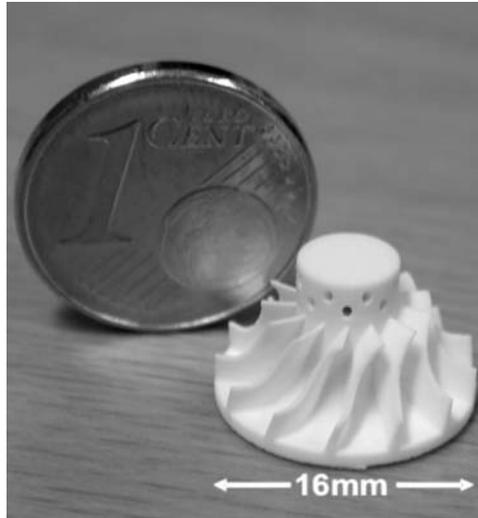
Phenix Systems has developed several different SLM platforms, from machines for intricate, small parts, to machines developed specifically for the dental industry, to highly versatile machines for metals and ceramics. One key characteristic of Phenix systems is their focus on ceramic parts. The build cylinder used in some Phenix machines can be held at an elevated temperature, thus enabling efficient sintering of ceramic powders, in addition to melting of metal powders. As such, the Phenix machines are perhaps the most suitable SLM machines for processing high-melting-temperature materials.

3D-Micromac AG, Germany, is a laser processing company which has developed small-scale SLM processes with small build cylinders 25 mm or 50 mm in diameter and 40 mm in height. Their fiber laser is focused to a particularly small spot size, for small feature definition. In order to use the fine powder particle sizes necessary for fine feature reproduction, they have developed a unique two-material powder feeding mechanism, shown in Fig. 5.11. The build platform is located between two powder feed cylinders. When the rotating rocker arm is above a powder feed cylinder, the powder is pushed up into the feeder, thus charging the



Fig. 5.11 3D Micromac Powder Feed System. In this picture, only one of the powder feeders (located over the build cylinder) is filled with powder (courtesy Laserinstitut Mittelsachsen e.V.)

Fig. 5.12 Example 3D Micromac part made from aluminum oxide powders (courtesy Laserinstitut Mittelsachsen e.V.)



hopper. When the rocker arm is moved over top of the build platform, it deposits and smooths the powder, moving away from the build cylinder prior to laser processing. By alternating between feed cylinders, the material being processed can be changed in a layer-by-layer fashion, thus forming multi-material structures. An exclusive distribution agreement with EOS, announced in 2005, may one day lead to machines becoming available to customers who wish purchase their own equipment. In the meantime, 3D-Micromac provides services to companies desiring small SLM parts. An example of a small impeller made aluminum oxide powders is shown in Fig. 5.12.

5.6.3 *Electron Beam Melting*

Electron Beam Melting (EBM) has become a successful approach to PBF. In contrast to laser-based systems, EBM uses a high-energy electron beam to induce fusion between metal powder particles. This process was developed at Chalmers University of Technology, Sweden, and was commercialized by Arcam AB, Sweden in 2001.

Similarly to SLM; in the EBM process, a focused electron beam scans across a thin layer of pre-laid powder, causing localized melting and resolidification as per the slice cross-section. However, there are a number of differences between how SLM and EBM are typically practiced, which are summarized in Table 5.1. Since the source of energy in EBM is electrons, there are a number of differences between

Table 5.1 Differences between EBM and SLM

Characteristic	Electron beam melting	Selective laser melting
Thermal source	Electron beam	Laser
Atmosphere	Vacuum	Inert gas
Scanning	Deflection coils	Galvanometers
Energy absorption	Conductivity-limited	Absorptivity-limited
Powder pre-heating	Use electron beam	Use infrared heaters
Scan speeds	Very fast, magnetically-driven	Limited by galvanometer inertia
Energy costs	Moderate	High
Surface finish	Moderate to poor	Excellent to moderate
Feature resolution	Moderate	Excellent
Materials	Metals (conductors)	Polymers, metals and ceramics

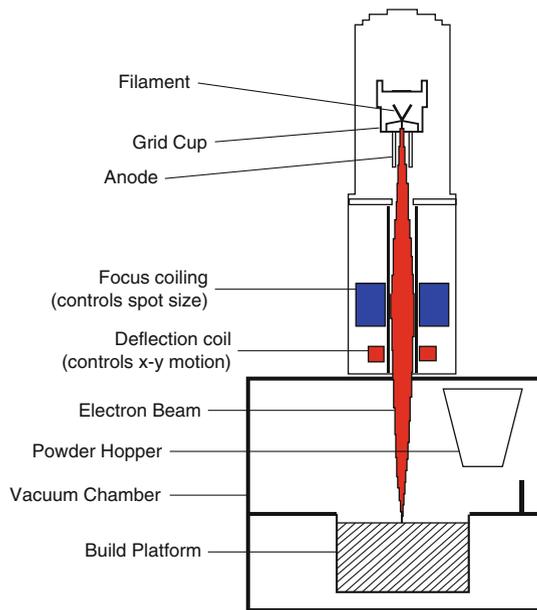


Fig. 5.13 Schematic of an EBM apparatus (courtesy Arcam)

EBM and SLM which are inherent. Other differences, however, are due to engineering trade-offs as practiced in EBM and SLM and are not necessarily inherent to the processing. A schematic illustration of an EBM apparatus is shown as Fig. 5.13.

