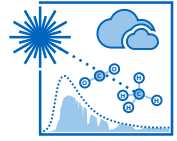




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*Bachelor's Thesis*

# Designing a Circuit for Alphasense NO2-B43F Sensor

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# Abstract

text text text text

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I confirm that this Master's Thesis is my own work and I have documented all sources and material used.

Munich, October 5, 2018

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Place, Date

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Signature

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

As the world population increases by millions every year, the environmental damage we cause increases dramatically. In densely populated areas -and especially in larger cities- air pollution is a major problem, which does not only have financial consequences but also affects the quality of our lives in many ways. Since air pollution today constitutes a significant problem, there are more than many researches and studies regarding this issue: " . . . the total damage costs of air pollution [is estimated] to be US\$ 3.0 trillion in 2010, or 5.6% of Gross World Product (GWP). These losses are equivalent to US\$ 430 for every person on the planet." [1] is from just one of the numerous studies made on financial damage caused by air pollution.

In order to assess this problem correctly and take suitable measures to minimize the harm of air pollution, one should first be capable of finding out the cause accurately. Only after an accurate diagnosis can there be a suitable solution and thus a significant outcome. When it comes to air pollution, the best way to detect the cause is to make density measurements of air pollutants with electrochemical sensors sensitive to specific gases in various locations. However there are some requirements that must be fulfilled: "To adequately characterize air quality (AQ), measurements must be fast (real-time), scalable, and reliable (with known accuracy, precision, and stability over time)." [2] The more accurate and fast the sensors get, the more expensive the gas measurement station will be. Since it is important to make measurements in multiple locations to create a pool of air pollutant density data and thus getting a better understanding of the environmental damage, a collective of stations are needed, which increases the total cost dramatically.

The goal of this bachelor thesis is to design and build a low-cost circuit suited for Alphasense NO2-B43F sensor, which is sensitive to NO<sub>2</sub> concentration in the air. This circuit is capable of receiving real-time NO<sub>2</sub> concentration and storing the data into an SD-Card. In addition to that documenting the steps and the final project well also plays a very important part, since it enables to create the same sensor station more efficiently, which means with less time and resources spent.

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## Chapter 2

### Preparation

#### 2.1 Initial Researches

Some research on the working principle of Alphasense NO<sub>2</sub> electrochemical sensor had to be made prior to the initialization of the mechanical and electronical sections of this project. The paper [1] on previous experiments conducted in Boston, United States of America was very helpful to get a first idea about how I could start building my project designed for NO<sub>2</sub> density measurements. In another paper about a research conducted in Zurich, Switzerland, [2] it is emphasized that it is quite expensive to build a gas pollutant measurement station sensitive to a certain gas and thus low cost sensor stations play a very important role in collecting environmental data.

My goal was to build a functioning circuit, to get meaningful data from it and to document the entire process of my project well, and the researchs and the papers I read gave me even more motivation about how topical air pollution is and thus how important it is to try to build a low-cost air pollutant density measuring station and to collect useful environmental data.

#### 2.2 Getting a Better Understanding

I had to read the application notes on the Alphasense Webpage to get a better understanding of the inner structure as well as the pinout of the sensor and for this purpose I began to study the [3] (kaynak) (inner structure). As I started to understand which electrode of the sensor was responsible for which purpose, I began to get an idea of how I could build my own circuit, which would be able to supply enough current to the sensor and output voltage, linearly proportional to the concentration of the air pollutant, which in other words is the ppb level of NO<sub>2</sub> in the air.

Afterwards I started to read [4] (designing a circuit), which gave me a starting point for the circuit. In diagram [5] from [6] you can see a circuit design for a three-electrode sensor. I was actually working with the sensor NO2-B43F, which is a four-electrode sensor, but this circuit schematic was nonetheless a good point to start building and testing the circuit.

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## Chapter 3

### Putting Into Practice

#### 3.1 Building the Initial Circuit

##### 3.1.1 Hardware

##### 3.1.1.1 Circuit Design

In order to understand the circuit fully, we must first study the structure and the pinout of the NO<sub>2</sub>-B43F sensor. There are 4 electrodes of the electrochemical sensor: Working electrode, reference electrode, counter electrode and auxiliary electrode. The reference electrode holds the potential of the working electrode stable at a certain level, which is equal to the potential of the reference electrode itself. This potential must be fixed to ensure a stable outcome from the sensor and the circuit. The counter electrode must be able to supply enough current to the working electrode, so that the current through the counter and working electrode can be translated and amplified to create the output voltage.

