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[Continued on next page]

(54) Title: SYNTHETIC MOLDED SLABS, AND SYSTEMS AND METHODS RELATED THERETO

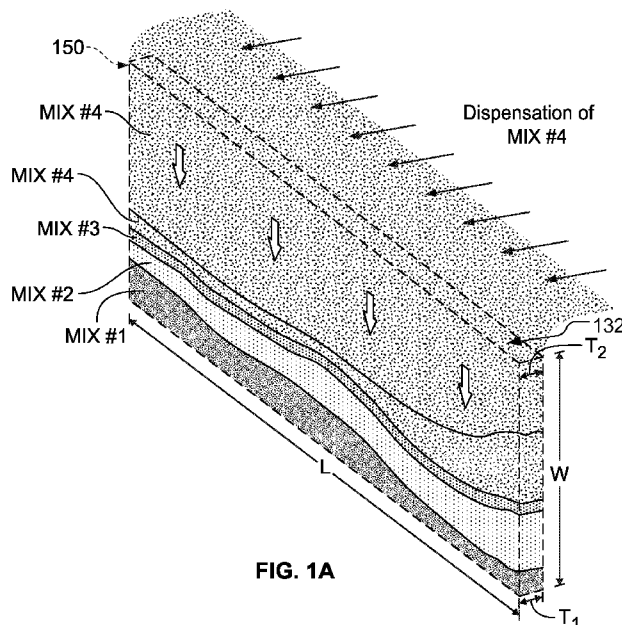
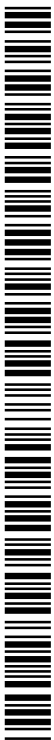


FIG. 1A

(57) Abstract: Systems and processes form improved synthetic molded slabs suitable for use in living or working spaces (e.g., along a countertop, table, floor, or the like). The synthetic molded slabs can be manufactured so as to have a similar appearance to one another that, unlike quarried stone slabs taken from a quarry, is generally repeatable and predefined as part of the manufacturing process. In those embodiments, however, the appearance of each synthetic molded slab can provide complex striations or other veining patterns that emulate a quarried stone slab. For example, each slab can be formed from a combination of differently pigmented particulate mineral mixes that are vertically dispensed according to predefined pattern into a vertically oriented mold (thereby facilitating the selected striations or other veining patterns), which is then shifted to a horizontally oriented position for subsequent compression molding and curing operations.



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SYNTHETIC MOLDED SLABS, AND SYSTEMS AND METHODS RELATED THERETO

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0001] This document describes systems and processes for forming synthetic mold slab products, for example, a synthetic mold slab that is thermoformed or otherwise compacted to a selected slab shape from a mixture including particulate mineral material, resin binder, and pigments so that the synthetic molded slab is suitable for use in living or working spaces (e.g., along a countertop, table, floor, or the like).

BACKGROUND

[0002] Quarried stone slabs are a commonly used building material. Granite, marble, soapstone, and other quarried stones are often selected for use as countertops due to their aesthetic properties. Despite the visual appeal of quarried stone, such quarried stone slabs can be quite expensive to obtain and are generally limited to naturally occurring color schemes.

[0003] Engineered stone slabs may be formed from a man-made combination of materials that can provide improved stain-resistant or heat-resistant properties compared to quarried stone slabs. Engineered stone is typically a combination of particulate mineral material and a binder, such as a polymer resin or cement. Some engineered stone slabs, especially those of a larger slab size and having a granular formation appearance, can fall noticeably short of the complicated look and texture of quarried stone slabs.

SUMMARY

[0004] Some embodiments described herein include systems or processes for forming improved synthetic molded slabs suitable for use in living or working spaces (e.g., along a countertop, table, floor, or the like). In particular embodiments, the synthetic molded slabs can be manufactured so as to have a similar appearance to one another that, unlike quarried stone slabs taken from a quarry, is generally repeatable and predefined as part of the manufacturing process. In those embodiments, however, the appearance of each synthetic molded slab can provide complex striations or other veining patterns that emulate a quarried stone slab. For example, each slab can be formed from a combination of differently pigmented particulate mineral mixes that are vertically dispensed according to predefined pattern into a vertically oriented mold (thereby facilitating the selected striations or other veining patterns), which is then shifted to a horizontally oriented position for subsequent compression molding and curing operations. As used herein, “differently pigmented” means having different pigment combinations or otherwise having a different visual appearance in color tone or visual texture.

[0005] Particular embodiments described herein include a synthetic molded slab comprising a quartz material. Optionally, the synthetic molded slab may have a major surface at least 2 feet wide by at least 6 feet long and extending perpendicularly to a slab thickness. The major surface may at least a first pigmented vein extending generally lengthwise from edge-to-edge that separates at least two other veins extending generally lengthwise and positioned on opposing edges of the first pigmented vein. The first pigmented vein optionally has a vein thickness equal to and parallel to the slab thickness.

[0006] Some embodiments described herein include a set of separately molded synthetic slabs. Each respective slab of the set may include at least four different particulate mineral mixes distributed in the series of successive layers according to the predefined pattern for all of the separately molded synthetic slabs. The four different particulate mineral mixes may each optionally comprise a quartz material, one or more pigments, and one or more resin binders. In one preferred option, each respective slab may be rectangular and may have major surface with a width or at least 2 feet and a length of at least 6 feet. At least one of the four different particulate mineral mixes may define substantially lengthwise veins extending for a majority of the length of each respective slab such that the major surface of each respective slab in the set has similarly positioned and colored substantially lengthwise veins.

[0007] Other embodiments described herein include a process of forming a synthetic molded slab from different particulate mineral mixes. The process may include positioning a slab mold in a substantially vertical orientation. The process may also include dispensing multiple different particulate mineral mixes into the substantially vertically oriented mold so as to fill a mold space. Optionally, the mold space is at least 6 feet long by at least 2 feet wide, and the multiple different particulate mineral mixes each comprise predominantly a quartz material. The process may further include adjusting the mold to a substantially horizontal orientation while the different particulate mineral mixes are positioned in the mold. Also, the process may include contemporaneously vibrating and compacting the particulate mineral mixes arranged in the mold while the mold is in the substantially horizontal orientation.

[0008] Some embodiments of a process of forming a synthetic molded slab include pouring multiple differently pigmented particulate quartz mixes into a non-horizontally oriented mold according to a predetermined pattern. Optionally, the non-horizontally orientated mold may define an internal space having a first edge thickness that is smaller than and parallel to a second edge thickness proximate to an upwardly facing opening of the mold. The process may also include compacting the multiple differently pigmented particulate quartz mixes arranged in the mold while the mold is in the horizontal orientation.

[0009] Additional embodiments described herein include a system forming a synthetic molded slab using a combination of different particulate mineral mixes. The system may include a mold adjustment apparatus configured to reposition a slab mold from a substantially vertical orientation to a substantially horizontal orientation. Optionally, the slab mold may define a mold space that is at least 6 feet long by at least 2 feet wide. The system may also include one or more mineral aggregate distributors that are each configured to dispense a corresponding particular mineral mix vertically into the slab mold retained by the mold adjustment apparatus.

[0010] The systems and techniques described herein may provide one or more of the following advantages. First, a system can be used to produce a plurality of synthetic molded slabs that each have similar vein patterns and that are suitable for use in living or working spaces (e.g., along a countertop, table, floor, or the like). Such slabs can be formed from a combination of differently pigmented particulate mineral mixes that are vertically deposited according to predefined and repeatable dispensation pattern into a vertically oriented mold, which provides the selected veining patterns that emulate a quarried stone slab and that are generally repeatable for each slab in the plurality of separately molded slabs.

[0011] Second, each slab in the system can be formed from a series operations including at least a compression molding operation in which the mold containing the particulate mineral mixes are positioned in a horizontal orientation after the mold is filled in the vertical orientations. For example, the differently pigmented particulate mineral mixes are vertically poured into the vertically oriented mold, which is then shifted to a horizontally oriented position for a subsequent compression molding operation (e.g., vibro-compaction molding, or the like) and (in some embodiments) a curing operation. From there, some or all of the mold is removed from the hardened slab so that at least a major surface of the slab is polished to provide an appearance of the complex striations and veining patterns that emulate a quarried stone slab. In some optional embodiments, the polished major surface of each of the synthetic molded slabs provides an outer appearance that is remarkably similar to the other slabs in the set of separately molded slabs, unlike quarried stone slabs taken from a quarry. Moreover, the pigments and particulate mineral mixes can be selected to provide color combinations and visual effects that improved upon and offer a variety of color combination options far beyond what is available from quarried stone slabs taken from a quarry.

[0012] The details of one or more implementations are set forth in the accompanying drawings and the description below. Other features and advantages will be apparent from the description and drawings, and from the claims.

DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

[0013] FIGs. 1A and 1B are perspective views of a synthetic molded slab during and after formation, in accordance with some embodiments.

[0014] FIG. 2 is a diagram of an example system for forming a synthetic molded slab product, in accordance with some embodiments.

[0015] FIG. 3 is a diagram of another example system for forming a synthetic molded slab product, in accordance with other embodiments.

[0016] FIGs. 4A and 4B are perspective and cross-sectional views of a slab mold adjustment apparatus of FIGs. 2 and 3 in a horizontal configuration.

[0017] FIG. 5 is another cross-sectional view of the slab mold adjustment apparatus of FIGs. 4A and 4B.

[0018] FIGs. 6A-6C are perspective and cross-sectional views of the slab mold adjustment apparatus of FIGs. 4A and 4B in a vertical configuration.

[0019] FIG. 7 is a perspective view of an example synthetic molded slab product formed by either of the systems of FIGs. 2 and 3.

[0020] FIG. 8 is a flow diagram of an example process for forming a synthetic molded slab product.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0021] Referring to FIGs. 1A and 1B, a system can be used to produce one or more synthetic molded slabs 50 having a number of striations or veins according to a predefined pattern. Each slab 50 can comprise a quartz material and/or other particulate mineral material that, when mixed with pigments and a resin binder and subsequently compressed and cured, provides a hardened slab product suitable for use in living or working spaces (e.g., along a countertop, table, floor, or the like). As shown in FIGs. 1A-B, each slab 50 may optionally be formed from a combination of differently pigmented particulate mineral mixes that are vertically poured according to predefined and repeatable dispensation pattern into a vertically oriented mold 130 (refer to FIG. 2), which provides the selected striations or other veining patterns that are generally repeatable for each separately molded slab a slab mold is oriented vertically and filled from an open end. Successive layers of different particulate

mineral mixes (e.g., different pigments, different mineral compositions, different additives, or the like) are vertically poured according to predefined and repeatable dispensation pattern into the mold until filled. The open end is closed, and the mold 130 is pivoted to a horizontal orientation (refer to the apparatus 150 in FIGS. 2-3) and then transported in the horizontal orientation for compaction, curing, and other operations. As shown in FIG. 1B, depending upon the predefined dispensation pattern of the different particular mixes, the vertical dispensation/layering process can provide a layering effect that emulates the veined appearance of quarried stone slabs such as granite or marble, including some veins 51, 52, 53, and 54 that extend fully across a complete length L of the hardened slab 50 (e.g., at least 2 feet wide by at least 6 feet long, and between about 3 feet and 5 feet wide and between about 6 feet and 14 feet long, preferably about 4.5 feet wide (more particularly, about 140 cm wide) by about 10 feet long (more particularly, about, 310 cm long)). Other veins 55 may extend only partially across the length L of the slab 50. Not only can such differently pigmented veins 51, 52, 53, and 54 extend across the full length of the slab product, but such veins 51, 52, 53, and 54 (and also partial vein 55) can also extend through the thickness of the slab 50 (thereby providing a natural vein appearance even when the slab is cut and edged to specific shapes in living or working spaces (e.g., along a countertop, table, floor, or the like). Because each slab 50 in the set of separately molded slabs can include the layers of different particulate mineral mixes dispensed vertically into the mold 130 (refer to FIG. 2) according to the predefined and repeatable dispensation pattern, multiple slabs 50 in the set of separately molded slabs can have substantially the same appearance to one another.