Electron beams are inherently different from laser beams, as electron beams are made up of a stream of electrons moving *near* the speed of light, whereas, laser beams are made up of photons moving *at* the speed of light. When an electron beam is passed through a gas at atmospheric pressure, for instance, the electrons interact with the atoms in the gas and are deflected. In contrast, a laser beam can pass through a gas unaffected as long as the gas is transparent at the laser wavelength. Thus, EBM is practiced in a low-partial-pressure vacuum environment (a small

amount of inert gas is swept through to remove gaseous byproducts and oxygen), whereas SLM is practiced in an inert gas atmosphere at atmospheric pressure.

Electrons have a negative charge and are focused and deflected magnetically, whereas photons are optically focused and deflected using mirrors attached to motors. As a result, since magnetic coils have an almost instantaneous response to changing input conditions, an electron beam can be scanned slowly or very rapidly. In essence an electron beam can be moved instantaneously from one location to another without needing to traverse the area in-between. In contrast, galvanometers are mirrors attached to motors. For a laser beam focal spot to move from point A to point B, the galvanometer motors have to move the mirrors accordingly. Thus, virtually instantaneous motion is not possible and the scan speed is determined by the mass of the mirrors, the characteristics of the motors, and the distance from the mirrors to the powder bed.

Laser beams heat the powder when photons are absorbed by powder particles. Electron beams, however, heat powder by transfer of kinetic energy from incoming electrons into powder particles. As powder particles absorb electrons they gain an increasingly negative charge. This has two potentially detrimental effects: (1) if the repulsive force of neighboring negatively charged particles overcomes the gravitational and frictional forces holding them in place, there will be a rapid expulsion of powder particles from the powder bed, creating a powder cloud; and (2) increasing negative charges in the powder particles will tend to repel the incoming negatively charged electrons, thus creating a more diffuse beam. There are no such complementary phenomena with photons. As a result, the conductivity of the powder bed in EBM must be high enough that powder particles do not become highly negatively charged, and scan strategies must be used to avoid build-up of regions of negatively charged particles. In practice, electron beam energy is more diffuse; in part, so as not to build up too great a negative charge in any one location. As a result, the effective melt pool size increases, creating a larger heat-affected zone. Consequently, the minimum feature size, resolution and surface finish of an EBM process is typically larger than an SLM process.

As mentioned above, in EBM the powder bed must be conductive. Thus, EBM can only be used to process conductive materials (e.g., metals) whereas, lasers can be used with any material that absorbs energy at the laser wavelength (e.g., metals, polymers and ceramics).

Electron beam generation is typically a much more efficient process than laser beam generation. When a voltage difference is applied to the heated filament in an electron beam system, most of the electrical energy is converted into the electron beam, and higher beam energies (above 1 kW) are available at a moderate cost. By contrast, it is common for only 10–20% of the total electrical energy input for laser systems to be converted into beam energy, with the remaining energy lost in the form of heat. In addition, lasers with beam energies above 1 kW are typically much more expensive than comparable electron beams with similar energies. Thus, electron beams are a less costly high energy source than laser beams. Newer fiber lasers, however, are more simple in their design, more reliable to maintain, and more efficient to use (with conversion efficiencies reported of 70–80% for some

fiber lasers) and thus, this energy cost advantage for electron beams may not be a major advantage in the future.

EBM powder beds are maintained at a higher temperature than SLM powder beds. There are several reasons for this. First, the higher energy input of the beam used in the EBM system naturally heats the surrounding loose powder to a higher temperature than the lower energy laser beams. In order to maintain a steady-state uniform temperature throughout the build (rather than having the build become hotter as the build height increases) the EBM process uses the electron beam to heat the metal substrate at the bottom of the build platform before laying a powder bed. By defocusing the electron beam and scanning it very rapidly over the entire surface of the substrate or the powder bed, the bed can be preheated rapidly and uniformly to any pre-set temperature. As a result, the radiative and resistive heaters present in most SLM systems for powder bed heating are not typically used in EBM. By maintaining the powder bed at an elevated temperature, however, the resulting microstructure of a typical EBM part is significantly different from a typical SLM part (*see* Fig. 5.14). In particular, in SLM the individual laser scan lines are typically easily distinguishable, whereas individual scan lines are often indistinguishable in EBM microstructures. Rapid cooling in SLM creates smaller grain sizes; and subsequent layer deposits only partially re-melt the previously deposited layer. The powder bed is held at a low enough temperature that elevated temperature grain growth does not erase the layering effects. In EBM, the higher temperature of the powder bed, and the larger and more diffuse heat input result in a contiguous grain pattern that is more representative of a cast microstructure, with less porosity than an SLM microstructure.

Although the microstructures presented in Fig. 5.14 are representative of the current practice of SLM and EBM, it should be noted that the presence of beam traces in the final microstructure (as seen in Fig. 5.14) is process parameter and material dependent. For certain alloys, such as titanium, it is not uncommon for contiguous grain growth across layers even for SLM. For other materials, such as those that have a higher melting point, the layering may be more prevalent.