The A4 and B4 sensors have two sensing electrodes: The working electrode and the auxiliary electrode. The main purpose of the working electrode is to react to the NO<sub>2</sub> in the air and thus create a current flow proportional to the gas concentration. In other words the working electrode responds to gas concentration whereas the auxiliary electrode does not respond to gas. The idea is to be able to correct for zero drifts using the auxiliary electrode output. It is thus recommended that at the beginning both electrode outputs are recorded (Working electrode and auxiliary electrode) rather than applying a correction directly.

The circuit in general comprises of operational amplifiers, a couple of capacitors to reduce noise from the sensor and various resistors to get the desired gain from the operational amplifiers. In Figure // the detailed circuit schematic is given. On the left hand side of the circuit the NO<sub>2</sub>-B43F sensor is connected via 3 electrodes to the circuit. This schematic is for 3 electrode sensors like previously mentioned, so the auxiliary electrode is left out. The power connections of the operational amplifiers are also not shown, however they must be provided a regulated and high enough voltage to encompass the maxima of the output voltage. In addition to that the power supply must be rated with high enough current to be able to supply the required current drawn by the counter electrode and the operational amplifiers themselves.



The circuit consists of 2 stages of amplifiers. The first stage is the control circuit, whose main objective is to supply the counter electrode with enough current so that the current required by the working electrode is met. The potential at the reference electrode, namely the reference voltage is connected to the inverting input of the operational amplifier. It is important that near to zero current is drawn from the reference electrode, so an op amp with minimal input bias current is recommended. **alinti** Since the current control part of the circuit can already supply the counter electrode with enough current, the next step is to build the sensing part of the circuit, namely the current measuring stage. In this stage, the current through the counter and working electrode flows through the sensing resistor  $R_{Load}$ , which in return creates a voltage on the inverting input of the second operational amplifier IC1. As it is mentioned before this current through  $R_{Load}$  is linearly proportional to the gas concentration in the air. As a reminder our main goal is to measure the amplitude of this current created by the working electrode, which gives us information about the concentration of  $NO_2$ . That is where IC1 comes into play. The voltage difference between the inputs of IC1 is amplified (multiplied) by a very large number and is created on the output of IC1. However this high voltage is fed back to the inverting input over the resistor R4, which increases the voltage on the inverting input and thus reduces the voltage difference between the inputs of the operational amplifier. As a result the output voltage is reduced and so is the influence of the output on the inverting input voltage. This pendulum saturates at a specific voltage level, which is equal to the input voltage multiplied by a constant determined by the resistors  $R_{Load}$  and R4. This constant i.e. the gain of the amplifier is equal to **form $\tilde{A} \frac{1}{4}$** .

In conclusion the control stage supplies the required current by the counter electrode to the sensor, which is created by the potential difference between the counter and working electrodes. The current then flows through the sensing resistor  $R_{Load}$  creating a voltage on the inverting input of IC1. This input voltage is then multiplied by the gain and in the end creates the output voltage.

### 3.1.1.2 Microcontroller

For this project I decided to use an Arduino Uno board, since it is inexpensive and easy to use. I used a 12 Volts 1 Amp wall adapter for the power supply of the Arduino board. The Arduino board has 5V and 3.3V voltage regulator onboard. Since this circuit does not consist any component which requires high current, the voltage regulation from 12 Volts down to 5 Volts does not dissipate any excessive heat.

I put all the parts depicted in the circuit design together on a breadboard. For the power supply needed for the operational amplifiers I simply used the 5V and *GND* power supply lines of the Arduino Uno board. The output of IC1 is connected to the analog input A0 on the board, which makes the voltage level readings possible.

### 3.1.2 Software

The Arduino Uno board is simply an I/O device with several output and input pins. Through programming via the Arduino Integrated Development Environment (IDE) these pins can be accessed and thus works as an interface between the circuit and the computer. It is capable of reading the voltage connected to its input, sending it to the computer via serial communication. These values sent from the Arduino are then displayed on the computer screen via Arduino Integrated Development Environment (IDE). But in order to let the Arduino board know which data to send and at which frequency, we first have to program it using the same Arduino IDE.

