

Metal expansion joints manufacturing by a mechanically assisted laser forming hybrid method – concept

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Abstract

This paper presents the concept of metal expansion joints manufacturing using a mechanically assisted laserforming hybrid method. The metal expansion joints are made of a metal tube of an appropriate diameter and wall thickness with a combined bellow-lens shape. The concept assumes using a CO₂ laser to implement such expansion joints. The laser beam heats the selected area of the rotating tube, mounted on a swivel handle on one side and the actuator handle on the other end. After reaching the plasticising temperature, the actuator compresses the element. As a result, a bellow-lens shape is formed at the plasticization area. Initial experimental studies confirmed the validity of the concept. The bellow-lens metal expansion joint (type DN20) was obtained as a final result. The presented idea and the element manufacturing method were submitted to The Patent Office of RP.

Keywords: laser forming, metal expansion joints, pipe treatment

1. Introduction

Laser technologies are widely used and thus remains under constant development nowadays in many industries and medical applications. In the aspect of mechanical engineering, the author of this publication is most interested in laser technologies utilised in the machine and metal manufacturing industries. Engineering practices of laser beam utilisation are being used in such technologies as cutting, welding and surface treatment – examples can be found in the literature (Antoszewski, 2015, 2021; Banak, 2017; Danielewski, 2020; Nowakowski, 2016; Nowakowski, 2017; Radek, 2014; (Tofil, 2021; Witkowski, 2020).

One of the lesser-known laser technologies is laser forming. This is a contactless, thermal method of stress induction in the material leading to permanent plastic strain. The mechanism that makes this possible is the thermal expansion phenomenon. As a result of this phenomenon, it is possible to induce thermal stresses sufficient to obtain permanent deformations. This process involves creating internal thermal stresses in the material. Therefore, this method does not require external forces from tools, for example, punch and die, to be exerted on the material. Thus, this type of forming can be named “free laser forming”. In the research on laser forming performed to date, three main mechanisms leading to the deformation of materials due to thermal expansion have been distinguished (Vollertsen, 1994):

- ▶ temperature gradient mechanism – TGM,
- ▶ upsetting mechanism – UM,
- ▶ buckling mechanism – BM.

This technology can be used for the laser forming of developable surface elements (like elements made from plates) (Silve, 2009; Shi, 2007), non-developable surface elements (like pipes and profiles) (Safdar, 2007; Li, 2007), laser forming of shape memory, brittle and non-metallic materials and composites (Birnbaum, 2006; Carey, 2007) as well as for precise laser forming in precision mechanics and electronics (Palmern, 2006; Bechtold, 2007).

This technology, however, has a significant disadvantage – it is very time-consuming. Such an approach has improved this technology and, as a result, created and developed a hybrid method called mechanically assisted laser forming. This technology is currently being developed, inter alia, in the Laser Processing Research Centre of Kielce University of Technology and Polish Academy of Sciences (Kurp, 2018; Widłaszewski, 2019), and consists of forming process acceleration by applying additional external force.

Metal expansion joints are part of industrial pipeline installations. The main task is to compensate stresses resulting from the thermal expansion of the material (compensation of axial, lateral, and angular displacements). These are made from the pipe, on which there are upsets in the form of bellows or lenses. These parts function as “springs” to compensate for the aforementioned deformations. Currently, these elements are mainly made by plastic cold working using roller systems (Standards of EJMA 10th Edition). This paper presents the idea of manufacturing such expansion joints using a mechanically assisted laser forming hybrid method.

2. Concept

The concept of creating expansion joints by the mechanically assisted laser forming hybrid method is based on the assumption that only part of the pipe subjected to the laser beam at a given moment is deformed. The laser beam heats the selected area of the pipe to a specific, preset temperature, which improves the plastic properties of the heated region. The element is evenly and uniformly heated along its circumference by quickly rotating around its axis. At the same time, an axial force acts on the element, which causes pipe upsetting in the plasticised zone (heated by the defocused laser beam). The remaining

Fig. 1. Scheme of the execution and measurement stand: 1 – pipe quickly rotating around its axis, 2 – laser head (pipe heating), 3 – pyrometer, 4 – force sensor, 5 – axial thrust actuator, 6 – swivel handle

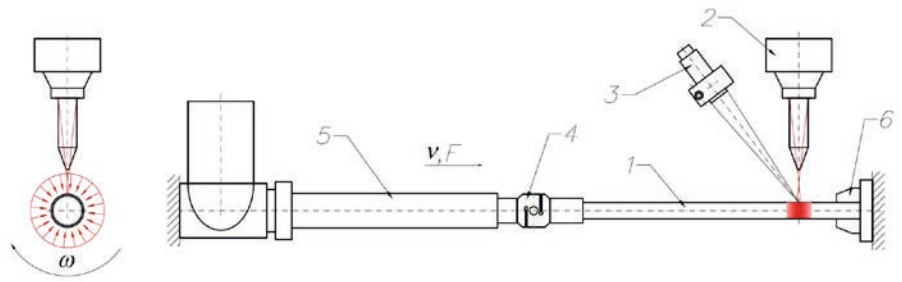
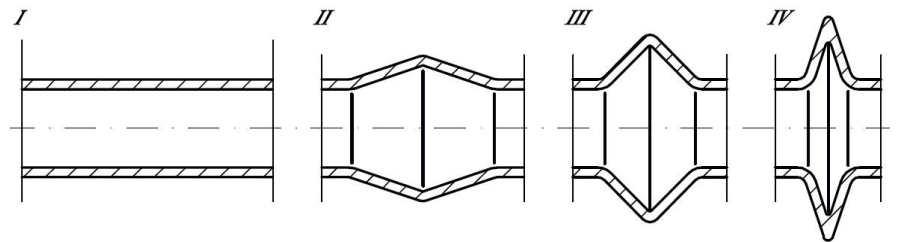


