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(54) **VEHICLE INTERIOR PANEL WITH INTEGRAL WIRE HARNESS**

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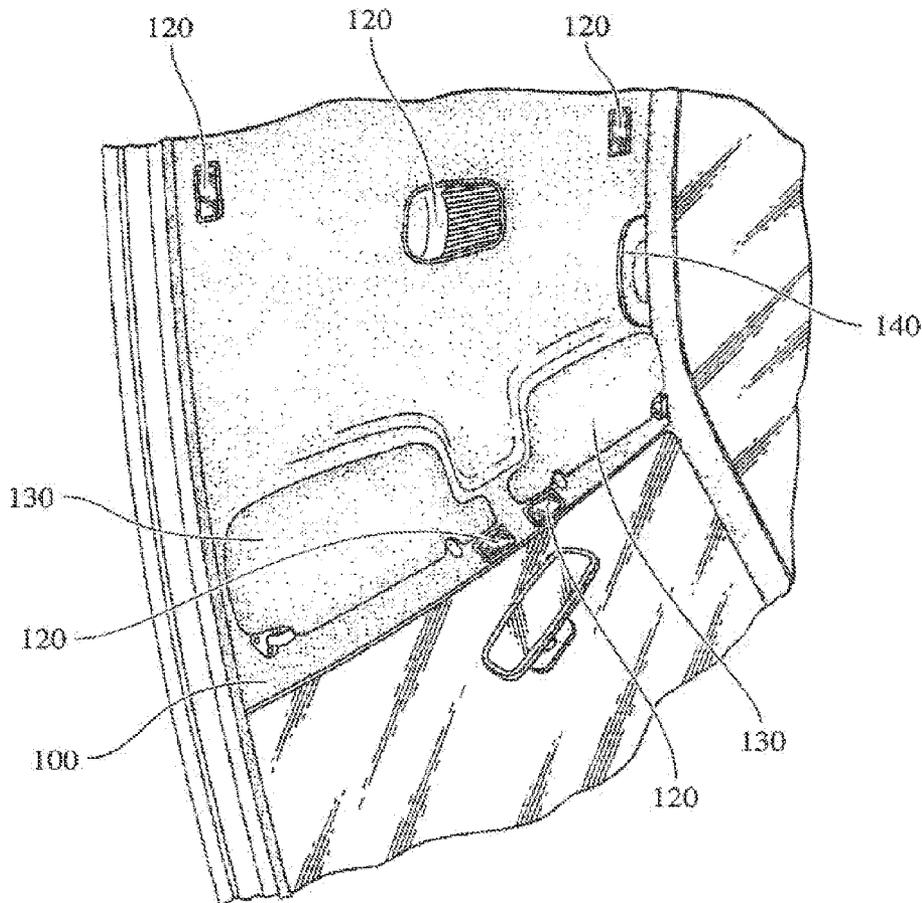
(57) **ABSTRACT**

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An interior panel, for use in a vehicle that includes a plurality of electrical devices and a vehicle component frame, includes printed electrical connection means for connecting the electrical devices in the vehicle and a substrate layer that has an inner surface directed towards the vehicle component frame. The electrical connection layer means are printed on the inner surface of the substrate layer using an electrically conductive ink.

Related U.S. Application Data

(63) Continuation of application No. 13/143,377, filed on Sep. 21, 2011, now Pat. No. 8,733,828, filed as application No. PCT/US10/20090 on Jan. 5, 2010.



