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Hybrid Additives-Subtractive Manufacturing of Multi-Layer PCBs Using Laser Direct Structuring (LDS) and Inkjet printing

Ankit Bharatbhai Goti

Abstract
The increasing demand for miniaturized, high-performance, and lightweight electronic systems—particularly in applications such as wearable technology, automotive sensors, and medical implants—has driven a paradigm shift in printed circuit board (PCB) manufacturing. Traditional subtractive manufacturing methods, though reliable, pose limitations in terms of design flexibility, environmental sustainability, and scalability for complex three-dimensional structures. In response to these challenges, hybrid manufacturing processes that combine additive and subtractive techniques have emerged as a transformative solution.

This article explores a novel hybrid approach integrating **Laser Direct Structuring (LDS)** with **Inkjet Printing** to fabricate multi-layer PCBs with enhanced structural and electrical performance. LDS enables high-resolution patterning on 3D substrates by selectively activating surfaces for electroless metal deposition, offering precise subtractive control. Complementarily, inkjet printing introduces additive capabilities, enabling the selective deposition of functional inks for fine features, layer stacking, and cost-effective customization.

The study presents a comprehensive analysis of the process flow, materials compatibility, and parameter optimization needed to harmonize these two technologies. Furthermore, we discuss the implications for high-density interconnects (HDIs), thermal management, and circuit complexity in multi-layer architectures. The hybrid LDS–inkjet platform demonstrates not only the potential to improve design agility and production efficiency but also marks a significant step toward more sustainable and digitally-driven electronics manufacturing. Future outlooks suggest integration with AI-based design automation and nanomaterial-enhanced inks to further extend the capabilities of this hybrid paradigm.

Keywords: Hybrid Manufacturing, Additive-Subtractive Processes, Laser Direct Structuring (LDS), Inkjet Printing, Multi-Layer PCBs, Micropatterning, Conductive Inks, PCB Fabrication.

II. Introduction

A. Background

The fabrication of printed circuit boards (PCBs) forms the cornerstone of modern electronics. Traditional PCB manufacturing primarily relies on **subtractive methods**, such as photolithography and chemical etching, where unwanted copper is removed from copper-clad substrates to form conductive traces. While these techniques have matured over decades and offer high yield and precision, they inherently suffer from several limitations. These include **material wastage**, **environmental hazards from chemical etchants**, and **design inflexibility**, particularly when adapting to complex or 3D geometries.

With the evolution of electronics toward compact, multifunctional systems, **High-Density Interconnect (HDI) PCBs** and **multi-layer architectures** have become essential. These configurations allow for increased circuit density, higher signal integrity, and faster performance by integrating multiple conductive layers with interlayer vias. However, HDI fabrication introduces **severe challenges** such as:

- Precision drilling of microvias,
- Layer misalignment,
- High tooling and setup costs,
- Inability to scale easily for prototyping or custom designs.

These challenges create bottlenecks, especially in sectors where rapid development cycles and customized form factors are required.

B. Emerging Needs

The **push toward miniaturization** in electronics is primarily driven by the rise of **wearables**, **Internet of Things (IoT)** devices, and **implantable medical electronics**. These systems often demand:

- Flexible form factors,
- Integration of sensors and antennas into non-planar geometries,
- Biocompatibility and lightweight designs.

Such requirements are increasingly difficult to fulfill with conventional subtractive processes alone. Additionally, subtractive methods are **material-intensive** and **environmentally taxing**, involving harsh chemicals, energy-heavy cleanroom setups, and significant material scrap, especially in prototyping and low-volume production.

Consequently, there is growing interest in **additive manufacturing** methods, which build circuits layer-by-layer, depositing materials only where needed. These methods, including **inkjet printing**, offer considerable advantages in **cost-efficiency, sustainability, and design flexibility**.

C. Hybrid Manufacturing Vision

To address the limitations of purely subtractive or additive approaches, a **hybrid additive-subtractive manufacturing paradigm** is emerging as a powerful alternative. This model leverages the precision and reliability of subtractive patterning while integrating the flexibility and material efficiency of additive technologies.

Laser Direct Structuring (LDS) exemplifies the subtractive aspect of this hybrid model. LDS uses a laser to selectively activate a thermoplastic substrate embedded with metal-organic compounds. These activated regions then undergo **electroless metal plating**, forming precise 3D interconnects without the need for masks or photolithography. LDS is highly suited for complex, curved, or miniaturized components, commonly seen in antennas and wearables.