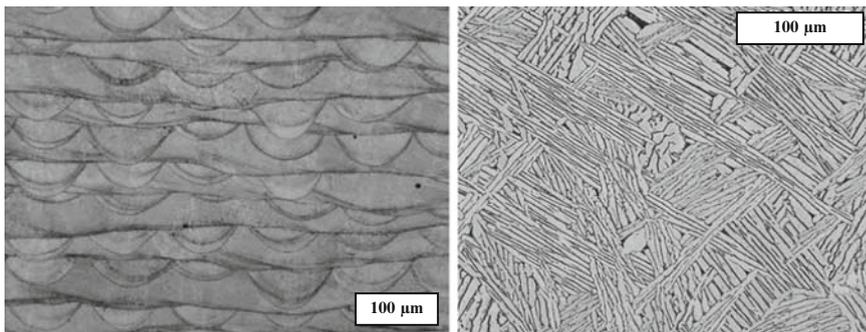


Fig. 5.14 Representative CoCrMo SLM microstructure (*left*, courtesy EOS), and Ti6Al4V EBM microstructure (*right*, courtesy Arcam)

In addition, layering is more prevalent for process parameter combinations of: lower bed temperature, lower beam energy, faster scan rate, thicker layers, and/or larger scan spacing for both SLM and EBM.

One of the most promising aspects of EBM is the ability to move the beam nearly instantaneously. Although the current control system for EBM machines makes use of this capability, future improvements to scanning strategies may dramatically increase the build speed of EBM, helping to distinguish it even more from SLM for certain applications. For instance, when nonsolid cross-sections are created, in particular when scanning truss-like structures (with designed internal porosity), instantaneous beam motion from one scan location to another can dramatically speed up the production of the overall product. In addition, future scan strategies may help reduce the buildup of residual stresses in powder bed fusion processes. It may be that future EBM scan strategies may enable complex free-form components to be made without attachment to a base substrate. This will have significant benefits for users, as the need to remove metal support structures means that post-processing of EBM and SLM parts is nontrivial.

5.6.4 Line-wise and Layer-wise PBF Processes

PBF processes have proven to be the most flexible general approach to AM. The large variety of materials, manufacturers and applications that are available surpass those of any other approach. However, the use of expensive laser or electron beams, the fact that these beams can only process one “point” of material at any instant in time, and the overall cost of the systems means that there is considerable room for improvement. As a result, a number of organizations are developing ways to fuse lines or layers of material at a time. Although these processes currently use too low of temperature to process metals directly, the potential for polymer processing in a line-wise or layer-wise manner could dramatically increase the build-rate of PBF processes, thus making them more cost-competitive. Three of these processes will be discussed below. All three utilize infrared energy to induce fusion in powder beds; the key differences lay in their approach to controlling which portions of the powder bed fuse and which remain unfused, as illustrated in Fig. 5.15.

Sintermask GmbH, Germany, founded in 2009, is currently commercializing their Selective Mask Sintering (SMS) technology, based upon technology developed at Speedpart AB since 2000 and beta tested commercially by FIT GmbH since 2007. Sintermask projects a 2010 commercial launch of their new ZORRO system. The key characteristics of their technology are exposure of an entire layer at a time to infrared thermal energy through a mask, and rapid layering of powdered material. Their powder delivery system can deposit a new layer of powder in 3 s. Heat energy is provided by an infrared heater. A dynamic mask system, similar to those used in a photocopier to transfer ink to paper, is used between the heater and the powder bed. This is a re-birth of an idea conceived by Cubital for layer-wise photopolymerization in the early days of AM, as mentioned in Chap. 2. The SMS mask allows

