Overview and Status of the Space Interferometry Mission (SIM) Technology Development

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ABSTRACT

Optical and infrared interferometry will open new vistas for astronomy over the next decade. Space based interferometers, operating unfettered by the Earth's atmosphere, will offer the greatest scientific payoff. They also present the greatest technological challenge: laser metrology systems must perform with sub-nanometer precision; mechanical vibrations must be controlled to nanometers requiring orders of magnitude disturbance rejection; a multitude of actuators and sensors must operate flawlessly and in concert. The Interferometry Technology Program at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory is addressing these challenges with a development program that plans to establish technology readiness for the Space Interferometry Mission by end of 2001.

Keywords: interferometry, metrology, pointing, control, nanometer, picometer, optics, lasers

1. INTRODUCTION

The Space Interferometry Mission (SIM), with a target launch date of June 2006, will be one of the premiere missions in the Astronomical Search for Origins (ASO) Program, NASA's bold endeavor to understand the origins of the galaxies, of planetary systems around distant stars, and perhaps the origins of life itself. This adventure of discovery will be enabled by an explosive growth of innovative technology, as exciting in its own right as the underlying scientific quest.

Over the past several years a consensus has formed around the idea that space based optical interferometers operating in the visible and infrared wavebands represent the next great leap forward in astronomy and astrophysics. Interferometers lend themselves to space application due to their extremely efficient use of weight and volume to achieve the goals of high resolution, high sensitivity imaging and astrometry. SIM (see Figure 1) will mark NASA's first scientific use of this revolutionary observing technique in space. If it succeeds, it will presage the flight of the Terrestrial Planet Finder (TPF) and other larger and more ambitious Origins interferometers.

It is not surprising that such a huge step forward in observational power requires a concomitant leap in technological sophistication. SIM indeed drives the state-of-the-art in optomechanical and optoelectronic systems as well as presenting daunting challenges in precise stabilization of lightweight deployable structures and coordinated computer control of numerous optical surfaces. In this sense it very much embodies the principles of the Origins program—to couple breakthrough science with breakthrough technology in the service of both a fuller knowledge of our universe and a richer technological landscape that helps preserve our nation's preeminence as a force for global innovation. In this regard technology has become an important end-in-itself for NASA's Origins missions.

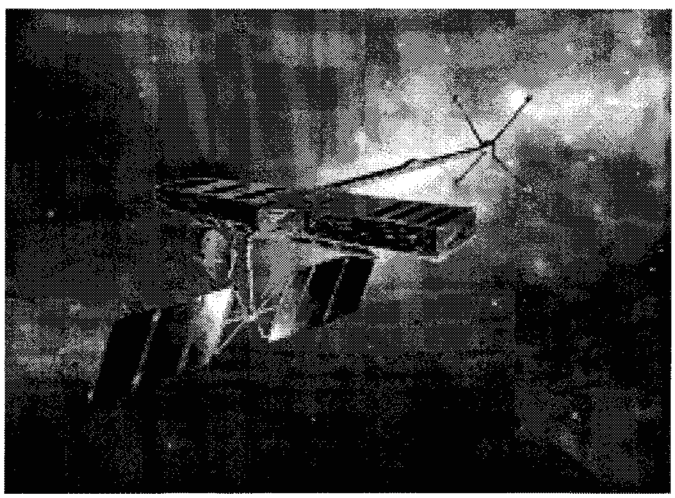

Figure 1 Artist's Rendering of SIM

2. MAJOR TECHNICAL CHALLENGES

This paper proceeds by discussing the key technical challenges faced by SIM and the technology development

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approach to meet them. As an overview paper, there is appended an extensive list of references which contain greater technical detail on the various elements of interferometry technology.

Successful development of SIM requires that three grand technological challenges be met and overcome:

(1) nanometer level control and stabilization of optical element on a lightweight flexible structure
(2) sub-nanometer level sensing of optical element relative positions over meters of separation distance
(3) overall instrument complexity and the implications for interferometer integration and test and autonomous on-orbit operation.

These flow from the fundamental science objectives of the mission, as illustrated in Figure 2.

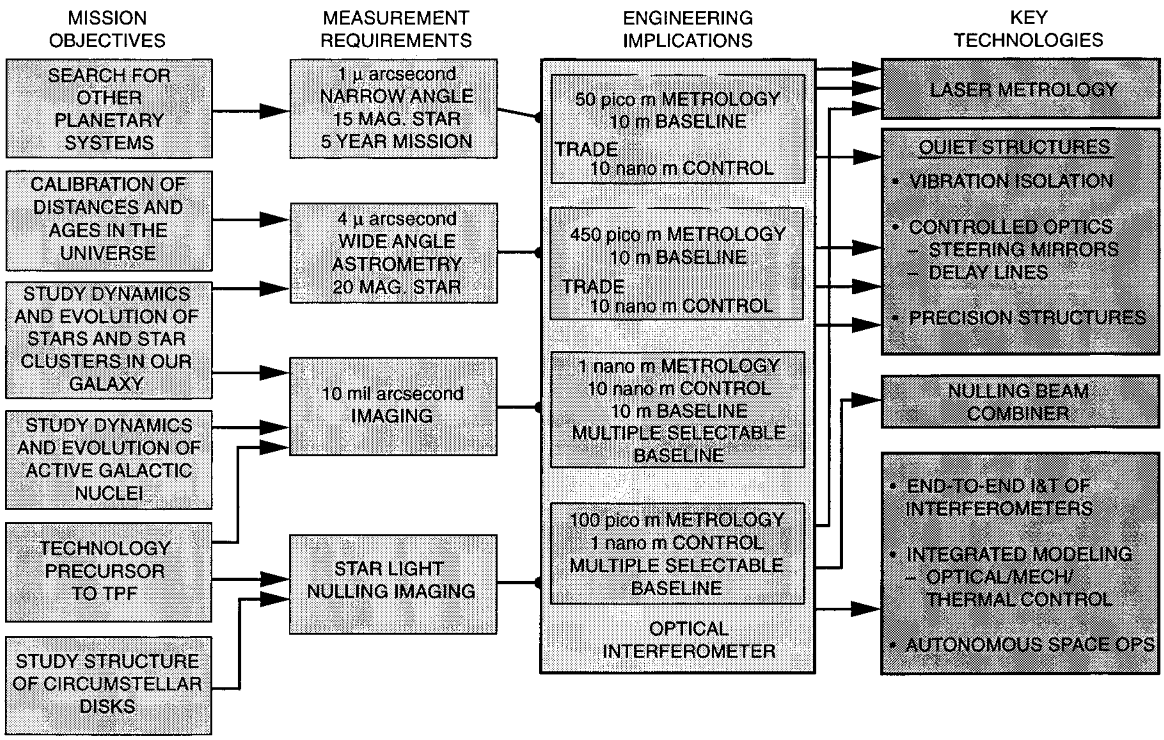

Figure 2 SIM Technology Requirements Flowdown

The need for nanometer control is driven by requirements on fringe visibility for astrometry and imaging as well as by the requirement for 10^4 starlight nulling. The nulling requirement is the more stringent necessitating 1 nanometer RMS optical path difference (OPD) control over a broad frequency range. Fringe visibility requirements translate into the need for 10 nanometer RMS OPD control.

The picometer regime metrology requirements flow directly from the principal astrometry science requirements. For example, in order to make a 1 microarcsecond angular measurement between two stars using a 10 meter baseline triple interferometer requires the relative measurement of baseline positions to about 50 picometers.

