

# Small-Area Si Photovoltaics for Low-Flux Infrared Energy Harvesting

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**Abstract**—Silicon photovoltaics are prospective candidates to power mm-scale implantable devices. These applications require excellent performance for small-area cells under low-flux illumination condition, which is not commonly achieved for silicon cells due to shunt leakage and recombination losses. Small area (1–10 mm<sup>2</sup>) silicon photovoltaic cells are studied in this paper, where performance improvements are demonstrated using a surface n-type doped emitter and Si<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> passivation. A power conversion efficiency of more than 17% is achieved for 660-nW/mm<sup>2</sup> illumination at 850 nm. The silicon cells demonstrate improved power conversion efficiency and reduced degradation under low illumination conditions in comparison with conventional crystalline silicon photovoltaic cells available commercially.

**Index Terms**—Energy harvesting, photovoltaics, shunt resistance, silicon.

## I. INTRODUCTION

HUMAN microchip implant [1]–[4] is a promising technology for a variety of applications, including identification, biomedical sensors for monitoring neuron pulses [5], biomarkers [6], and tracking positions [7]. Recently developed low power systems [8] have made implantable systems a feasible approach. Energy harvesting from vibration and RF sources [9] has been tested and evaluated, but the stability of the energy source and miniaturization is challenging [4], [9]. Alternatively, infrared photovoltaic energy harvesting has been considered, utilizing the near-infrared (NIR) transparency window of tissue between 700 and 1100 nm [10] from natural ambient sunlight or intentional low-intensity LED illumination through tissue. High-efficiency photovoltaic cells based on III–V semiconductors for mm-scale low-power systems under low-flux illumination may meet these requirements, where GaAs cells have achieved 19.4% power conversion efficiency under indoor 1-μW/mm<sup>2</sup> illumination [11].

One of the obstacles facing GaAs-based photovoltaic cells is concerns related to toxicity, despite encapsulation with biocompatible materials. Silicon photovoltaics may be a more

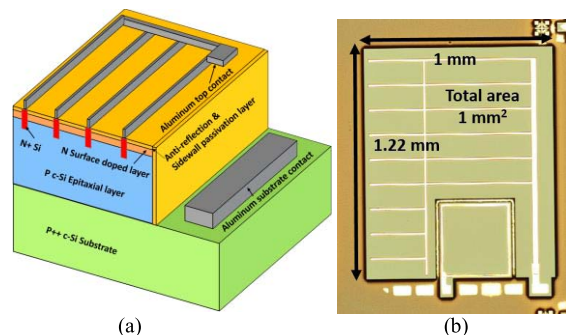


Fig. 1. (a) Schematic of device structure. (b) Optical microscope image of a fabricated 1-mm<sup>2</sup> device.

attractive option for implantable devices due to their excellent NIR response, compatibility with silicon CMOS [12], and reduced cost. High-efficiency silicon photovoltaic cells are well established for solar energy, where low flux solar response has demonstrated a power conversion efficiency of 13.5% under 1 μW/mm<sup>2</sup> [13] and 13.1% under 3-μW/mm<sup>2</sup> AM 1.5 illumination [14]. However, specific requirements for the 700–1100-nm NIR window and mm-scale device size have not been addressed, where sidewall recombination [11], [15] and shunt resistance [13], [17] are expected to be critical. In this paper, mm-scale silicon photovoltaic cells are explored for low-flux NIR energy harvesting.

## II. EXPERIMENT

Silicon photovoltaic cells were designed and simulated using Sentaurus Device [18], using built-in values for silicon material parameters at 300 K, as indicated in Table I, and neglecting the edge effects, including surface recombination and sidewall recombination. The baseline device structure consists of a thick p-type silicon base layer on heavily doped p-type silicon substrate and diffused n-type emitter contacts on the top surface, as shown in Fig. 1(a). The baseline geometry utilizing a heavily doped substrate and lightly-doped base, while unconventional for solar Photovoltaic (PV), is selected in this paper to provide top contacts to facilitate a stacked configuration for mm-scale systems [8]. A lightly-doped n-type emitter near the surface between heavily doped emitter contacts was also included for select samples with the goal of improving carrier collection. The base thickness and doping concentration were optimized for irradiation between 800 and 850 nm at a power density of 100 nW/mm<sup>2</sup>.