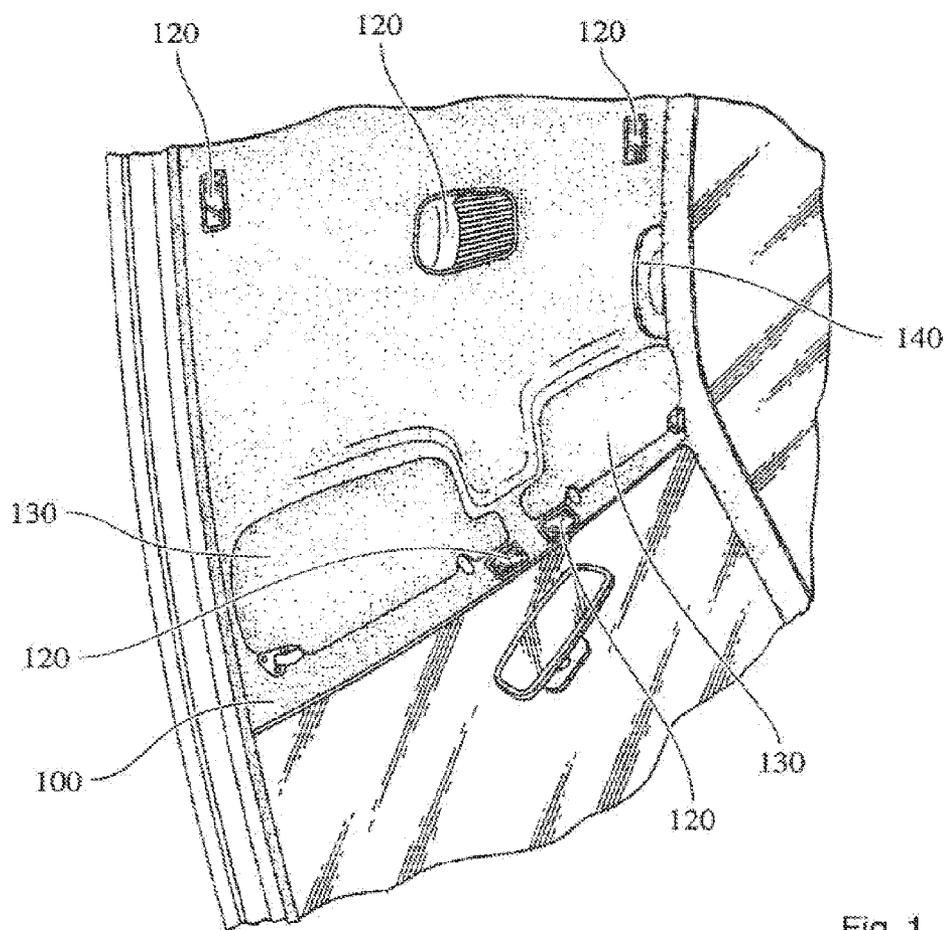
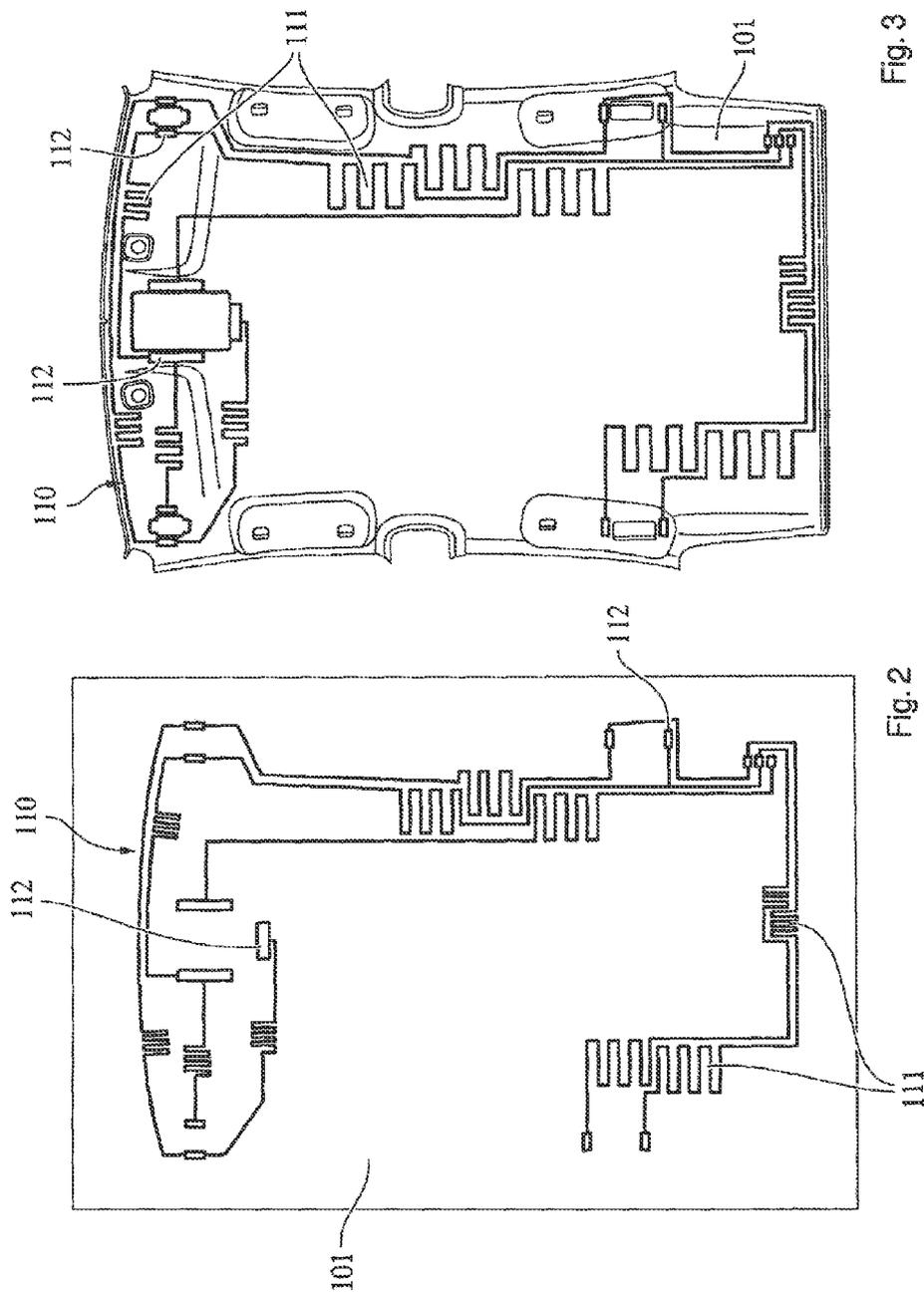