The complexity of an interferometer, with all its moving parts and control systems, is the price that must be paid for stepping beyond the paradigm of rigid monolithic telescopes as built since the days of Galileo. SIM will have to use active feedback control for at least 50 optical degrees of freedom. Another 80 degrees of freedom will need to be controlled in open loop fashion. Additional degrees of freedom will require articulation at least once for initial deployment and instrument alignment. All of this places great importance on the development of realtime software capable of autonomously operating SIM. New and creative integration and test methods will also be required to enable development of the instrument at an affordable cost.

The suite of new technologies that must be developed to enable SIM is depicted in Figure 3.

3. TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

Fundamentally the approach taken to technology development is one of rapid prototyping of critical hardware and software followed by integration into technology testbeds where critical interfaces can be validated, system level performance demonstrated, and integration and test procedures developed and verified. To some extent, due to the objective of completing the technology development by the end of 2001, this will entail concurrent engineering (e.g., we will need to develop some hardware component brassboards in parallel with the development of the testbeds, dictating that breadboards of those components will be used in the testbeds rather than brassboards, which would be preferred).

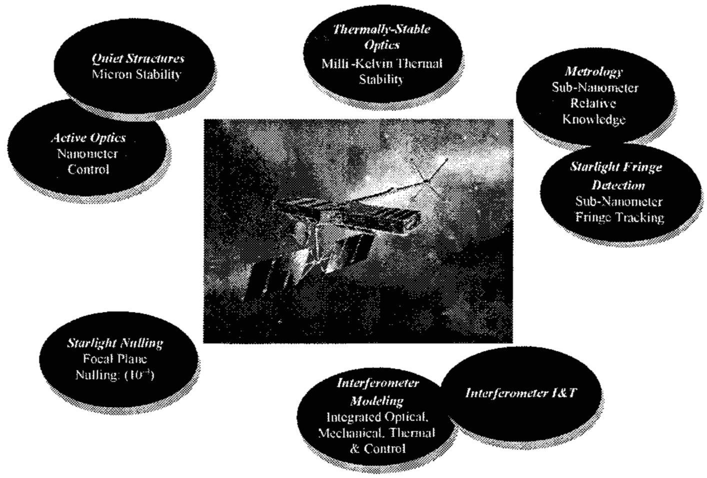

Figure 3 Key Technologies for SIM

This approach places the ground testbeds at the very heart of the technology development effort. It is in these testbeds that the technology products will be validated and technology readiness demonstrated. It is also in these testbeds that our engineering team will learn about what works and what does not when it comes to integrating and testing interferometers. Flight experiments will in general be undertaken only where the space environment is required to explore the relevant phenomenology.

3.1 Component hardware development

Breadboards and brassboards of the new technology components required by SIM will be built and tested by the technology program. The objectives are threefold: mitigate technical, schedule, and cost risk associated with key hardware components early in the SIM project life cycle (when the cost of correcting problems is low); deliver necessary components to the technology integration testbeds; transition the capability to manufacture the components to industry.

For each component to be brassboarded, whether it is built in-house, built in partnership with industry, or procured in a traditional manner, a series of performance and environmental tests will be conducted whose objective it is to qualify the component design as ready for space flight. A distinction is made between qualifying the design and qualifying the component itself. None of the brassboard components are destined for flight and hence the qualification process will lack the formality (and cost) associated with flight hardware. Nevertheless the qualification process will be quite rigorous with each component subjected to full functional, shock, random vibration, and thermal (and/or thermal / vacuum) testing. JPL quality assurance and reliability personnel will be included from the outset to ensure proper test procedures. Note that only those components considered as high risk will be built and tested as brassboards. Figures 4 and 5 depict examples of two units, the optical delay line and the astrometric beam combiner, that have finished development, performance and environmental testing.

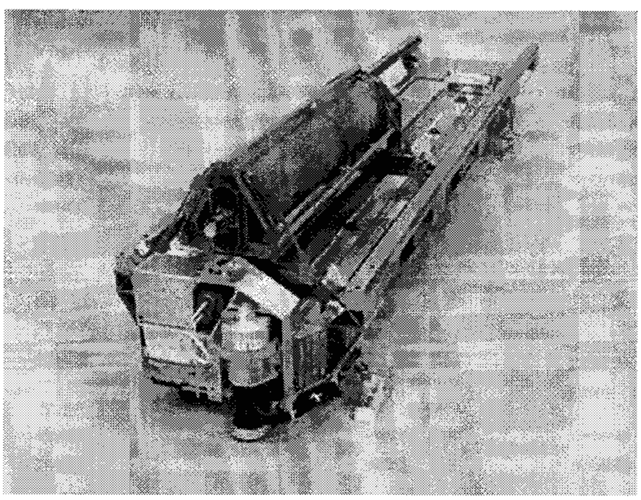

Figure 4 Brassboard Optical Delay Line

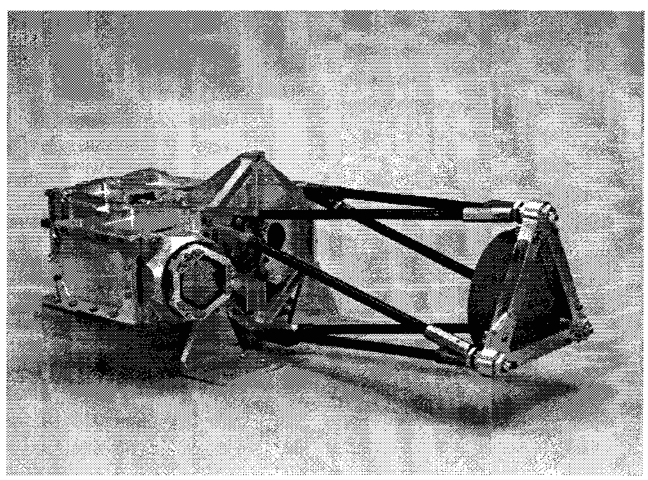

Figure 5 Brassboard Astrometric Beam Combiner

3.2 Prototype realtime software development

Space interferometers will be required to operate with limited intervention from the ground and in doing so perform initial optical alignment, calibration, stellar target acquisition, angle tracking, fringe tracking, slew, continuous rotation for synthesis imaging, and other autonomous functions. Realtime software will play the central role in performing these functions. This software represents a significant technical challenge since it will have to operate a very complex instrument, run on a distributed set of computers, and control processes at timescales from milliseconds to days. As advanced systems demand increasingly sophisticated software, the portion of project cost (and associated schedule and cost risk) assigned to software begins to rival that of hardware. Hence, the technology program has determined to place the importance of the development of realtime software on a par with that of interferometer hardware.

The approach to realtime software development is completely analogous to the development of component hardware via breadboards and brassboards. "Breadboard" software is regarded to be code that establishes the feasibility of performing a particular function. "Brassboard" software is a true prototype of flight software and demonstrates that the constraints imposed by the target flight processor can be met and that the code is efficient and maintainable. It is intended that the brassboard (or prototype) software developed under the technology program could actually be flown on SIM with only minor modification and upgrade required.

The job of developing SIM breadboard software is largely already done thanks to the development of two ground interferometers in recent years: the Palomar Testbed Interferometer (PTI) and the Micro-Precision Interferometer (MPI) Testbed PTI and MPI share a significant amount of common realtime software and together demonstrate the basic feasibility of automated interferometer operation.