[0022] Referring now to FIGs. 1A-B and 2 in more detail, the mold 130 can be vertically oriented during the dispensation of the different particulate mineral mixes into the mold 130. For example, as described in more detail below, the mold 130 can include a shell portion that at least partially defines a space (shown in dashed lines in FIG. 1A) for receiving the different particulate mineral mixes via an open upwardly facing opening 132 of the mold 130. Optionally, each different particulate mineral mix is dispensed from a separate conveyor line (refer to FIGS. 2-3) that transports the respective mix to a region above the upwardly facing opening 132 so that the respective mix is then vertically poured into the mold 130. Each conveyor line may transport the respective mix according to a predefined pattern so that the different particular mixes pour into the mold a predetermined series of successive layers, some or all of which can form the veins 51, 52, 53, 54, 55 of the slab 50. Optionally, each of the successive layer of the different particulate mineral mixes can be dispensed in different amounts, thereby providing differently sized and positioned veins or striations. Furthermore, each individual layer may be differently sized at one end of the mold 130 compared to the other end of the mold 130, thereby further enhancing the complex striations and veining patterns in the hardened slab 50 so as to increasingly emulate a quarried stone slab (e.g., a traditional quarried granite slab or the like).

[0023] In this embodiment, the slab 50 comprises four different particulate mineral mixes that are separately conveyed and dispensed into the upwardly facing opening 132 of the vertically oriented mold 130. The different mixes can be compaction molded and cured in the mold (described in more detail below) so as to provide the hardened slab 50 (FIG. 1B) of composite stone material. One or more of the mixes that are used to form the composite stone material can include organic polymer(s)

and inorganic (mineral) particulate component. The inorganic (mineral) particulate component may include such components as silicon, basalt, glass, diamond, rocks, pebbles, shells, a variety of quartz containing materials, such as, for example, but not limited to: crushed quartz, sand, quartz particles, and the like, or any combination thereof. In this embodiment, all four different particulate mineral mixes each comprise a quartz material as a predominant component, which may include sand of various particle sizes and of different combinations. In the hardened slab 50 (FIG. 1B), the organic and inorganic materials can be linked using a binder, which may include for example, mono-functional or multifunctional silane molecules, dendrimeric molecules, and the like, that may have the ability to bind the organic and inorganic components of the composite stone mix. The binders may further include a mixture of various components, such as initiators, hardeners, catalysators, binding molecules and bridges, or any combination thereof. Some or all of the mixes dispensed in the mold 130 (FIG. 1A) may include components that are combined in a mixing apparatus (not shown in FIG. 1A) prior to being conveyed to the mold 130. The mixing apparatus can be used to blend raw material (such as the quartz material, organic polymers, unsaturated polymers, and the like) at various ratios. For example, some or all of the mixes dispensed in the mold 130 may include about 8-95% quartz aggregates to about 5-15% polymer resins. In addition, various additives may be added to the raw materials in the mixing apparatus, such additives may include metallic pieces (e.g., copper flecks or the like), colorants, dyes, pigments, chemical reagents, antimicrobial substances, fungicidal agents, and the like, or any combination thereof. In alternative embodiments, some or all of the quantity of quartz aggregates (mentioned above) can be replaced with or include porcelain and/or ceramic aggregate material.

[0024] Still referring to FIGS. 1A-B and 2, the mold 130 can be vertically oriented during dispensation of the mineral particular mixes in that a major surface of the mold is positioned in a vertical position or a generally vertical position (e.g., 90 degrees from the horizontal +/- 10 degrees). In such circumstances, each mineral particulate mix is vertically poured into the mold and rests on a previously deposited layer of a mineral particular mix (with the first layer being deposited instead on a closed bottom edge of the vertically oriented mold 130). Preferably, the mold 130 at least partially defines a length L and a width W of the hardened slab 50 (because the mold 130 retains the particulate mineral mixes therein throughout the subsequent compaction and curing processes). In some embodiments, the width W of the slab 50 formed in the mold 130 is at least 2 feet, between about 3 feet and 5 feet, and preferably about 4.5 feet, and the length L of the slab 50 formed in the mold 130 is at least 6 feet, and between about 6 feet and 15 feet, preferably about 10 feet. Thus, for example, the slab 50 may have a width W of 4.5 feet and a length L of 10. Alternatively, the slab 50 may have a width W of 26 inches and a length L of 10. Other slab sizes described in the above-mentioned ranges are also contemplated herein. As such, even though each slab 50 can be quite large in length L, some or all of the veins 51, 52, 53, and 54 can nevertheless extend across the full length of the slab 50. Additionally, some of the veins 51, 52, 53, and 54 that do not extend across the full length of the slab 50, at least some of those veins can optionally extend substantially across the full length of the slab 50 so that a person viewing the slab initially visualizes separated portions of the vein as being connected form a full-length vein during an initial view. Optionally, during the vertical dispensation of the mineral particular mixes into the mold 130, the mold 130 may have a thickness T_1 at its lower edge that is different from the thickness T_2 at its upper opening 132. For

example, the thickness T_2 may be about twice the thickness T_1 . The different thicknesses T_1 and T_2 may be used to account for the additional compaction of the particulate mineral mixes that occurs near the lower edge of the slab as additional layers of the particulate mineral mixes are deposited into the mold 130. After the mold 130 is rotated to a horizontal orientation for subsequent compaction and curing of the slab 50, the mixture is more evenly compacted together and the mold 130 defines a generally continuous thickness T (FIG. 1B) of the slab 50. In some embodiments, the thickness T of the slab 50 formed in the mold 130 is at least 0.2 cm, between about 0.2 cm and 5 cm, and preferably about 3 cm. Each mold 130 may be formed of structure that comprises a flexible polymer (including an elastomeric material), paper, wood, metal or a combination thereof.

[0025] Referring now to FIG. 2, in some embodiments, a system 100 for forming a set of synthetic molded slab products (e.g., the slab 50 in FIG. 1B, the slab 600 in FIG. 7, or the like) is configured to vertically pour differently pigmented particulate mineral mixes into a vertically oriented mold, which is then shifted to a horizontally oriented position for a subsequent compression molding operation (e.g., vibro-compaction molding, curing, etc.). The system 100 in the depicted embodiment includes an input conveyor 110 and an output conveyor 120. A collection of slab molds 130 are transported on the input conveyor 110. The slab molds 130 provide a form for synthetic molded slab products that are at least three feet wide and at least six feet long, and about 4.5 feet wide by about 10 feet long in some embodiments depicted herein. The input conveyor 110 transports the slab molds 130 to a mold positioning table 140, which is configured to help operators move and/or orient the slab molds 130.

[0026] In this embodiment, the slab molds 130 are moved horizontally (e.g., relative to gravity) onto an apparatus 150 for pivoting each mold 130 between a vertical orientation and a horizontal orientation. The apparatus 150 in this embodiment serves as a tip table 150, which is configured to accept one or more of the slab molds 130, secure it, and pivot the slab mold 130 from the horizontal orientation to the vertical orientation (described above) with an open edge (numeral 132 in FIG. 1A) positioned at the top of the slab mold 130 when in the vertical orientation. For example, in this embodiment, the tip table 150 is configured to receive and releasably retain one mold 130 at a time. Additional details of this particular embodiment of the tip table 150 are described further in connection with FIGs. 4A-6C. In alternative embodiments, the tip table 150 can be configured to receive and releasably retain multiple molds 130 at a time.

[0027] Still referring to FIG. 2, in this embodiment, the mold 130 vertically oriented in the apparatus 150 is configured to receive four differently pigmented mineral mixes (comprising mostly a quartz material as described above), which can be conveyed from four corresponding mixers and directed to inputs 160 such as dispenser heads or other material transport structures. In this embodiment, each dispenser head 160 is configured to release a different particulate mineral mix (e.g., different pigments, different mineral compositions, different additives, or a combination thereof) compared to the other dispenser heads 160. Each dispenser head 160 is configured to controllably dispense its supply of corresponding particulate mineral mix for input into the vertically oriented mold 130 retained by the tip table 150. For example, the dispensing heads 160 are each configured with a shutter or valve apparatus (not shown) that is controllable to regulate the flow of particulate mineral mix from the dispensing head 160 for input to the mold 130. In

such embodiments, the dispensing heads (or other inputs for distributing the particulate mineral mixes to the mold 130) can be controlled according to a predetermined control algorithm so as to define successive layers of the differently pigmented particulate mineral mixes for vertical dispensation into the slab mold 130 retained by the tip table 150.

[0028] When the tipping table 150 retains a mold 130 in the vertical orientation, the upwardly facing opening 132 (FIG. 1A) of the mold 130 is positioned below (e.g., relative to gravity) the outputs of the mineral aggregate distributors 160. As such, the particulate mineral mixes that are dispensed from the outputs of the distributors 160 and then through the upwardly facing opening 132 (FIG. 1A) of the mold 130. As such, the distributors 160 (each carrying a different particulate mineral mix according to a pattern dispensed by its corresponding dispensing head) can be used to pour the respective mix into the vertically oriented mold 130 to provide a predetermined series of successive layers (which are repeatable for each mold 130 in the line). As previously described, some or all of these successive layers of different particulate mineral mixes can form the lengthwise veins of the hardened slab (e.g., the slab 50 in FIG. 1B, the slab 600 in FIG. 7, or the like).

[0029] In the illustrated example, four mineral aggregate inputs 160 are used, although in other examples, the slab may be formed from between 1 and 20 different particulate mineral mixes, and more preferably between 3 and 8 different particulate mineral mixes (which, in some embodiments, would provide a system that would include a corresponding number of inputs 160). In some examples, the number of mineral aggregate distributors 160 can correspond equally to the number of differently pigmented particulate mineral mixes used to create the hardened slab product.

[0030] After the slab mold 130 retained by the tipping table 150 has been sufficiently filled (while in the vertically oriented orientation), the tip table 150 pivots or otherwise adjusts the slab mold 130 to a horizontal orientation. The slab mold 130 (now a filled mold 180) is moved out of the tip table 150, on a cushion of air provided by another mold positioning table 170, to an output conveyor 120. As shown in FIG. 2, the successive layers of different particulate mineral mixes that were vertically dispensed into the mold 130 are generally noticeable in the filled molds 180 are arranged in the horizontal orientation on the output conveyor 120. Some or all of these successive layers of different particulate mineral mixes can form the lengthwise veins of the hardened slab (e.g., the slab 50 in FIG. 1B, the slab 600 in FIG. 7, or the like).

[0031] Optionally, the system 100 may be configured to provide one more generally “widthwise” or transverse veins 192 (as compared to the generally “lengthwise” veins 51, 52, 53, and 54 (FIG.1B) defined by the successive layers of different particulate mineral mixes previously poured into the mold 130 while at the tip table 150). Optionally, these widthwise veins 192 may be thinner and spread further apart than the generally “lengthwise” veins defined by the successive layers of different particulate mineral mixes. Also, these widthwise veins 192 may be formed from a material having a different pigmentation than the particulate mineral mixes dispensed from the inputs 160. For example, the system can be configured to controllably dispense the particulate mineral mix for the widthwise veins 192 in a selected location or pattern for each mold before the mold is advanced to a top mold attachment operation 194 or a vibro-compaction press 195 (FIG. 2), thereby providing a predetermined pattern of the widthwise veins 192 that is repeatable for each of the filled molds. In some optional circumstances, the widthwise veins 192

may not extend through the full thickness of the hardened slab (which can be different from some or all of the generally lengthwise veins 51, 52, 53, and 54 (FIG. 1B)).

