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(54) **SOLAR SENSOR INCLUDING REFLECTIVE ELEMENT TO TRANSFORM THE ANGULAR RESPONSE**

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

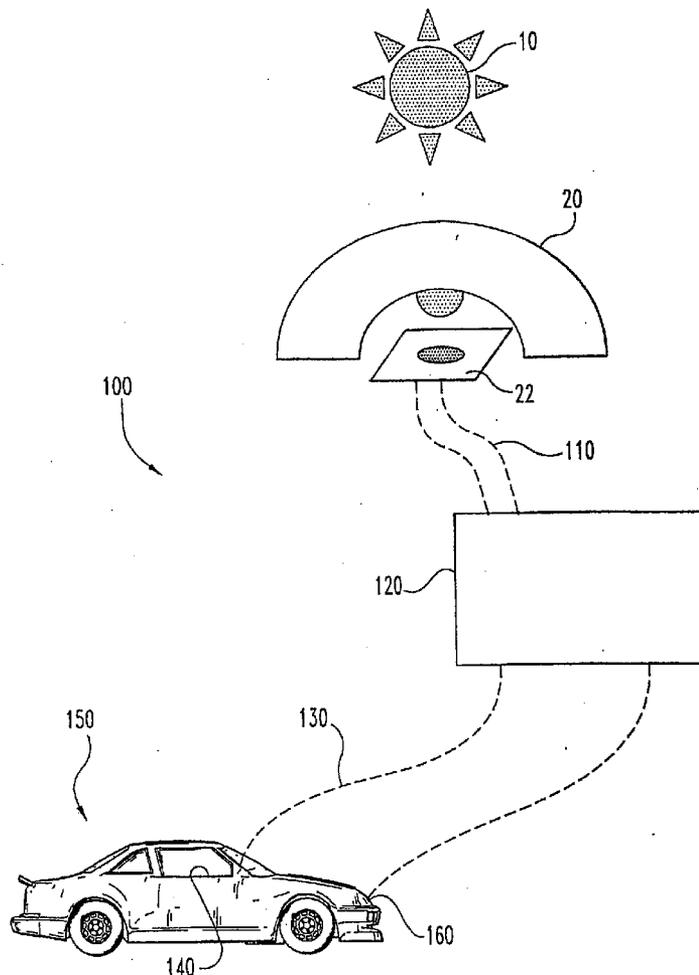
A solar sensor that utilizes a blocking element and curved reflective element between the sun and a photo-sensitive electronic device to provide high signal levels and the ability to shape the angular response of the overall sensor. A particular angular response can be achieved by combining the attenuating affects of the blocking element with the increased response affects of the curved reflector. These two elements may be combined into one physical structure, or may be separate. Further, the present invention contemplates the use of multiple blocking elements and multiple reflectors.

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Related U.S. Application Data

(62) Division of application No. 11/419,352, filed on May 19, 2006, now Pat. No. 7,235,765, which is a division of application No. 10/738,726, filed on Dec. 17, 2003.