The development of the SIM prototype (or brassboard) software takes place in a development environment called the Realtime Interferometer Control Software Testbed (RICST). RICST builds the code in a modular fashion and is making a series of incremental deliveries. This greatly simplify the process of testing and debugging. The initial deliveries were internal to the RICST team and served to validate the development approach and train the personnel. RICST testing incorporates breadboard and brassboard hardware allowing the software to be fully exercised by actually driving the relevant controlled components (Figure 6). RICST software is being incrementally delivered to integration testbeds (described below) where it is being used to operate complete interferometers like SIM. This process is expected to result in software that can be referred to as "protoflight"—ready for flight application with modest rework.

3.3 Integrated modeling tool development

The challenges facing space interferometry do not lie exclusively in the province of developing component hardware and realtime control software. Work is also needed to advance the state-of-the-art for software tools for analysis and design. Existing analysis tools provide only limited capability for evaluation of spaceborne optical system designs. They determine optical performance from the geometry and material properties of the optical elements in the system, assuming only minor deviations from the nominal alignment and figure. They cannot evaluate the impact on optical performance from controlled/articulated optics, structural dynamics, and thermal response, which are important considerations for future interferometer missions. To investigate these critical relationships, a new analysis tool has been developed called Integrated Modeling of Advanced Optical Systems (IMOS). IMOS enables end-to-end modeling of complex optomechanical systems (including optics, controls, structural dynamics, and thermal analysis) in a single seat workstation computing environment. IMOS has been applied at JPL to the Hubble Space Telescope and the Space Infrared Telescope Facility (SIRTF), as well as virtually all the space interferometer designs that have been considered in recent years (e.g., SIM, OSI, ISIS, SONATA, DLI, FMI, MPI, POINTS).

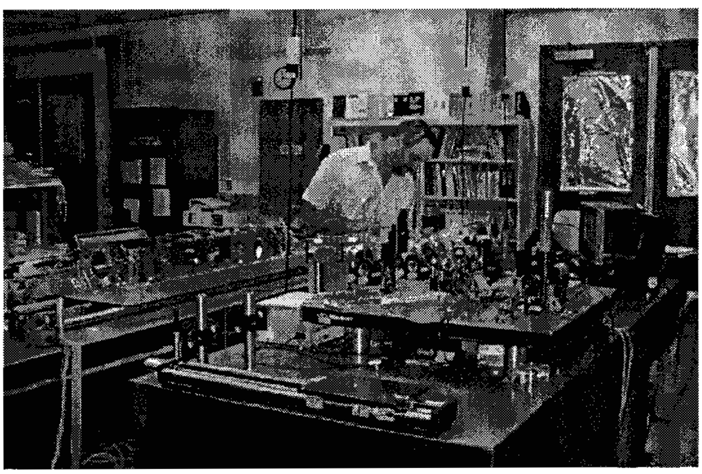

Figure 6 RICST Lab Hardware-in-the-Loop Testing

IMOS was originally created as a modeling tool to assist in the early design phases of multidisciplinary systems. In recent years IMOS has matured tremendously and has greatly increased its ability to address complex, many degree-of-freedom systems that are typical of the detail design phase. Currently IMOS is the baselined integrated modeling tool for the SIM project and NGST pre-project, and is also being adopted by their industrial partners.

Figure 7 shows a thermal/mechanical analysis run in IMOS predicting the deformation of one of SIM's collector telescopes over expected temperature changes.

3.4 Ground Integration Testbeds

In some sense the hardware and software products delineated above comprise the full set of tools and parts that the SIM Project needs to design, build and operate the interferometer instrument. However, having developed all the pieces, one huge task remains to be done—proving that they all fit together and work as an interferometer at the relevant levels of performance. This is the province of the ground testbeds.

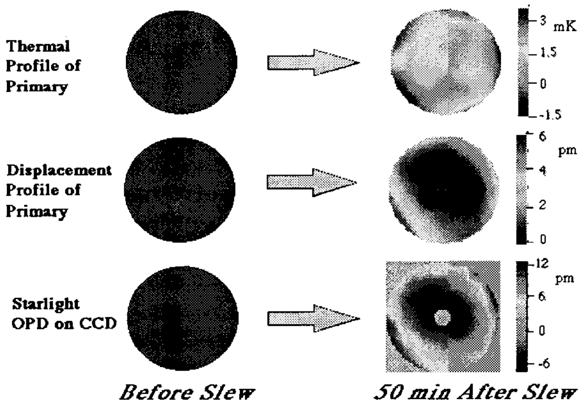

Figure 7 Collector Deformation Map Over Temperature

Three major ground testbeds are planned: the evolutionary SIM System Testbed (STB-1,3), the evolutionary Microarcsecond Metrology (MAM-1,3) Testbed, and the Palomar Testbed Interferometer (PTI). This particular delineation of the ground testbed effort derives from the recognition that one major subset of the technologies can be tested in air at nanometer precision and at full scale while another subset must be tested in vacuum at picometer precision but at subscale. The first set of technologies, i.e. those associated with vibration attenuation, is grouped into the STB. The second, i.e., the laser metrology technologies, is assigned to the MAM Testbed. PTI, an operational ground based interferometer observatory, is unique in that it is capable of viewing real stars which is necessary to validate the science data processing software.

SIM System Testbed (STB)—The SIM System Testbed is actually an evolutionary series of two testbeds. The first, STB-1, was built during the FY'91 through FY'94 timeframe. It is a full single baseline interferometer built on a flexible structure (see Figure 8) out of breadboard hardware components.

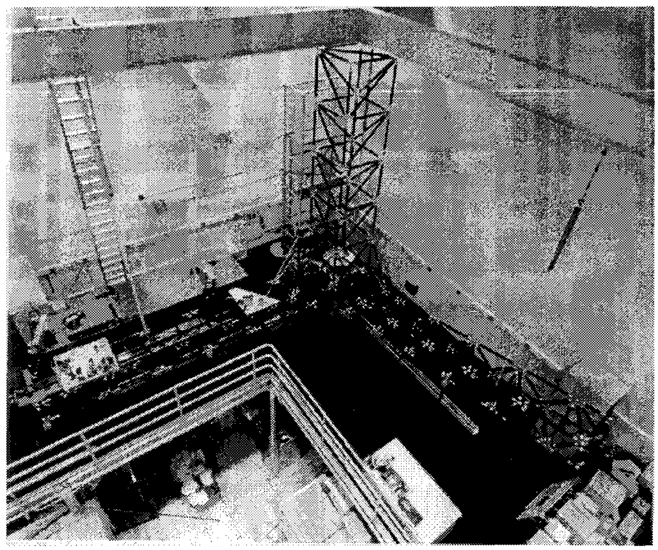

Figure 8 Bird's Eye View of STB-1

The structure is a 7m x 6.8m x 5.5m aluminum truss weighing 200 kg (with optics and control systems attached the weight is about 600 kg). Three active gravity off-load devices make up the structure's suspension system providing about a factor of ten separation between the structure's "rigid body" and flexible body modes (the lowest of which is at about 6 Hz). The equipment complement includes a three tier optical delay line with associated laser metrology, a pointing system complete with two gimballed siderostats, two fast steering mirrors, and coarse and fine angle tracking detectors, a six-axis isolation system, and all associated electronics and real time computer control hardware necessary for closed loop system control and data acquisition. The principal objectives of STB-1 are demonstrating vibration attenuation technologies and validating the IMOS modeling tool in the nanometer regime. STB-1 was completed during the summer of 1994 when "first fringes" were acquired. Two metrics have been tracked over time to monitor testbed progress. These are: (a) pseudo-star fringe tracking stability in the presence of the laboratory ambient vibration environment and; (b) fringe stability vs. emulated spacecraft reaction wheel disturbances, which are expected to be the dominant on-orbit disturbance source. The current performance, as measured by each metric, is below 5 nm RMS (see Figure 9 for a typical lab ambient fringe tracking time trace). The goal is to achieve 1 nm by the end of the evolutionary STB program and thereby demonstrate technology readiness to tackle the level of optical stability necessary to achieve factor of 10,000 starlight nulling.