Fig. 1



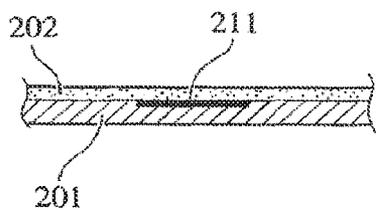
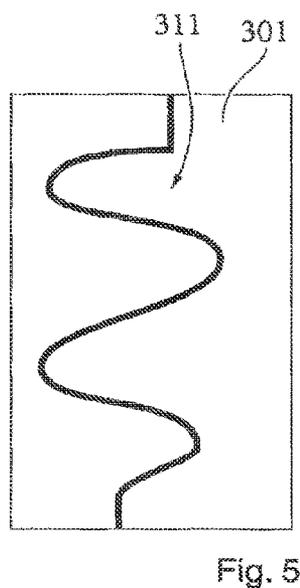
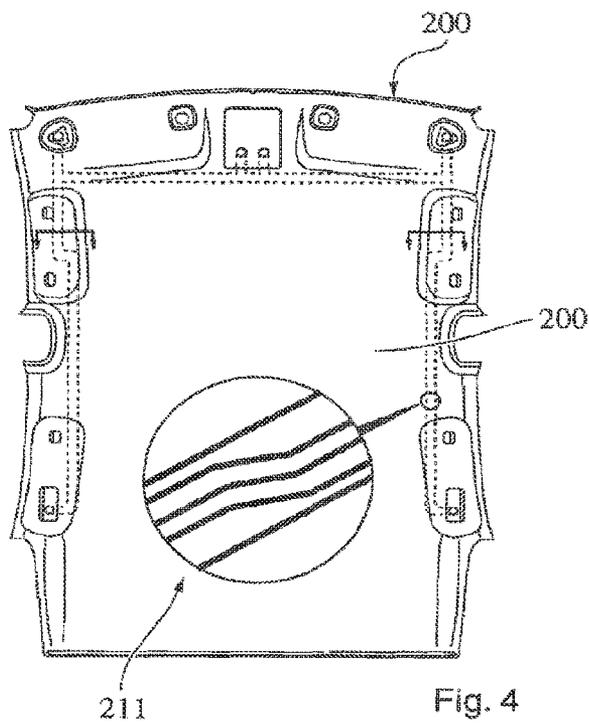