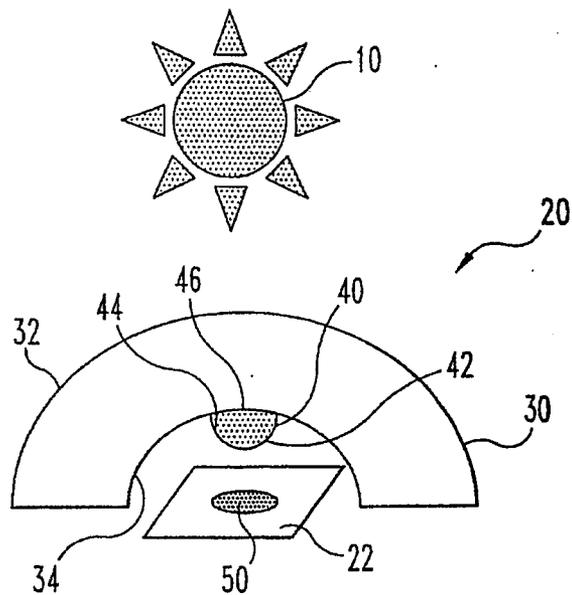


Fig. 1

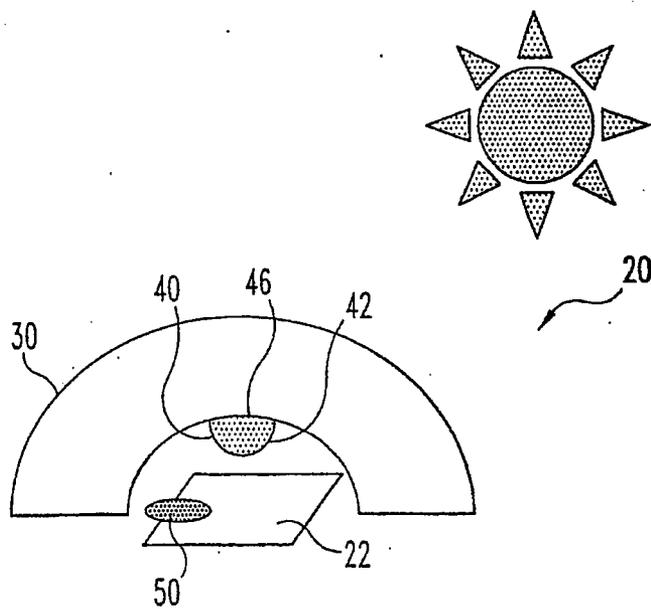
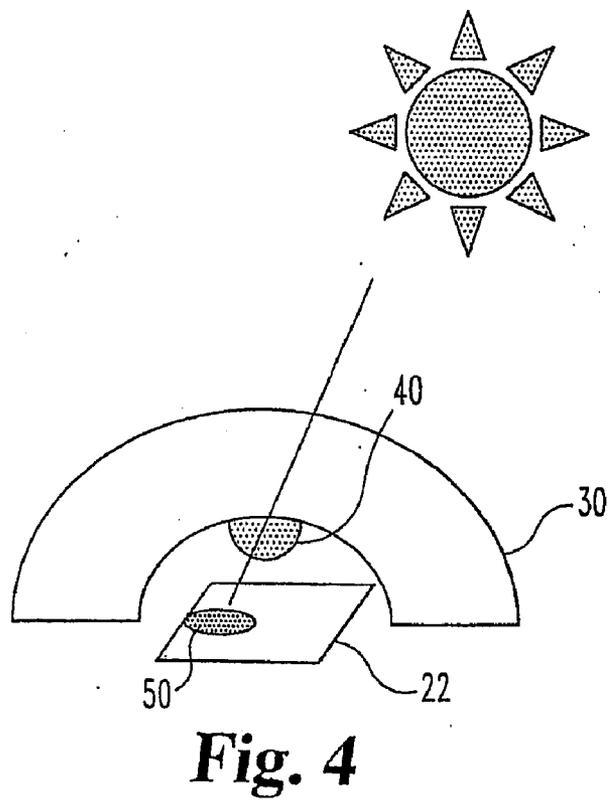