As the name implies, STB-3 is a three baseline testbed. It's objectives are twofold: (1) to demonstrate that information from the guide interferometers and the metrology system can be fed at high bandwidth to the science interferometer enabling it to track, in angle and phase, dim science stars; (2) to demonstrate the capability to integrate and operate a system of comparable complexity to the flight instrument, thereby serving as a pathfinder for the flight system integration and test.

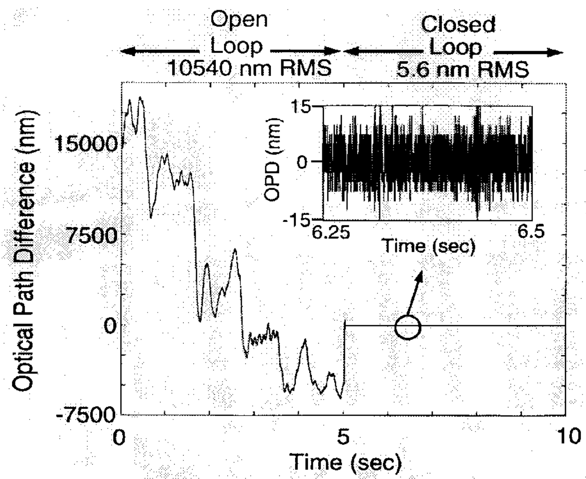

Figure 9 Time Trace of STB-1 Fringe Tracking OPD with Control Loops Open/Closed

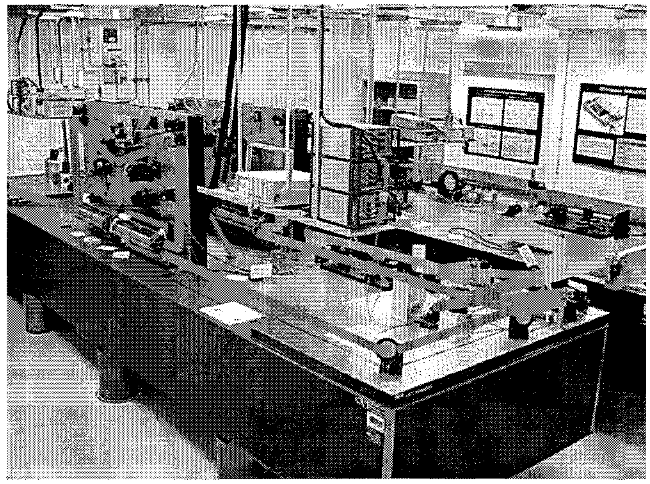

Figure 10 STB-3 on Optical Tables

The STB-3 approach is to proceed in three phases. In Phase 1, we will develop dim star phase tracking on optical tables, which entails three-baseline "pathlength feedforward." Phase 2 moves the three interferometers onto a SIM-scale flexible structure and repeats the dim star phasing experiments, demonstrating rejection of pathlength disturbances at the levels required by SIM. In Phase 3, we demonstrate a number of critical realtime control system functions, including dim star tip/tilt tracking and autonomous alignment and operation.

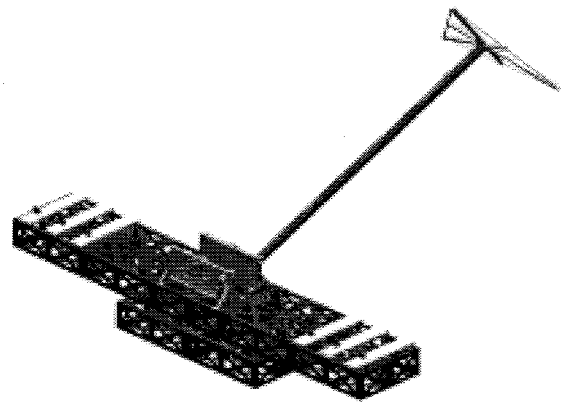

Figure 11 CAD Drawing of STB-3 Flexible Structure

The testbed is currently nearing completion of the build of the three interferometers on optical tables (Figure 10). We have already seen "first fringes" on the science interferometer. Phase 1 will commence this spring when all three interferometers become operational. By end of 2000 we plan to have achieved full functionality on the flexible structure depicted in Figure 11. Phase 2 performance testing will follow early in 2001 with Phase 3 planned for the latter half of 2001.

Microarcsecond Metrology (MAM) Testbed—The sub-nanometer and microarcsecond measurement technology needed by SIM will be demonstrated through a combination of component development and testbed demonstrations. Two system level testbeds will be developed which integrate high accuracy white light fringe detection with picometer laser metrology. The first testbed, MAM-1, is a single baseline white light interferometer fed by a reverse interferometer pseudostar and is currently being built at JPL (see Figure 12). This testbed will be followed by MAM-3 which tests 3 simultaneous interferometers with an external metrology system similar to SIM. The MAM-3 testbed will begin its design phase in mid-2000 with first fringes expected at the end of 2001. This testbed will continue to be used during SIM's implementation phase.

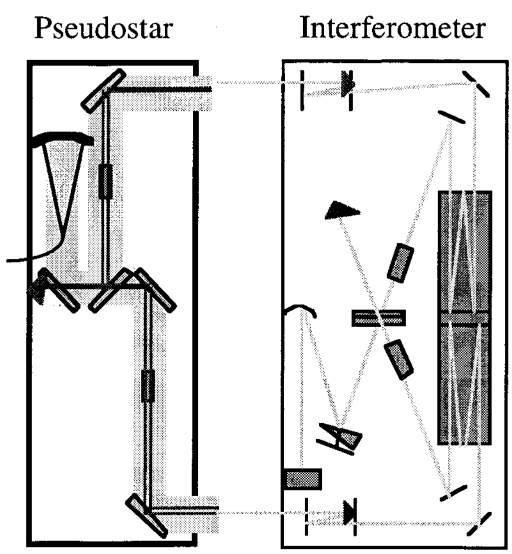

Figure 12 Schematic of MAM Interferometer and Pseudostar

MAM-1's single interferometer includes siderostats for wide angle acquistion, fast steering mirrors for high precision pointing, a delay line to control optical path and a beam combiner with both pointing and pathlength sensors. Additionally, internal metrology beams integrated into the beam combiner are used to measure the optical path between the combiner and each arm of the interferometer. An inverse interferometer pseudostar (IIPS) is used to feed white light into the

MAM-1 interferometer. The IIPS also uses internal metrology beams which monitor the optical path from its main beamsplitter to the fiducials on the MAM-1 intereferometer. By comparing the white light fringe measurement and the metrology measurements from both the interferometer and the pseudostar as the angle of the "star" is varied, one can measure optical path measurement errors arising from a number of sources which are present on SIM. These include diffraction effects from moving delay lines, surface figure errors in the interferometer optics, and fringe estimation errors.