Fig. 6

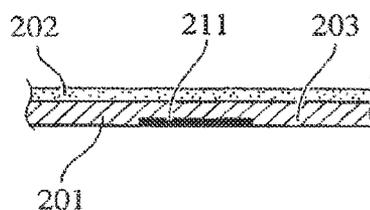
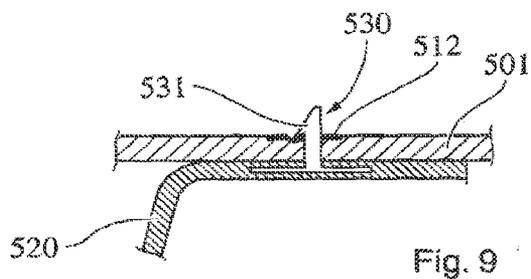
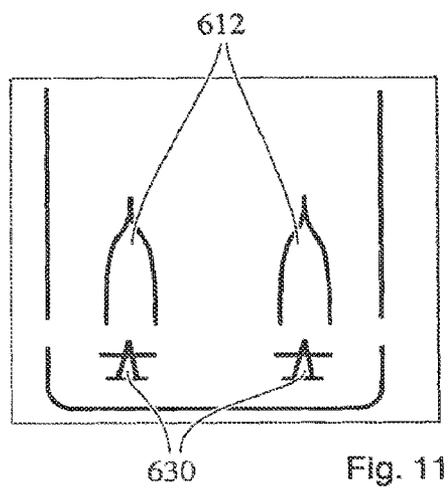
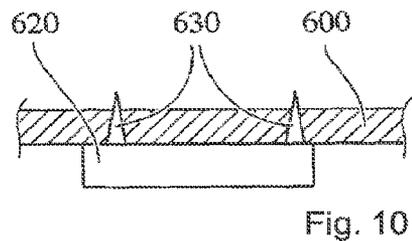
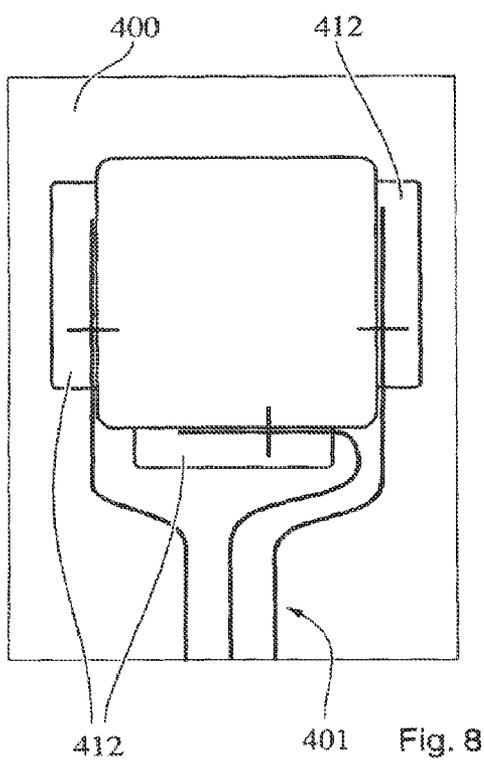


