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Patent Public Search | Text View

United States Patent Application Publication

20250250114

Kind Code

A1

Publication Date

August 07, 2025

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DELIVERY SYSTEM, AN AUTOMATED STORAGE AND RETRIEVAL SYSTEM AND A METHOD OF TRANSPORTING A CONTAINER

Abstract

A delivery system for transport of a container to an access point for handling of items held in the container by a human and/or robotic operator, the delivery system comprising: a delivery rail grid, a delivery vehicle and a container accessing station comprising at least one conveyor line extending into the access point. The delivery vehicle is arranged for delivering/receiving the container to/from the at least one conveyor line and wherein the at least one conveyor line is arranged for transport of the container between the delivery vehicle and the access point. The invention is also directed to an automated storage and retrieval system and a method of transporting a container to an access point.

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Family ID: 72193483

Appl. No.: 19/189397

Filed: April 25, 2025

Foreign Application Priority Data

NO 20191009

Aug. 22, 2019

Related U.S. Application Data

parent US continuation 17637419 20220222 parent-grant-document US 12312176 WO
continuation PCT/EP2020/073559 20200821 child US 19189397

Publication Classification

Int. Cl.: B65G1/137 (20060101)

U.S. Cl.:

CPC B65G1/1375 (20130101);

Background/Summary

BENEFIT CLAIM [0001] This application claims the benefit under 35 U.S.C. § 120 as a continuation of application Ser. No. 17/637,419, filed 22 Feb. 2022, which claims the benefit as a § 371 National Stage entry of PCT/EP2020/073559, filed 21 Aug. 2020, which claims the benefit of Norway application Ser. No. 20/191,009, filed 22 Aug. 2019, the entire contents of which are hereby incorporated by reference as if fully set forth herein. Applicant hereby rescinds any disclaimer of claim scope in the application(s) of which the benefit is claimed and advises the USPTO that the present claims may be broader than any application(s) of which the benefit is claimed. [0002] The present invention is related to a delivery system for transport of a storage container between a first location and a second location which is an access point. The access point is provided in a container accessing station provided with at least one conveyor line. The invention is also related to an automated storage and retrieval system comprising the delivery system and a method of transporting a container.

BACKGROUND AND PRIOR ART

[0003] FIGS. 1A and 1C disclose a typical prior art automated storage and retrieval system **1** with a framework structure **100**. FIGS. 1B and 1D disclose a prior art container handling vehicle **101** operating the system **1** disclosed in FIGS. 1A and 1C, respectively.

[0004] The framework structure **100** comprises a plurality of upright members **102** and optionally a plurality of horizontal members **103** supporting the upright members **102**. The members **102**, **103** may typically be made of metal, e.g. extruded aluminum profiles.

[0005] The framework structure **100** defines a storage grid **104** comprising storage columns **105** arranged in rows, in which storage columns **105** of storage containers **106**, also known as bins, are stacked one on top of another to form stacks **107**.

[0006] Each storage container **106** may typically hold a plurality of product items (not shown), and the product items within a storage container **106** may be identical or may be of different product types depending on the application.

[0007] The storage grid **104** guards against horizontal movement of the storage containers **106** in the stacks **107**, and guides vertical movement of the storage containers **106**, but does normally not otherwise support the storage containers **106** when stacked.

[0008] The automated storage and retrieval system **1** comprises a rail system **108** arranged in a grid pattern across the top of the storage **104**, on which rail system **108** a plurality of container handling vehicles **200,300** (as exemplified in FIGS. 1B and 1D) are operated to raise storage containers **106** from, and lower storage containers **106** into, the storage columns **105**, and also to transport the storage containers **106** above the storage columns **105**. The horizontal extent of one of the grid cells **122** constituting the grid pattern is in FIGS. 1A and 1C marked by thick lines.

[0009] Each grid cell **122** has a width which is typically within the interval of 30 to 150 cm, and a length which is typically within the interval of 50 to 200 cm. Each grid opening **115** has a width and a length which is typically 2 to 10 cm less than the width and the length of the grid cell **122** due to the horizontal extent of the rails **110,111**.

[0010] The rail system **108** comprises a first set of parallel rails **110** arranged to guide movement of the container handling vehicles **200,300** in a first direction X across the top of the frame structure

100, and a second set of parallel rails **111** arranged perpendicular to the first set of rails **110** to guide movement of the container handling vehicles **200,300** in a second direction Y which is perpendicular to the first direction X.

[0011] In this way, the rail system **108** defines grid columns above which the container handling vehicles **200,300** can move laterally above the storage columns **105**, i.e. in a plane which is parallel to the horizontal X-Y plane.

[0012] Each prior art container handling vehicle **200,300** comprises a vehicle body and a wheel arrangement of eight wheels **201,301** where a first set of four wheels enable the lateral movement of the container handling vehicles **200,300** in the X direction and a second set of the remaining four wheels enable the lateral movement in the Y direction. One or both sets of wheels in the wheel arrangement can be lifted and lowered, so that the first set of wheels and/or the second set of wheels can be engaged with the respective set of rails **110, 111** at any one time.

[0013] Each prior art container handling vehicle **200,300** also comprises a lifting device (not shown) for vertical transportation of storage containers **106**, e.g. raising a storage container **106** from, and lowering a storage container **106** into, a storage column **105**. The lifting device comprises one or more gripping/engaging devices (not shown) which are adapted to engage a storage container **106**, and which gripping/engaging devices can be lowered from the vehicle **201,301** so that the position of the gripping/engaging devices with respect to the vehicle **201,301** can be adjusted in a third direction Z which is orthogonal the first direction X and the second direction Y.