Both the MAM-1 interferometer and IIPS are place in a vibration-isolated, thermally stabilized vacuum chamber (Figure 13). Doing so, eliminates optical path errors due to fluctuations in the refractive index of air. The MAM-1 experiment is exepected to be operational in late 2000 and will be performing experiments throughout 2001. To meet SIM's requirements, the MAM-1 experiment will achieve its goal of 200 pm optical path measurement accuracy over a 15 degree field of regard.

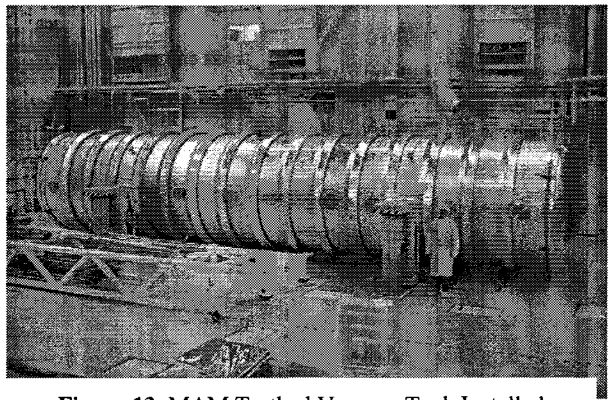

Figure 13 MAM Testbed Vacuum Tank Installed in JPL Highbay

In order for SIM and the MAM system testbeds to be successful a number of component technologies must first be demonstrated. These include laser metrology with relative motion accuracies less than 50 pm, absolute metrology gauges with accuracy less than 3 μm and white light fringe sensors with less than 30 pm error. A two metrology gauge experiment (Figure 14) is used to measure the consistency between two relative metrology beam launchers. Figure 15 shows that difference between the two beam launchers is less than 400pm rms as one of the test corner cubes is articulated. An automatic launcher pointing control system and athermalization of the beam launcher will be incorporated by late 2000. These two capabilities will enable the beam launchers to meet its requirements over longer time scales (~ 1 hour). The beam launchers in SIM are used simultaneously for both absolute and relative metrology. The absolute metrology test set up consists of two corner cubes whose separation can be accurately monitored. By bringing the two corner cubes in contact with each other and carefully calibrating the initial separation, an accurate measure of the absolute distance between the two cubes can be made. After separating the fiducials, a beam launcher is inserted between the two corner cubes and an absolute metrology measurement made.

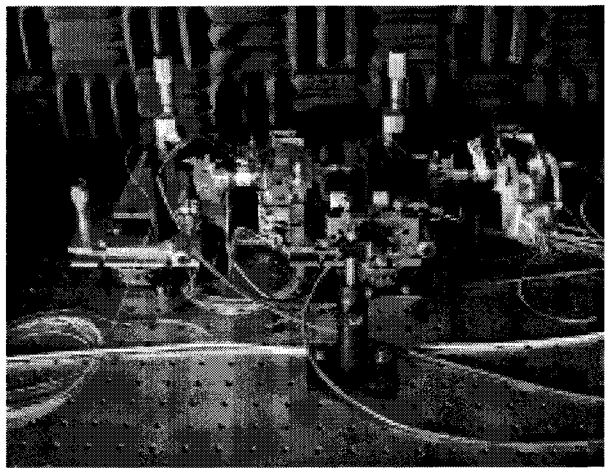

Figure 14 Photo of "2-Gauge" Metrology Experiment

The white light experiment will demonstrate the ability to measure broadband fringe positions to less than 30 pm. Figure 16 shows a layout of the experiment which utilizes the beam combiner components of the MAM-1 testbed. White light is fed into the beam combiner, propagates backward through the beam combiner and delay line and is retro-reflected by the fast steering mirror back to the fringe detector. Fringe estimates are made by monitoring the fringe intensity pattern while modulating the optical path approximately one wave using the PZT stage of the delay line. A He-Ne laser is simultaneously injected into the white light fiber and is used as a truth reference for the fringe position. Figure 17 shows the difference between the phase estimate from the white light fringe detector and the He-Ne laser signal as a function of the OPD difference between the left and right arms of the interferometer. Errors less than 400 pm have been consistently demonstrated. In the future, high precision internal metrology will be used to monitor the PZT dither of the delay line and is expected to greatly reduce the errors in the white light estimate.

