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Mechanism of optical degradation in microstructured InGaN light-emitting diodes

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While the enhancement of light extraction efficiency from microstructured InGaN light-emitting diodes (μLED) has been firmly established, there is concern over the effect of microstructuring on the device lifetimes. A study on the electrical characteristics and reliability of μLED arrays has been carried out. Despite improved optical performance, expanded device sidewalls served to accelerate the rate of optical degradation, adversely affect the lifetimes of devices. Through current-voltage plots and noise spectrum measurements, vertical current conduction along the plasma-damaged sidewalls was identified as the key degradation mechanism. © 2010 American Institute of Physics. [doi:10.1063/1.3517829]

I. INTRODUCTION

The proven advantage of μLEDs over large-area LEDs is its distinctively higher optical output. Photons can be extracted from the sidewalls of the multiple micrometer-scale elements, resulting in reduced re-absorption (and thus heat generation). Many studies on the effects of dimensions and geometry (microdisks, 1 microrings, 2 and microhexagons 3 for instance) have been reported. While the benefits of enhanced light extraction are firmly established, there inevitably will be concerns over the reliability of μLEDs as LEDs are expected to be light sources of exceptionally long lifetime. The formation of a μLED network involves dry etching through the multiquantum wells (MQWs) removing the materials between μLED elements, exposing additional sidewalls. Since the plasma-damaged sidewall terminations are in fact two-dimensional defects, the electrical characteristics and reliability of such devices are potential affected. As a matter of fact, the distinctive geometries of μLEDs facilitate failure analysis of LED devices.

In this paper, the mechanisms of degradation in μLEDs are reported. Interconnected μLEDs of hexagonal and circular geometries are fabricated and characterized, and compared with conventional large area rectangular LEDs. The devices are not passivated after dry etching in order to study the true impact of microstructuring. Device optical spectrum, together with electrical performance, including I-V characteristics, leakage current and noise spectrum are measured. The devices subsequently undergo a 1000 h continuous constant current stress test to determine the optical degradation rate, which is correlated with the device geometries. The effects of vertical conduction along sidewalls on device performance and reliability are discussed.

II. EXPERIMENTAL DETAILS

The structure of the LED wafer used in this study consists of a GaN buffer layer grown on c-plane sapphire substrate, an n-type GaN layer, InGaN/GaN quantum wells, capped with a top contact p-type GaN layer. The emission center wavelength of the wafer is ~465 nm. The LEDs were fabricated using a standard microfabrication process beginning with the deposition of an indium-tin-oxide (ITO) current-spreading layer. The active regions of different geometries were defined by photolithography and dry etched by reactive ion etching using a gas chemistry comprising CHF₃ and Ar to expose the n-contact regions. For μhexagon LED's, each emissive element is in the shape of a hexagon, with side lengths of 25 μm. These are in turn hexagonally packed into a 12 × 14 array with a separation of 4 μm. For μdisk LEDs, each emissive element is a disk with a diameter of 50 μm and an array consists of 14 × 7 interconnected μdisks. The large area LED is of the geometry of a 640 × 640 μm². The effective emissive areas of the large area, μdisk and μhexagon LEDs are 4.1 × 10⁵ μm², 3.7 × 10⁵ μm², and 4.2 × 10⁵ μm², respectively, while their respective sidewall circumferences are 2.88 mm, 18.03 mm, and 21.77 mm. Subsequently, photolithography was carried out again to define the p-pad and p-pad areas. A bi-layer of Ti/Al (50nm/350nm) was deposited as bonding pads, annealed in N₂ at 500 °C for 1 min. The chips were diced by UV nanosecond laser micromachining and packaged into TO headers. Following Al wire-bonding, a silicone encapsulant was applied to protect the device. The optical spectral were measured with an Ocean Optics HR2000 fiber-coupled spectrometer with optical resolution of ~1 nm. The electrical properties, including the I-V characteristics and leakage cur-
rent of the packaged devices were measured with an HP 4156A precision semiconductor parameter analyzer, while the 1/f noise spectrum was measured by a BTA 9603 FET Noise Analyzer. The devices as shown in Fig. 1, biased at 20 mA, were subsequently subjected to a 900 h continuous stress test at room temperature.