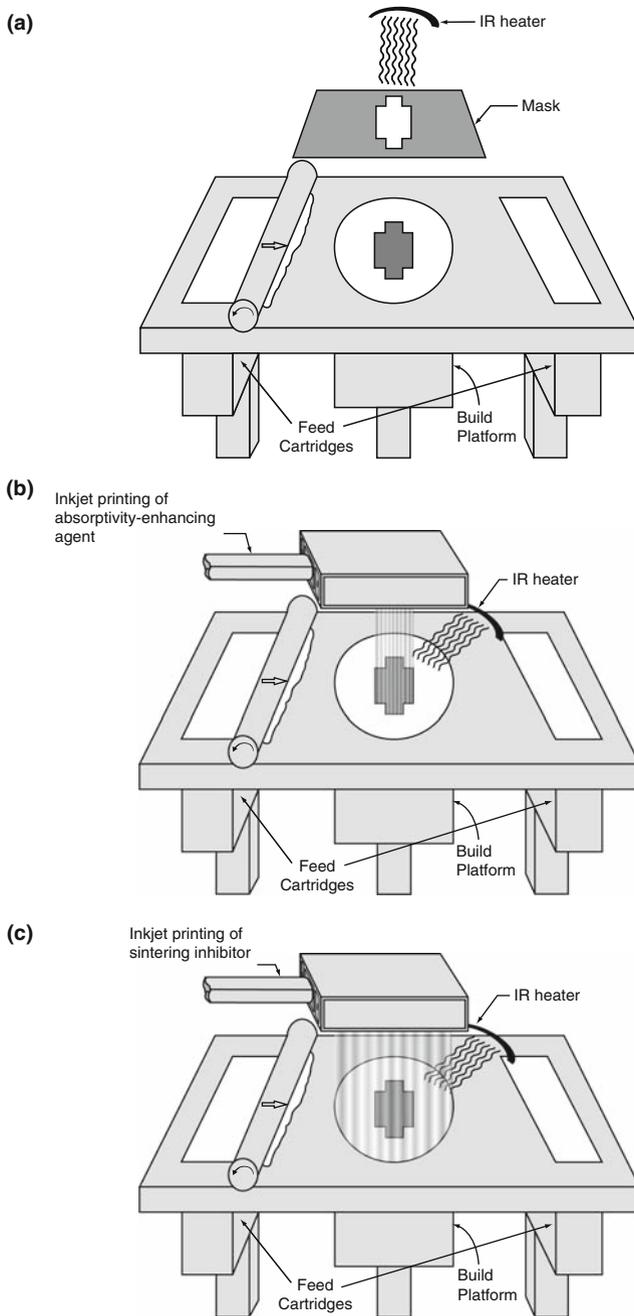


Fig. 5.15 Three different approaches to line- and layer-wise powder bed fusion processing (a) mask-based sintering, (b) printing of an absorptivity-enhancing agent in the part region, and (c) printing of a sintering inhibitor outside the part region

infrared energy to impinge on the powder bed only in the region prescribed by the layer cross-section, fusing powder in approximately 1 s. From a materials standpoint, the use of an infrared energy source means that the powder must readily absorb and quickly sinter or melt in the presence of infrared energy. Most materials with this characteristic are dark colored (e.g., gray or black) and thus color-choice limitations may be a factor for some adopters of the technology.

High speed sintering (HSS) is a process being developed at Loughborough University, UK. In HSS, an ink-jet printer is used to deposit ink onto the powder bed, representing a part's cross-section for that layer. Inks are specially formulated to significantly enhance infrared absorption compared with the surrounding powder bed. An infrared heater is used to scan the entire powder bed quickly, following ink-jetting. Thus, this process is an example of line-wise processing. The difference between the absorptivity of the unprinted areas compared to the printed areas means that the unprinted areas do not absorb enough energy to sinter, whereas the powder in the printed areas sinters and/or melts. Again, as the distinguishing factor between the fused and unfused region is the enhanced absorption of energy where printing occurs, the inks are typically gray or black and thus affect the color of the final part.

A third approach to rapid powder bed fusion is the selective inhibition sintering (SIS) process. In contrast to HSS, a sintering inhibitor is printed in regions where fusion is not desired, followed by exposure to infrared radiation. In this case, the inhibitor interferes with diffusion and surface properties to inhibit sintering. In addition, researchers have also utilized movable plates to mask portions of the powder bed where no sintering is desired, in order to minimize the amount of inhibitor required. One benefit of SIS over the previous two are that it does not involve adding an infrared absorption agent into the part itself, and thus the untreated powder becomes the material in the part. However, the unused powder in the powder bed is not easily recyclable, as it has been "contaminated" with inhibitor, and thus, there is significant unrecyclable material created.

Two additional variations of ink-jet printing combined with PBF methodology are also practised in SIS and by fcubic AB. In SIS, if no sintering is performed during the build (i.e., inhibitor is printed but no thermal infrared energy is scanned) the entire part bed can be moved into an oven where the powder is sintered to achieve fusion within the part, but not in areas where inhibitor has been printed.

fcubic AB, Sweden, uses ink-jet printing plus sintering in a furnace to compete with traditional powder metallurgy for stainless steel components. A sintering aid is printed in the regions representing the part cross-section, so that this region will fuse more rapidly in a furnace. A sintering aid is an element or alloy which increases the rate at which solid-state sintering occurs between particles by changing surface characteristics and/or by reacting with the particles. Thus, sintering in the part will occur at lower temperatures and times than for the surrounding powder that has not received a sintering aid.

Both SIS and fcubic are similar to the binder printing processes described in Chap. 7 (such as practiced by ProMetal) where a binder joins powders in regions of the powder bed where the part is located followed by furnace processing. There is, however, one key aspect of SIS and the fcubic processing which is different than the

ProMetal approach. In the SIS and f cubic processes, the printed material is a sintering aid or inhibitor rather than a binder, and the part *remains embedded* within the powder bed when sintering in the furnace. Using the ProMetal process, the machine prints a binder to glue powder particles together; and the bound regions are *removed from the powder bed* as a green part before sintering in a furnace (much like the indirect metal processing discussed earlier).

Common to all of the line-wise and layer-wise PBF processes is the need to differentiate between fusion in the part versus the remaining powder. Too low of total energy input will leave the part weak and only partially sintered. Too high of energy levels will result in part growth by sintering of excess surrounding powder to the part and/or degradation of the surrounding powder to the point where it cannot be easily recycled. Most importantly, in all cases it is the *difference* between fusion induced in the part versus fusion induced in the surrounding powder bed that is the key factor to control.