[0032] Still referring to FIG. 2, the output conveyor 120 can be configured to transport each of the filled molds 180 to one or more sequent stations in the system 100 for forming the hardened slab. For example, each of the filled molds 180 can continue to a subsequent station in which a top mold attachment 194 is positioned over the filled mold 180 so as to encase the layers of particular mineral mixes between the mold 130 and a top cover mold piece (not shown in FIG. 2). From there, the filled mold 180 (now including the top cover mold piece) continues to a subsequent station in which a vibro-compaction press 195 applies compaction pressure, vibration, and vacuum to the contents inside the filled mold 180, thereby converting the particulate mixes into a rigid slab. After the vibro-compaction operation, the filled mold 180 (with the compacted and hardened slab therein) proceeds to a curing station 196 in which the material used to form the slab (including any resin binder material) are cured via a heating process or other curing process, thereby further strengthening the slab inside the filled mold 180. After the slab is fully cured (and, optionally, after the slab is cooled), the primary mold 130 and the top mold cover piece are removed from the hardened and cured slab at a mold removal station 197. The primary mold 130 is then returned to the input conveyor 110 (FIG. 2). Then, in some embodiments, the hardened and cured slab is moved to a polisher station 198, in which a major surface of the slab is polished to a smooth finish, thereby an appearance of the complex striations and veining patterns that emulate a quarried stone slab. Alternatively, the polisher station 198 is not implemented so that the resulting slab has a more textured major surface rather than

a smooth, polished surface. In some embodiments of the system 100, the polished or otherwise exposed major surface of each of the synthetic molded slabs can provide an outer appearance that is substantially repeatable for the other slabs (from the other filled molds 180 in FIG. 2).

[0033] Referring now to FIG. 3, another example system 200 for forming a synthetic molded slab product can be configured to contemporaneously fill multiple vertically oriented molds 130, thereby increasing the production rate in some circumstances. The system 200 is substantially similar in layout and operation to the system 100 (FIG. 2), having the input conveyor 110, the output conveyor 120, the mold positioning tables 140 and 170, the slab molds 130, and the filled molds 180. The system 200, however, includes eight of the mineral aggregate inputs 160, with four inputs 160 arranged to feed four different particulate mineral mixes into a first vertically oriented mold 130 secured to the tip table 150, and another set of four inputs 160 arranged to feed the four different particulate mineral mixes into a second vertically oriented mold 130 secured to a second tip table 150 (not visible in FIG. 3).

[0034] Accordingly, the operation of the system 200 is substantially similar to that of the system 100 (FIG. 2), except that multiple molds 130 are substantially vertically oriented and contemporaneously filled before being adjusted to horizontal orientations and moved to the output conveyor 120 as filled molds 180. As shown in FIG. 3, the filled molds 180 that were simultaneously filled (in this embodiment, using the two adjacent tip tables 150) can have substantially the same appearance of veins defined by the successive layers of different particulate mineral mixes poured into each of the molds according to a predetermined pattern.

[0035] Referring now to FIGs. 4A and 4B, each tip table 150 in the system 100 or 200 can be configured to receive the mold 130 in a horizontal orientation. The tip

table 150 is located vertically below a fill chute 301, with respect to gravity. In the systems 100 and 200 (FIGs. 2 and 3, respectively), the chute 301 is positioned vertically below the gap(s) 166 at the end of the belts 164, e.g., to direct fill from the mineral aggregate distributor 160 into the slab mold 130. The tip table 150 includes a collection of supports 302 and a table base 304 connected by a pivot point 306a and a pivot point 306b (not visible). The supports 302 provide support to elevate the table base 302 above a floor, and the pivot points 306a-306b provide a bearing upon which the table base 302 can tilt relative to the supports 302.

[0036] As previously described, the mold positioning table 308 provides a mechanism (e.g., rollers, conveyors, actuator arms, etc.) to move the slab mold into the tip table 150 between the table base 302 and a top plate 310 (e.g., while the tip table is in a horizontal configuration). Optionally, a film 320 extends across the surface of the top plate 310, between the top plate 310 and the slab mold 130. The film 320 is fed from a feeder roll 322 and is collected by a takeup roll 324. In use, the optional film provides a protective barrier between the top plate 310 and filler material deposited into the mold (e.g., to maintain the cleanliness of the top plate 310 during repeated use with a series of molds 130). Predetermined lengths of the film 320 can be used once per mold filling operation, or for multiple mold filling operations before being advanced to the takeup roll 324 and a fresh length of the film 320 is provided from the feeder roll 322. A collection of actuators 350 controllably position the top plate 310 apart from the table base 302 and the slab mold 130.

[0037] FIG. 5 is another cross-sectional view of the tip table 150 of FIGs. 1-3B. In the illustrated view, the slab mold 130 is positioned in a horizontal orientation within the tip table 150. The collection of actuators 350 are actuated to bring a mold gasket

402 into contact with the outer periphery of the slab mold 130. The collection of actuators 350 are actuated to move the top plate 310 toward the slab mold 130, compressing the mold gasket 402 between the slab mold 130 and the top plate 310. Optionally, the combination of the mold gasket 402 and the slab mold 130 includes a slight asymmetry in the form of a trapezoidal cuboid (e.g., refer to T_1 and T_2 described in connection with FIG. 1A). In the configuration shown in FIG. 4, the slab mold provides three edges and a one major face of a six-sided trapezoidal cuboid form, and the film 320 and the top plate 310 form another major face. An open end 410 of the slab mold 130 forms the sixth side (e.g., the fourth edge) of the trapezoidal cuboid form. In this embodiment, the major faces are oriented at a slight angle so as to be non-coplanar, with the cuboid having a relatively greater thickness (T_2 from FIG. 1A) along the openable end 410 and a thickness (T_1 from FIG. 1A) along the opposing edge that is less than the thickness along the openable end 410. With the tip table 150 in the configuration shown in FIG. 5, the slab mold 130 is ready to be repositioned to a vertical orientation for filling.

[0038] Referring now to FIGs. 6A-6C, the tip table 150 of FIGs. 1-5 can adjust the slab mold 130 to the vertical orientation by pivoting about pivot points 306a-b. In particular, the slab mold 130 is oriented to the vertical position by pivoting the table base 304, the mold positioning table 308, the top plate 310, the mold gasket 402, and the film 320, on the pivot points 306a-306b relative to the supports 302. As shown in FIG. 6B, in the illustrated example, the slab mold 130 is partly filled with successive layers of different particulate mineral mixes 502 (e.g., partially through the mold filling process; refer also to FIG. 1A for another example). As discussed in the descriptions of FIGs. 2 and 3, the different particulate mineral mixes are controllably released via the inputs 160s and poured (under the force of gravity in

this embodiment) into the chute 301, through the open end 410, and into the slab mold 130. The different particulate mineral mixes 502 includes multiple, variously designed and selected mixes (including predominantly a quartz material in this embodiment) vertically poured into the mold 130 in successive layers, which can create different vein layers 506a-506b. As previously described in connection with FIGs. 1A and 1B, some or all of the vein layers 506a-506b can extend substantially from edge to edge and across the length L of the slab mold 130.

[0039] As discussed previously, the slab mold 130 in this embodiment provides a trapezoidal cuboid form. In the illustrated vertical orientation, the asymmetry of the slab mold 130 occurs from top to bottom, forming a very slight "V" shape (e.g., refer also to the description of T_1 and T_2 described in connection with FIG. 1A). In some embodiments, the asymmetry can be selected to at least partly offset the effects of gravity on the slight compaction of the different particulate mineral mixes 502 at the lower edge of the mold 130 as the mixes fill the slab mold 130. Optionally, a vibrator 530 vibrates and/or shakes the slab mold 130 and the particulate mineral mixes 502 to promote a complete filling of the mold 130. Once the slab mold 130 is sufficiently filled with the particulate mineral mixes 502 according to the predefined pattern from the distributors 160 (FIGs. 2 and 3), the slab mold 130 becomes the filled mold 180 (refer to FIGs. 2 and 3).

[0040] Referring now to FIG. 6C, an enlarged view of the chute 301 and the open end 410 (refer also to the upwardly facing opening 132 in FIG. 1A) of the slab mold 130. In this embodiment, the open end 410 includes a mold end cap 520, and the mold end cap 520 is movable about a pivot point 522 to selectably open and close the openable end 410. When the slab mold 130 is sufficiently filled with the filler 502, the mold end cap 520 is pivoted to the closed position to provide the sixth side

of the cuboid form (e.g., to close the open edge of the filled mold. The tip table 150 then adjusts the filled mold from the vertical orientation (FIGs. 6A-6C) to the horizontal orientation (refer to FIGs. 4A-5). The actuators 350 can be activated to release the filled mold 180 from the tip table 150, and the filled mold 180 can be moved out of the tip table 150 and onto the output conveyor 120 (FIGs. 2 and 3).

[0041] Referring now to FIG. 7, an example synthetic molded slab product 600 can be formed by either of the systems of FIGs. 2 and 3 using a combination of differently pigmented particulate mineral mixes that are vertically poured according to predefined pattern into the mold 130. In some embodiments, the synthetic molded slab product 600 can provide a veined appearance that emulates quarried stone slabs such as granite or marble, depending upon the predefined dispensation pattern of the different particular mixes. For example, the major surface 612 of the slab 600 can be polished and provide at least some veins 602, 606, and 608 that extend fully across a complete length of the hardened slab 600 (which may be about 6 feet to about 14 feet long, and preferably about 10 feet long in this embodiment). Other veins 605 and 609 may extend only partially across the length of the slab 50, and some veins 605 have much smaller size (although perhaps a much darker hue). Not only can such differently pigmented veins (602, 605, and 605, for example) extend across the full length of the slab product, but such veins can also extend through the thickness 610 of the slab 600 from the first major face 612 to the opposing major face 614 (thereby providing a natural vein appearance even when the slab is cut and edged to specific shapes in living or working spaces (e.g., along a countertop, table, floor, or the like). Additionally, at least the major surface 612 of the slab 600 may include a plurality of veins 607 that are oriented in a transverse direction relative to the veins 602, 605, 606, 608 and 609. Such veins may be defined, for example, by

the secondary dispenser 190 (refer to FIGs. 2 and 3). Some of these “widthwise” veins 607 can extend fully across a complete width of the hardened slab 600 (which may be about 2 feet and about 6 feet wide, and preferably about 4.5 feet wide in this embodiment). Because each slab 600 in the set of separately molded slabs (refer, for example, to the system in FIGs. 2 and 3) can include the layers of different particulate mineral mixes dispensed vertically into the mold 130 according to the predefined and repeatable dispensation pattern, multiple slabs 600 in the set can have similarly positioned veins in the major surface and can provide substantially the same appearance to one another.

[0042] The synthetic molded slab 600 can be cut, milled, machined, or otherwise processed to various shapes and sized (e.g., to provide custom-fit countertop surfaces with optional holes for sinks, faucets, or other amenities). For example, a section 630 is cut away from the synthetic molded slab product 600. With the veins 602 and 605 extending into the interior 606 and/or across the thickness 610, cutting and/or processing of the synthetic molded slab product 600 shows the veins 602, 605, 606, 608 and 609 in a manner that emulates the aesthetics of quarried stone slabs.