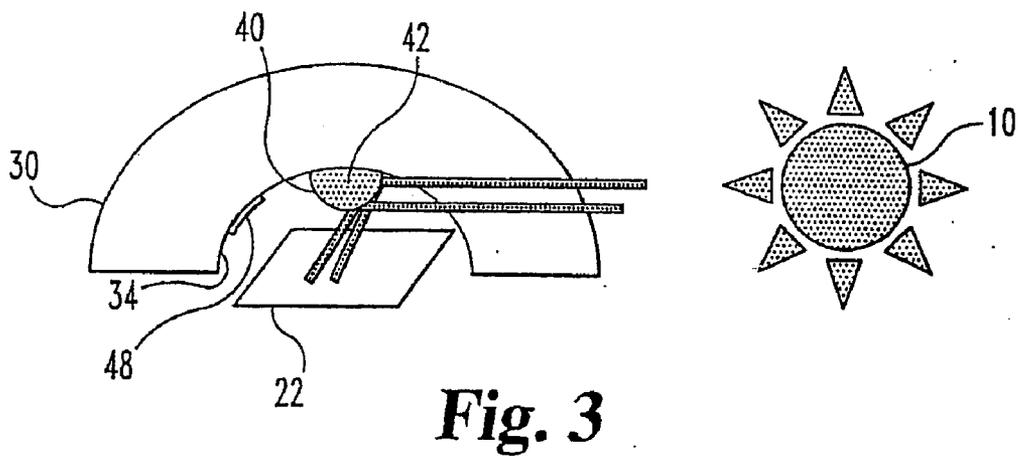
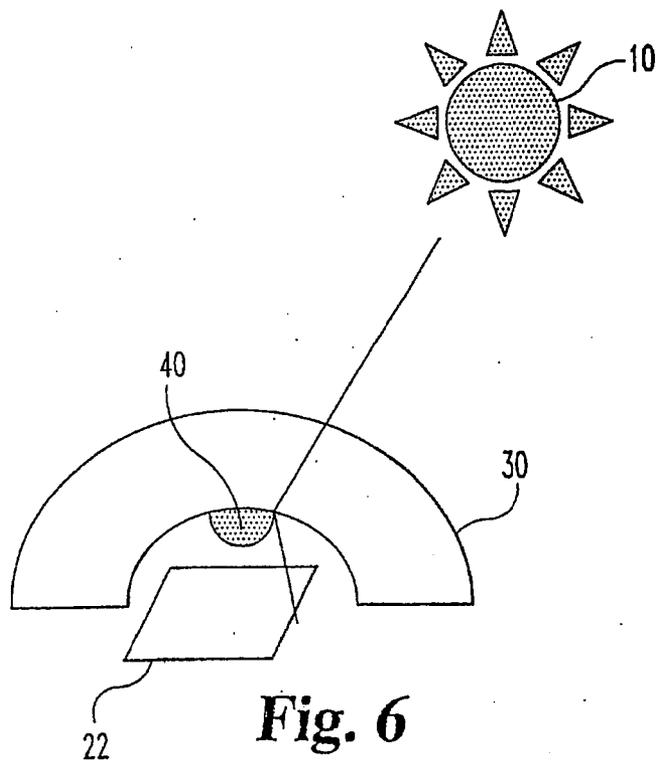
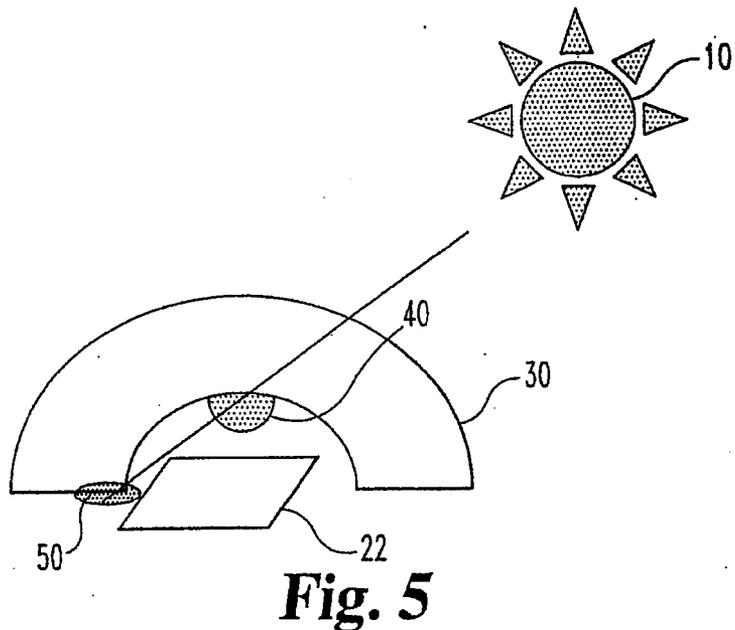