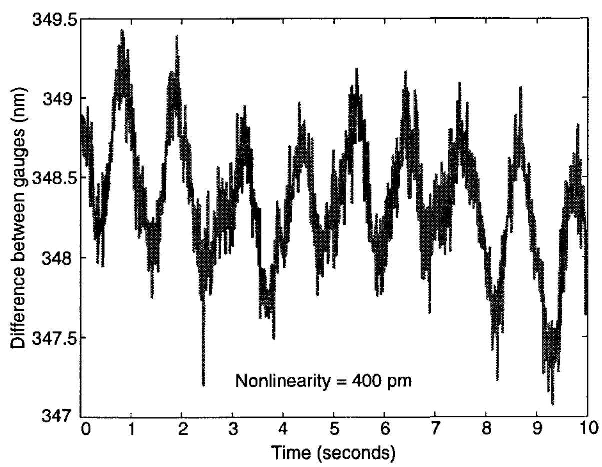

Figure 15 2-Gauge Consistency at 400 pm RMS

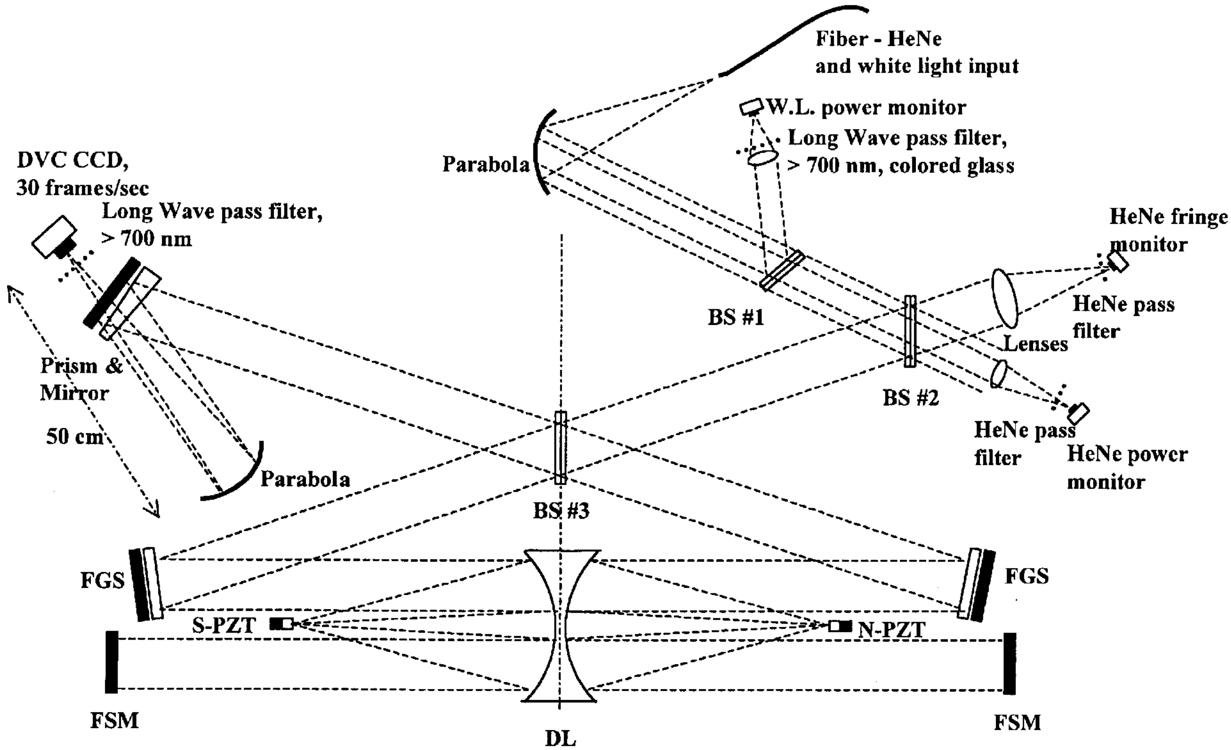

Figure 16 Layout of White Light Fringe Detection Experiment

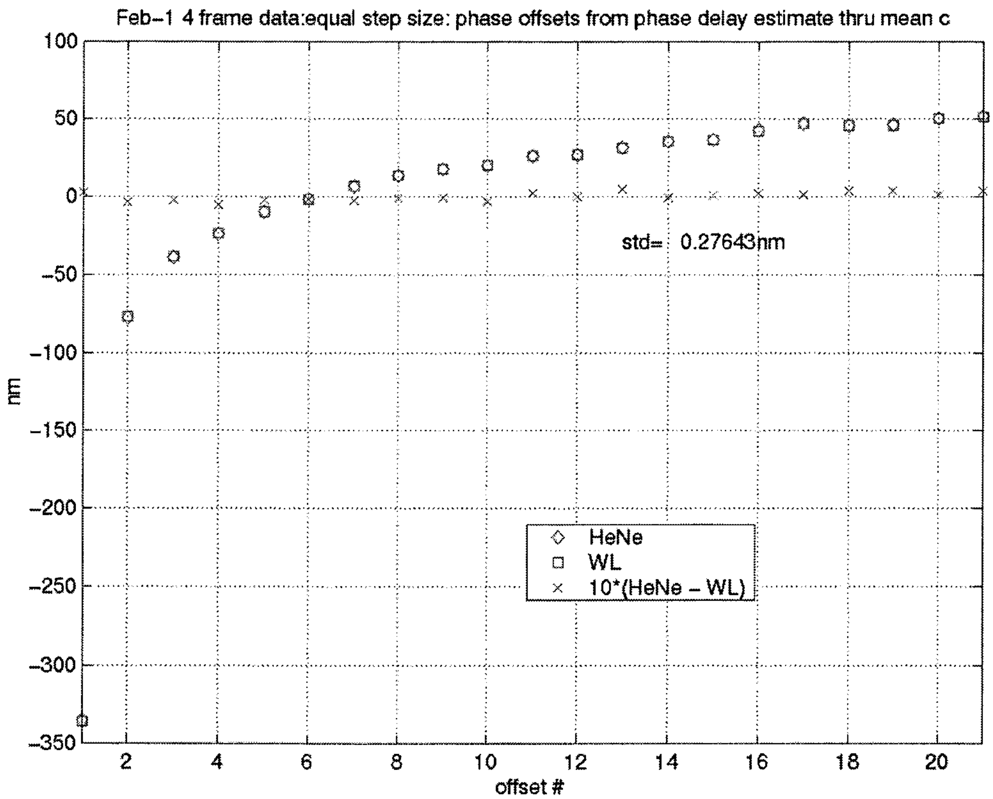

Figure 17 Consistency Between White Light Fringe Readout and HeNe Laser Gauge

In addition to the major system level testbeds, a number of testbeds are planned to focus more sharply on demonstrating particular capabilities better tested at lesser degrees of integration. The Thermal Opto-mechanical (TOM) Testbed is an example. TOM, under the direction of Lockheed-Martin's Palo Alto Advanced Technology Center, is aimed at exploring the response of optical figure to small changes in thermal conditions. This is a critical area for SIM. Since the SIM metrology system samples only a small portion of each collecting aperture, sub-nanometer changes to optical figure across the apertures during the course of an observation would result in misleading estimates of the optical path excursions seen by starlight. SIM's design solution is to maintain very tight (< 10 mK) thermal control of time varying gradients across the collecting optics. Thermal-optical-mechanical modeling indicates that these small mirror temperature excursions will insure acceptably small distortions in optical figure. The TOM Testbed's job is to prove that this is the case.

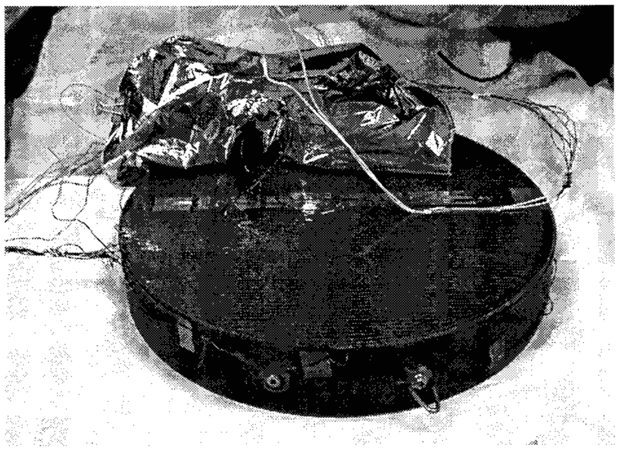

Figure 18 Pyrex Mirror for TOM Test #1

TOM will proceed in three major steps. Test #1 has been completed. This is a thermal-only experiment where a 33 cm Pyrex mirror (Figure 18) in a thermal vacuum tank is exposed to time varying thermal loads and its temperature response is recorded. These data are compared to predictive thermal models. Test #2 introduces optical figure measurement so that mirror temperature changes can be experimentally correlated with changes in figure. Test #2 uses a relatively high CTE test optic so that mechanical response will be exaggerated (compared to SIM) leading to high SNR measurements and easier model comparison. Test #3 introduces a flight-traceable low-CTE telescope as the test optic and a test environment closely emulating on-orbit conditions.

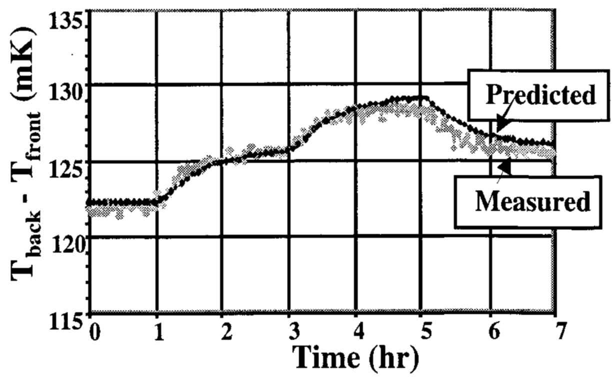

Figure 19 Time Variation of TOM Mirror Front-to-Back Thermal Gradient—Actual vs Predict

Test #1 objectives were to verify temperature sensor performance and thermal modeling capability in the mK regime. Both objectives were met in impressive fashion. The temperature sensors, platinum resist thermometers (PRTs), were shown capable of sub mK resolution. The thermal modeling predicted temporal changes in through-mirror temperature gradients to an accuracy of about 20% (Figure 19). This is critical to SIM since it is the through-mirror gradients that are expected to produce the majority of mirror deformation. This postulate will be examined in Test #2.