Fig. 7



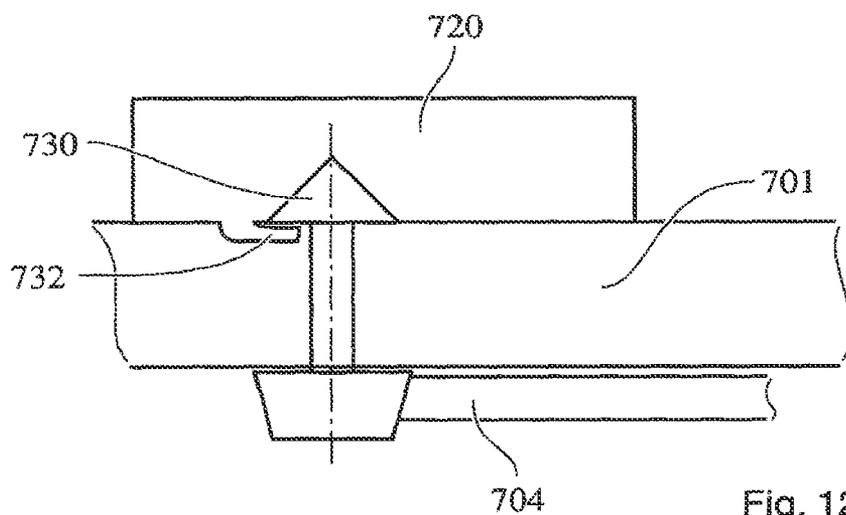


Fig. 12

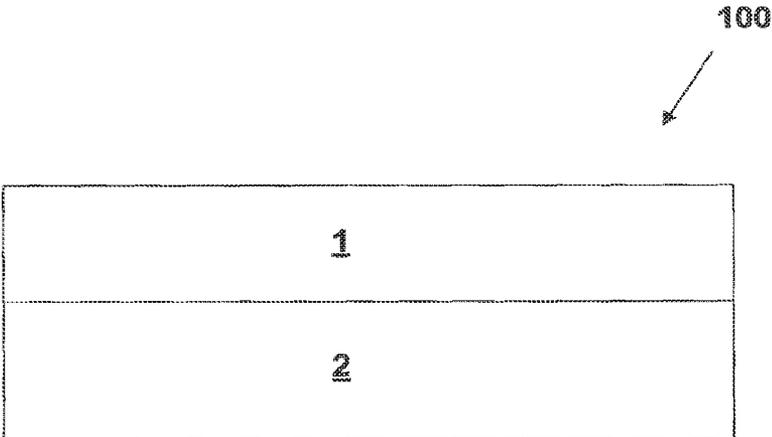


Fig. 13

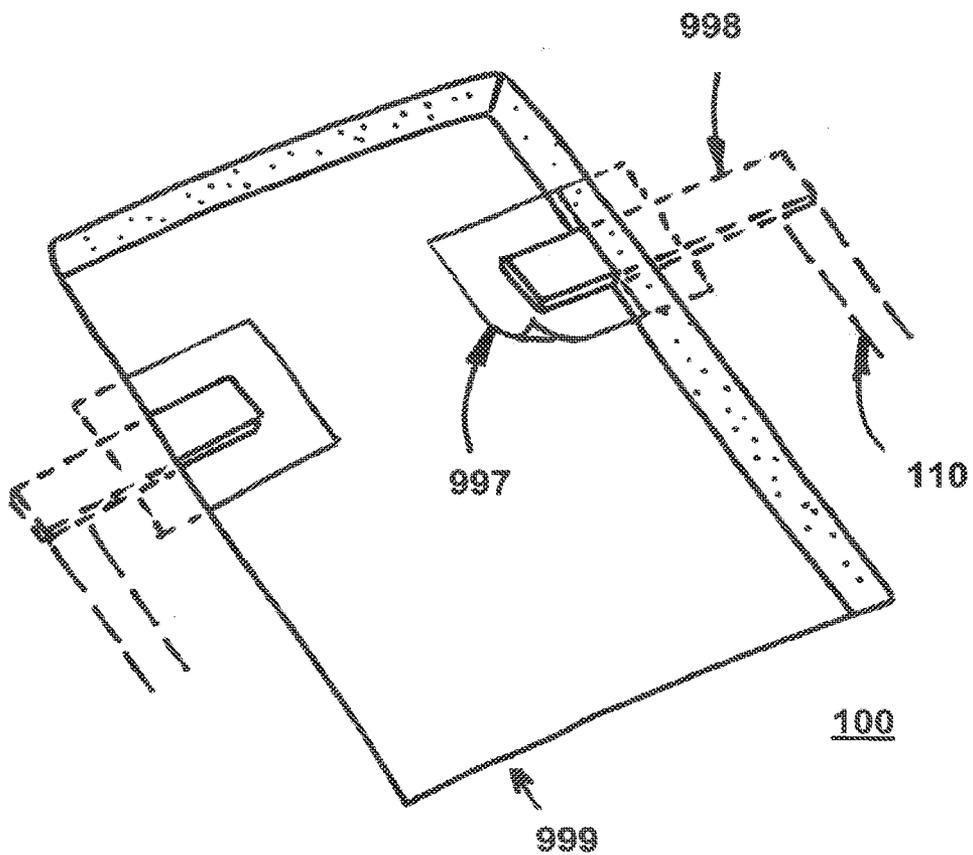


Fig. 14

VEHICLE INTERIOR PANEL WITH INTEGRAL WIRE HARNESS

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application is a continuation of co-pending U.S. patent application Ser. No. 13/143,377 filed on Sep. 21, 2011, which is a national stage entry under 35 U.S.C. §371 of International Patent Application No. PCT/US2010/020090 filed Jan. 5, 2010, which claims priority to U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 61/142,769 filed on Jan. 6, 2009, the entire contents of all of which are incorporated herein by reference.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] This invention relates to a roof structure, especially a vehicle overhead system including a headliner with an integral wire harness, a method for manufacturing this roof structure and a system comprising such a roof structure, a connector and a conductive pad.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] Many vehicle overhead systems include electrical wiring behind the vehicle headliner to provide power to and/or communication with various controls, such as, for example, garage door opener or compass, and/or features such as, for example, a dome light. With conventional overhead systems, standard wires such as, for example, stranded, insulated copper or other metallic wires are installed between the headliner and the vehicle roof.

[0004] Overhead systems are currently installed in motor vehicles in a series of steps at a plurality of stations on a vehicle assembly line. Individual overhead system components that require electricity as a power source or to provide a signal are individually connected to the vehicle body electrical system at the time of assembly. A wire harness, including all of the wiring necessary for the overhead system components, is attached to the back of the headliner with, for example, tape or hot melt glue. The various wires forming the wire harness are typically located between the headliner and the roof of the vehicle. When the wires are located between the headliner and the roof, they sometimes contact the roof structural supports. This contact between the wire and the roof structural supports may result in the wire being pinched, cut, or having the insulation rubbed off to cause a short circuit as the wire contacts the vehicle body. The insulation and/or other wrappings required for traditional wire harnesses also add significantly to headliner weight.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0005] The invention provides, in one aspect, an interior panel for use in a vehicle that includes a plurality of electrical devices and a vehicle component frame. The interior panel includes printed electrical connection means for connecting the electrical devices in the vehicle and a substrate layer that has an inner surface directed towards the vehicle component frame. The electrical connection means are printed on the inner surface of the substrate layer using an electrically conductive ink.

[0006] The invention provides, in another aspect, a method for manufacturing an interior panel of a vehicle that includes a plurality of electrical devices. The method includes printing electrical connection means on the interior panel using an

electrically conductive ink and piercing the interior panel with an electrical connector to connect one of the electrical devices to the electrical connection means.