Fig. 2





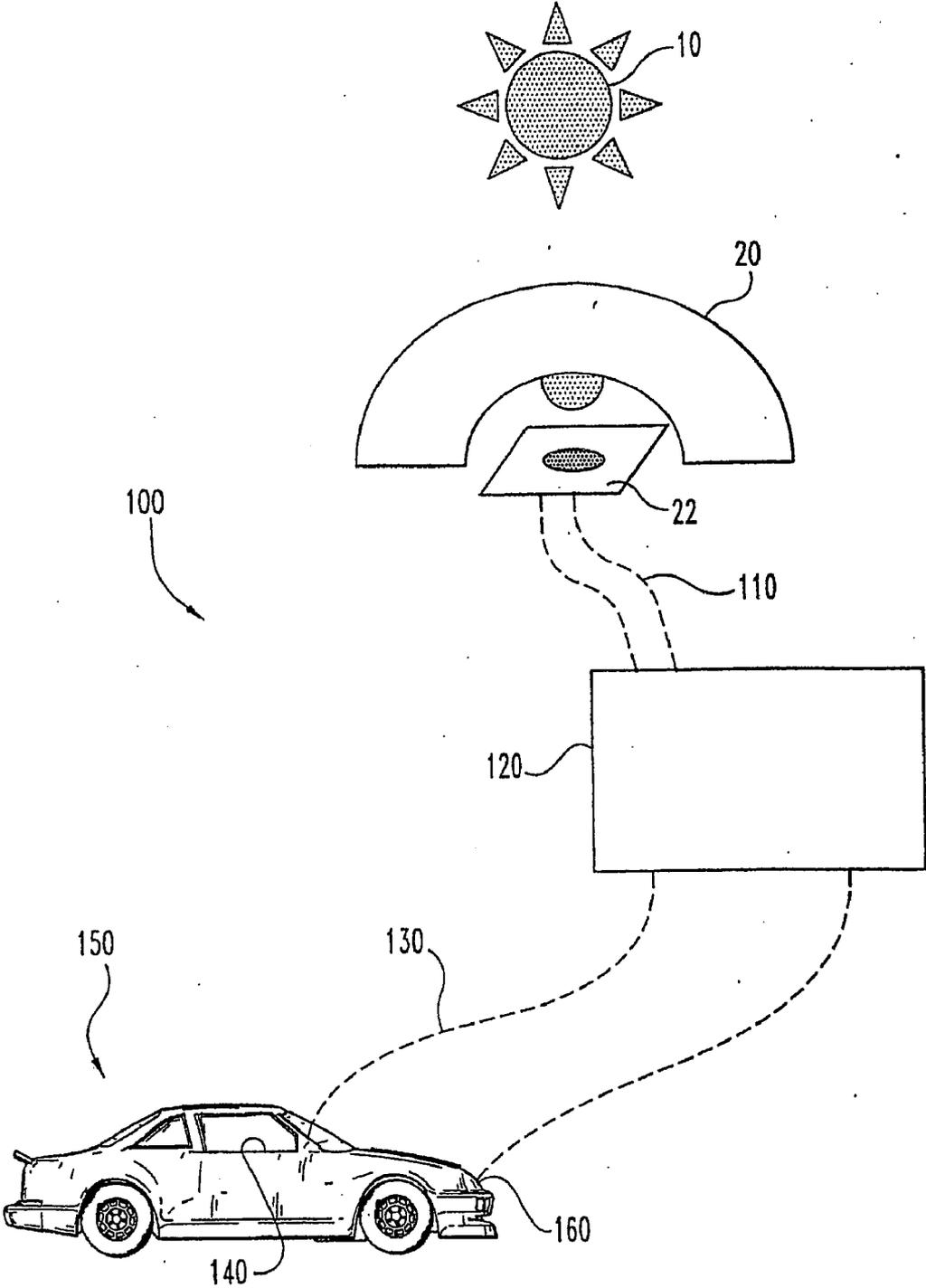


Fig. 7

SOLAR SENSOR INCLUDING REFLECTIVE ELEMENT TO TRANSFORM THE ANGULAR RESPONSE

[0001] This application claims the benefit of priority to U.S. provisional application 60/466,815, filed Apr. 30, 2003, which is incorporated by reference.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The present invention relates to solar sensors for that respond to the position of the sun, and in particular solar sensors used for adjustment of climate controls of a vehicle.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] Generally, photodiodes have a cosine angular response, meaning that the peak response of the photodiode is achieved at a normal angle of incidence where light is impinging perpendicular to the surface. This response gradually decreases according to the cosine function to a zero output at 90°.

[0004] This cosine response is a drawback in some types of solar sensors. In some vehicles, a solar sensor is used to measure solar heating by sunlight. The sensor represents a sampling of the heating affect occurring on some object, such as a vehicle. However, the solar heating affect only follows the cosine response for objects that are flat. Thus, the use of photodiodes is sometimes limited to modeling the heating of flat objects.

[0005] However, many practical solar sensor applications, including especially those with a passenger compartment of a vehicle, are helped by sensors whose response corresponds to such complex three-dimensional shapes.

[0006] One of the design goals of automotive solar sensors is to respond to sunlight in a fashion that is consistent with the heating affects on the passenger compartment. In general terms, the desired overhead response is about 50% of the peak response, due to the shading effects of the roof. The peak response typically occurs at about 50° from overhead. The response at the horizon is generally desired to be about 50 to 70% of the peak response, due to the relatively large area of glass exposed in that angular region.

[0007] Some automotive solar sensors use a domed diffuser to provide increased response when the sun is near the horizon. The thicker top section reduces the overhead response inherent in the photodiode's cosine-related angular response. One difficulty with this approach is the significant reduction in overall signal current due to the loss of light through the diffuser material. In some solar sensors, the use of a diffuser provides lower signal output for a given size diode, requires a larger diode to achieve a given signal output level, may require additional signal amplification for proper signal processing, and may be characterized with a decreased signal to noise ratio due to the attenuated signal.