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TABLE I  
SILICON SIMULATION PARAMETERS AT 300 K

Parameter	Value	Unit
Bandgap	1.124	eV
Intrinsic carrier concentration	$1.075 \times 10^{10}$	$\text{cm}^{-3}$
Refractive index	3.681 (at 800 nm) 3.65 (at 850 nm)	
Absorption coefficient	850 (at 800 nm) 535 (at 850 nm)	$\text{cm}^{-1}$
Carrier lifetime	$10^{-5}$ (for electron) $3 \times 10^{-6}$ (for hole)	s

TABLE II  
OPTIMIZED DEVICE PARAMETERS UNDER ILLUMINATION  
OF  $100 \text{ nW/mm}^2$  BETWEEN 800 AND 850 nm

Parameter	Value	Unit
Base thickness	35	$\mu\text{m}$
Base doping concentration	$2 \times 10^{17}$	$\text{cm}^{-3}$
N-type surface layer thickness	0.34	$\mu\text{m}$
N-type surface layer doping	$2.5 \times 10^{16}$	$\text{cm}^{-3}$
Anti-reflection $\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4$ layer	100	nm
Emitter width	3	$\mu\text{m}$
Emitter depth	0.46	$\mu\text{m}$

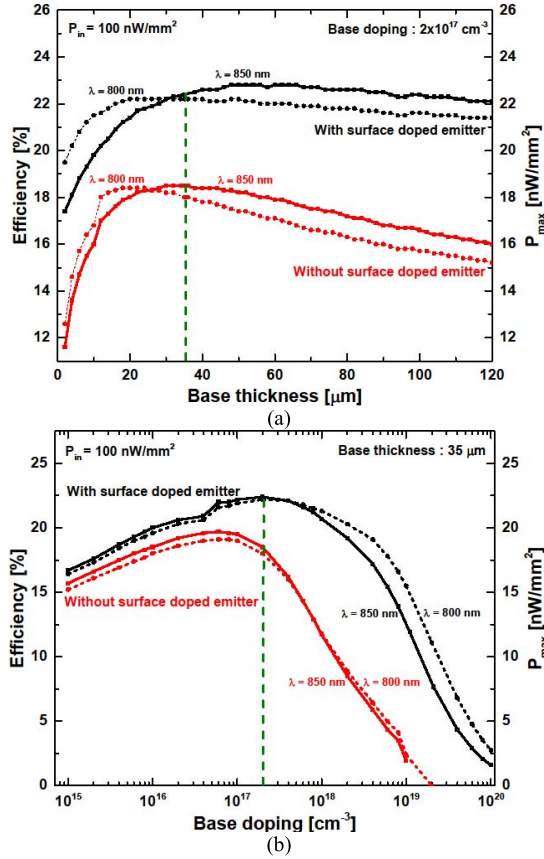


Fig. 2. Simulated power conversion efficiency under  $100\text{-nW/mm}^2$  illumination at 800 nm (dashed line) and 850 nm (solid line) for variable. (a) Base thickness. (b) Base doping concentration.

The dependence of power conversion efficiency on base layer thickness and doping concentration is shown in Fig. 2. Base thickness near  $35 \mu\text{m}$ , corresponding to optical absorption depth [19] of silicon at 300 K, and base doping concentration near  $2 \times 10^{17} \text{ cm}^{-3}$  were found to provide near optimal performance under the NIR illumination conditions simulated. The inclusion of a surface n-type emitter with thickness of  $340 \text{ nm}$  and concentration of  $2.5 \times 10^{16} \text{ cm}^{-3}$  was found to significantly increase the power conversion efficiency, as shown in Fig. 2. Optimized device parameters are summarized in Table II.