[0043] FIG. 8 is a flow diagram of an example process 700 for forming a synthetic molded slab product (such as slab 50 or 600 described above). In some implementations, the systems 100 or 200 of FIGs. 2 and 3 can be used to perform the process 700. The process 700 may include the operation 710 of positioning a slab mold in a non-horizontal orientation, such as a substantially vertical orientation or another orientation that extends transverse to the horizontal. In such an operation, a major face of the mold (which will define a major face of the slab product) can be positioned in a substantially vertical position (about 90 degrees from

the horizontal +/- 30 degrees (preferably +/- 10 degrees)), for example, by a tip table or another mold adjustment apparatus. In some embodiments depicted above herein, the major face of the mold (which will define a major face of the slab product) can be positioned in a vertically oriented position (about 90 degrees from the horizontal +/- 10 degrees) by the tip table 150 (FIGs. 2 and 3). The process 700 may also include the operation 720 of dispensing multiple different particulate mineral mixes into the vertically oriented mold. For example, as previously described, differently pigmented mixes comprising predominantly a quartz material (e.g., a mix including the particulate quartz material, one or more pigments, and one or more resin bonders) can be fed into a vertical pour operation using one of the distributors 160 (FIGs. 2 and 3). Next, the process 700 may include the operation 730 of adjusting the mold to a horizontal orientation while the different particulate mineral mixes are positioned in the mold. Again, such an operation can be performed, for example, by the tip table 150 (FIGs. 2 and 3) or another mold adjustment apparatus. The process 700 may further include the operation 740 of contemporaneously vibrating and compacting the particulate mineral mixes arranged in the mold while the mold is in the horizontal orientation. In such circumstances, the operation 740 may provide a compacted slab of composite stone material. Also, in some embodiments, the process 700 may further include the operation 750 of curing the compacted slab. The process 700 may also include the operation 760 of polishing a major surface of the slab to provide a veined appearance on the polished surface of the slab, including but not limited to the examples described above.

[0044] Although a number of implementations have been described in detail above, other modifications are possible. For example, the logic flows depicted in the figures do not require the particular order shown, or sequential order, to achieve

desirable results. In addition, other steps may be provided, or steps may be eliminated, from the described flows, and other components may be added to, or removed from, the described systems. Accordingly, other implementations are within the scope of the following claims.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

- 1 1. A synthetic molded slab comprising a quartz material, comprising:
2 a major surface at least 2 feet wide by at least 6 feet long and extending
3 perpendicularly to a slab thickness, the major surface having at least a first
4 pigmented vein extending generally lengthwise from edge-to-edge that separates at
5 least two other veins extending generally lengthwise and positioned on opposing
6 edges of the first pigmented vein, wherein the first pigmented vein has a vein
7 thickness equal to and parallel to the slab thickness.

- 8 2. The synthetic molded slab of claim 1, further comprising a plurality of
9 transverse pigmented veins extending transversely to and intersecting the first
10 pigmented vein, the transverse pigmented veins having a different color than the first
11 pigmented vein.

- 12 3. The synthetic molded slab of claim 2, wherein at least one of the transverse
13 pigmented veins extends generally widthwise from edge-to-edge.

- 14 4. The synthetic molded slab of claim 2, wherein the transverse pigmented veins
15 are thinner than the first pigmented vein.

- 16 5. The synthetic molded slab of claim 1, wherein the slab comprises the different
17 mineral mixes that each includes the quartz material, one or more pigments, and at
18 least one binder.

- 19 6. The synthetic molded slab of claim 5, wherein the slab comprises at least four
20 differently colored mineral mixes distributed in a series of successive layers
21 according to a predefined pattern, a first of the four differently colored mineral mixes

22 defining the first pigmented vein extending generally lengthwise from edge-to-edge
23 of the slab.

24 7. The synthetic molded slab of claim 6, wherein at least a second of the four
25 differently colored mineral mixes defines the two other veins extending generally
26 lengthwise and positioned on opposing edges of the first pigmented vein.

27 8. The synthetic molded slab of claim 7, wherein the two other veins extend
28 generally lengthwise from edge-to-edge of the slab.

29 9. The synthetic molded slab of claim 8, wherein the major surface of the slab is
30 polished and emulates the appearance of a quarried stone slab due at least in part to
31 the four differently colored mineral mixes distributed in the series of successive
32 layers according to the predefined pattern.

33 10. A set of separately molded synthetic slabs, each respective slab of the set
34 comprising at least four different particulate mineral mixes distributed in the series of
35 successive layers according to a predefined pattern for all of the separately molded
36 synthetic slabs, the four different particulate mineral mixes each comprising a quartz
37 material, one or more pigments, and one or more resin binders, wherein each
38 respective slab is rectangular and has major surface with a width or at least 2 feet
39 and a length of at least 6 feet, wherein at least one of the four different particulate
40 mineral mixes defines substantially lengthwise veins extending for a majority of the
41 length of each respective slab such that the major surface of each respective slab in
42 the set has similarly positioned and colored substantially lengthwise veins.

43 11. The set of separately molded synthetic slabs of claim 10, wherein at least one
44 of the substantially lengthwise veins of each respective slab extends fully lengthwise
45 from edge-to-edge of the respective slab.

46 12. The set of separately molded synthetic slabs of claim 11, wherein the major
47 surface of each respective slab of the set further comprises a plurality of transverse
48 pigmented veins extending transversely to and intersecting the substantially
49 lengthwise veins, the transverse pigmented veins having a different color than the
50 substantially lengthwise veins.

51 13. The set of separately molded synthetic slabs of claim 12, wherein the
52 transverse pigmented veins of each respective slab are thinner than said at least one
53 of the substantially lengthwise veins of the respective slab.

54 14. A process of forming a synthetic molded slab from different particulate mineral
55 mixes, comprising:

56 positioning a slab mold in a substantially vertical orientation;

57 dispensing multiple different particulate mineral mixes into the substantially
58 vertically oriented mold so as to fill a mold space that is at least 6 feet long by at
59 least 2 feet wide, the multiple different particulate mineral mixes each comprising
60 predominantly a quartz material;

61 adjusting the mold to a substantially horizontal orientation while the different
62 particulate mineral mixes are positioned in the mold; and

63 contemporaneously vibrating and compacting the particulate mineral mixes
64 arranged in the mold while the mold is in the substantially horizontal orientation.

65 15. The process of claim 14, wherein said dispensing comprises substantially
66 vertically depositing the multiple different particulate mineral mixes into the mold
67 according to a predefined and repeatable pattern so as to define successive layers
68 of multiple different particulate mineral mixes.

69 16. The process of claim 15, wherein at least some of the successive layers of
70 multiple different particulate mineral mixes provide lengthwise veins of the synthetic
71 molded slab.

72 17. The process of claim 14, wherein said dispensing multiple different particulate
73 mineral mixes comprises pouring multiple differently pigmented particulate quartz
74 mixes into the substantially vertically oriented mold according to a predetermined
75 pattern.

76
77 18. The process of claim 17, wherein the substantially vertically oriented mold
78 defines the mold space having a first edge thickness that is smaller than and parallel
79 to a second edge thickness proximate to an upwardly facing opening of the mold.

80
81 19. The process of claim 18, wherein said contemporaneously vibrating and
82 compacting provides a rectangular molded slab having a thickness that is generally
83 constant at its four edges.

84 20. The process of claim 17, wherein said pouring according to the predetermined
85 pattern provides successive layers of differently pigmented particulate quartz mixes,
86 wherein at least some of the successive layers of differently pigmented particulate
87 quartz mixes provide lengthwise veins of the synthetic molded slab.

88 21. A synthetic molded slab formed according to the process of claim 14.

89

90 22. A system forming a synthetic molded slab using a combination of different
91 particulate mineral mixes, comprising:

92 a mold adjustment apparatus configured to reposition a slab mold defining a
93 mold space that is at least 6 feet long by at least 2 feet wide from a substantially
94 vertical orientation to a substantially horizontal orientation; and

95 one or more mineral aggregate distributors that are each configured to
96 dispense a corresponding particular mineral mix vertically into the slab mold retained
97 by the mold adjustment apparatus.

98 23. The system of claim 22, wherein said one or more mineral aggregate
99 distributors include dispensing heads configured to distribute at least first, second,
100 third, and fourth differently pigmented particulate mineral mixes, wherein the
101 dispensing heads output the at least first, second, third, and fourth differently
102 pigmented particulate mineral mixes according to a predetermined control algorithm
103 so as to define successive layers of the differently pigmented particulate mineral
104 mixes for vertical dispensation into the slab mold retained by the mold adjustment
105 apparatus.