On the additive side, **inkjet printing** enables the non-contact deposition of conductive or dielectric inks onto a substrate, allowing for **rapid prototyping**, **multi-material integration**, and **fine-feature resolution**. When combined with LDS, inkjet printing facilitates the formation of additional conductive layers, custom feature enhancements, or embedded functional components—pushing the boundary of what's achievable in PCB fabrication.

Together, LDS and inkjet printing form a synergistic platform capable of producing **multi-layer PCBs with 3D interconnects**, significantly improving **design agility, production efficiency, and sustainability**. This hybrid strategy not only meets the technical requirements of modern electronics but also aligns with broader industry goals related to green manufacturing and agile production models.

III. Theoretical Foundations and Technologies

A. Laser Direct Structuring (LDS)

Principles of LDS

Laser Direct Structuring (LDS) is a **maskless subtractive fabrication method** designed for complex, often three-dimensional (3D), circuit layout directly on molded or shaped plastic components. The process involves a **laser beam (typically a Nd:YAG or UV laser)** that activates an LDS-compatible polymer substrate by breaking metal-organic bonds, thereby leaving behind catalytic sites. These sites initiate **electroless plating**, allowing for the selective deposition of metal tracks.

LDS-Compatible Substrates

LDS requires thermoplastics that are **doped with metal-organic additives**. Common substrates include:

- **Liquid Crystal Polymer (LCP)** – Excellent dimensional stability and low water absorption.
- **Polybutylene Terephthalate (PBT)** – Offers high heat resistance and is commonly used in automotive applications.
- **Polyamide (PA)** – Provides good flexibility and mechanical strength.

These substrates must maintain **thermal integrity** during laser activation and **adhesive compatibility** for subsequent metal deposition.

Metallization Process

The LDS process involves three primary steps:

1. **Laser Activation** – Laser writes circuit paths by activating the embedded catalyst.
2. **Chemical Cleaning** – Removes loose debris and exposes the catalytic layer.
3. **Electroless Plating** – Deposits copper, nickel, or gold onto activated areas via autocatalytic reduction.

Advantages and Limitations

Advantages	Limitations
3D circuit formation	Limited to LDS-compatible polymers
High precision (micron scale)	Surface roughness post-laser activation
No photomasks required	Equipment cost (laser and plating systems)
Suitable for antenna integration	Process tuning needed for multilayer stacking

B. Inkjet Printing in Electronics

Additive Deposition of Conductive Inks

Inkjet printing offers **non-contact, digital deposition** of functional inks. Common inks include:

- **Silver nanoparticle inks** – High conductivity, fast sintering
- **Copper nanoparticle inks** – Economical, but prone to oxidation
- **Carbon-based inks** – Used for flexible, low-cost electronics

This process enables printing directly onto rigid or flexible substrates in user-defined patterns, ideal for prototyping and low-volume production.

Printhead Technology and Surface Considerations

- **Drop-on-demand (DOD)** piezoelectric printheads dominate, offering droplet sizes as small as **1–10 picoliters**.
- Surface energy and roughness of the substrate affect **line width, ink adhesion**, and **feature resolution**.

Post-Processing Requirements

Printed inks typically require:

- **Sintering** (thermal or photonic) to form continuous conductive paths
- **Plasma or UV treatments** for enhancing adhesion and ink flow
- **Encapsulation layers** to protect against oxidation or abrasion