[0008] What is needed are apparatus and methods which overcome the problems in other solar sensors. The present invention does this in a novel and unobvious manner.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0009] One embodiment of the present invention is a unique method to adjust the response characteristics of a solar sensor by combining both solar radiation blocking

features and solar radiation reflecting features. Other embodiments include unique apparatus and systems for modifying the response characteristics of a solar sensor.

[0010] A further embodiment of the present invention pertains to an apparatus whose output corresponds to the angular position of a source of radiation, such as the sun. For some angular positions of the source, one or more opaque regions or opaque bodies block a portion of the radiation from falling incident upon a photosensitive electronic device. In yet other positions of the radiation source, a portion of the radiation that would otherwise have missed the photosensitive electronic device is instead reflected onto the device.

[0011] In yet other embodiments of the present invention, an apparatus for responding to the angular position of a radiation source includes one or more reflective surfaces. Preferably the reflective surfaces are curved. The curved shapes can be spherical, parabolic, and conical. Some embodiments of the present invention do not include blocking elements.

[0012] Further objects, embodiments, forms, benefits, aspects, features, and advantages of the present invention can be obtained from the description, drawings, and claims provided herein.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0013] FIG. 1 is a schematic representation according to one embodiment of the present invention.

[0014] FIG. 2 is a schematic representation of the embodiment of FIG. 1, with the sun shown in a different location.

[0015] FIG. 3 is a schematic representation of the embodiment of FIG. 1, with the sun shown in a different location.

[0016] FIG. 4 is a schematic representation of the embodiment of FIG. 1, with the sun shown in a different location.

[0017] FIG. 5 is a schematic representation of the embodiment of FIG. 1, with the sun shown in a different location.

[0018] FIG. 6 is a schematic representation of the embodiment of FIG. 1, with the sun shown in a different location.

[0019] FIG. 7 is a schematic representation of a vehicle climate control system according to another embodiment of the present invention.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0020] While the present invention may be embodied in many different forms for the purpose of promoting an understanding of the principles of the invention, reference will now be made to the embodiments illustrated in the drawings and specific language will be used to describe the same. It will nevertheless be understood that no limitation of the scope of the invention is thereby intended. Any alterations and further modifications in the described embodiments, and any further applications of the principles of the invention as described herein are contemplated as would normally occur to one skilled in the art to which the invention relates.

[0021] This application incorporates by reference the following U.S. patent applications: Ser. No. 220,021, filed Jul.

15, 1988, which issued as U.S. Pat. No. 4,933,550; Ser. No. 08/653,818, filed May 28, 1996, which issued as U.S. Pat. No. 5,670,774; Ser. No. 09/188,824, filed Nov. 9, 1998, which issued as U.S. Pat. No. 6,084,228; Ser. No. 09/554,297, filed May 11, 2000, which issued as U.S. Pat. No. 6,297,740; Ser. No. 09/269,701, filed May 31, 1999, which issued as U.S. Pat. No. 6,243,002; and Ser. No. 09/508,789, filed Mar. 16, 2000, which issued as U.S. Pat. No. 6,396,040.

[0022] The present invention relates to a solar sensor which provides a signal that corresponds to the angular position and intensity of a source of radiation, such as the sun. In one embodiment, the sensor is part of a system for controlling the climate within a vehicle.

[0023] Previous systems for controlling the climate within a vehicle tended to use sensors with limited responses. The sensor would provide a signal output that corresponded to the relative placement between the sensor and the sun, such as along fore and aft, and right and left directions. The output of the sensor would change in a manner corresponding to the radiation from the sun striking a two-dimensional planform.

[0024] Other solar sensors lack the methods and structures for modeling the vertical attributes of the passenger compartment of a vehicle. For example, the roof of a vehicle is spaced several feet above the front hood or trunk compartment body sections. Therefore, when the sun is relatively close to the horizon, the front, side, and rear glass of the vehicle compartment allow significant amounts of solar radiation to enter the vehicle compartment. If a solar sensor improperly models the vehicle compartment, this heating affect at low solar angles is not approximated.

[0025] In contrast, a solar sensor according to one embodiment of the present invention includes a reflective surface and provides a better approximation of the vehicle compartment. The shape of this reflective surface is adapted and configured such that when the sun is at low angles above the horizon, radiation from the sun which would otherwise not fall incident on the photo-sensitive electronic device is instead reflected off of the reflecting surface and onto the active surface of the photo-sensitive electronic device. In some embodiments, the solar sensor does not include a diffuser. By not including a diffuser, these embodiments provide higher signal levels for a given size photodiode. In other embodiments, a smaller photodiode can be used to achieve a given output signal, thus reducing the sensor cost. Further, subsequent signal amplification can be reduced owing to the increased photocurrent levels. Because the signal levels are higher, the signal to noise ratio is improved.