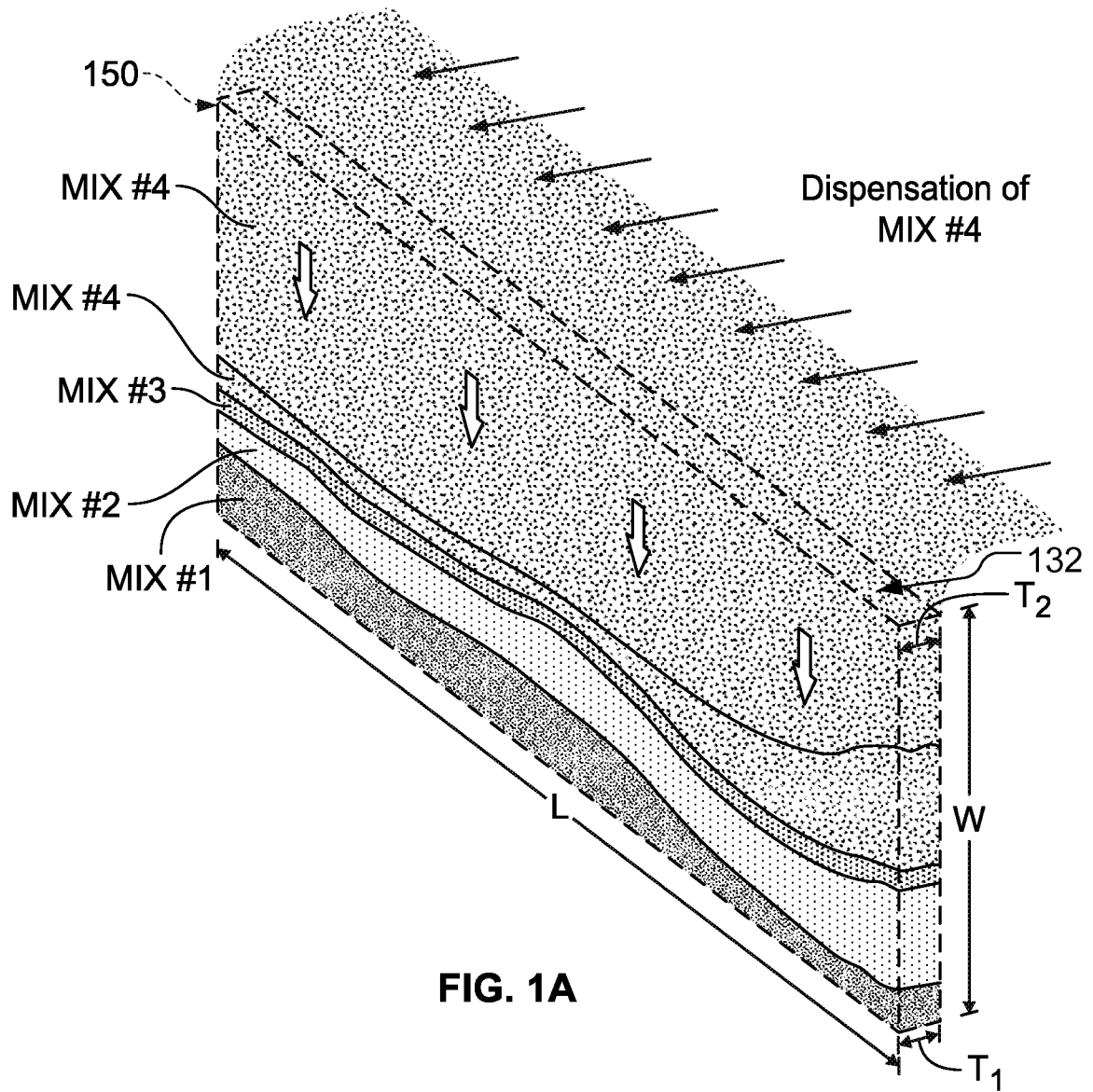


FIG. 1A

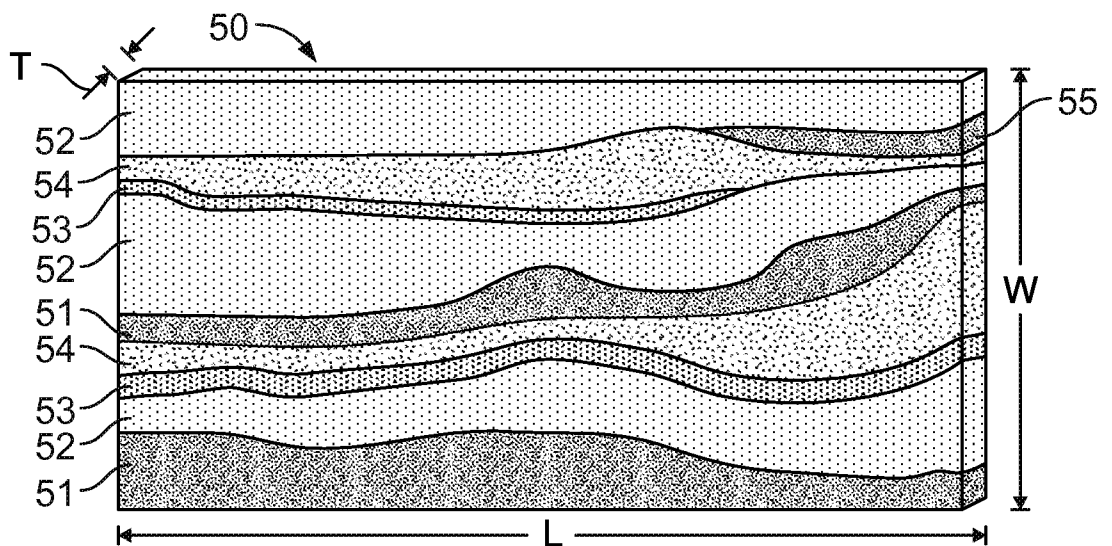


FIG. 1B

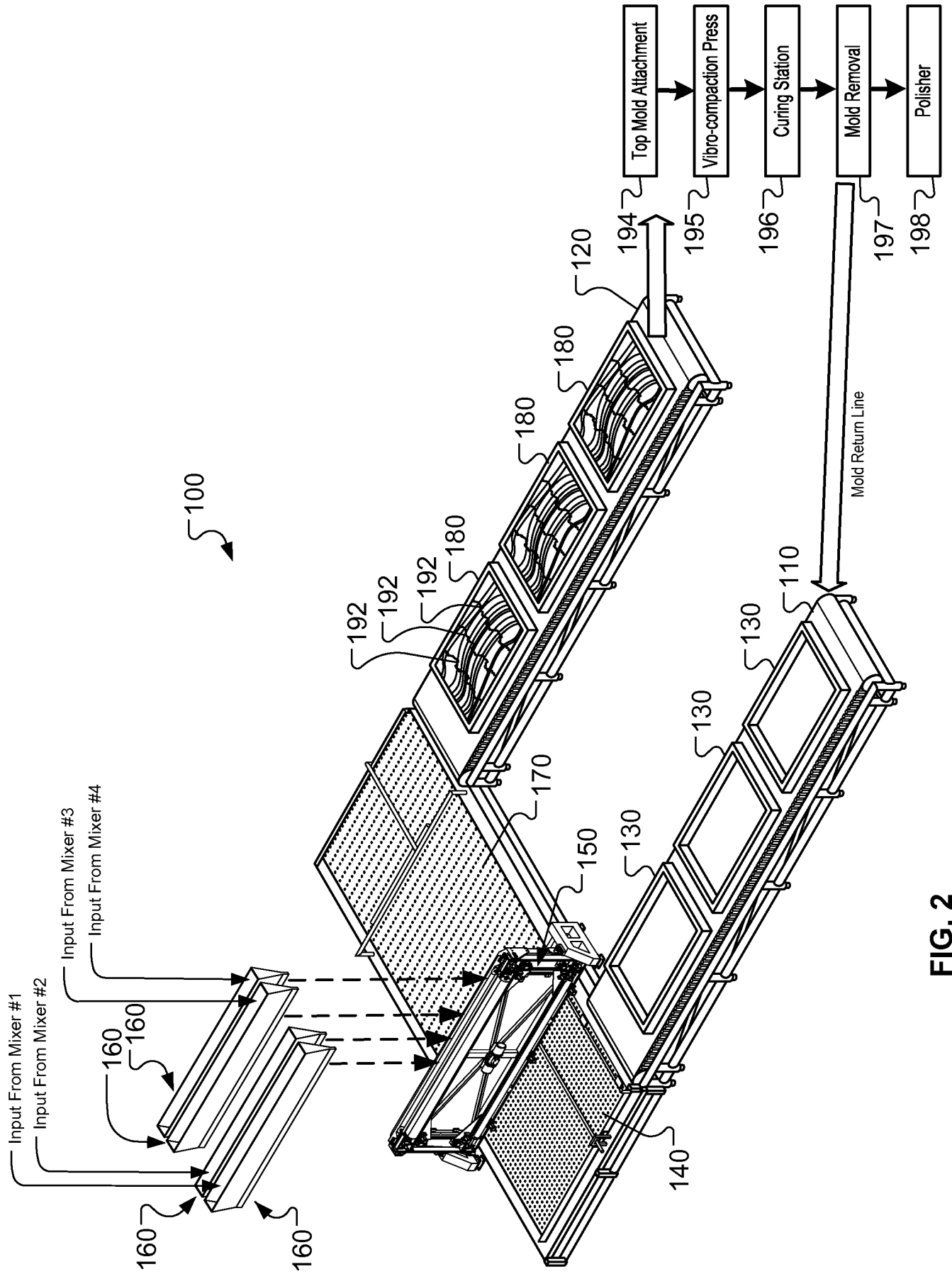


FIG. 2

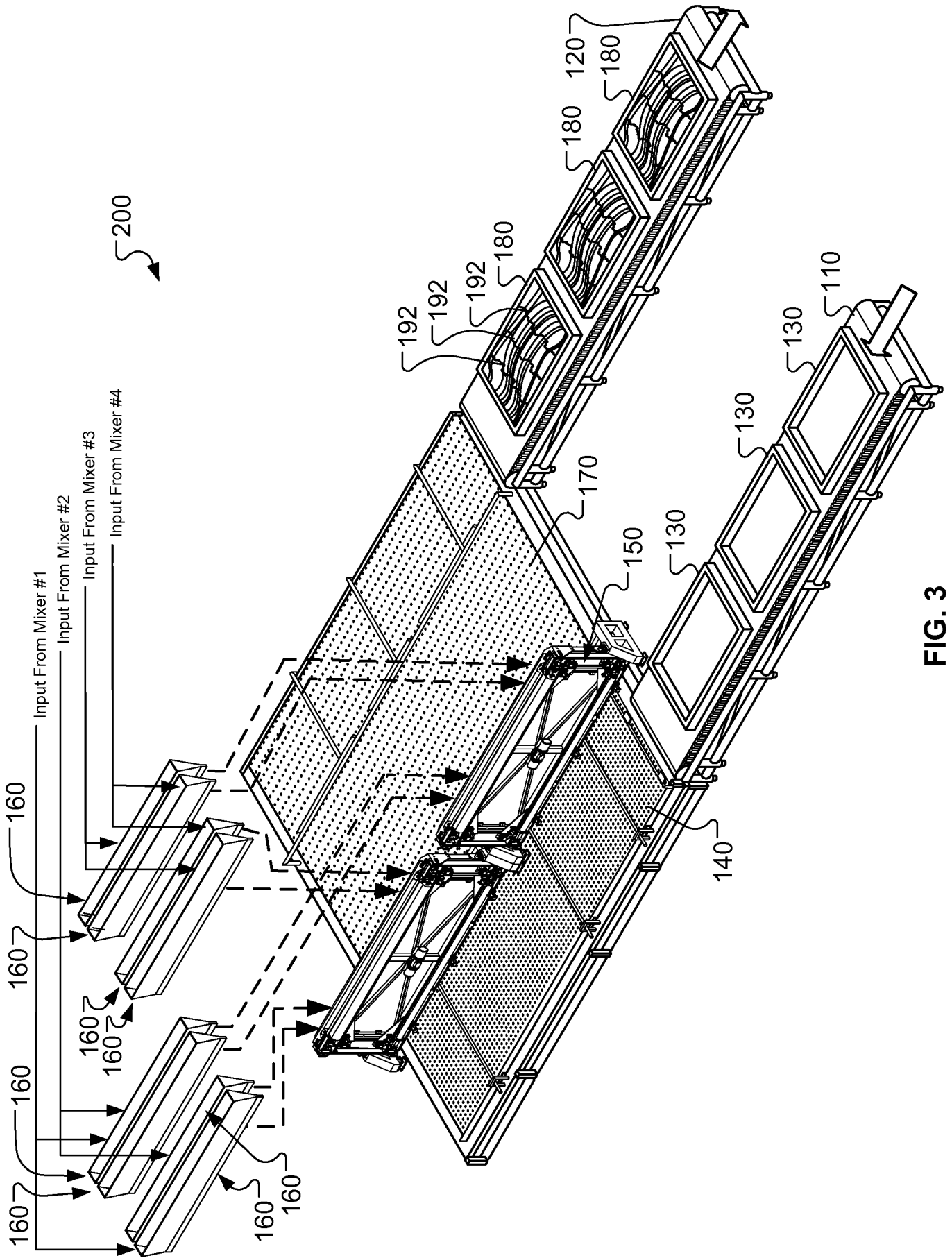


FIG. 3

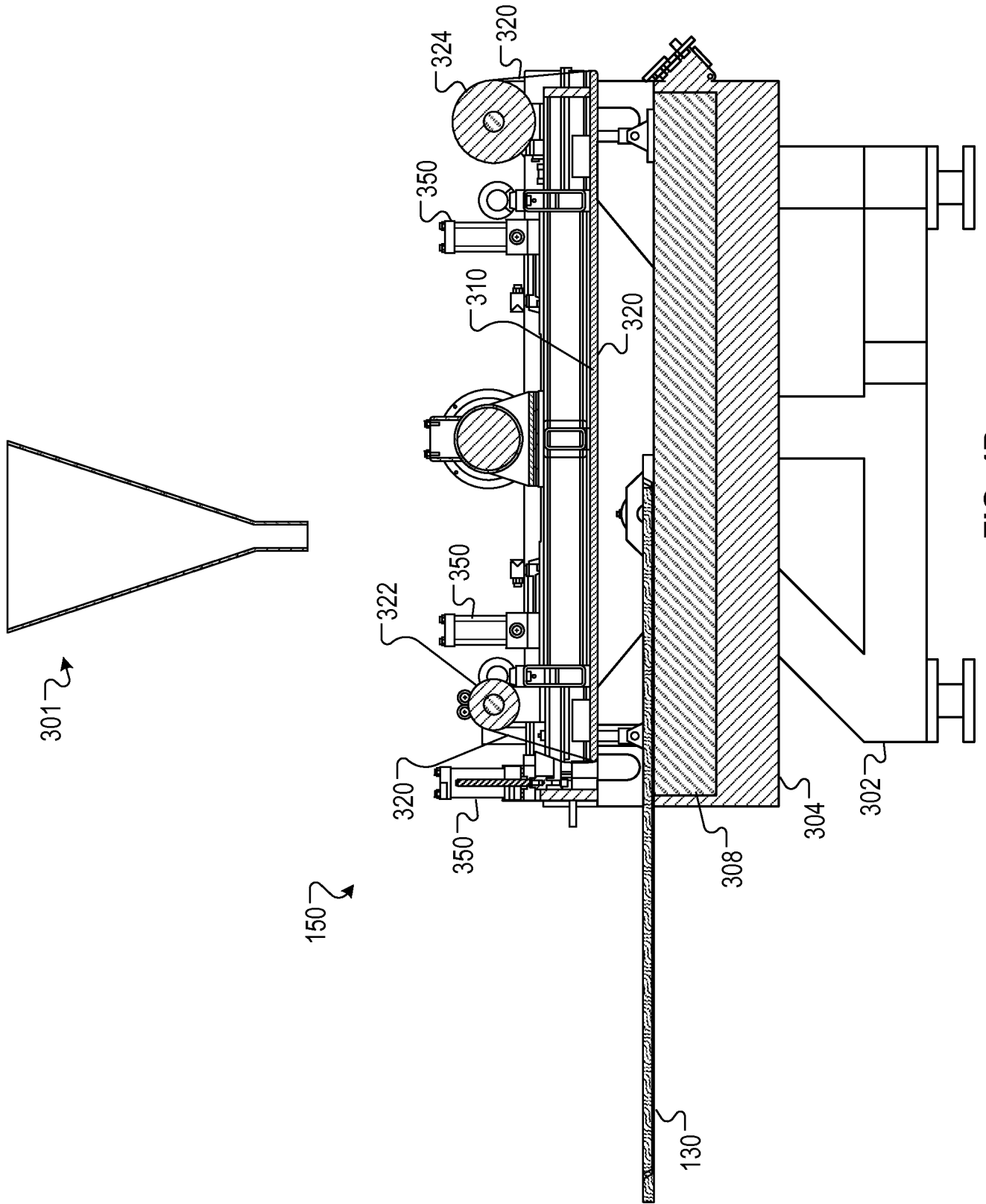


FIG. 4B

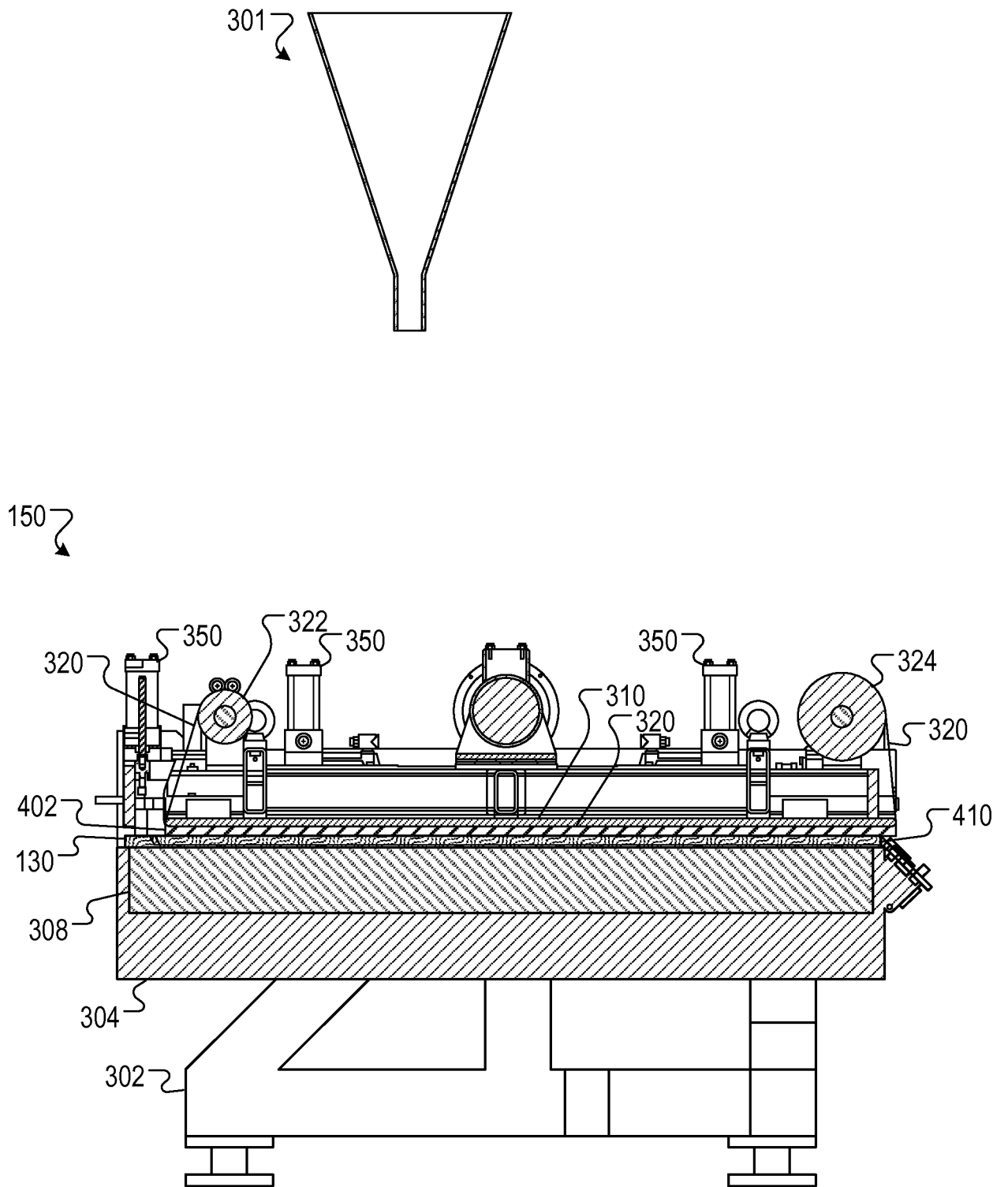


FIG. 5

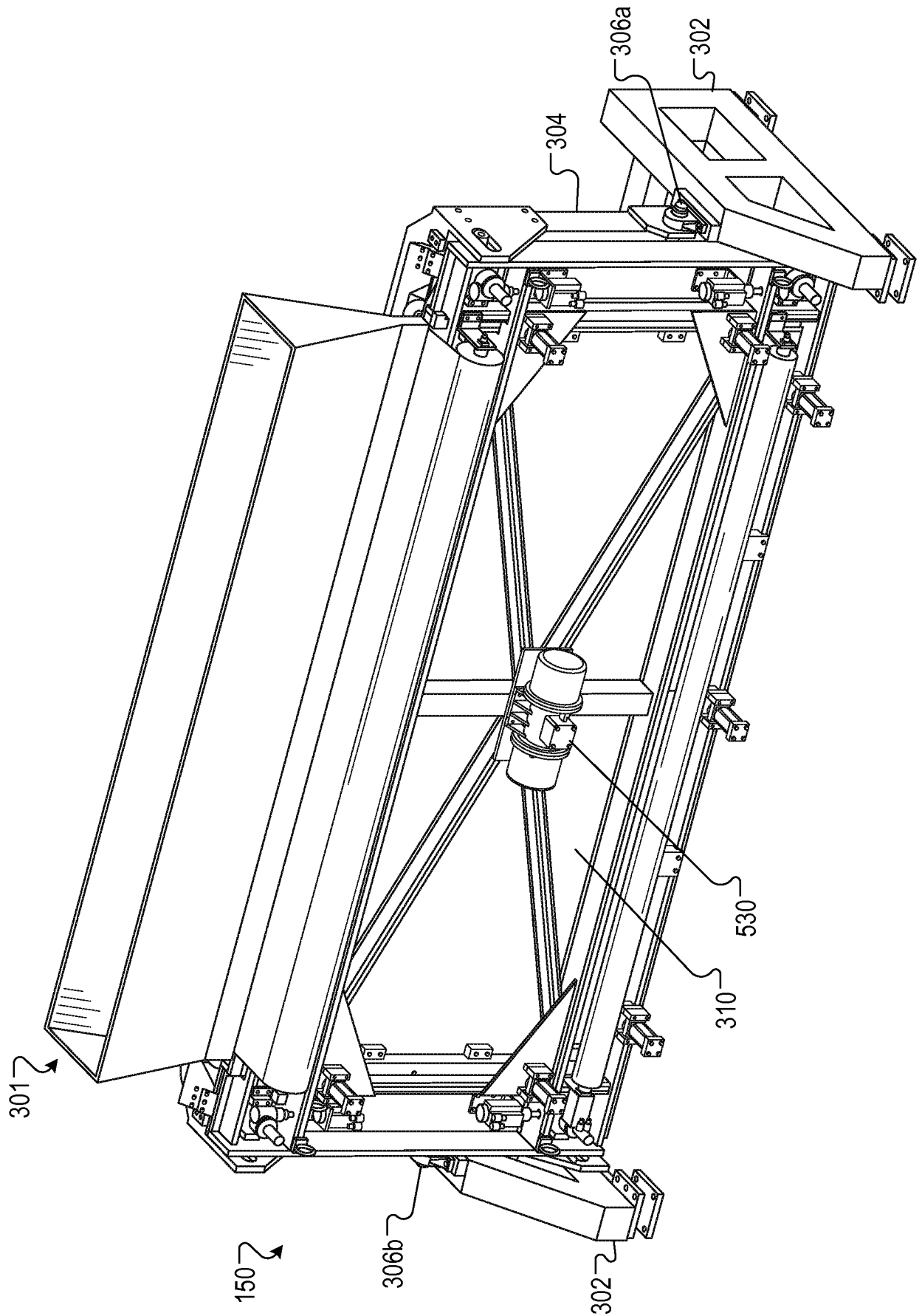


FIG. 6A

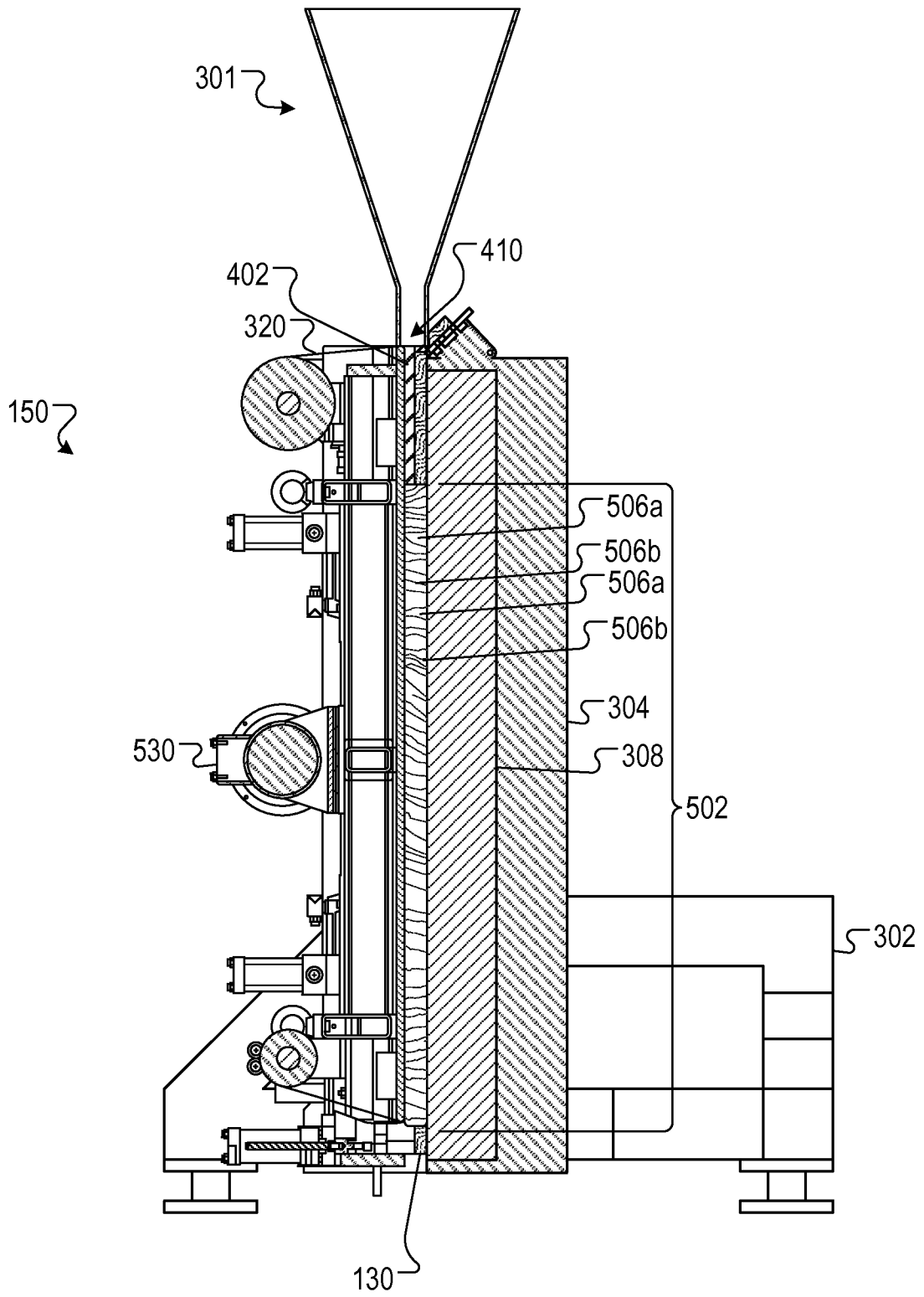


FIG. 6b

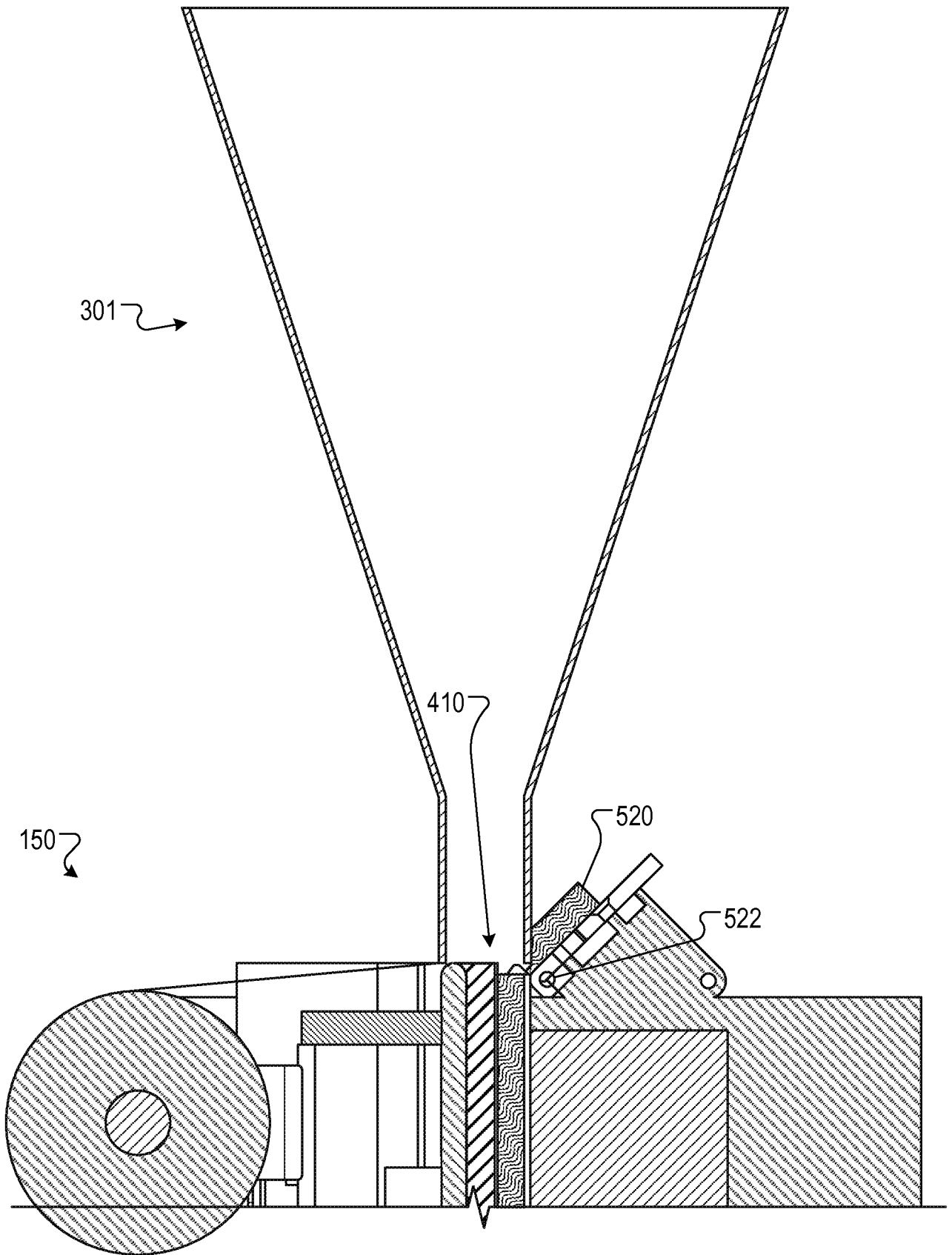


FIG. 6C

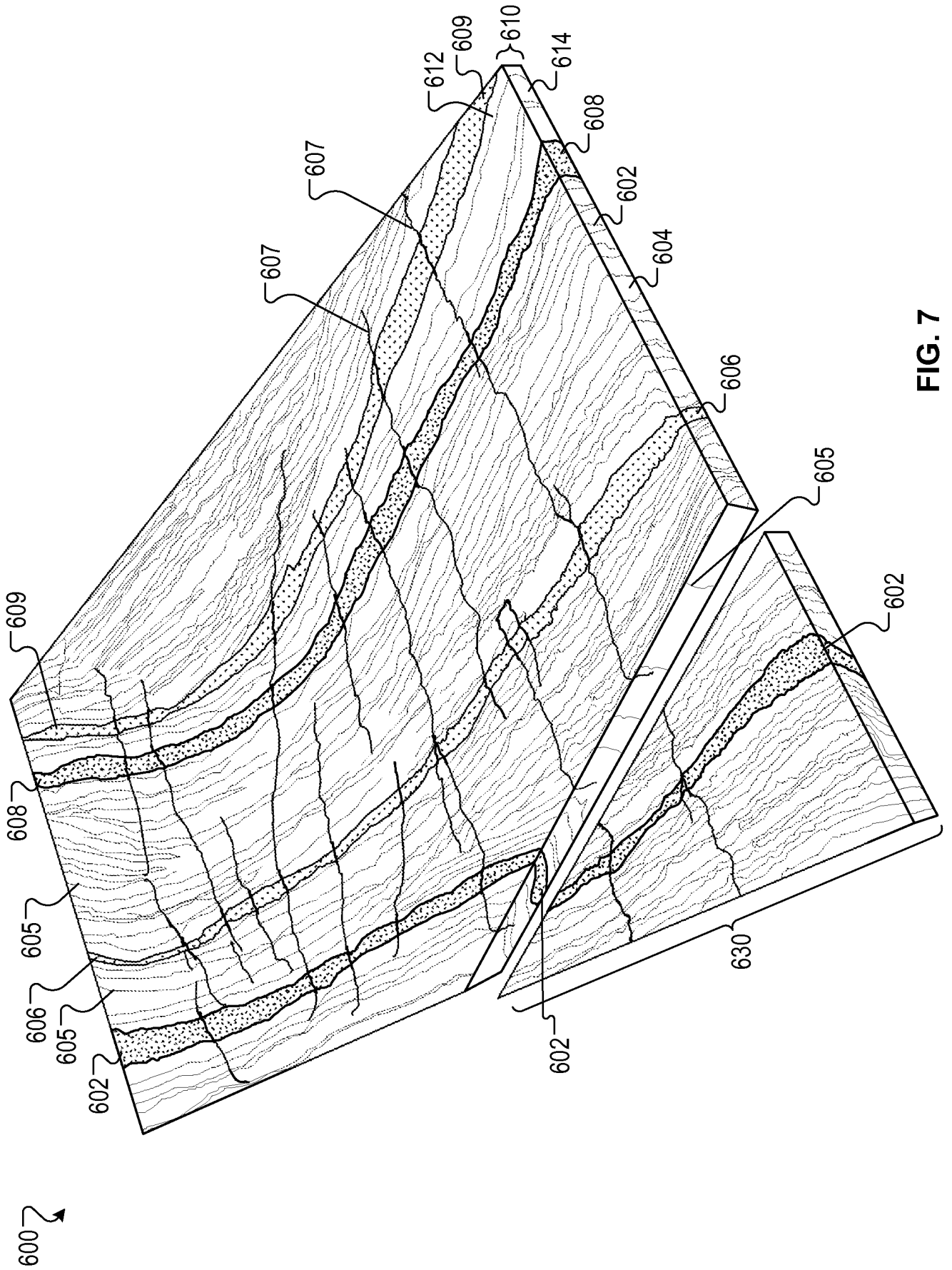


FIG. 7

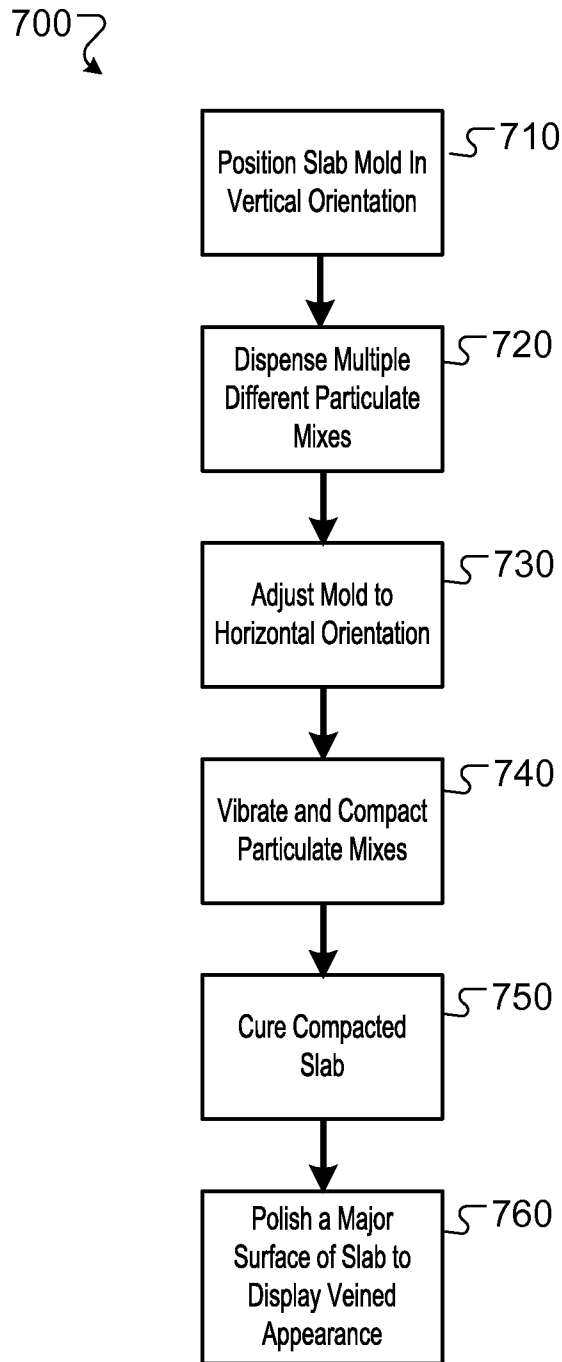


FIG. 8

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US 15/45693

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER IPC(8) - B28B 1/14, B29C 41/18, C03B 19/02, C04B 14/06, C04B 103/54 (2015.01) CPC - B28B 1/14, B29C 41/18, B29C 44/0476, C03B 19/02, C04B 14/06, C04B 2103/54 According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC																			
B. FIELDS SEARCHED Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols) IPC(8)- B28B 1/14, B29C 41/18, C03B 19/02, C04B 14/06, C04B 103/54 (2015.01); CPC- B28B 1/14, B29C 41/18, B29C 44/0476, C03B 19/02, C04B 14/06, C04B 2103/54 Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched USPC- 106/688, 106/707, 106/709, 106/714, 106/737, 106/738, 264/299, 264/327, 264/333; Patents and NPL (classification, keyword; search terms below) Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used) Pub West (US EP JP WO), Pat Base (AU BE BR CA CH CN DE DK EP ES FI FR GB IN JP KR SE TH TW US WO), Google Patent, Google Scholar, Free Patents Online; search terms: slab, cast, mold, mould, quartz, aggregate, inorganic, glass, sand, vein, stratify, striation, layer, edge, width, length, long, dimension, pigment, edge, evenly, uniform...																			
C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT																			
<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Category*</th> <th>Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages</th> <th>Relevant to claim No.</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>X -- Y</td> <td>US 2012/0003453 A1 (BUSKILA et al.) 05 January 2012 (05.01.2012), Fig. 3B; para [0007], [0014], [0018], [0021], [0029], [0035], [0050], [0051]</td> <td>1, 5, 10, 11 ----- 2-4, 6-9, 12, 13</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Y</td> <td>US 1,568,070 A (JENNENS) 05 January 1926 (05.01.1926), Figs. 1-5; pg 1, col 1, ln 46 to pg 2, col 1, ln 24</td> <td>2-4, 6-9, 12, 13</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Y</td> <td>US 8,636,941 B1 (CIUPERCA) 28 January 2014 (28.01.2014), col 3, ln 23 to col 27, ln 50</td> <td>1-13</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Y</td> <td>US 2008/0153688 A1 (BORENS et al.) 26 June 2008 (26.06.2008), para [0024]-[0125]</td> <td>1-13</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Y</td> <td>US 2007/0216058 A1 (CARRERAS-MALDONADO et al.) 20 September 2007 (20.09.2007), para [0004]-[0056]</td> <td>1-13</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.	X -- Y	US 2012/0003453 A1 (BUSKILA et al.) 05 January 2012 (05.01.2012), Fig. 3B; para [0007], [0014], [0018], [0021], [0029], [0035], [0050], [0051]	1, 5, 10, 11 ----- 2-4, 6-9, 12, 13	Y	US 1,568,070 A (JENNENS) 05 January 1926 (05.01.1926), Figs. 1-5; pg 1, col 1, ln 46 to pg 2, col 1, ln 24	2-4, 6-9, 12, 13	Y	US 8,636,941 B1 (CIUPERCA) 28 January 2014 (28.01.2014), col 3, ln 23 to col 27, ln 50	1-13	Y	US 2008/0153688 A1 (BORENS et al.) 26 June 2008 (26.06.2008), para [0024]-[0125]	1-13	Y	US 2007/0216058 A1 (CARRERAS-MALDONADO et al.) 20 September 2007 (20.09.2007), para [0004]-[0056]	1-13	