Benefits

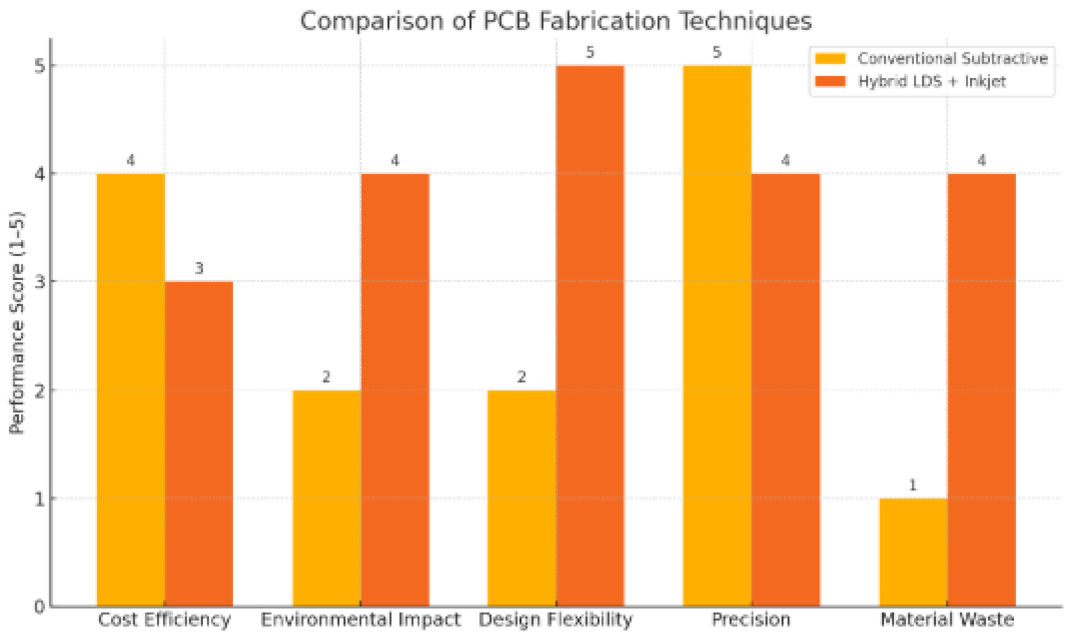
- **Design versatility** with rapid iteration
- **Minimal material waste**
- **Cost-effective tooling**—no need for masks or etching chemicals
- Suitable for **multi-material and multi-layer** deposition

C. Comparison with Conventional Techniques

Criteria	Conventional Subtractive	Hybrid LDS + Inkjet
Fabrication Process	Etching and drilling	Laser activation + ink deposition
Cost (Setup & Materials)	High (masking, chemicals, tooling)	Moderate (laser and printer investment)
Design Flexibility	Limited (2D, rigid)	High (3D, flexible, complex)
Environmental Impact	High (chemical waste)	Low (less chemical use, less waste)
Multi-layer Integration	Complex, slow	Faster stacking via digital processes

Visual Comparison: Fabrication Metrics

The chart below compares the two fabrication methods across five key performance metrics:

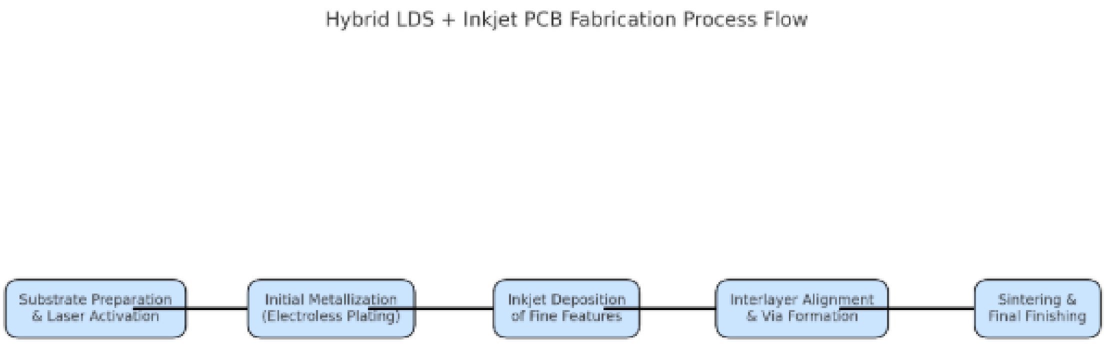


IV. Integration Methodology: Hybrid LDS + Inkjet Approach

A. Process Flow

The integration of Laser Direct Structuring (LDS) and inkjet printing in multi-layer PCB fabrication follows a **sequential hybrid process**, leveraging the strengths of each technique at different stages of manufacturing.

Process Flow Diagram:



1. **Substrate Preparation & Laser Activation**
   - **Material selection** is critical—LDS-compatible thermoplastics such as LCP or PBT are cleaned and fixed.
   - A **UV or IR laser** (commonly 355 nm or 1064 nm) is then used to **activate catalytic sites** on the substrate's surface by modifying its chemistry and topography.
2. **Initial Metallization (Electroless Plating)**
   - After activation, the substrate undergoes a **chemical plating process**, typically using **copper or nickel baths**, to deposit the first conductive layer.
   - This forms the **base circuit layer** which serves as the foundation for further patterning.
3. **Inkjet Deposition of Fine Features**
   - Inkjet printing deposits **nanoparticle-based conductive inks** over or between existing LDS-formed traces.
   - Used for creating:
     - Additional conductive paths,
     - Fine-pitch interconnects,

- Embedded sensors or antennas.