3.5 Ground based interferometer observatories

Ground interferometers are invaluable testbeds for space-based systems, not only from a hardware perspective, but also with a view toward operations and scientific productivity. Members of the JPL team have built and operated a series of ground interferometers over a period of nearly 20 years. These interferometers have pioneered advances in interferometer architecture, algorithms, performance, automation, and scientific productivity that are directly applicable to SIM.

The Mark I through Mark III interferometers were built and operated on Mt. Wilson and served as technological forerunners of the currently operational Palomar Interferometer Testbed (PTI). PTI was funded by NASA to demonstrate the technology for ultra precise narrow-angle astrometry. The ultimate application would be to the Keck Interferometer and the detection of exoplanets through observations of the perturbations of the parent star. Development of PTI began in December 1992, the site at Palomar Mountain was available for occupancy in May 1995, and first fringes were obtained three months later in July 1995. The instrument has attained its performance goal of sub 50 μas narrow angle astrometry over single observation times on the order of hours. Recently night-to-night astrometric repeatability of 100 μas was achieved. A photograph of PTI taken from the Palomar 5-m catwalk is shown in Figure 20.

PTI has a 110-m baseline, employing 50 cm siderostats with 40-cm telescopes. It is a dual-star system, using a bright target star to cophase the system in order to detect a faint astrometric reference star against which the astrometric perturbations of the bright target would be measured. PTI employs 4 delay lines, two with physical travels of 20 m each, and two with shorter travels for offsetting between the two stars. PTI, compared with the Mark I–III interferometers, works in the near-IR, and is the first infrared interferometer to employ the active-fringe-tracking technology originally developed on the Mark I. PTI also incorporates complete end-to-end laser metrology of the internal optical path from the stellar beam combiner to a corner cube located in front of the siderostat. This constant-term metrology system, to use the SIM nomenclature, uses the same optical architecture as proposed for SIM, employing the starlight beamsplitter as the metrology beamsplitter to eliminate non-common- mode measurement errors.

Perhaps the most significant benefit of PTI to SIM, besides the obvious one of building, integrating, and operating the instrument, is the implementation approach that was used. PTI was built in a highly modular manner, both with respect to the optical system and the computer control system. The computer system, which employs 9 real-time single-board computers, integrates these with a high-level communications architecture which hides most of the details associated with the large number of the CPUs from the subsystem developer. This allowed developers to concentrate on the details of their subsystem, and also allowed multiple developers to work simultaneously. Modularity allowed the testing of subsystems in the lab and on the roof of our lab at JPL, so that final systems integration on the mountain took less than 3 months to first fringes. PTI, while borrowing extensively from the Mark III, incorporated all new software (approximately 65k non-comment lines, of which 40k is the real-time control system). The modularity and testability of the architecture allowed a rapid development cycle. The architecture is also fairly autonomous. As a demonstration of the type of autonomy so necessary for the operation of space systems, PTI has been operated remotely from JPL, more than 100 miles away.

In the future PTI will serve as a development platform for interferometer science data processing software. Its narrow angle astrometry measurements are similar enough to those on SIM that the data processing software developed for the PTI astrometry will become the core of the SIM narrow angle astrometry science software.

Development of the Keck Interferometer (Figure 21) is taking place largely in parallel with the development of SIM technology. This has enabled synergistic work in at least two important areas: realtime software and starlight nulling. Keck and SIM will both make use of the same core software being developed by the RICST team. This should benefit SIM by virtue of having the luxury of seeing another operational system be the first to run the software through its paces. In the area of nulling, SIM and Keck have been able, thus far, to pursue a common nulling beam combiner development. Figure 22 shows the breadboard experimental set up that has been able to achieve, to date, better than a factor of 10,000 null on 18% white light in the optical. This effort is now at the point of bifurcation where Keck must pursue hardware that operates in the infrared while SIM will continue with the visible light system. Nevertheless, the two efforts will continue to share results and learn from one another.

Figure 20 The Palomar Testbed Interferometer

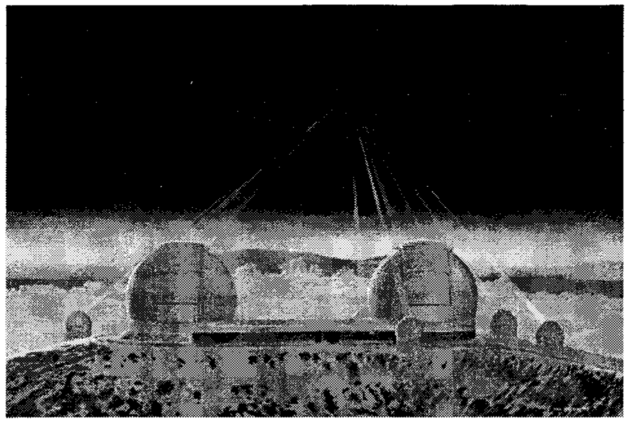

Figure 21 Artist's Rendition of the Keck Interferometer on Mauna Kea

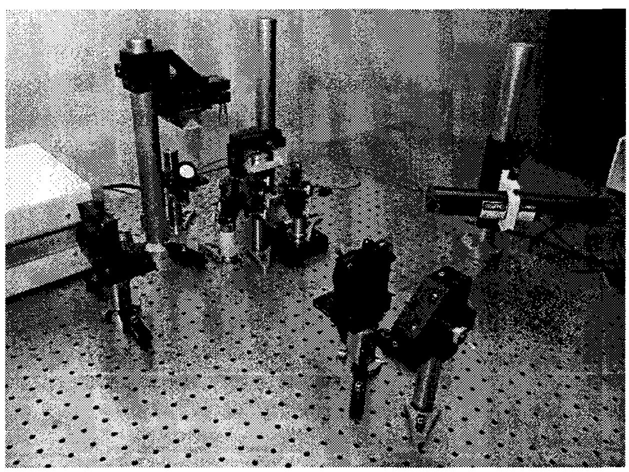

Figure 22 Nulling Beam Combiner Experimental Apparatus

3.6 Flight experiments

The philosophy that the Interferometry Technology Program takes toward flight experiments is to undertake them only if the technology in question is one that cannot be validated via ground testing. The technology for deployable structures is considered to be relatively mature from the standpoint of scale (> 50 meter in length), initial deployment accuracy (millimeters), and long time scale stability over thermal loads (millimeters). On the other hand, the on-orbit short time scale stability (viz., above 1 Hz) of these systems in the nanometer regime is completely unknown. The concern is that deployable structures are dominated by hinges, latches, and joints all of which have the potential to exhibit stick-slip nonlinearities which are particularly susceptible to "creaking" due to time varying thermal conditions. Such creaking would be likely to have broad frequency content given its impulsive nature and hence, even if it occurs on the micron scale, could be quite problematic for an interferometer whose actively controlled optics might not have sufficient bandwidth to track it out.