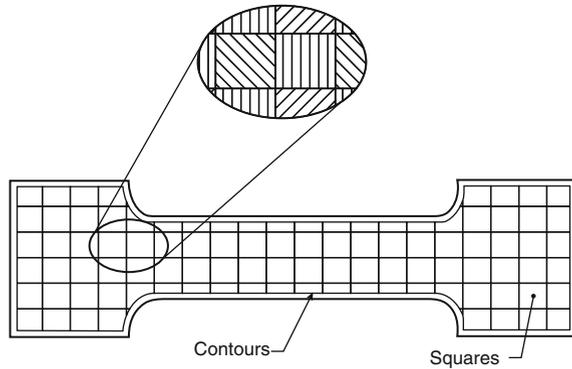
5.7 Process Parameters

Use of optimum process parameters is extremely important for producing satisfactory parts using PBF processes. In this section, we will discuss “laser” processing and parameters, but by analogy the parameters and models discussed below could also be applied to other thermal energy sources, such as electron beams or infrared heaters.

In PBF, process parameters can be lumped into four categories: (1) laser-related parameters (laser power, spot size, pulse duration, pulse frequency, etc.), (2) scan-related parameters (scan speed, scan spacing, and scan pattern), (3) powder-related parameters (particle shape, size and distribution, powder bed density, layer thickness, material properties, etc.), and (4) temperature-related parameters (powder bed temperature, powder feeder temperature, temperature uniformity, etc.). It should be noted that most of these parameters are strongly interdependent and are mutually interacting. The required laser power, for instance, typically increases with melting point of the material and lower powder bed temperature, and also varies depending upon the absorptivity characteristics of the powder bed, which is influenced by material type and powder shape, size and packing density.

A typical PBF machine includes 2 galvanometers (one for the x -axis and one for the y -axis motion). Scanning often occurs in 2 modes, contour mode and fill mode, as shown in Fig. 5.16. In contour mode, the outline of the part cross-section for a particular layer is scanned. This is typically done for accuracy and surface finish reasons around the perimeter. The rest of the cross-section is then scanned using a rastering technique whereby one axis is incrementally moved a laser scan width, and the other axis is continuously swept back and forth across the part being formed. In some cases the fill section is subdivided into squares, with each square being processed separately and randomly. Random scanning is often utilized so that there is no preferential direction for residual stresses induced by the scanning.

Fig. 5.16 Scan strategies employed in PBF techniques



The use of a random, square-based strategy is primarily for metal parts, whereas a simple raster pattern for the entire part (without subdividing into squares) is typically used for polymers and other low-temperature processing.

Powder shape, size and size distribution strongly influence laser absorption characteristics as well as powder bed density and powder spreading. Finer particles provide greater surface area and absorb laser energy more efficiently than coarser particles. Powder bed temperature, laser power, scan speed and scan spacing must be balanced to provide the best trade-off between dimensional accuracy, surface finish, build rate and mechanical properties. The powder bed temperature should be kept uniform and constant to achieve repeatable results. Generally, high-laser-power/high-bed-temperature combinations produce dense parts, but can result in part growth, poor recyclability, and difficulty cleaning parts. On the other hand, low-laser-power/low-bed-temperature combinations produce better dimensional accuracy, but result in lower density parts and a higher tendency for layer delamination. High-laser-power combined with low-part-bed-temperatures result in an increased tendency for nonuniform shrinkage and the build-up of residual stresses; leading to curling of parts.

Laser power, spot size and scan speed, and bed temperature together determine the energy input needed to fuse the powder into a useable part. The longer the laser dwells in a particular location, the deeper the fusion depth and the larger the melt pool diameter. Typical layer thicknesses range from 0.1 to 0.15 mm. Operating at lower laser powers requires the use of lower scan speeds in order to ensure proper particle fusion. Melt pool size is highly dependent upon settings of laser power, scan speed, spot size and bed temperature. Scan spacing should be selected to ensure a sufficient degree of melt pool overlap between adjacent lines of fused material to ensure robust mechanical properties.

The powder bed density, as governed by powder shape, size, distribution, and spreading mechanism, can strongly influence the part quality. Powder bed densities typically range between 50 and 60% for most commercially available powders, but

may be as low as 30% for irregular ceramic powders. Generally the higher the powder packing density, the better the part mechanical properties.

Commercialized PBF processes use continuous-wave (CW) lasers. Laser-processing research with pulsed lasers, however, has demonstrated a number of potential benefits over CW lasers. In particular, the tendency of molten metal to form disconnected balls of molten metal, rather than a flat molten region on a powder bed surface, can be partially overcome by pulsed energy. Thus, it is likely that future PBF machines will be commercialized with both CW and pulsed lasers.

5.8 Applied Energy Correlations and Scan Patterns

Many common physics, thermodynamics and heat transfer models are relevant to PBF techniques. In particular, solutions for stationary and moving point-heat-sources in an infinite media and homogenization equations (to estimate, for instance, powder bed thermo-physical properties based upon powder morphology, packing density, etc.) are commonly utilized. The solidification modeling discussed in the beam deposition chapter (Chap. 9) can also be applied to PBF processes. For the purposes of this chapter, a highly simplified model which estimates the energy-input characteristics of PBF processes is introduced and discussed with respect to process optimization for PBF processes.