Fig. 2. Individual steps of bellow-lens forming (concept): I – straight output pipe, II, III – pipe upsetting, IV – the final bellow-lens shape



part of the formed pipe, which has a lower temperature, does not deform; only the “selected girdle” of an element is upset at this time. The width of this “girdle” depends on laser beam focal point dimensions incident on the element’s surface. This, in turn, affects the possibility of obtaining the appropriate geometry of manufactured expansion joints (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).

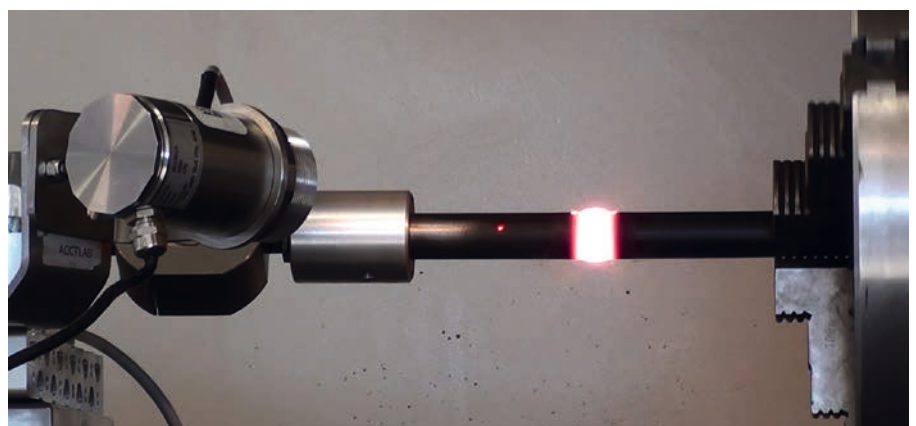
As shown in the Fig. 1 scheme, a test stand was prepared, and an experimental procedure was conducted to validate the presented concept.

3. Experiment

The material used in the experiments were pipes made of grade X5CrNi18-10 stainless steel, with dimensions of $\phi 20 \times 1$ mm (diameter \times wall thickness) and 250 mm in length. The pipe was installed between the axial actuator with a maximum pressure force of 5kN (4) and a swivel handle (6). The sample’s surface was covered with a special absorber (matt black enamel) to increase the uniform absorption coefficient of the laser radiation. The experiment was performed by using the CO₂ laser TRUMPF TruFlow 6000 with maximum output laser power equal to 6kW. The treatment parameters were as follows:

- ▶ laser wavelength: $\lambda = 10.6 \mu\text{m}$,
- ▶ CW laser mode,
- ▶ laser power: $P = 900\text{--}1,100$ W,
- ▶ process temperature: approx. $T = 1,050\text{--}1,100^\circ\text{C}$,
- ▶ pipe compressive force: max. $F = 600$ N,

Fig. 3. Pipe in the course of the experiment: heating and compression process



- ▶ compressive length: $s = 10\text{--}20\text{ mm}$,
- ▶ pipe rotation speed: $\omega = 10,000^\circ/\text{min}$,
- ▶ pipe compressive speed: $v = 10\text{ mm/s}$.

The linear polarised laser beam was positioned perpendicularly to the pipe's surface so that the beam width coincided with the pipe axis. The laser beam width on the pipe's surface was about 20 mm, which was both a heating and plasticizing zone of the pipe around its entire circumference. Simultaneously, the pipe was rotated at speed ω . After obtaining the appropriate plasticisation temperature T , measured by a temperature sensor (3), the actuator (5) was started. The actuator pressed on the pipe axially with the force F (4) applied at speed v . The experiment was performed for two actuator strokes s . The element during the investigation is presented in Fig. 3.

After the experiment, the pipe was cooled down freely and the formation of a specific bellow-lens on the periphery was observed. Geometric differences were noticed related to the process parameters (actuator stroke s). The element was then subjected to geometric measurements and macroscopic evaluation.

4. Results and Discussion

Macroscopic analysis was performed using photographic devices with recording functions. The shapes were measured using a digital calliper. Example shapes of the obtained expansion joints are shown in Fig. 4.