Devices were fabricated from epitaxial silicon wafers grown by chemical vapor deposition, with base thickness measured between  $33$  to  $37 \mu\text{m}$ . The base doping concentration was  $1.5 \times 10^{16} \text{ cm}^{-3}$ , corresponding to a resistivity of  $1 \Omega\text{-cm}$ . A lower base doping concentration than the optimal identified from simulations was used with the objective of reducing sensitivity to shunt resistance leakage paths. Emitter junctions and lightly doped surface emitter (for select samples) were formed via phosphorous diffusion. The thermal phosphorous doping process results in a Gaussian doping profile with an estimated junction depth around  $1.5 \mu\text{m}$ . A lightly doped emitter with  $1.2 \mu\text{m}$  thickness and  $5 \times 10^{18} \text{ cm}^{-3}$  peak concentration was formed through a subsequent  $300\text{-nm}$  reactive ion etch of the top surface. Aluminum contacts were fabricated for the n-type and p-type layers using conventional photolithography, electron beam evaporation, and wet chemical etching processes. Photolithography and reactive ion etching were used for device isolation and patterning to contact the heavily doped p-type substrate. Due to the strong sidewall/perimeter dependence of small area PV cells [11], [15], variable device area was studied in the range of  $0.02$  to  $10 \text{ mm}^2$ , corresponding to a perimeter/area (P/A) ratio from  $35.84$  to  $1.4 \text{ mm}^{-1}$ . Several sidewall and surface passivation layer processes were investigated, since surface recombination is expected to have a major impact on device performance for small mm-scale devices operating under low-flux conditions [11], [15]. Passivation layers studied in this paper include low-pressure chemical vapor deposition (LPCVD) of  $\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4$ , LPCVD a-Si, and  $\text{SiO}_2$  via dry thermal oxidation, plasma-enhanced chemical vapor deposition (PECVD) of  $\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4$  and PECVD  $\text{SiO}_2$ , and no passivation for comparison. Further details on the six different passivation layers under study: 1)  $50\text{-nm}$  LPCVD  $\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4$  (refractive index:  $2.02$ ) at  $800^\circ\text{C}$  +  $50\text{-nm}$  PECVD  $\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4$  at  $380^\circ\text{C}$ ; 2)  $25\text{-nm}$  LPCVD a-Si at  $560^\circ\text{C}$  +  $100\text{-nm}$  PECVD  $\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4$  at  $380^\circ\text{C}$ ; 3)  $40 \text{ nm}$  thermally grown dry  $\text{SiO}_2$  at  $900^\circ\text{C}$  +  $50\text{-nm}$  LPCVD  $\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4$  at  $800^\circ\text{C}$  +  $100\text{-nm}$  PECVD  $\text{SiO}_2$  at  $380^\circ\text{C}$ ; 4)  $100\text{-nm}$  PECVD  $\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4$  at  $380^\circ\text{C}$ ; 5)  $100\text{-nm}$  PECVD  $\text{SiO}_2$  at  $380^\circ\text{C}$ ; and 6) control sample without passivation.

Electrical current density versus voltage ( $J$ - $V$ ) characteristics under dark and illumination were measured using a Keithley 4200 Semiconductor Characterization System.