4. **Interlayer Alignment & Via Formation**
   - For **multi-layer structures**, precision alignment is required.
   - Interlayer **vias** are either laser-drilled or printed as **conductive vertical pillars**, ensuring robust **electrical connectivity** between stacked layers.
5. **Sintering & Final Finishing**
   - Conductive inks are **thermally or photonic sintered** to enhance electrical conductivity.
   - Additional processes include **encapsulation, testing, and trimming** for final product validation.

B. Process Parameters and Control

Precision in hybrid manufacturing depends heavily on controlling numerous process parameters across both LDS and inkjet printing stages.

Key Process Parameters

Category	Parameter	Typical Range / Notes
Laser Settings	Power	1–15 W (varies by material)
	Wavelength	355 nm (UV), 1064 nm (IR)
	Focus Depth	~10–50 µm; critical for uniform activation
Inkjet Printing	Ink Viscosity	5–30 cP (centipoise) for stable droplet formation
	Droplet Volume	1–10 pL (picoliters)
	Line Width/Spacing	20–100 µm depending on resolution and substrate absorption
Substrate Settings	Temperature	40–60°C (during printing) for ink flow optimization
	Surface Treatment	Plasma/UV/Ozone to improve wettability and adhesion

V. Applications in Multi-Layer PCB Fabrication

A. Layer-by-Layer Construction

The hybrid integration of Laser Direct Structuring (LDS) with inkjet printing facilitates the **seamless fabrication of multi-layer PCBs**, overcoming many of the physical limitations associated with traditional subtractive manufacturing.

Vertical Interconnect Access (VIAs)

- In multi-layer PCBs, **vertical interconnects (vias)** provide electrical connectivity between stacked layers.
- Using **laser drilling**, microvias can be precisely formed post-LDS metallization, while **conductive inkjet-printed vias** offer a maskless alternative with excellent z-axis conductivity.
- These vias are crucial for enabling **dense 3D routing**, especially in compact devices like **hearing aids** and **implantable sensors**.

High-Density Interconnects (HDI) and 3D Integration

- HDIs enable **greater wiring density per unit area** by minimizing line width and spacing, and increasing via counts.
- The hybrid method supports **3D integration**—where circuits are formed not just on a flat plane, but on complex, conformal surfaces—ideal for:
  - Curved antenna arrays,
  - Biomedical patches,
  - Foldable or wearable electronics.

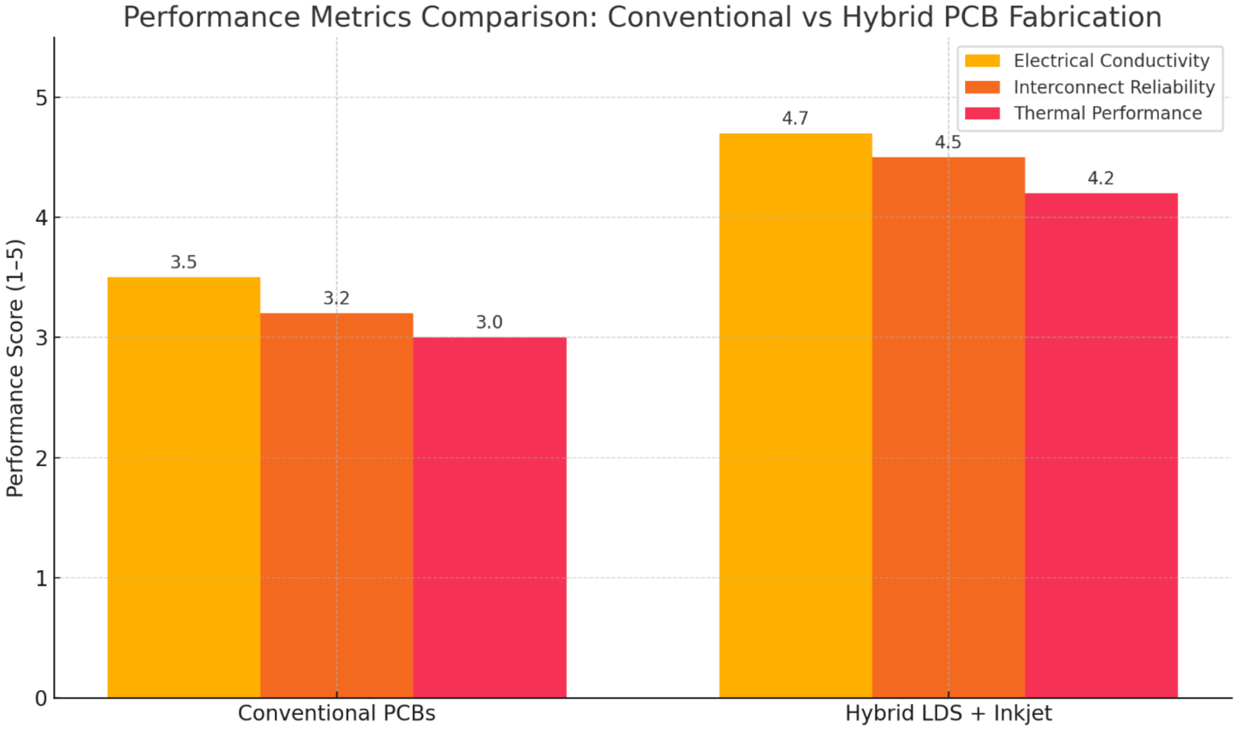
Application Area	Role of Hybrid Manufacturing
Medical Devices	LDS enables 3D antennas for implants; inkjet