Melt pool formation and characteristics are fundamentally determined by the total amount of applied energy which is absorbed by the powder bed as the laser beam passes. Both the melt pool size and melt pool depth are a function of absorbed energy density. A simplified energy density equation has been used by numerous investigators as a simple method for correlating input process parameters to the density and strength of produced parts [5]. In their simplified model, applied energy density E_A (also known as the Andrews number) can be found using (5.1):

$$E_A = P / (U \times SP) \quad (5.1)$$

where P is laser power, U is scan velocity and SP is the scan spacing between parallel scan lines. In this simplified model, applied energy increases with increasing laser power and decreases with increasing velocity and scan spacing. For SLS, typical scan spacing values are $\sim 100 \mu\text{m}$, whereas typical laser spot sizes are $\sim 300 \mu\text{m}$. Thus, typically every point is scanned by multiple passes of the laser beam.

Although (5.1) does not include powder absorptivity, heat of fusion, laser spot size or other important characteristics, it provides the simplest analytical approach for optimizing machine performance for a material. For a given material, laser spot size and machine configuration, a series of experiments can be run to determine the minimum applied energy necessary to achieve adequate material fusion for the desired material properties. Subsequently, build speed can be maximized by

utilizing the fastest combination of laser power, scan rate and scan spacing for a particular machine architecture based upon (5.1).

Optimization of build speed using applied energy is reasonably effective for PBF of polymer materials. However, when a molten pool of metal is present on a powder bed, a phenomenon called balling often occurs. When surface tension forces overcome a combination of dynamic fluid, gravitational and adhesion forces, the molten metal will form a ball. The surface energy driving force for metal powders to limit their surface area to volume ratio (which is minimized as a sphere) is much greater than the driving force for polymers, and thus this phenomenon is unimportant for polymers but critically important for metals. An example of balling tendency at various power, P , and scan speed, U , combinations is shown in Fig. 5.17 [6]. This figure illustrates 5 typical types of tracks which are formed at various process parameter combinations.

A process map showing regions of power and scan speed combinations which result in each of these track types is shown in Fig. 5.18.

As described by Childs et al. tracks of type A were continuous and flat topped or slightly concave. At slightly higher speeds, type B tracks became rounded and sank into the bed. As the speed increased, type C tracks became occasionally broken, although not with the regularity of type D tracks at higher speeds; whose regularly and frequently broken tracks are perfect examples of the balling effect. At even higher speeds, fragile tracks were formed (type E) where the maximum temperatures exceed the solidus temperature but do not reach the liquidus temperature (i.e., partially melted or liquid phase sintered tracks). In region F, at the highest speed, lowest power combinations, no melting occurred.

When considering these results, it is clear that build speed optimization for metals is much more complex, as a simple maximization of scan speed for a particular power and scan spacing based on (5.1) is not possible. However, within process map regions A and B, (5.1) could still be used as a guide for process optimization.

In practice, multiple overlapping scans lines create different melt pool dynamics than single scan tracks. If the laser returns to a spot on a return pass prior to solidification from the previous pass, it has a similar effect to a longer dwell time (lower scan speed). Thus, more rapid scan speeds can be used for multiple-pass scanning than single line scanning, as long as the beam returns prior to solidification. By splitting the cross-section into small squares that are scanned individually the balling effect can be avoided while still utilizing high scan rates. This is effectively the same as creating a line-shaped (or elliptical-shaped) laser spot size the width of the square.

Numerous researchers have investigated residual stresses and distortion in laser PBF processes using analytical and finite element methods. These studies have shown that residual stresses and subsequent part deflection increase with increase in track length. Based on these observations, dividing the scan area into small squares and then scanning each segment with short tracks is highly beneficial. Thus, there are multiple reasons for subdividing the layer cross-section into small squares for metals.

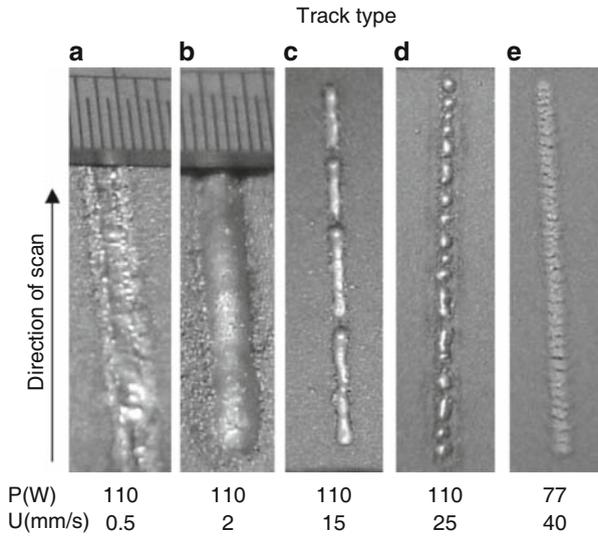


Fig. 5.17 Five examples of test tracks made in $-150/+75 \mu\text{m}$ M2 steel powder in an argon atmosphere with a CO_2 laser beam of 1.1 mm spot size, at similar magnifications (© Professional Engineering Publishing, reproduced from T H C Childs, C Hauser, and M Badrossamay, Proceedings of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers, Part B: Journal of Engineering Manufacture 219 (4), 2005)