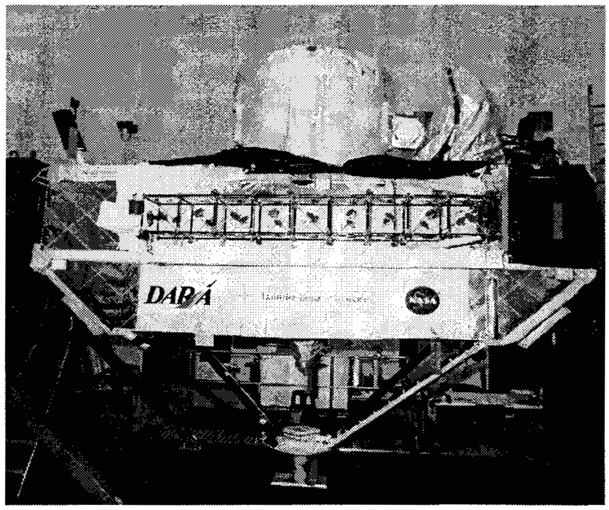

Figure 23 IPEX-2 Integrated to Crista-SPAS and Ready for Launch

Ground based experimental investigations into the microdynamic behavior of deployable structures is very difficult. In particular, testing in 1-g suffers from the inability to perfectly remove gravity induced internal loads from the test specimen in order to emulate on-orbit conditions. These gravity induced "preloads" could well act to completely hide the suspected stick-slip phenomena which would be unleashed only in space. This is the motivation for conducting space experimentation in order to understand the microdynamics of deployable structures.

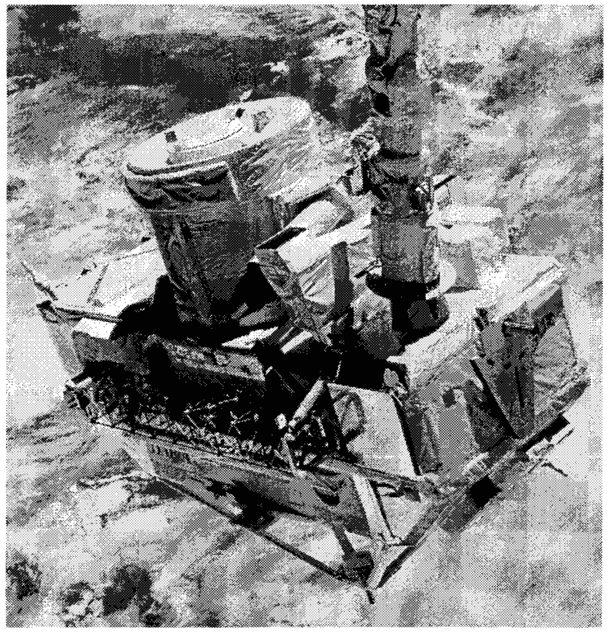

Figure 24 Crista-SPAS/IPEX-2 Deployment from Shuttle RMS

IPEX-1 (Interferometry Program Experiment-1) was the first step toward filling the microdynamics information gap. Hosted on DARA's (German Space Agency) Astro-SPAS platform, which flew a shuttle sortie mission on STS-80 in December 1996, IPEX-1 gathered twelve channels of micro-g acceleration data using Sunstrand QA-2000 accelerometers sampled at 744 Hz. During quiet periods when thrusters were not operating, accelerations of the order of 100 micro-g's were measured. This data tells us two important facts: (i) the microdynamics of built up monolithic structures like Astro-SPAS appear compatible with interferometer mission requirements; (ii) the Astro-SPAS is a quiet enough platform to host future Origins flight experiments. The first of these, IPEX-2, was flown in August 1997, a scant eight months after IPEX-1. IPEX-2 (shown prior to flight in Figure 23 and on-orbit in Figure 24) consisted of an instrumented portion of a representative deployable structure, a so-called ADAM-Mast built by ABLE Engineering of Goleta, California. IPEX-2 mission operations went perfectly. Over 60 channels of accelerometer, load cell, and temperature data were taken during various orbital thermal conditions including Sun-shade transitions and long duration hot and cold soaks. This voluminous data is currently being analyzed. However, the preliminary overriding conclusion is that deployable structures that are engineered to eliminate backlash in joints and placed in thermally benign orbits (e.g., Earth escape orbit like SIM's) will exhibit sufficiently low levels of microdynamics to support optical interferometry. The ultimate intent is to combine the flight data with ground test measurements to develop empirically validated analytical models capable of predicting the conditions leading to and the vibrations emanating from thermal creaks. This work will be carried out by JPL in conjunction with NASA LaRC and will involve university participation from MIT and University of Colorado.

4. SUMMARY

The technology necessary to make SIM a reality presents unprecedented challenges in the fields of nanometer stabilization, picometer sensing, and complex system integration, test, and autonomous operation. However, we are far from starting from scratch on this development effort. Work on these technologies—dispersed at first, now much more highly focussed—has been underway for almost 20 years. The "roadmap" of Figure 25 shows how the pieces described above fit together into a coherent whole. When this roadmap is followed to completion, sometime in 2001, SIM will be ready to begin flight system development with its formidable technical risks well understood and its critical technology in hand.

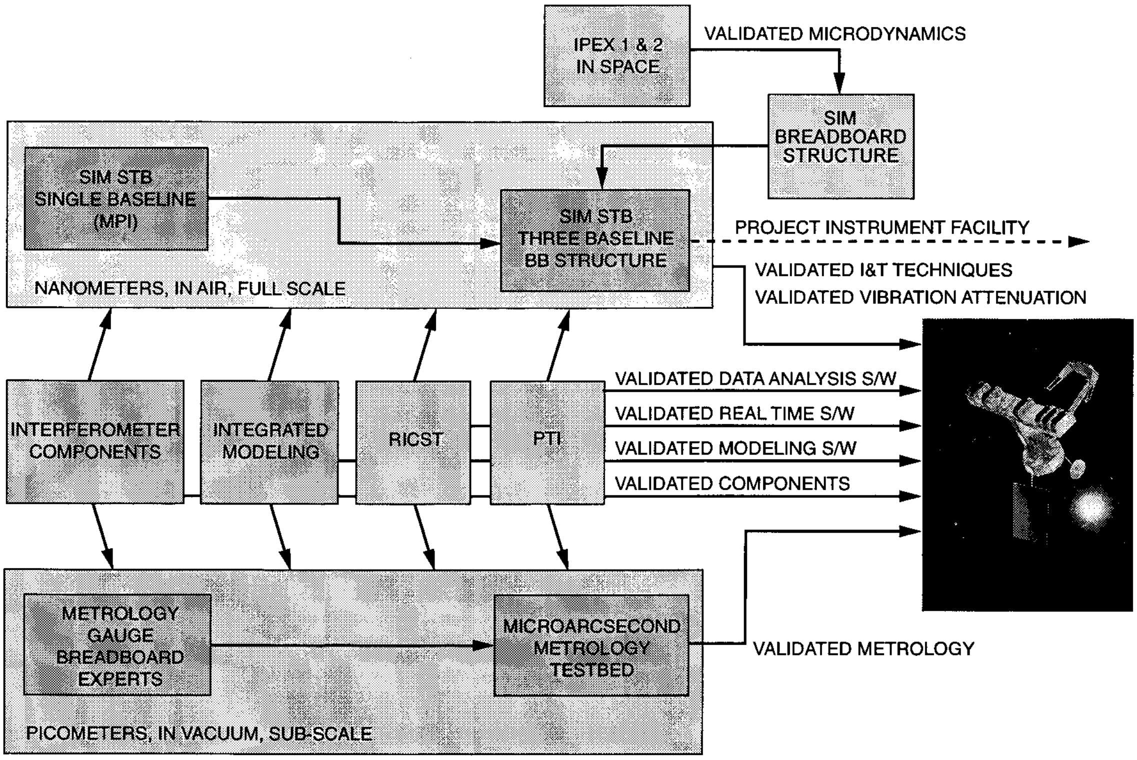

Figure 25 SIM Technology Development Flow

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