	printing integrates sensors or bio-compatible layers
RF Applications	Low-loss LDS substrates and fine inkjet traces enhance impedance control for antennas and filters
Flexible Electronics	Inkjet printing on flexible substrates allows dynamic form factors for smart clothing and e-skin

B. Performance Metrics

Hybrid PCB fabrication techniques must meet or exceed conventional standards across several technical dimensions. Below are the key performance indicators used to evaluate hybrid LDS + inkjet platforms.

Performance Comparison: Conventional vs Hybrid



The graph compares **Conventional Subtractive PCB fabrication** and **Hybrid LDS + Inkjet** across three primary metrics:

- **Electrical Conductivity**
  - Hybrid methods using nanoparticle inks and LDS-plated copper traces offer near-bulk conductivity after sintering.
  - Suitable for RF transmission and power delivery up to moderate levels.
- **Interconnect Reliability**
  - Conductive vias and surface-printed features demonstrate **excellent adhesion and structural integrity**, even under thermal cycling and flexural stress.
- **Thermal Performance and Heat Dissipation**
  - LDS-compatible substrates like LCP provide superior **thermal stability**, while **multi-material layering** using inkjet can optimize heat spreading.

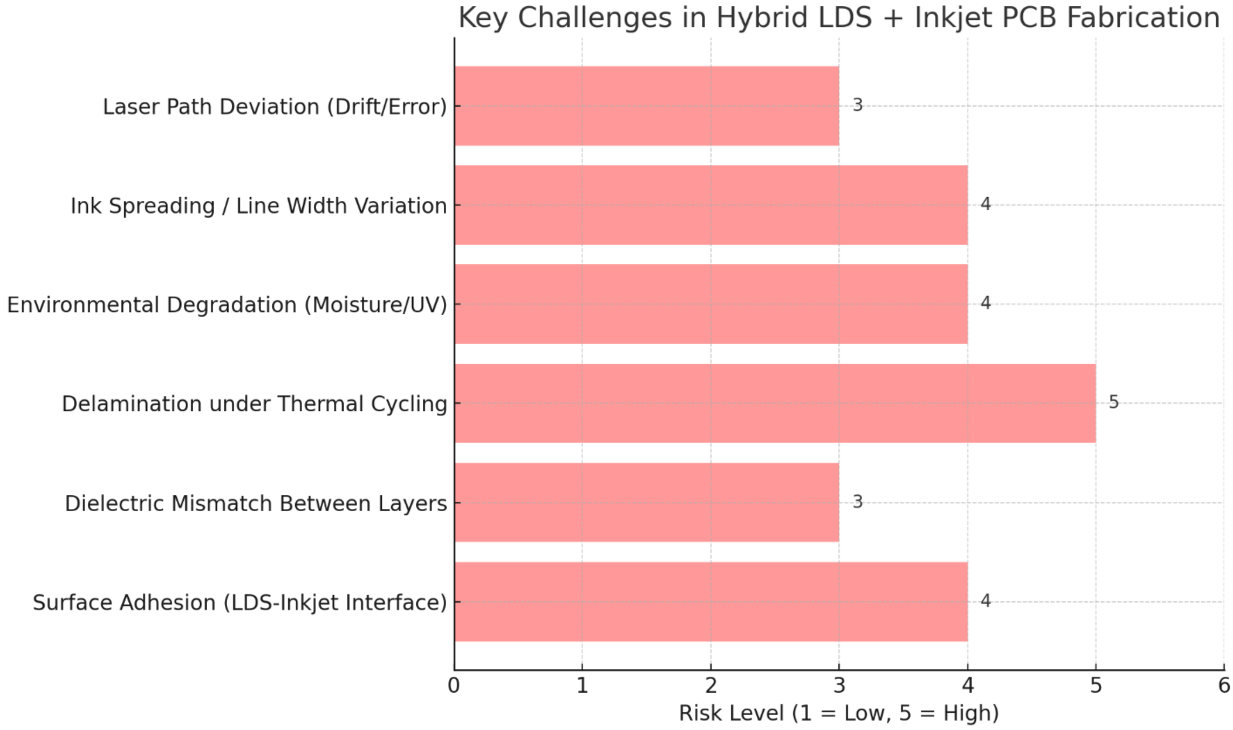
Summary Table: Performance Metrics

Metric	Conventional PCBs	Hybrid LDS + Inkjet PCBs
Electrical Conductivity	Moderate (bulk copper only)	High (LDS copper + printed silver)
Interconnect Reliability	Good (mechanical vias)	Very Good (vias + printed fills)
Thermal Performance	Fair	Excellent (material + design control)

VI. Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

While hybrid manufacturing holds tremendous promise, practical implementation brings a series of **engineering challenges** that must be addressed through material science, process control, and design optimization.

Chart: Key Risk Areas in Hybrid Fabrication



A. Material Compatibility

Surface Adhesion Issues Between LDS and Inkjet Layers

- Mismatch in **surface energy** can lead to **poor ink wetting** and **adhesion failure** at the interface between the LDS-formed copper and inkjet-deposited layers.
- Common issues include delamination during handling or sintering and electrical discontinuities at junctions.

Mitigation Strategies:

- **Plasma or UV-ozone surface treatments** to increase wettability
- Use of **adhesion-promoting agents** (e.g., silanes)
- Application of **thin dielectric buffer layers** to smooth surface roughness

Dielectric Matching Across Layers

- Differences in **dielectric constants** between printed inks, LDS materials, and substrates can result in **impedance mismatches**, especially in RF designs.

Mitigation Strategies:

- Careful **material selection and simulation** for dielectric uniformity
- Use of **composite dielectric inks** or matching layers
- Adjustment of **layer thickness and trace geometries**

B. Mechanical and Thermal Reliability

Delamination Under Thermal Cycling

- Variations in thermal expansion coefficients among LDS substrates, plated metals, and printed inks can cause **mechanical stress accumulation** and layer delamination.

Mitigation Strategies:

- Use of **flexible inks and polymers** with compatible coefficients of thermal expansion (CTE)
- **Gradual sintering protocols** to relieve thermal stress
- Integration of **mechanical anchor features** in 3D-printed vias

Long-Term Reliability Under Environmental Stress

- Hybrid PCBs are often deployed in **moist, UV-rich, or chemically harsh environments** (e.g., automotive, biomedical).
- **Oxidation, hydrolysis, and UV degradation** can compromise inkjet traces and adhesion zones.

Mitigation Strategies:

- Use of **UV-stable encapsulants**
- Application of **anti-oxidant topcoats** on printed features
- Encapsulation of critical interconnects with **conformal coatings**

C. Precision and Alignment

Ink Spreading and Line Width Control

- Inkjet printing precision is influenced by:
  - Substrate **roughness and porosity**
  - **Ink viscosity and surface tension**
  - **Substrate temperature during deposition**

Mitigation Strategies:

- **Real-time inkjet monitoring** and closed-loop droplet control
- Tuning ink formulations for optimal **viscoelastic behavior**
- Pre-conditioning of substrates using **thermal and chemical methods**

Laser Path Fidelity

- In LDS, **beam misalignment**, **thermal drift**, or **vibration** can result in:
  - Inaccurate trace placement
  - Faulty via connections

Mitigation Strategies:

- Use of **high-precision galvanometric laser scanners**
- Implementation of **feedback-controlled laser path correction**
- Incorporation of **fiducial markers** for machine vision-assisted alignment