[0007] The invention provides, in yet another aspect, a system including an electrical device and an interior panel with printed electrical connection means and a printed conductive pad. An electrical connector pierces through the interior panel to connect the electrical device with the conductive pad, and the electrical connection means are printed on the interior panel using an electrically conductive ink.

[0008] The invention provides, in a further aspect, an interior panel for use in a vehicle that includes a plurality of electrical devices and a vehicle component frame. The interior panel includes a printed wire harness for connecting the electrical devices in the vehicle and a substrate layer having an inner surface directed towards the vehicle component frame. The wire harness is printed on the inner surface of the substrate layer using an electrically conductive ink.

[0009] Other aspects of the invention will become apparent by consideration of the detailed description and accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0010] Various exemplary embodiments of the systems and methods according to the present disclosure will be described in detail, with reference to the following figures, wherein:

[0011] FIG. 1 is a partial perspective view of the interior of a vehicle;

[0012] FIG. 2 is a top view of a first exemplary embodiment of a headliner substrate with an exemplary circuit on the headliner substrate according to this invention;

[0013] FIG. 3 is a top view of a first exemplary embodiment of a headliner according to this invention after being formed and trimmed, including the headliner substrate of FIG. 2;

[0014] FIG. 4 is a top view of a headliner according to this invention;

[0015] FIG. 5 is a top view of an exemplary embodiment of a strain relief circuit according to this invention;

[0016] FIG. 6 is a partial cross-sectional view of a first exemplary embodiment of a headliner according to this invention taken along the line 6-6 in FIG. 4;

[0017] FIG. 7 is a cross-sectional view of a second exemplary embodiment of a headliner according to this invention;

[0018] FIG. 8 is a top view of an exemplary embodiment of circuitry for a connection point according to this invention;

[0019] FIG. 9 is a cross-sectional view of a first exemplary embodiment of an electrical coupler according to this invention;

[0020] FIG. 10 is a cross-sectional view of a second exemplary embodiment of an electrical coupler according to this invention;

[0021] FIG. 11 is a perspective view of the electrical coupler shown in FIG. 10;

[0022] FIG. 12 is a cross-sectional view of a third exemplary embodiment of an electrical coupler according to this invention;

[0023] FIG. 13 shows schematically a part of a roof structure according to the present invention; and

[0024] FIG. 14 shows schematically a further embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0025] In various exemplary embodiments, this invention relates to a overhead systems with a wire harness for electrically connecting to components integrated into the headliner. For example, the wire harness may be formed by printing the wiring or circuitry on part of the headliner core using a conductive ink and methods for making the same. The wiring or circuitry may be printed either before or after the overhead system is fully assembled. The wiring or circuitry may be printed in various parts of the overhead system, including, for example, on a scrim layer, on a substrate layer, or on a film attached to overhead systems. The overhead systems of this invention are produced at a lower cost, require less space, and weigh less than conventional overhead systems (e.g., headliners and wire harnesses) due to the reduced cost, size, and weight of the wire harness.

[0026] In various exemplary embodiments, the wire harness is incorporated into a film layer that is attached to or otherwise incorporated into the headliner. For example, the wire harness could be formed from flex circuits attached to an overhead systems component.

[0027] FIG. 1 shows a partial view of the interior of a vehicle. In particular, FIG. 1 shows a portion of a headliner 100 adjacent to a front windshield. Various overhead system components are shown attached to or through the headliner 100, such as, for example, various lights 120, visors 130, and hand grips 140. Other components, such as, for example, a center overhead console, control buttons, etc. are also often attached to the headliner 100. Many of these components require electrical power and/or communication with a control to function. This power and/or communication is typically supplied with wires located behind the headliner 100.

[0028] FIG. 2 shows a first exemplary embodiment of a headliner substrate 101 with one exemplary embodiment of a printed wire harness 110 provided on the headliner substrate 101. In various embodiments, the printed wire harness 110 is applied to the headliner substrate 101 using a conductive ink. The ink may be applied by any method including, for example, painting, screen printing, inkjet printing, pad printing, transfer printing, or any other known or later-developed method. Strain relief circuits 111 and conductive pads 112 are provided at several locations on the headliner substrate 101. FIG. 3 shows the headliner substrate 101 of FIG. 2 after the headliner substrate 101 has been formed and trimmed to its final shape.