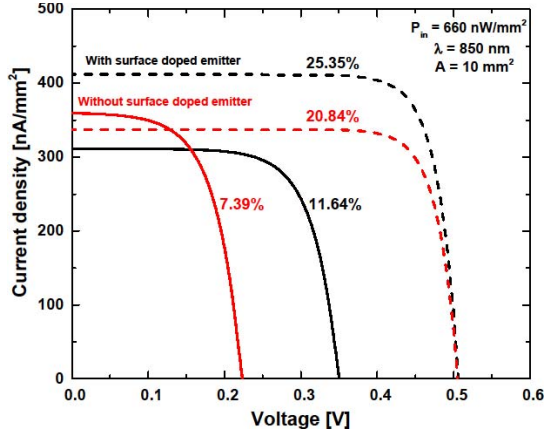


Fig. 3. Measured (solid line) and simulated (dashed line) current–voltage characteristics of silicon photovoltaic cells with thermal SiO<sub>2</sub> passivation and with/without lightly doped emitter under 660-nW/mm<sup>2</sup> illumination at 850 nm.

Low-flux illumination conditions were controlled by a microscope-compatible 850-nm infrared light emitting diode and calibrated power meter. Power conversion efficiency was measured for irradiation at a power density of 660 nW/mm<sup>2</sup>, which is extremely dim in comparison with the power density of AM 1.5 sunlight of 1000 μW/mm<sup>2</sup> [20]. The external quantum efficiency spectrum was measured on select samples using a system equipped with a halogen white light source, lock-in amplifier, monochromator, and calibrated photodetector.

### III. RESULTS

#### A. Surface Doped Emitter

The impact of the lightly doped surface emitter on device performance is illustrated by the response under IR illumination and under dark conditions, as shown in Figs. 3 and 4. The IR power conversion efficiency is dramatically increased from 7.39% to 11.64% (Fig. 3) for a 10-mm<sup>2</sup> cell. The short circuit current density ( $J_{SC}$ ) of the cell with surface n-type emitter was reduced in contrast to the simulation results, due to the nonideal Gaussian doping profile of the surface emitter with peak concentration near 10<sup>20</sup> cm<sup>-3</sup>. This heavily doped surface layer introduces free carrier absorption and degradation in carrier lifetime, thus reducing  $J_{SC}$ . A majority of the improved power conversion efficiency is attributed to an increase in open circuit voltage ( $V_{OC}$ ), suggesting a corresponding reduction in the reverse saturation current ( $J_0$ ). The n-type emitter alters the field-effect passivation between silicon and thermal SiO<sub>2</sub> from inversion to accumulation, resulting in dramatic improvements in the carrier lifetime at low carrier injection [21] and reduction in the reverse saturation current. Dark current measurements demonstrate a decrease in the reverse saturation current density [Fig. 4(a)], agreeing with the increased value of  $V_{OC}$ . Numerical parameters for dark current were obtained by fitting the forward biased region from 0 to 0.4 V to the diode equation