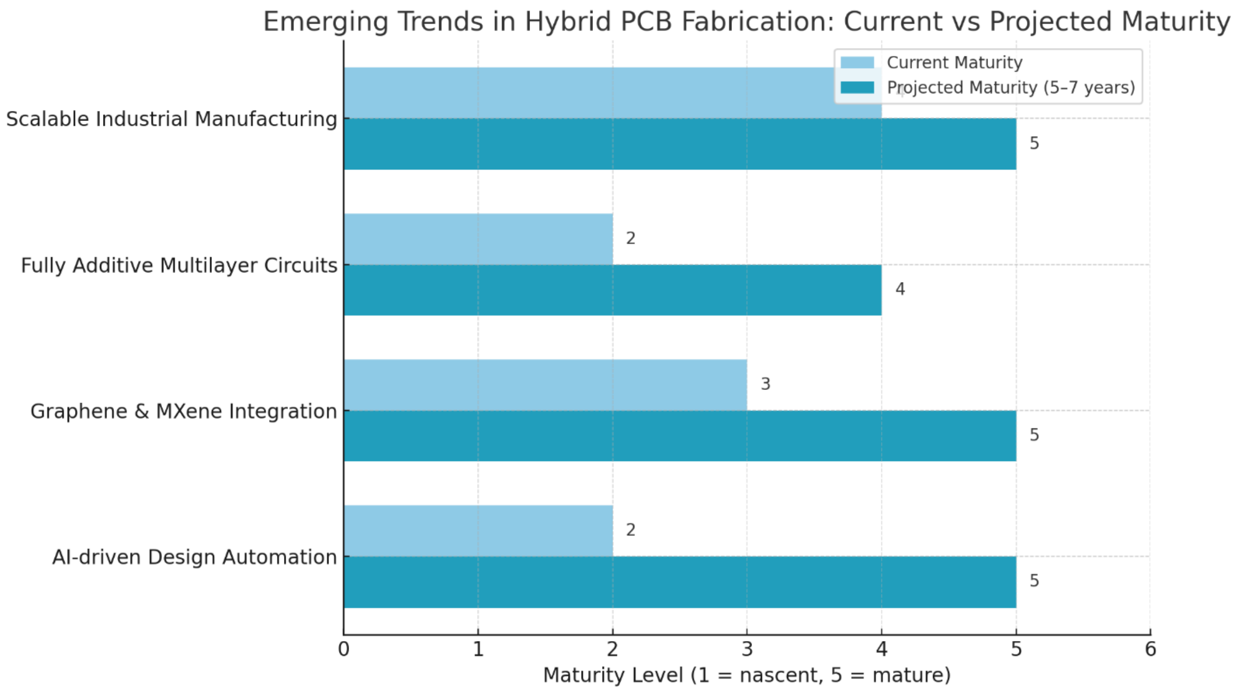
Challenge Summary Table

Challenge Area	Risk Level (1–5)	Primary Concern	Mitigation Technique
Surface Adhesion	4	Ink delamination, poor electrical contact	Surface treatments, primers
Dielectric Mismatch	3	RF impedance distortion	Material modeling, controlled layer stacking
Thermal Delamination	5	Cracking or lifting under temperature cycles	Matched CTE materials, slow thermal ramping
Environmental Degradation	4	Oxidation, UV sensitivity	Encapsulation, anti-corrosive coatings
Ink Spreading	4	Reduced resolution and feature accuracy	Ink tuning, surface modification
Laser Path Drift	3	Misaligned traces or vias	Machine vision calibration, vibration damping

VII. Future Prospects and Trends

The fusion of LDS and inkjet technologies lays a strong foundation for a **new era of digitally defined, miniaturized, and highly customized electronics**. However, future advancements are expected to radically amplify these capabilities through **AI integration**, **nanomaterial innovation**, and **scalable additive platforms**.

Maturity Chart:



Visualizing the **current and projected maturity** (over the next 5–7 years) of key enabling trends in the hybrid PCB ecosystem.

1. Integration with AI-Driven Design Automation for PCBs
Problem:
Modern multi-layer PCB layouts with embedded sensors, RF components, and flexible interconnects have design spaces too large for manual optimization.
Solution:

- **AI-driven electronic design automation (EDA)** tools use **machine learning**, **evolutionary algorithms**, and **topology optimization** to automatically generate:
    - **3D circuit layouts** conforming to non-planar geometries
    - **Material layer stacks** for optimal electrical and thermal performance
    - **Manufacturing constraints** tailored to LDS and inkjet limitations

Key Development:

- Ongoing research into **reinforcement learning models** for PCB trace routing
- Digital twins and simulation-driven generative PCB designs
- Integration with CAM systems for one-click hybrid manufacturing setup

2. Use of Advanced Nanomaterials (Graphene, MXenes)
Trend:
Advanced 2D nanomaterials like **graphene**, **MXenes**, and **carbon nanotubes (CNTs)** are being formulated into printable inks for next-generation inkjet electronics.