III. Results and Discussion

Microstructuring of the emission region affects not only the extraction efficiency but also the angular emission characteristics, as a greater component of light is emitted from the sidewalls. As such, the packaged LEDs were placed within a 2 in. integrating sphere to ensure that all the emitted light is collected, while the optical signal was channeled from the output port via fiber to the spectrometer. Figure 2 shows the electroluminescent spectral measured from the devices biased at 20 mA. As noted from the plot, the µLEDs emit 17% more light than the large-area counterpart, attributable to enhanced light extraction from sidewalls of microstructures. Figures 3(a)–3(c) show high-magnification optical microphotographs of the LEDs biased at lower currents to avoid saturation of the charge-coupled device (CCD) camera. Bright edges were observed at the periphery of the microstructures in Figs. 3(b) and 3(c), contributed by laterally propagating photons that have escaped through the sidewalls. These photons contributed to the overall enhancement of light emission. Additionally, a slight spectral blueshift was observed from the µLEDs, which can be attributed to reduced current densities as a result of improved current spreading.

Insight on device reliability is often provided by its electrical characteristics. The current-voltage (I-V) characteristics of the devices are shown in Fig. 4. The leakage currents of the devices have been extracted from the plots at a reverse bias voltage of 4 V. The magnitude of the leakage current increases from 0.79 mA in large area LED to 3.64 mA in the µhexagon LED and 3.73 mA in the µdisk LED. The slope of the linear region of the I-V curves (in the forward bias region) has also been interpolated to determine the static resistance of the devices.

FIG. 1. (Color online) Electroluminescent LEDs of different geometries: (a) large-area; (b) µhexagon array; and (c) µdisk array.

FIG. 2. (Color online) Electroluminescent spectra of the large-area, µhexagon, and µdisk LEDs biased at a current of 20 mA.

FIG. 3. (Color online) High magnification optical microphotographs showing emission regions of the (a) large-area, (b) µdisk, and (c) µhexagon LEDs.

FIG. 4. (Color online) I-V characteristics of the large-area, µhexagon, and µdisk LEDs.
cies as a result of preferential loss of N2. Consequently, the which can be attributed to the formation of nitrogen vacan-
crystal damage in the surface regions. Such defects trap car-
etrying, whereby the incidence of high energy ions leaves behind
elements. The exposed sidewall surfaces are highly defective
area shrinks, surface effects become more prominent on the
electrical properties. In a semiconductor, the MQW active
layers are disrupted at the peripheries of individual µLED
elements. The exposed sidewall surfaces are highly defective
due to the exposure of dangling bonds during plasma etch-
ing, whereby the incidence of high energy ions leaves behind
crystal damage in the surface regions. Such defects trap car-
riers and induces carrier scattering, resulting in a higher
static resistance and reduced carrier mobility.

Additionally, these interfacial defects may also serve as
vertical current conduction pathways in a way similar to that
of threading dislocations. During plasma etching, p-type
GaN becomes compensated through introduction of shallow
donors states, while n-type GaN becomes n+, both of which can be attributed to the formation of nitrogen vacancies as a result of preferential loss of N2. Consequently, the µLED element can be thought of as being surrounded by a network of defects that are n-type in nature, promoting the vertical conduction of electrons across the p-n junction as illustrated in Fig. 5(a), giving rise to an increase in leakage currents. Vertical conductivity along dislocations had been identified as one of the major causes of breakdown in LEDs, and in p-n junctions in general. In a separate study, the I-V characteristics and lifetimes of a group of LEDs with different dislocation densities (by varying the In concentration in the MQWs) was studied and analyzed, the results of which are summarized in Fig. 6. It was observed that as the dislocation densities of devices increases beyond ~1.5 × 10⁹ cm⁻², the leakage currents (at a reverse bias voltage of 4 V) rises rapidly. On the other hand, the L70 lifetime of devices [L70 lifetime is the time to 70% lumen maintenance, as proposed by ASSIST (Ref. 10)] are drops linearly with increasing dislocation densities. The results positively identify current leakage at sites of dislocations as causes of degradation. Following the same model, the defects generated as a result of microstructuring in µLEDs are expected to play a key role in their enhanced degradation rates.