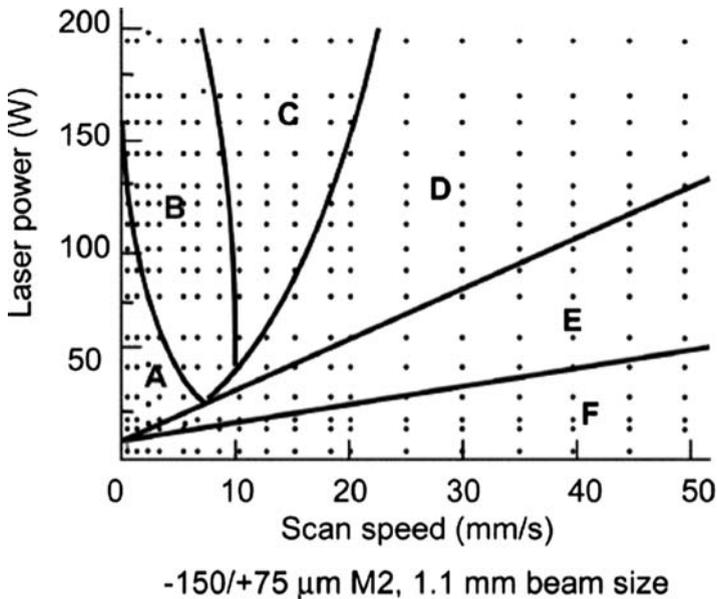


Fig. 5.18 Process map for track types shown in Fig. 5.17 (© Professional Engineering Publishing, reproduced from T H C Childs, C Hauser, and M Badrossamay, Proceedings of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers, Part B: Journal of Engineering Manufacture 219 (4), 2005)

Randomization of square scanning (rather than scanning contiguous squares one after the other) and changing the primary scan direction between squares helps alleviate preferential build-up of residual stresses, as shown in Fig. 5.16. As a result, randomized, small-square scan patterns are extensively utilized in PBF processes for metals.

5.9 Typical Materials and Applications

5.10 Materials

In principle, all materials that can be melted and resolidified can be used in PBF processes. Thermoplastic materials are well-suited for powder bed processing because of their relatively low melting temperatures, low thermal conductivities, and low tendency for balling. Polyamide-based powders are the most common PBF materials, and are commonly used to create plastic parts for functional applications. Glass-filled polyamides are another common material, where the glass beads provide additional strength and rigidity, but lower the ductility when compared with unfilled polyamides. Mechanical properties of SLS parts produced using polyamide powders approach those of injection molded thermoplastics parts, but with significantly reduced elongation and unique microstructures (as seen in Fig. 5.3).

Polystyrene-based materials with low residual ash content are particularly suitable for making sacrificial patterns for investment casting. Parts intended for precision investment casting applications should be sealed to prevent ceramic material seeping in and to achieve a smooth surface finish. Amorphous polymer materials (e.g., polycarbonate and polystyrene) tend to soften and sinter into highly porous shapes, whereas crystalline polymers (polyamides) are typically processed using full melting, which result in higher densities. As a result, crystalline materials generally have better surface finish and mechanical properties. However, crystalline polymers exhibit greater shrinkage compared to amorphous materials and are more susceptible to curling and distortion and thus require more uniform temperature control.

Elastomeric thermoplastic polymers are available for producing highly flexible parts with rubber-like characteristics. These elastomers have good resistance to degradation at elevated temperatures and are resistant to chemicals like gasoline and automotive coolants. Elastomeric materials can be used to produce gaskets, industrial seals, shoe soles and other components.

Biocompatible materials have been developed for specific applications. For example, calcium hydroxyapatite, a material very similar to human bone, has been processed using SLS for medical applications.

A number of proprietary metal powders (either thermoplastic binder-coated or binder mixed) are available from machine manufacturers for producing functional tools through the indirect processing route. RapidSteel was one of the first metal/binder systems, developed by DTM Corp. The first version of RapidSteel was available in 1996 and consisted of a thermoplastic binder coated 1,080 carbon steel powder with copper as the infiltrant. Parts produced using RapidSteel were debinded (350–450°C), sintered (around 1,000°C) and finally infiltrated with Cu (1,120°C) to produce a final part with approximately 60% low carbon steel and 40% Cu. Subsequently, RapidSteel 2.0 powder was introduced in 1998 for producing functional tooling, parts, and mold inserts for injection molding. It was a dry blend of 316 stainless steel powder impact milled with thermoplastic and thermoset organic binders with an average particle size of 33 μm . After green part fabrication, the part was debinded and sintered in a hydrogen-rich atmosphere. The bronze infiltrant was introduced in a separate furnace run to produce a 50% steel and 50% bronze composite. RapidSteel 2.0 was structurally more stable than the earlier version, RapidSteel 1.0. This is because the bronze infiltration temperature was less than the sintering temperature of the stainless steel powder, unlike in the case of RapidSteel 1.0 powders.

A subsequent material development was LaserForm ST-100. It consisted of binder mixed with AISI 420 stainless steel powder. The infiltrant material was also bronze. A significant difference between RapidSteel 2.0 and LaserForm ST-100 is that the latter had a broader particle size range, with fine particles not being screened out. These fine particles allowed ST-100 particles to be furnace sintered at a lower temperature than RapidSteel 2.0, which makes it possible to carry out sintering and infiltration in a single furnace run. Other benefits of the ST-100 material include that it is a magnetic material which can be fixtured using magnetic chucks and that the finer particles allow for greater feature definition, sharpness of corners and greater strength of green parts. In addition to the above, H13 and A6 tool steel powders with a polymer binder can also be used for tooling applications. The furnace processing operations (sintering and infiltration) must be carefully designed with appropriate choices of temperature, heating and cooling rates, furnace atmosphere pressure, amount of infiltrant, and other factors, to prevent excessive part distortion. After infiltration, the part is finish machined as needed. These issues are further explored in Chapter 16.