Arduino can supply voltage and read voltage inputs up to 5 Volts. Analog inputs of the Arduino divide the continuous voltage range from 0 Volts to the analog reference voltage into 1024 discrete steps while digital outputs with Pulse Width Modulation (PWM) feature can supply 1024 different levels of voltage from 0 Volts up to a maximum of 5 Volts. Digital outputs without this feature can only supply either 0 Volts (LOW) or 5 Volts (HIGH). For this purpose I connected the output pin of the operational amplifier in the last stage to one of the analog inputs on the Arduino. This way I could read the voltage level on the output of the operational amplifier at a high frequency (9600 bits per second) and thus get enough data to plot the output signal with sufficient resolution.

For this reason I wrote a simple Arduino code using the Arduino IDE. This code consists of two standard main functions, namely *setup()* and *loop()*. The *setup* function is called once when the sketch starts and runs only once after each powerup or reset of the Arduino board **Arduino setup aliniti**. Afterwards the *loop* function is called and loops consecutively as the name suggests **Arduino loop aliniti**. In *setup()* the serial communication speed, at which the microcontroller Atmega328p of the Arduino Uno is going to communicate with the computer, set with the function *Serial.begin()* at 9600 bits per second. In *loop* the function *Serial.print()* is then used to print the *//////////* values on the serial monitor or on the serial plotter. For testing purposes it is recommended to use the serial monitor embedded in the Arduino IDE, since it is sufficient to show the voltage values at the analog pin on the computer. Alternatively the serial plotter, again embedded in the Arduino IDE, can be used to plot the data and thus to create sample-voltage graph. At the end of the code I added the *delay()* function, which "[p]auses the program for the amount of time (in milliseconds) specified as parameter." **delay alinti**. In the code I have written the program waits for 50 milliseconds before acquiring the next value. This way it becomes more pleasant to read the data printed on the serial monitor.

### 3.1.3 Discussion

This design was a success in terms of testing the sensor and the circuit. The values printed on the serial monitor showed us that the sensor reacted to the NO<sub>2</sub> concentration in the air. However it was lacking of protection against electrical noise and the values were not similar to the nominal values which were determined with the help of the Individual Sensor Board

(ISB) from Alphasense. Most importantly the auxiliary electrode was left out, which is why a correction for zero drifts was impossible with this circuit design alone. An improvement of the circuit was needed for better results, namely for the output data to get closer to the nominal values of the ISB circuit. Therefore I started to study and eventually build the circuit explained in the next section.

## **3.2 Realising the Last Circuit**

### **3.2.1 Hardware**

#### **3.2.1.1 Circuit Design**

The circuit mainly consists of 3 operational amplifiers, a couple of capacitors to reduce noise from the power supply and various resistors to get the required output voltage to input voltage ratio from each operational amplifier. The circuit and the purpose of its components will be explained in detail in the following section.

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## Chapter 4

### Challenges

#### 4.1 Initial Design

##### 4.1.1 Mechanical and Optical Challenges

After preparing an orders list according to the previously mentioned circuit design taken from Alphasense **dokuman** and receiving these components, my first challenge was very clear: Transforming the surface-mount device (SMD) parts into through-hole components. The operational amplifiers used in the circuit (LT6011) were only available to order in SMD form. Since I needed the SMD components to verify the circuit design, I could not simply design a printed circuit board and solder the components on the board without testing the circuit design with a breadboard first. Otherwise everything would be inalterable and the tiniest change in circuit schematic would lead to a whole new circuit design and thus a printed circuit board from scratch. That is why I started to build an adapter for making the SMD modules breadboard compatible.