$$J = J_0 \left[ \exp \left( \frac{qV}{nkT} \right) - 1 \right] \quad (1)$$

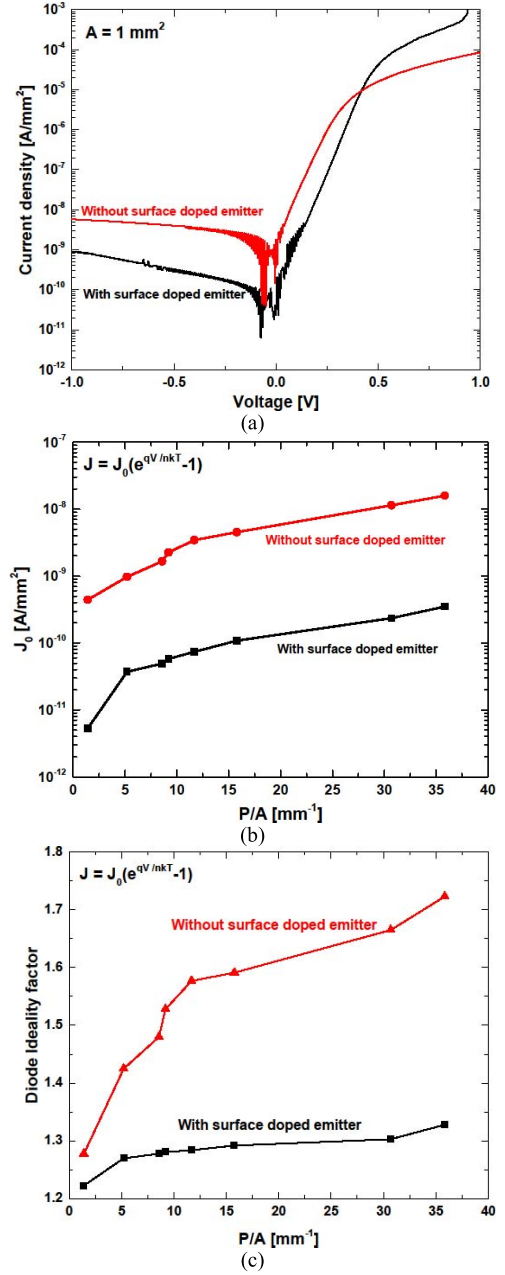


Fig. 4. (a) Measured current versus voltage characteristics of cells with thermal SiO<sub>2</sub> passivation and with/without lightly doped emitter under dark conditions. (b) Extracted  $J_0$  parameters and (c) diode ideality factors versus  $P/A$  (mm<sup>-1</sup>) ratio from 1.4 to 35.84 mm<sup>-1</sup> corresponding device size from 10 to 0.02 mm<sup>2</sup>.

where  $J$  is the total current density,  $V$  is the applied voltage,  $n$  is the diode ideality factor,  $k$  is the Boltzmann constant,  $T$  is the temperature, and  $J_0$  is the reverse saturation current. Extracted parameters for  $J_0$  [Fig. 4(b)] demonstrate a strong perimeter dependence, ranging from 5.31 to 348.96 pA/mm<sup>2</sup> for the surface doped sample and from 0.443 to 15.9 nA/mm<sup>2</sup> for a cell without the surface doped emitter layer. In all the cases, the cell with a surface n-type emitter demonstrates a decrease in  $J_0$  by one to two orders of magnitude. The extracted ideality factor also emphasizes the improvement in device performance with the inclusion of the surface



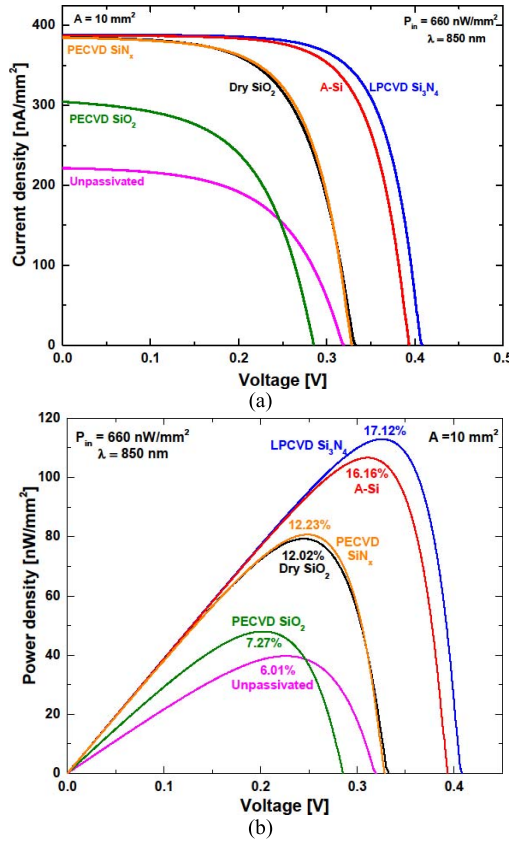


Fig. 5. (a) Measured current versus voltage characteristics. (b) Power density versus voltage of different passivation layers and 10-mm² cell under 850-nm LED illumination with 660 nW/mm².