Another possible contributing factor is the junction curva-
ture effect. The breakdown voltage associated with a spherical junction is significantly reduced compared to a planar junction due to higher field intensities, depending also on the radius of the curvature. The presence of interfacial defects in µLEDs is thus predicted to adversely affect their reliability. The SEM images in Fig. 5(b), showing an as-
etched µLED sidewall, and Fig. 5(c), showing the same side-
wall after 1000 h operation, further illustrate this point. The sidewall has become significantly rougher with fragmentation due to proliferation of defects. Low-frequency noise measurements were conducted to further study the carrier properties.

Low-frequency noise, especially 1/f noise and generation-recombination (G-R) noise, is sensitively dependent on the presence of defects, traps and dislocations in semiconductors. The noise spectrum accurately reflects the internal material quality and is thus deemed an important tool for determining the reliability of an LED. Figure 7 show plots of the noise spectrum of LEDs with different geometries for frequencies in the range of 3.15 Hz to 16.5 kHz. In an LED (or p-n junction in general) structure, the current spectral density $S_I$ under low current bias can be expressed by the following equation:

$$S_I = \frac{4N_t q I_D}{\tau_r \sigma N_e^2 e^{2E_i/kT}},$$

where $N_t$ is the trap density; a larger $N_t$ generally implies poorer crystal quality, increasing the magnitude of the noise spectrum. $\tau_r$ is the recombination time or carrier lifetime, which increases the magnitude of the noise spectrum when the trap density increases, while the other terms have their
usual meanings. From Fig. 7, the noise magnitude for a \( \mu \)LED (irrespective of geometry) is approximately an order of magnitude higher than the corresponding large-area LED. This can be understood from the trapping and de-trapping of carriers along the plasma-damaged sidewalls, whereby the total sidewall areas of the \( \mu \)LEDs were approximately six to eight times larger than the large-area LED. With a higher sidewall ratio, the noise magnitudes of the LEDs are thus significantly enhanced.

The LEDs were then operated for \( >1000 \) hrs to determine their rate of degradation. Figure 8 shows the plot of normalized optical intensity over 1000 h, whereby a constant bias current of 20 mA was applied to the devices. While the two large area LEDs maintains \( \sim 82\% \) and \( \sim 79.5\% \) of their initial optical powers after 900 h, the \( \mu \)disk LED maintains \( \sim 65.5\% \) of its initial optical power, while the \( \mu \)hexagon LED maintains \( \sim 67\% \) of its initial optical power. During the 900-h test, the optical output of \( \mu \)LED degraded very quickly during the first 500 h; the degradation rate slows down since then. On the other hand, the large-area LED degraded almost linearly throughout. Assuming linearity, the L70 lifetime for the large-area LED is 2500 h. For the \( \mu \)LEDs, the degradation rate after the initial 100 h of operation becomes linear, and the lifetime \( t_{70\%} \) of the \( \mu \)disk LED and \( \mu \)hexagon LED are found to be \( \sim 400 \) h and \( \sim 500 \) h, respectively. This corresponds to less than 1/5 of the lifetime of a large-area LED. \( \mu \)LEDs, therefore, expected to have shorter lifetimes despite higher extraction efficiency. Expctedly, there is a tradeoff between device performance and reliability. The compromised reliability may be partially alleviated through passivation of sidewalls, control of plasma damage and damage removal, subjects of our on-going studies.

IV. CONCLUSION

In summary, the effects of microstructuring of LEDs have been studied. In terms of optical performance, the increased sidewall surface areas of micro-LEDs certainly promote light extraction efficiency. However, the formation of plasma-damaged sidewalls becomes a threat to the reliability as a result of severe vertical current leakage. A balance should be struck between light extraction and device lifetime.

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10. Alliance for Solid-state Illumination and Technologies; website: www.lrc.rpi.edu/programs/solidstate.