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<input type="checkbox"/> Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C. <input type="checkbox"/>																			
<table border="0"> <tr> <td>* Special categories of cited documents:</td> <td>"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention</td> </tr> <tr> <td>"A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance</td> <td>"X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone</td> </tr> <tr> <td>"E" earlier application or patent but published on or after the international filing date</td> <td>"Y" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art</td> </tr> <tr> <td>"L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)</td> <td>"&" document member of the same patent family</td> </tr> <tr> <td>"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>		* Special categories of cited documents:	"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention	"A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance	"X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone	"E" earlier application or patent but published on or after the international filing date	"Y" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art	"L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)	"&" document member of the same patent family	"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means		"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed							
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"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means																			
"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed																			
Date of the actual completion of the international search 04 December 2015 (04.12.2015)	Date of mailing of the international search report 04 JAN 2016																		
Name and mailing address of the ISA/US Mail Stop PCT, Attn: ISA/US, Commissioner for Patents P.O. Box 1450, Alexandria, Virginia 22313-1450 Facsimile No. 571-273-8300	Authorized officer: Lee W. Young PCT Helpdesk: 571-272-4300 PCT OSP: 571-272-7774																		

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US 15/45693

Box No. II Observations where certain claims were found unsearchable (Continuation of item 2 of first sheet)

This international search report has not been established in respect of certain claims under Article 17(2)(a) for the following reasons:

1. Claims Nos.:
because they relate to subject matter not required to be searched by this Authority, namely:

2. Claims Nos.:
because they relate to parts of the international application that do not comply with the prescribed requirements to such an extent that no meaningful international search can be carried out, specifically:

3. Claims Nos.:
because they are dependent claims and are not drafted in accordance with the second and third sentences of Rule 6.4(a).

Box No. III Observations where unity of invention is lacking (Continuation of item 3 of first sheet)

This International Searching Authority found multiple inventions in this international application, as follows:
This application contains the following inventions or groups of inventions which are not so linked as to form a single general inventive concept under PCT Rule 13.1. In order for all inventions to be examined, the appropriate additional examination fees must be paid.

Group I: Claims 1-13, drawn to a synthetic molded slab comprising a quartz material.

Group II: Claims 14-21, drawn to a process of forming a synthetic molded slab from different particulate mineral mixes.

Group III: Claims 22 and 23, drawn to a system forming a synthetic molded slab using a combination of different particulate mineral mixes.

-- Please See Supplemental Box --

1. As all required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant, this international search report covers all searchable claims.
2. As all searchable claims could be searched without effort justifying additional fees, this Authority did not invite payment of additional fees.
3. As only some of the required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant, this international search report covers only those claims for which fees were paid, specifically claims Nos.:

4. No required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant. Consequently, this international search report is restricted to the invention first mentioned in the claims; it is covered by claims Nos.:
1-13

- Remark on Protest**
- The additional search fees were accompanied by the applicant's protest and, where applicable, the payment of a protest fee.
 - The additional search fees were accompanied by the applicant's protest but the applicable protest fee was not paid within the time limit specified in the invitation.
 - No protest accompanied the payment of additional search fees.

Continued from Box No. III, Observations where unity of invention is lacking,

The inventions listed as Groups I, II, and III do not relate to a single general inventive concept under PCT Rule 13.1 because, under PCT Rule 13.2, they lack the same or corresponding special technical features for the following reasons:

Special Technical Features

Groups II and III do not require a slab comprising: a major surface at least 2 feet wide by at least 6 feet long and extending perpendicularly to a slab thickness, the major surface having at least a first pigmented vein extending generally lengthwise from edge-to-edge that separates at least two other veins extending generally lengthwise and positioned on opposing edges of the first pigmented vein, wherein the first pigmented vein has a vein thickness equal to and parallel to the slab thickness, as required by Group I.