n-type emitter. The ideality factor for the sample without the surface doped layer demonstrates a strong dependence on  $P/A$  ranging from 1.285 to 1.723, while the ideality factor of the surface doped sample only shows a relatively small increase from 1.223 to 1.303. This unwanted increase in the diode ideality factor for the sample without the surface n-type emitter is attributed to an increase in Shockley–Read–Hall recombination in the space charge region near the surface due to surface inversion at the p-Si and SiO₂ interface [21]. While the surface doping technique demonstrates substantial improvements in the power conversion efficiency, the measured values are still substantially lower than simulated values. The primary source of efficiency reduction is likely due to nonideal thermal silicon dioxide passivation of the p-type sidewall resulting in reduced minority carrier diffusion length. Improved passivation of the sidewall may be achieved by using a-Si or Si₃N₄ [21] to approach the simulated efficiency values. Losses associated with the high doping concentration at the emitter surface interface, such as free carrier absorption or Auger recombination, are other efficiency limiting factors. An optimized doping profile of the surface n-type emitter through selective etching between the light harvesting and metal finger regions is required, as well as improved design of the surface passivation layer to serve as an antireflection coating and layer to effectively reduce bulk and sidewall recombination losses.

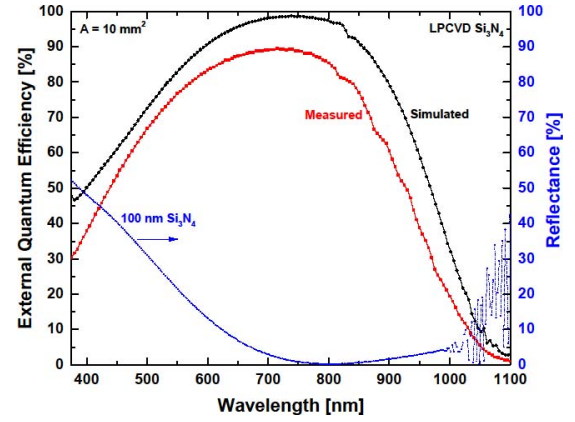


Fig. 6. Measured and simulated EQE characteristics for the 100-nm LPCVD Si₃N₄ passivated cell along with a surface reflectance curve (dashed line) of cell between 375- and 1100-nm wavelength.

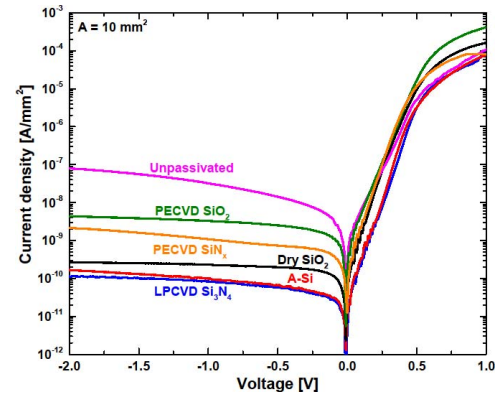


Fig. 7. Measured  $J-V$  under dark conditions for samples with different passivation layers.

## B. Passivation Layer

Silicon cells with variable passivation layers and optimized surface n-type emitter were fabricated. The passivation layers served the dual purpose of an antireflection coating, where the surface reflectance was optimized at a wavelength of 800 nm. The 100-nm Si₃N₄ is expected to provide 1%–2% surface reflectance at 850 nm, as shown in Fig. 6. Fabricated device sizes were 1 and 10 mm². A comparison of  $J-V$  and  $P-V$  results is shown in Fig. 5, where LPCVD Si₃N₄ and LPCVD a-Si passivation demonstrate the highest power conversion efficiency at 17.12% and 16.16%, respectively. The improved efficiency originates primarily from an increase in  $V_{OC}$ , with relatively similar  $J_{SC}$  values. From the external quantum efficiency measurement, as shown in Fig. 6, the device structures, including the base thickness and antireflection layer, are well optimized for near-IR wavelength between 700 and 850 nm with above 80% external quantum efficiency (EQE) over this wavelength range. Dark  $J-V$  characteristics are shown in Fig. 7, with results from parameter extraction summarized in Table III. The LPCVD Si₃N₄ and a-Si passivation processes demonstrate a clear reduction in reverse saturation current and reduction in ideality factor from 1.968 to 1.4, demonstrating that the LPCVD processes are effectively passivating the deep