Material	Key Benefit	Challenge
Graphene	High electrical & thermal conductivity	Ink stability, sintering compatibility
MXenes	Excellent EMI shielding & energy storage	Susceptibility to oxidation
CNTs	Flexibility, tensile strength	Uniform dispersion in ink medium

Impact:

- Ultra-flexible circuits

- Embedded sensors with multifunctionality (sensing + processing)
- Biocompatible inks for medical and bioelectronic devices

3. Potential for Fully Additive Multilayer Circuits

Vision:

Move from hybrid to **entirely additive** PCB fabrication, reducing reliance on subtractive steps like laser drilling or electroless plating.

Research Directions:

- Inkjet-printable **dielectrics and insulators** for interlayer separation
- **Conductive pillar printing** for through-layer vias
- Multi-material printheads enabling **one-pass multilayer stackup**

Prototypes:

Initial demonstrations include 4–6 layer PCBs built entirely using additive means, though resolution and long-term stability still lag behind conventional techniques.

4. Scalability for Industrial Manufacturing

Need:

To move beyond lab-scale fabrication and into **high-throughput, repeatable manufacturing** for sectors like automotive, aerospace, and healthcare.

Required Enablers:

- **Roll-to-roll (R2R) inkjet systems**
- Automated LDS machines with vision feedback
- Standardization of **process monitoring & QA protocols**

Sustainability Angle:

- Lower water and chemical use
- Minimal copper waste
- Integrated recycling of printed electronics

Summary Table: Future Readiness

Trend	Current Maturity (1–5)	Expected in 5–7 Years	Key Impact Area
AI-driven PCB Design	2	5	Rapid prototyping & optimization
Graphene / MXene Ink Integration	3	5	High-performance flexible electronics
Fully Additive Multilayer Fabrication	2	4	Environmentally clean PCB production
Scalable Industrial Implementation	4	5	Mass production & commercialization

VIII. Conclusion

The convergence of **Laser Direct Structuring (LDS)** and **inkjet printing** represents a transformative step in the evolution of printed circuit board (PCB) fabrication. This **hybrid additive-subtractive manufacturing approach** strategically blends the high-precision capabilities of laser-defined structuring with the material efficiency and design freedom of inkjet-based additive deposition.

Recap of Hybrid Advantages

- **Design Flexibility**: Enables complex 3D and conformal circuit geometries, suitable for miniaturized and wearable electronics.
- **Manufacturing Precision**: LDS offers sub-100 µm accuracy in trace formation, while inkjet enables fine-feature deposition and multi-material integration.

- **Sustainability**: By eliminating photomasks, etchants, and excess copper, this method minimizes waste, reduces energy consumption, and aligns with green manufacturing initiatives.
- **Prototyping Agility**: Maskless inkjet printing allows for rapid design iterations, reducing time-to-market and tooling costs.

Potential for Next-Gen Electronics

This hybrid methodology opens new frontiers for **next-generation electronic systems** that demand higher performance within smaller, lighter, and more complex form factors. Specifically, it is uniquely positioned to support:

- High-Density Interconnect (HDI) and multi-layer 3D PCBs
- Flexible and stretchable electronics for IoT and medical devices
- Integrated sensors and antennas on curved substrates for RF applications
- Environmentally friendly, scalable production pipelines for industrial adoption

Moreover, when augmented with **AI-assisted design automation**, **advanced nanomaterials** (like graphene and MXenes), and **digitally driven workflows**, LDS–inkjet systems will become the cornerstone of a new era of **fully additive, intelligent electronics manufacturing**.

Key Takeaways for Researchers and Industry

- **For Researchers**: Focus areas should include ink-material development, interface engineering between LDS and inkjet layers, and predictive AI models for design-to-fabrication workflows.
- **For Industry Practitioners**: Immediate benefits can be realized in rapid prototyping, low-to-medium volume manufacturing, and component-level customization across automotive, healthcare, and consumer electronics sectors.
- **Cross-disciplinary Collaboration**: Success in this field will depend on close collaboration between materials scientists, mechanical engineers, circuit designers, and process automation experts.

In conclusion, the hybrid LDS–inkjet manufacturing framework not only addresses the limitations of traditional PCB technologies but also **lays the groundwork for intelligent, sustainable, and design-unbounded electronics of the future.**

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