[0026] In one embodiment of the present invention, an approach is developed that uses a shaped blocking element and a curved reflector to transform the inherent cosine angular response of a photodiode into a response more representative of a three-dimensional vehicle compartment. In some embodiments of the present invention, the output response of the photodiode is changed for some angular ranges of the incoming solar radiation relative to the normal cosine response. For other angular ranges of solar radiation the response is decreased relative to the normal cosine response.

[0027] In one embodiment of the present invention, the response of the sensor to overhead radiation is attenuated by placing a substantially opaque portion of a body above the

photosensitive electronic device. Yet other embodiments of the present invention include a sensor with increased response when the solar radiation approaches the sensor from angles closer to the horizon. In such embodiments, a reflecting element is placed above the photosensitive electronic device such that incoming light is reflected off of the reflecting surface and onto the active, planar surface of the electronic device.

[0028] In some embodiments, the reflecting surface is generally above the electronic device. In yet other embodiments, the electronic device is in-between the source of radiation and the reflecting element, such as the case where the reflecting surface is located aft of the electronic device. Solar radiation entering the sensor housing at near horizontal angles passes over the electronic device, strikes the reflecting surface aft of the device, and is reflected forward and downward onto the active surface of the electronic device. In yet other embodiments, the detector is placed over the reflector, with the detector thus functioning as a blocking element. In yet other embodiments, the detector is placed to the side of the reflector or off to the side, at a downward-facing angle.

[0029] FIG. 1 is a schematic representation of an apparatus 20 according to one embodiment of the present invention. Apparatus 20 includes a housing 30 having a photosensitive electronic device 22 located therein. Electronic device 22 can be of any type which modifies and/or produces an electrical signal in response to the incidence of solar radiation on an active element. As one example, device 22 can be a single photodiode or an array of photodiodes. In some embodiments using multiple photodiodes, there is also an opaque divider which minimizes the "cross-over" effects as the angle of the sun changes. The figures of this application are not drawn to scale. As one example, the thickness of housing 30 is not representative.

[0030] As another example, electronic device 22 can be a single photocell or an array of photocells. In some embodiments of the present invention, the electronic device 22 includes one or more active elements arranged on a generally flat, planar surface. However, the invention is not so limited, and contemplates nonplanar arrangements of photosensitive electronic devices.

[0031] Although the term "solar radiation" is used herein, various embodiments of the present invention pertain to sensors which can sense the orientation of a radiation source other than the sun. Further, it is understood that the photosensitive electronic device of the present invention can be sensitive to one or more portions of the spectrum of solar radiation, and may not be sensitive to some portions of the solar radiation spectrum at all. The sensor's overall spectral response is the combination of the spectral response of the photosensitive electronic device and the spectral transmission of the housing. Two examples of spectral responses are "eye-like response" and "near-infrared response." In some embodiments, the housing is tinted to provide a predetermined spectral response.

[0032] Housing 30 of apparatus 20 is preferably a dome-shaped, generally transparent cover for protection of electronic device 22. In other embodiments, housing 30 is flat or has a complex curved profile. In some embodiments, housing 30 can include cosmetic texturing to provide some scattering or reorientation of solar energy that is incident

upon outer surface 32 as it travels through the thickness of the housing wall and exits interior surface 34. However, the invention is not so limited, and housing 30 can have little, if any, diffusive properties. In a preferred embodiment, housing 30 does not have any diffusive properties. Housing 30 as shown in FIGS. 1-7 is depicted schematically, and not to scale.

[0033] Housing 30 preferably includes a blocking and reflecting element such as a body 40 which depends downwardly from interior surface 34 toward electronic device 22. In other embodiments, the blocking and reflecting element is accomplished as a coating applied housing 30. In one embodiment body 40 is generally hemispherical and includes a reflecting surface 42 on a convex portion of the body. Further, body 40 preferably includes a surface which is at least partly opaque. Referring to FIG. 1, the opaque portion of body 40 can be a generally opaque coating 44 along the convex surface of body 40. Further, the blocking element could be a generally opaque coating along the interface 46 between body 40 and interior surface 34. For a source 10 of solar radiation as shown in FIG. 1, either opaque coating 44 or opaque coating 46 constitutes a shadow element projecting a shadow 50 onto the surface of electronic device 22.