TABLE III  
EXTRACTED PARAMETERS OF 10-mm<sup>2</sup> CELLS USING (1)

Passivation	$J_0$ (A/mm <sup>2</sup> )	n
LPCVD Si <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub>	$5.31 \times 10^{-12}$	1.393
LPCVD a-Si	$8.87 \times 10^{-12}$	1.419
Dry SiO <sub>2</sub>	$3.54 \times 10^{-10}$	1.851
PECVD Si <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub>	$7.03 \times 10^{-11}$	1.498
PECVD SiO <sub>2</sub>	$1.04 \times 10^{-9}$	1.943
Unpassivated	$4.07 \times 10^{-10}$	1.968

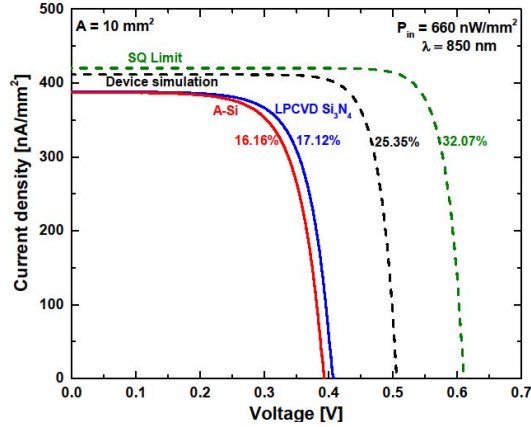


Fig. 8. Measured  $J$ - $V$  characteristics and corresponding conversion efficiency and comparison with device simulation and SQ model.

sidewall with Si<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and a-Si. The improved dark  $J$ - $V$  characteristics demonstrate a clear agreement with the measured improvements in  $V_{OC}$  for the Si<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and a-Si processes.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The maximum efficiency achieved in the cells for this paper is 17.12% for the LPCVD Si<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> under low-flux 850-nm LED illumination. This provides a power density of 113 nW/mm<sup>2</sup>, above the desired value of 100 nW/mm<sup>2</sup> for mm-scale systems [8], [22]. The results are also improved over previously reported commercial cm-scale c-Si photovoltaic cells that were tested under the low-flux solar spectrum condition of 3000 nW/mm<sup>2</sup>, with reported efficiency of 13.1% [14].

The limitation on power conversion efficiency of these cells is attributed to a reduction in  $V_{OC}$ , as shown in Fig. 8 comparing measured and simulated results. The evident reduction in measured  $V_{OC}$  in comparison to values obtained from the Shockley-Queisser (SQ) limit for Si [23], [24] and the drift-diffusion device simulation in Sentaurus device [18] arises from nonradiative recombination losses, including sidewall and surface recombination. The behavior of reduced  $V_{OC}$  is similar to reports on GaAs PV cells under low flux indoor illumination [11], [22]. As shown in Table IV,  $V_{OC}$  values and corresponding conversion efficiency decrease for the smaller 1-mm<sup>2</sup> devices, suggesting that sidewall recombination is more important for mm-scale applications in comparison with conventional cm-scale photovoltaic cells. Degradation in conversion efficiency under low incident light intensity by shunt resistance compared with the negligible impacts of series

TABLE IV  
DEVICE SIZE DEPENDENCE ON DEVICE PARAMETERS OF LPCVD PASSIVATED CELLS UNDER ILLUMINATION OF 660 nW/mm<sup>2</sup> AT 850 nm