[0029] FIG. 4 shows another embodiment of a headliner 200 according to this invention. It should be noted that forming the headliner substrate 201 to its final shape can involve stretching all or part of the headliner substrate 201. Stretching the substrate material underlying the wire harness 210 may result in breaks in the wire harness 210. The wire harnesses 110 shown in FIGS. 2 and 3 and 210 shown in FIG. 4 include strain relief circuits 111 and 211 that will retain their integrity during and after the underlying headliner 201 substrate 101 are stretched. FIG. 5 illustrates another embodiment of a strain relief circuit 311. The curved strain relief circuit 311 shown in FIG. 5 can withstand common amounts of stretching of the underlying headliner substrate 101 and/or 201 to which the headliner substrate 101 is subjected during installation without breaking the connection. Although FIG. 5 shows the strain relief circuit 311 with dramatic switchback curves, narrower or shallower curves may be used, depending on the extent to which the headliner substrate 301 will be stretched during subsequent handling. As outlined above with

respect to FIGS. 2 and 3, the strain relief circuits 111 can be provided at one or more locations on the headliner substrate 101.

[0030] In various exemplary embodiments, the wire harness 210 may be located on various surfaces within a headliner 200. In an exemplary embodiment, shown on FIG. 6, the wire harness 210 is placed on the B side of the headliner substrate 201 (i.e., the side of the substrate adjacent to the fabric layer). In another exemplary embodiment shown in FIG. 7, the wire harness 210 is placed on the C side of the headliner substrate 201 and covered by a scrim layer 202, which may be used to insulate the wire harness 210 from contact with the vehicle body. In various other exemplary embodiments, the wire harness 210 may be covered and/or insulated by a thin film layer and/or a sprayed-on layer, rather than a scrim layer 202.

[0031] FIG. 8 shows a section of a wire harness 410 according to this invention at a point in the headliner 400 where a headliner component is electrically connected to the wire harness 410. As shown in FIG. 8, one or more conductive pads 412 are provided along the wire harness 410 at or near where the headliner component (not shown) will be attached to the wire harness 410. The conductive pads 410 act like "targets" for connecting components. FIG. 9 illustrates one exemplary embodiment of an electrical connector 530 that creates an electrical connection between the conductive pad 512 and a headliner component 520. As shown in FIG. 9, a conductive pad 512 is located on the headliner substrate 501. The electrical connector 530 is designed to pierce the headliner fabric 503, the headliner substrate 501, and the conductive pad 512. The electrical connector 530 includes a hook 531 that prevents the electrical connector 530 from separating from the headliner substrate 501 after installation. As shown in FIGS. 9 to 11, a headliner component (not shown) includes one or more connectors (not shown) that pierce the headliner 400 and contact the conductive pads 412. In various exemplary embodiments, the connectors (not shown) may pierce the headliner core to reach the conductive pads 412. The electrical connector 530 is a conductor that electrically couples the conductive pad 512 to the headliner component 520. As outlined above with respect to FIGS. 2 and 3, the conductive pad 112 can be provided at one or more locations on the headliner substrate 101.

[0032] FIGS. 10 and 11 show a second exemplary embodiment of an electrical connector 630 that provides an electrical connection between the integral wire harness (not shown) and a headliner component 620. Headliner component 620 includes electrical connectors 630. The electrical connectors 630 pierce through the headliner 600 to contact the connector pads (not shown). In various exemplary embodiments, the electrical connectors 630 and/or other connectors secure the component 620 to the headliner 600.

[0033] FIG. 12 illustrates another embodiment of a connector that provides an electrical connection between a headliner component 120 and the wire harness 710. In various exemplary embodiments, the wire harness (not shown) is pre-printed on a carrier product, 704 such as, for example, thermoplastic film, non-woven scrim, or paper sheet, which is attached to the headliner substrate 701. The headliner substrate 701 comprises e.g. a thermoplastic material with a thickness of about 3 mm. A connector 730, which comprises e.g. a copper material or an aluminium material, is placed in the headliner substrate 701. The connector 730 may be inserted after the headliner 700 is formed or during formation

of the headliner substrate **701**, such as, for example, by insert molding. A portion of the connector **730** extends through the headliner fabric **703**. In various exemplary embodiments, the connector **730** is adapted to be coupled to a headliner component **720**. In the embodiment shown in FIG. **12**, the connector **730** is coupled to the headliner component **720** with a spring detent mechanism **732**, but any known or later-developed attaching device, structure or mechanism may be used instead of or in addition to, the detent spring **732**. FIG. **13** shows schematically a roof structure according to a further embodiment of the present invention. The roof structure **100** comprises a printed connection means **1** and a substrate layer **2**, on which the printed connection means **1** is applied. FIG. **14** shows schematically a roof structure according to a further embodiment of the present invention. Contact strips **998** of electrically conductive material are embedded in the headliner **100** during manufacturing such that they make contact with the printed circuit **110** and extend into a cutout area **999**. The cutout area **999** is trimmed in such a way that the contact strip **998** is not broken, e.g. by die cutting or “kiss-cutting” to a controlled depth. A release film **997** prevents plastics or adhesive residue from adhering to the contact strip **998**.