[0034] Although what has been shown and described is an opaque portion of body 40 which casts shadow 50 onto device 22, the present invention is not so limited. The opaque portion of apparatus 20 can be a portion of housing 30, including portions on the outer surface 32 or inner surface 34, or embedded within the wall of housing 30. Further, the opaque portion of apparatus 20 can be of a different size and/or shape than body 40. For example, as seen in FIG. 1, body 40 is generally hemispherical. However, an opaque portion of housing 30 could be rectangular in shape.

[0035] The size of the projected area of the blocking element helps determine the response of electronic device 22 to an overhead radiation source. For example, a blocking element that is relatively small provides a relatively large response from electronic device 22 to a source 10 that is located above both the blocking element and the electronic device.

[0036] FIG. 1 shows the source 10 of solar radiation to be generally overhead of apparatus 20. Because of the opacity of body 40, a shadow 50 is cast generally onto the center of the active planar area of electronic device 22. There is little or no reflection of radiation from source 10 on the reflective surface 42 of body 40.

[0037] Referring to FIG. 2, the source 10 of solar radiation is displaced a moderate angle from the overhead position. Radiation from source 10 cannot penetrate the opaque portion 46 of body 40, and a shadow 50 is cast toward an edge of device 22. A portion of shadow 50 obscures some of the active area of device 22. However, the remainder of shadow 50 is cast on non-active portions of apparatus 20, which has no effect on the output of 22. Depending upon the shape of body 40, there can be little, if any, light reflected from surface 42 onto device 22.

[0038] FIG. 3 is a schematic representation in which radiation source 10 is near the horizon. Radiation from source 10 is generally parallel to the active surface of device

22. However, some of the radiation passes through housing 30 and falls incident upon the reflective surface 42 of body 40. Because of the convex shape of surface 42, this solar radiation is reflected off of surface 42 and falls incident upon the photoactive elements of device 22, thus causing the response of device 22 to change.

[0039] In yet other embodiments of the present invention, a reflective coating 48 can be placed along an interior wall 34 of housing 30. Radiation from source 10 would pass over device 22, and reflect forward off of reflective surface 48 onto device 22. In some embodiments, the presence of reflecting surface 48 may be at least partly opaque for radiation received from the rear of apparatus 20. However, this may be acceptable in those embodiments in which apparatus 20 approximates a vehicular compartment with a relatively small rear window.

[0040] FIGS. 1, 4 and 5 illustrate schematically the range of angles over which the opaque portion of apparatus 20 influences the output of electronic device 22. Referring to FIG. 1, when source 10 is generally overhead of apparatus 20, a shadow 50 is cast directly downwards from body 40. As radiation source 10 moves to the angle represented in FIG. 4, a generally elliptical shadow 50 is cast by body 40 onto device 22. One edge of the elliptical shadow intercepts an edge of the photoactive area of device 22. For a source of radiation shown in FIGS. 1 and 4, the opaque portion of apparatus 20 has maximum and near-maximum affect on device 22. However, as source 10 further inclines toward the horizon (referring to FIG. 5) the elliptical shadow area 50 completely falls out of the active area of device 22. For the angle depicted schematically in FIG. 5, the opaque blocking features of apparatus 20 no longer affect the output of device 22.

[0041] Referring to FIG. 6, source 10 is shown at an angle at which radiation from the source begins reflecting off of surface 42 and onto the active area of device 22. From this angle, and continuing for angles to the horizon, the reflecting surface 42 reflects radiation from source 10 onto the active area of device 22 and thereby modifies the output of device 22.

[0042] In one embodiment of the present invention, the range of angles from the overhead position (FIG. 1) to the position shown in FIG. 5, comprise a first range of angles over which the opaque portion of the body modifies the output of device 22. There is a second range of angles from the angle shown in FIG. 6 to the angle shown in FIG. 3 over which radiation from the source is reflected off of reflecting surface 42 and onto the active area of device 22. Both the first range of angles and the second range of angles are less than the total range of angles over which device 22 is responsive to solar radiation.

[0043] In some embodiments of the present invention, the first and second angular ranges overlap. That is, there are certain angular positions of the source of radiation for which there is a shadow cast on the electronic device, and also a portion of the radiation is reflected onto the electronic device. In yet other embodiments of the present invention, the first and second angular ranges are mutually exclusive. That is, the shadow cast by the opaque portion of the body falls off of the active area of the electronic device before any radiation is reflected off of the reflecting surface and onto the active area of the electronic device. Whether the first and second angular ranges are overlapping or exclusive can be chosen by selecting the size, shape and location of the opaque portion of apparatus 20 and the size, shape and location of the reflecting portion of apparatus 20.