Passivation	LPCVD Si <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub>		LPCVD a-Si	
Size (mm <sup>2</sup> )	10	1	10	1
P/A (mm <sup>-1</sup> )	1.18	3.13	1.18	3.13
$J_{SC}$ (nA/mm <sup>2</sup> )	388.29	403.18	387.47	404.66
$V_{OC}$ (V)	0.409	0.384	0.394	0.359
Efficiency (%)	17.12	15.91	16.16	15.53
$J_0$ (A/mm <sup>2</sup> )	$5.31 \times 10^{-12}$	$2.36 \times 10^{-11}$	$8.87 \times 10^{-12}$	$1.45 \times 10^{-11}$
Ideality factor	1.393	1.502	1.419	1.356
Fill factor	0.711	0.678	0.699	0.705

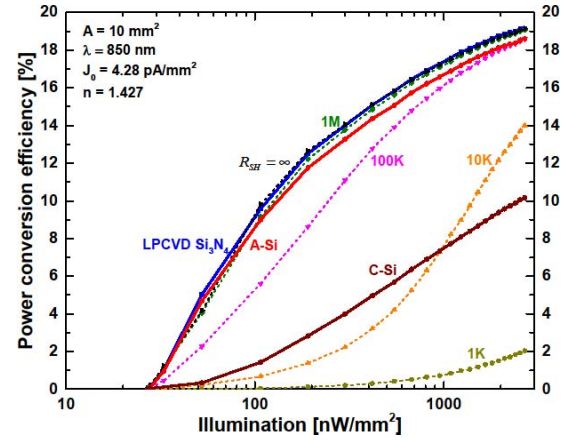


Fig. 9. Measured power conversion efficiency versus NIR illumination for varying device passivation and comparison with commercial c-Si. Simulated values using a diode model are shown assuming  $J_0$  and  $n$  values shown in the inset and varying shunt resistance in ( $\sim$ cm<sup>2</sup>).

resistance [16], [17] can also impact the utility of PV cells for energy harvesting applications. Power conversion efficiency under variable intensity illumination was examined for the cells with LPCVD Si<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and a-Si passivation, as shown in Fig. 9. The measured devices exhibit a decrease in efficiency with reduced illumination, with similar behavior for both passivation techniques. Measured results for a commercial c-Si solar cell [32] with 22% power conversion efficiency under AM 1.5 illumination are shown for comparison, which exhibits a more dramatic decrease in efficiency with reduced illumination. To examine the possible influence of efficiency degradation due to shunt leakage, conversion efficiency was simulated using a diode model with variable shunt resistance and assuming extracted  $J_0$  and  $n$  values from dark current measurement of tested cell. The LPCVD Si<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and a-Si passivated cells studied in this paper demonstrate a shunt resistance above 10 M $\Omega$ -cm<sup>2</sup>, sufficient to prevent degradation in efficiency for the range of illumination studied. Efficiency degradation with illumination follows expected behavior, where cells are limited by the dark current (reverse saturation current density,  $J_0$ ).

Further improvements in cell efficiency will, therefore, require reduction in  $J_0$ , where techniques, such as atomic layer deposition of Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> [21], [25] and chemical surface treatments, including NH<sub>4</sub>F [26], [27], (NH<sub>4</sub>)<sub>2</sub>S [28], [29], and H<sub>2</sub>S [30], [31], may be beneficial.

## V. CONCLUSION

Small area Si photovoltaic cells were optimized based on simulation results for energy harvesting applications in the NIR transparency window of biological tissue between 700 and 1100 nm. High EQE above 80% and power conversion efficiency exceeding 17% are demonstrated under low-flux NIR illumination. The device performance was dramatically improved by incorporating a surface lightly doped emitter and LPCVD passivation. In contrast to conventional c-Si PV, the cells in this paper demonstrate stable performance under low illumination intensity that is limited by dark current rather than shunt leakage. The good performance of the small-area silicon cells under low illumination conditions is promising for through-tissue infrared energy harvesting, where further improvements may be achieved by additional measures to reduce recombination losses at interfaces.

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