Groups I and III do not require a process of forming a synthetic molded slab from different particulate mineral mixes, comprising: positioning a slab mold in a substantially vertical orientation; dispensing multiple different particulate mineral mixes, the multiple different particulate mineral mixes each comprising a material; adjusting the mold to a substantially horizontal orientation while the different particulate mineral mixes are positioned in the mold; and contemporaneously vibrating and compacting the particulate mineral mixes arranged in the mold while the mold is in the substantially horizontal orientation, as required by Group II.

Groups I and II do not require a system forming a synthetic molded slab, comprising: a mold adjustment apparatus configured to reposition a slab mold defining a mold space from a substantially vertical orientation to a substantially horizontal orientation; and one or more mineral aggregate distributors, as required by Group III.

Shared Common Features

The only feature shared by Groups I, II, and III that would otherwise unify the groups is a synthetic molded slab. However, this shared technical feature does not represent a contribution over prior art, because the shared technical feature is anticipated by US 8,636,941 B1 (Ciuperca). Ciuperca discloses a synthetic molded slab (col 3, ln 28-37).

The only feature shared by Groups I and II that would otherwise unify the groups is a quartz material. However, this shared technical feature does not represent a contribution over prior art, because the shared technical feature is anticipated by Ciuperca. Ciuperca a quartz material (col 12, ln 9-29).

The only feature shared by Groups II and III that would otherwise unify the groups is the using a combination of different particulate mineral mixes; a mold space that is at least 6 feet long by at least 2 feet wide; dispensing a corresponding particular mineral mix vertically into the slab mold retained by the mold adjustment apparatus. However, this shared technical feature does not represent a contribution over prior art, because the shared technical feature is anticipated by Ciuperca. Ciuperca discloses using a combination of different particulate mineral mixes (col 11, ln 34 to col 12, ln 29, cementitious materials.. having particle sizes of less than 10 microns... materials such as limestone powder, quartz, or other finely divided minerals.); a mold space that is at least 6 feet long by at least 2 feet wide (Fig. 1; col 8, ln 19-30; col 18, ln 39-61, concrete form, 22, shown, comprising conventional 8 feet by 2 feet concrete forms.); and filling a corresponding particular mineral mix into the slab mold retained by the mold adjustment apparatus (Fig. 1; col 8, ln 31-42; col 18, ln 39-61, horizontal concrete form, 22, filled with cementitious mixed material.); but does not specifically disclose dispensing vertically. To a person of ordinary skill in the art, it would have been obvious through routine experimentation to select amongst conventional concrete dispensing apparatus in order to optimize the filling of the concrete slab.

As the technical features were known in the art at the time of the invention, this cannot be considered a special technical feature that would otherwise unify the groups. Groups I, II, and III therefore lack unity under PCT Rule 13 because they do not share a same or corresponding special technical feature.