[0044] Although what has been shown and described is an apparatus including a body 20 that provides both blocking and reflection of incident radiation, the present invention is not so limited. Blocking of incident radiation can be created by one or more coatings or localized surface treatments on housing 30. Likewise, reflection of radiation onto the electronic device can be accomplished by one or more reflective coatings and/or reflective bodies attached to apparatus 20.

[0045] FIG. 7 is a schematic representation of a solar sensor according to one embodiment of the present invention as used within a vehicular system. System 100 includes a solar sensor 20. Radiation from a source 10 falls incident upon a photosensitive electronic device. This incident solar radiation changes the output characteristics of device 22, and a signal 110 corresponding to the incident solar radiation is received by an electronic controller 120. The electronic controller 120, which may be digital or analog, receives a variety of sensor and control inputs. In response to these various inputs, controller 120 establishes one or more output control signals 130 to various actuators (not shown) of a climate control system within a passenger compartment 140 of a vehicle 150. For example, controller 120 can control whether or not the air conditioning compressor is turned on, or the amount of heat from the engine being provided to a heat exchanger. In yet other embodiments of the present invention, controller 120 also controls the state of the headlights 160 of vehicle 150.

[0046] While the invention has been illustrated and described in detail in the drawings and foregoing description, the same is to be considered as illustrative and not restrictive in character, it being understood that only the preferred embodiment has been shown and described and that all changes and modifications that come within the spirit of the invention are desired to be protected. It should be understood that while the use of the word preferable, preferably or preferred in the description above indicates that the feature so described may be more desirable, it nonetheless may not be necessary and embodiments lacking the same may be contemplated as within the scope of the invention, that scope being defined by the claims that follow.

1-20. (canceled)

21. An apparatus comprising:

a photo-sensitive electronic device having an active surface for collection of incident solar radiation;

a shadow element located between the active surface and the incident solar radiation and projecting a shadow onto the active surface; and

a curved first reflective surface located between the active surface and the shadow element.

22. The apparatus of claim 21, wherein the output characteristics of said electronic device are modified because of blocking of solar radiation from the active surface by said shadow element and reflecting of solar radiation from said reflective surface onto the active surface.

23. The apparatus of claim 21, wherein said electronic device is a photodiode.

24. The apparatus of claim 21, wherein said shadow element is substantially opaque.

25. The apparatus of claim 21, wherein said shadow element is partly opaque.

26. The apparatus of claim 21, wherein the active surface has a first area, the projected shadow has a second area, and the second area is less than the first area.

27. The apparatus of claim 21, further including a housing located over said electronic device, wherein said housing includes said shadow element.

28. The apparatus of claim 27, wherein said housing is dome-shaped and diffuses solar radiation incident thereon.

29. The apparatus of claim 27, wherein said shadow element is an opaque coating applied to said housing.

30. The apparatus of claim 27, wherein said first reflective surface is a reflective coating applied to said housing.

31. The apparatus of claim 21, wherein the shape of said first reflective surface is chosen from the group consisting of partially spherical, parabolic, conical, and frusto-conical.

32. The apparatus of claim 21, further comprising:

a second reflective surface not located between the active surface and the shadow element.

33. The apparatus of claim 32, wherein said first surface and said second surface are non-contiguous.

34. The apparatus of claim 32, further including a housing located over said electronic device, said housing including an interior surface, wherein said second reflecting surface is on the interior surface.

35. The apparatus of claim 34, wherein said second reflecting surface is a reflective coating applied to said housing.

36. The apparatus of claim 32, wherein said apparatus has a front and a rear, said second reflecting surface being located aft of said first reflecting surface.

37. The apparatus of claim 21, wherein said photo-sensitive electronic device is an array of photodiodes.

38. The apparatus of claim 37, further including an opaque photodiode divider.

39. A method comprising the steps of:

providing an apparatus comprising:

a photo-sensitive electronic device having an active surface for collection of incident solar radiation;

a shadow element located above the active surface and projecting a shadow onto the active surface; and

a curved reflective surface located between the active surface and the shadow element.

receiving solar radiation incident on the active surface;

receiving solar radiation incident on the reflective surface;

reflecting a portion of the solar radiation incident on the reflective surface off the reflective surface and onto the active surface;

modifying the output of the sensor in response to the reflected portion.

40. The method of claim 39, which further comprises the steps of:

providing a controller for adjusting the climate controls of a vehicle in response to a signal from the photo-sensitive electronic device;

providing output of the photo-sensitive device to the controller; and

adjusting the climate controls of a vehicle.