For this purpose I used a perfboard and male sockets. I first split the male sockets into two 4-pin male sockets, since the LT6011 ICs have an 8-pin structure, namely 4 pins on both sides. Afterwards I soldered these sockets parallel to each other with reasonable distance in between so that there is enough room for the IC to fit between the two sockets. Here it is quite important to first solder the sockets on the side of the perfboard with copper rings around the holes with the longer part of the sockets laying on this side. The IC will be fixed on the other side of the perfboard because the distance between any two pins of the IC is much smaller than the distance between two holes of the perfboard and this would thus lead to a short between the pins. Afterwards I placed the IC between the sockets and anchored it on the perfboard by gluing it with hot glue. This makes it easier to make the connections between the sockets and the IC itself, since it stays fixed during soldering. It can be tricky to solder one pin of the IC with one pin of the socket since there is no such surface e.g copper between those two on which the solder can stick. This makes the soldering process much harder since the solder tends to stay on one the IC or the socket, thus not binding them together. It is therefore recommended to make the distance between the two sockets as small as possible, so that the IC and the socket stays as close as possible. This makes the soldering much easier since the distance between the two parts is smaller and a connection between the two can be made with enough solder applied.

Another option would be to use tiny wires between the parts. This way the solder can stick onto this wire and make the connection instead of just creating a solder bubble on one pin. Here it is recommended to fix the wire by gluing it on the perfboard or use a third hand soldering stand to stabilize the wire and the other parts.

### **4.1.2 Inconsistencies Between Design and Sensor**

The circuit schematic taken from Alphasense webpage **Alinti** illustrates a design for a 3-electrode sensor, but what we wanted to build was a circuit for the 4-electrode sensor NO2-B43F. This led to some problems concerning the correctness of the output data. The three electrodes of the sensor in the schematic, namely the working, counter and reference electrodes, have the same purposes like the three electrodes of the NO2-B43F. However according to this design, the auxiliary electrode was not used at all, which is the fourth electrode of our sensor. This electrode is used for noise cancellation and zero drift correction. Not using the auxiliary electrode led to an output with high noise ratio, because firstly the electrode was floating (not connected to any stable potential) and secondly it could not be used for corrections in the output voltage.

I first tried to solve this problem by changing the software and adapting it to suppress the noise consisted in the output signal.

## **4.2 Final Design**

### **4.2.1 Mechanical and optical challenges**

### **4.2.2 Critical parameters**

It is of utmost importance to pay attention to the resistor values in the circuit schematic and the resistors used in the actual circuit. A little difference in these values creates a large spread between the desired output voltage and the actual output, since most of the resistors in this circuit design plays a role in determining the gain of the operational amplifiers. An inaccuracy in resistor value changes the gain of the operational amplifier and consequently the output voltage gets multiplied with that error. If the resistor inaccuracy is in earlier stages of the circuit, the error at the output side gets even higher since the error gets amplified by the second operational amplifier in the last amplifying stage. It is recommended to check the resistors' values preferably with a multimeter before mounting it on the circuit, even if the circuit is being built on a breadboard. There are a lot of resistors in this circuit design and it can be really complicated to detect where the problem lies after the circuit is completed. For this reason it is quite important to check every part individually before putting them into the circuit.

In my case I built the circuit exactly how it was depicted on the circuit schematic and

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## Chapter 5

### Outlook

#### 5.1 Possible Future Enhancements

Directly measuring the output voltage gives us in theory the raw data of the NO<sub>2</sub> concentration, since the output voltage increases or decreases linearly as the ppb level of NO<sub>2</sub> changes. **grafik**, however the data will depend on electromagnetic noise and environmental elements -especially from humidity and temperature- and thus be somewhat inconsistent. The raw data obtained directly from the circuit must be calibrated against such noises in order to get a better approximation of real concentration values. This can be achieved through altering the circuit and making it more resistant to electromagnetic noise. There are two possible ways of dealing with such noises: Passive and active filtering. The former is achieved by adding passive elements like resistors, capacitors and inductors. After detecting the peak frequency of the noise contained in the raw signal (possibly with the help of an oscilloscope by applying Fourier Transformation on the signal and acquiring the frequency spectrum of the signal) it can be eliminated by adding high and low-pass filters. The latter option requires an outside power source, hence the name "active", which makes it a more expensive option than the former, however this can amplify the desired frequency while suppressing the noise, which makes the signal-to-noise ratio larger. Both options can be useful and serve our purpose of noise cancellation.

Data calibration against humidity and temperature could be achieved by integrating a humidity and temperature sensor into the circuit board and measuring their effect on the output voltage and then subtracting these elements from the raw data itself.

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## **APPENDIX**

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## **Appendix A**

### **Some Appendix**

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## **Appendix B**

### **Source Code**

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