These two photos show that the proper expansion joint shape is only for compression length $s = 10\text{ mm}$. For the given plasticisation zone (approx. 20 mm), the compression length $s = 20\text{ mm}$ was too large, which caused a burst of the element. There was no creation of a bellow-lens shape but a tight ring in this case. Further compression led to the rims of the ring bursting. Moreover, it should be assumed that an excessively compressed shape would not fulfil the compensation function.

For a correctly made expansion joint, the shape geometry was measured. Elements after polishing are presented in Fig. 5 and the measured data is shown in Table 1.

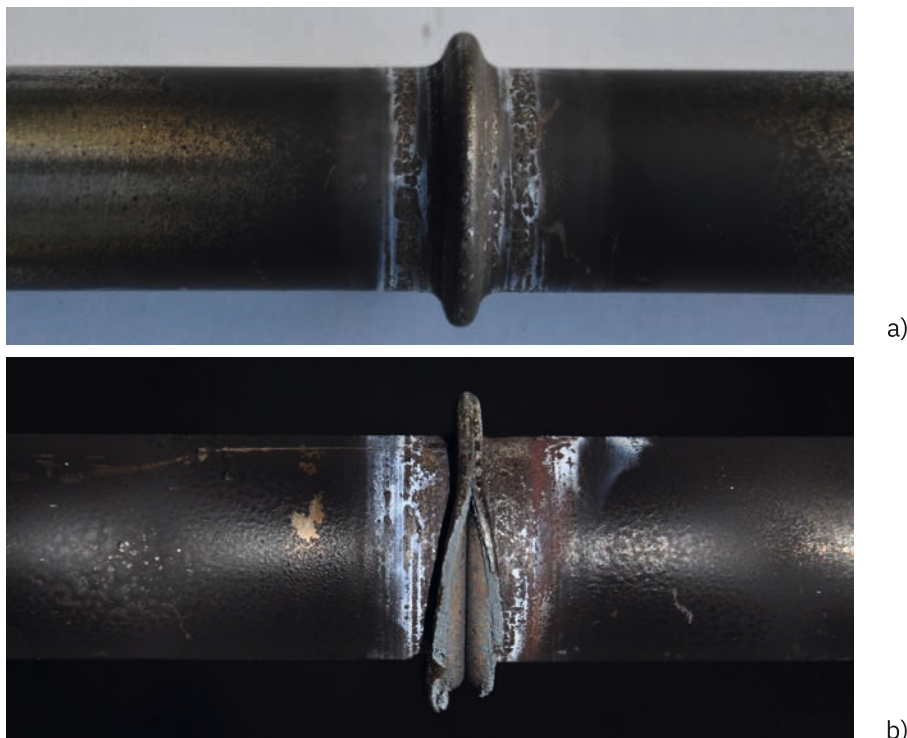


Fig. 4. The final products manufactured during the experiment: a) compressive length $s = 10\text{ mm}$, b) compressive length $s = 20\text{ mm}$



Fig. 5. Correctly made final expansion joints after polishing

Table 1. Summary of measurement results

Measurement number	Expansion joint diameter d_k , mm	Expansion joint width w_k , mm	Standard deviation, δ	
			dk	wk
1.	28.12	5.99	0.027737	0.003887
2.	28.15	6.00		
3.	27.92	6.01		
4.	28.20	6.01		
5.	27.98	5.98		
6.	28.09	6.02		
7.	28.08	6.00		
8.	27.99	6.01		
9.	28.00	6.01		
10.	28.01	5.99		

The average diameter of the expansion joint is $d_k^{avg} = 28.05$ mm, while its width is $w_k^{avg} = 6.00$ mm. The tests performed for the selected parameters indicate the high repeatability of the process.

5. Conclusions

The proposed hybrid method of mechanically assisted laser forming is justified and effective according to the experiment. Moreover, the concept’s validity presented in Section 2 of this paper was confirmed. Selection of the appropriate heating zone and process temperature, as well as the force and speed of compression lead to the formation of a bellow-lens expansion joint. The obtained results are reproducible, which confirms the industrial application potential of the technology mentioned above. Control of the material temperature and compression length are essential elements of the investigated technology. The incorrect selection of these parameters will lead to burnout and/or burst of the bellow-lens rim. Excessive compression of the pipe will lead to a flat ring forming around the pipe, which will not fulfil the functions assigned to this element type.

The investigation results are optimistic and stimulate further research. It is planned to perform experimental tests with different process parameters for DN20, DN50, and DN100 pipe diameters. It is intended to develop technological nomograms with process parameters. Furthermore, the authors are planning

to perform the following tests shortly: microstructure analysis (possibly post-process heat treatment development for X5CrNi18-10 stainless steel), FEM analysis of the temperature-distribution field, stresses and strain-state analysis during and after the process, and strength tests of finished elements such as compression, tension, and fatigue.

The concept presented in this paper and performed investigations contributed to the patent application on September 17, 2021, to The Patent Office of RP entitled *Method and device for the production of metal expansion joints*¹, patent application number: P.438965.

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¹ in Polish: *Sposób i urządzenie do wytwarzania kompensatorów metalowych.*

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