Several proprietary metal powders have been marketed over the years by EOS GmbH for their lower-temperature M250 Xtended metal platforms, prior to the introduction of the M270. These included liquid-phase sintered bronze-based powders, and steel-based powders and other proprietary alloys (all without polymer binders). These were suitable for producing tools and inserts for injection molding of plastics. Parts made from these powders were often infiltrated with epoxy to improve the surface finish and seal porosity in the parts. Proprietary nickel-based powders for direct tooling applications and Cu-based powders for parts requiring high thermal and electrical conductivities were also available. All of these materials have been successfully used by many organizations, however the more recent introduction of SLM and EBM technology has made these alloys

obsolete, as engineering-grade alloys are now able to be processed using a number of manufacturers' machines.

When it comes to metal materials, Ti-6Al-4V, numerous steel alloys, and CoCrMo are widely available from numerous manufacturers. Additionally, Inconel alloys are of interest in high-temperature applications and are also widely researched. As SLM and EBM processes advance, the types of metal alloys which are commonly utilized will grow.

5.10.1 Capabilities and Limitations

In PBF, the loose powder bed is a sufficient support material for polymer PBF. This saves significant time during part building and post-processing, and enables advanced geometries that are difficult to post-process when supports are necessary. As a result, internal cooling channels and other complex features that would be impossible to machine are possible.

Supports, however, are required for most metals. The high residual stresses experienced when processing metals means that support structures are typically required to keep the part from excessive warping. This means that post-processing of metal parts after AM can be expensive and time consuming. Small features (including internal cooling channels) can usually be formed without supports; but the part itself is usually constrained to a substrate at the bottom of the build platform to keep it from warping.

Accuracy and surface finish of powder-based AM processes are typically inferior to liquid-based processes. However, accuracy and surface finish are strongly influenced by the operating conditions and the powder particle size. Finer particle sizes produce smoother, more accurate parts but are difficult to spread and handle. Larger particle sizes facilitate easier powder processing and delivery, but hurt surface finish, minimum feature size and minimum layer thickness. The build materials used in these processes typically exhibit 3–4% shrinkage, which can lead to part distortion. Materials with low thermal conductivity result in better accuracy as melt pool and solidification are more controllable and part growth is minimized when heat conduction is minimized.

With PBF processes, total part construction time can take longer than other additive manufacturing processes because of the pre-heat and cool-down cycles involved. However, as is the case with several newer machine designs, removable build platforms enable pre-heat and cool-down to occur off-line, thus enabling much greater machine productivity. Additionally, the ability to nest polymer parts in 3-dimensions, as no support structures are needed, mean that many parts can be produced in a single build; thus dramatically improving the productivity of these processes when compared with processes that require supports.

5.11 Conclusions

Powder bed fusion processes were one of the earliest AM processes, and continue to be one of the most popular. Polymer-based laser sintering is commonly used for prototyping and end-use applications in many industries, competing with injection molding and other polymer manufacturing processes. PBF processes are particularly competitive for low-to-medium volume geometrically complex parts.

Metal-based processes, including laser and electron beam, are growing in popularity and are widely available from manufacturers around the world. Metal PBF processes are becoming increasingly common for aerospace and biomedical applications, due to their inherent geometric complexity benefits and their excellent material properties when compared to traditional metal manufacturing techniques.

As methods for moving from point-wise to line-wise to layer-wise PBF are improved and commercialized, build times and cost will decrease. This will make PBF processing even more competitive. The future for PBF remains bright; and it is likely that PBF processes will remain one of the most common types of AM technologies for the foreseeable future.

5.12 Exercises

1. Find a reference which describes an application of the Arrhenius equation to solid state sintering. If an acceptable level of sintering is achieved within time T_1 at a temperature of 750 K, what temperature would be required to achieve the same level of sintering in half the time ($0.5 \cdot T_1$)?
2. Estimate the energy driving force difference between two different powder beds made up of spherical particles with the same total mass, where the difference in surface area to volume ratio difference between one powder bed and the other is a factor of 2.
3. Using standard kitchen ingredients, explore the powder characteristics described in Sect. 5.4.1 and powder handling options described in Sect. 5.4.2. Using at least 3 different ingredients, describe whether or not the issues described are reproducible in your experiments.
4. Using an internet search, find a set of recommended processing parameters for nylon polyamide using laser sintering. Based upon (5.1), are these parameters limited by machine laser power, scan spacing or scan speed? Why? What machine characteristics could be changed to increase the build rate for this material and machine combination?
5. Using Fig. 5.18 and the explanatory text, estimate the minimum laser dwell time (how long a spot is under the laser as it passes) needed to maintain a type B scan track at 100 W.
6. Assuming a subdivision of a metal part into 1 cm squares, estimate the minimum scan speed necessary to ensure that the laser beam returned to the same spot

needed to maintain the minimum laser dwell time from problem 5. (Assume instantaneous reversal of the laser beam at the end of a scan track.)

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