[0034] It should be noted that references to relative positions (e.g., “top” and “bottom”) in this description are merely used to identify various elements as are oriented in the figures. It should be recognized that the orientation of particular components may vary greatly depending on the application in which they are used.

[0035] It should be understood that the drawings are not necessarily to scale. In certain instances, details that are not necessary to the understanding of the invention or render other details difficult to perceive may have been omitted. It should be understood, of course, that the invention is not necessarily limited to the particular embodiments illustrated herein.

[0036] It should be appreciated that the construction and arrangement of the wire harness, as shown in the various exemplary embodiments, is illustrative only. While the wire harness, according to this invention, has been described in conjunction with the exemplary embodiments outlined above, various alternatives, modifications, variations, improvements, and/or substantial equivalents, whether known or that are or may be presently unforeseen, may become apparent. Accordingly, the exemplary embodiments of the console according to this invention, as set forth above, are intended to be illustrative, not limiting. Various changes may be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention. Therefore, the description provided above is intended to embrace all known or later-developed alternatives, modifications variations, improvements, and/or substantial equivalents.

[0037] Various features and advantages of the invention are set forth in the following claims.

What is claimed is:

1. An interior panel for use in a vehicle, the vehicle including a plurality of electrical devices and a vehicle component frame, the interior panel comprising printed electrical connection means for connecting the electrical devices in the vehicle and a substrate layer having an inner surface directed towards the vehicle component frame, wherein the electrical connection means are printed on the inner surface of the substrate layer using an electrically conductive ink.

2. The interior panel of claim **1**, wherein the interior panel comprises a cover layer overlying an outer surface of the substrate layer.

3. The interior panel of claim **2**, wherein the interior panel comprises a scrim layer between the vehicle component frame and the substrate layer, and overlying the printed electrical connection means.

4. The interior panel of claim **2**, wherein the interior panel comprises an insulating layer, and wherein the insulating layer is arranged between the substrate layer and the vehicle component frame.

5. The interior panel of claim **1**, further comprising printed contact strips embedded in the substrate layer and in electrical contact with the electrical connection means.

6. The interior panel of claim **5**, wherein the contact strips comprise patches of conductive ink printed on the substrate layer.

7. The interior panel of claim **1**, further comprising strain relief means for withstanding stretching of the underlying interior panel during installation into the vehicle without breaking connection within the printed electrical connection means.

8. The interior panel of claim **1**, further comprising a printed conductive pad connectable with an electrical device and the printed electrical connection means.

9. The interior panel of claim **1**, wherein the printed electrical connection means are formed from flex circuits attached to the substrate layer.

10. The interior panel of claim **1**, wherein the electrical devices require electrical power to function.

11. A method for manufacturing an interior panel of a vehicle, the vehicle including a plurality of electrical devices, the method comprising:

printing electrical connection means on the interior panel using an electrically conductive ink; and

piercing the interior panel with an electrical connector to connect one of the electrical devices to the electrical connection means.

12. A system comprising:

an electrical device;

an interior panel with printed electrical connection means and a printed conductive pad; and

an electrical connector pierced through the interior panel to connect the electrical device with the conductive pad, wherein the electrical connection means are printed on the interior panel using an electrically conductive ink.

13. The system of claim **12**, wherein the electrical connector comprises a fixing means for preventing the electrical connector from separating from the interior panel during or after the installation of the interior panel.

14. An interior panel for use in a vehicle, the vehicle including a plurality of electrical devices and a vehicle component frame, the interior panel comprising a printed wire harness for connecting the electrical devices in the vehicle and a substrate layer having an inner surface directed towards the vehicle component frame, wherein the wire harness is printed on the inner surface of the substrate layer using an electrically conductive ink.

15. The interior panel of claim **14**, wherein the interior panel comprises a cover layer overlying an outer surface of the substrate layer.

16. The interior panel of claim **14**, wherein the interior panel comprises a scrim layer between the vehicle component frame and the substrate layer, and overlying the printed wire harness.

17. The interior panel of claim **14**, wherein the interior panel comprises an insulating layer, and wherein the insulating layer is arranged between the substrate layer and the vehicle component frame.

18. The interior panel of claim **14**, further comprising printed contact strips embedded in the substrate layer and in electrical contact with the printed wire harness.

19. The interior panel of claim **18**, wherein the contact strips comprise patches of conductive ink printed on the substrate layer.

20. The interior panel of claim **14**, further comprising a printed conductive pad connectable with an electrical device and the printed wire harness.

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