[0014] Conventionally, and also for the purpose of this application, Z=1 identifies the uppermost layer of the grid **104**, i.e. the layer immediately below the rail system **108**, Z=2 the second layer below the rail system **108**, Z=3 the third layer etc. In the exemplary prior art grid **104** disclosed in FIGS. 1A and 1C, Z=8 identifies the lowermost, bottom layer of the grid **104**. Consequently, as an example, and using the Cartesian coordinate system X, Y, Z indicated in FIGS. 1A and 1D, the storage container identified as **106'** in FIG. 1A can be said to occupy grid location or cell X=10, Y=2, Z=3. The container handling vehicles **101** can be said to travel in layer Z=0 and each grid column can be identified by its X and Y coordinates.

[0015] Each container handling vehicle **200** comprises a storage compartment or space (not shown) for receiving and stowing a storage container **106** when transporting the storage container **106** across the rail system **108**. The storage space may comprise a cavity arranged centrally within the vehicle body, e.g. as is described in WO2014/090684A 1, the contents of which are incorporated herein by reference.

[0016] Alternatively, the container handling vehicles **300** may have a cantilever construction, as is described in NO317366, the contents of which are also incorporated herein by reference.

[0017] The container handling vehicles **200** may have a footprint, i.e. an extent in the X and Y directions, which is generally equal to the lateral extent of a grid cell **122**, i.e. the extent of a grid cell **122** in the X and Y directions, e.g. as is described in WO2015/193278A 1, the contents of which are incorporated herein by reference. The term "lateral" used herein may mean "horizontal".

[0018] Alternatively, the container handling vehicles **200** may have a footprint which is larger than the lateral extent of (lateral area defined by) a grid column **105**, e.g. as is disclosed in WO2014/090684A 1.

[0019] The rail system **108** may be a single rail system, as is shown in FIG. 2A. Alternatively, the rail system **108** may be a double rail system, as is shown in FIG. 2B, thus allowing a container handling vehicle **201** having a footprint generally corresponding to the lateral area defined by a grid column **112** to travel along a row of grid columns even if another container handling vehicle **200** is positioned above a grid column neighboring that row. Both the single and double rail system, or a combination comprising a single and double rail arrangement in a single rail system **108**, forms a grid pattern in the horizontal plane P comprising a plurality of rectangular and uniform grid locations or grid cells **122**, where each grid cell **122** comprises a grid opening **115** being delimited

by a pair of rails **110a**, **110b** of the first rails **110** and a pair of rails **111a**, **111b** of the second set of rails **111**. In FIG. 2B the grid cell **122** is indicated by a dashed box.

[0020] Consequently, rails **110a** and **110b** form pairs of rails defining parallel rows of grid cells running in the X direction, and rails **111a** and **111b** form pairs of rails defining parallel rows of grid cells running in the Y direction.

[0021] As shown in FIG. 2C, each grid cell **122** has a width $W_{sub.c}$ which is typically within the interval of 30 to 150 cm, and a length $L_{sub.c}$ which is typically within the interval of 50 to 200 cm. Each grid opening **115** has a width $W_{sub.o}$ and a length $L_{sub.o}$ which is typically 2 to 10 cm less than the width $W_{sub.c}$ and the length $L_{sub.c}$ of the grid cell **122**.

[0022] In the X and Y directions, neighboring grid cells are arranged in contact with each other such that there is no space there-between.

[0023] In a storage grid **104**, a majority of the grid columns are storage columns **105**, i.e. grid columns **105** where storage containers **106** are stored in stacks **107**. However, a grid **104** normally has at least one grid column which is used not for storing storage containers **106**, but which comprises a location where the container handling vehicles **200,300** can drop off and/or pick up storage containers **106** so that they can be transported to a second location (not shown) where the storage containers **106** can be accessed from outside of the grid **104** or transferred out of or into the grid **104**. Within the art, such a location is normally referred to as a “port” and the grid column in which the port is located may be referred to as a “delivery column” **119,120**. The drop-off and pick-up ports of the container handling vehicles are referred to as the “upper ports of a delivery column” **119,120**. While the opposite end of the delivery column is referred to as the “lower ports of a delivery column”.

[0024] The storage grids **104** in FIGS. 1A and 1C comprise two delivery columns **119** and **120**. The first delivery column **119** may for example comprise a dedicated drop-off port where the container handling vehicles **200,300** can drop off storage containers **106** to be transported through the delivery column **119** and further to an access or a transfer station, and the second delivery column **120** may comprise a dedicated pick-up port where the container handling vehicles **200,300** can pick up storage containers **106** that have been transported through the delivery column **120** from an access or a transfer station. Each of the ports of the first and second delivery column may comprise a port suitable for both pick up and drop of storage containers.

[0025] When a storage container **106** stored in the grid **104** disclosed in FIG. 1A is to be accessed, one of the container handling vehicles **200,300** is instructed to retrieve the target storage container **106** from its position in the grid **104** and to transport it to or through the delivery column **119**. This operation involves moving the container handling vehicle **200,300** to a grid location above the storage column **105** in which the target storage container **106** is positioned, retrieving the storage container **106** from the storage column **105** using the container handling vehicle's lifting device (not shown), and transporting the storage container **106** to the delivery column **119**.

[0026] If the target storage container **106** is located deep within a stack **107**, i.e. with one or a plurality of other storage containers positioned above the target storage container **106**, the operation also involves temporarily moving the above-positioned storage containers prior to lifting the target storage container **106** from the storage column **105**. This step, which is sometimes referred to as “digging” within the art, may be performed with the same container handling vehicle **200,300** that is subsequently used for transporting the target storage container **106** to the delivery column, or with one or a plurality of other cooperating container handling vehicles **200,300**. Alternatively, or in addition, the automated storage and retrieval system **1** may have container handling vehicles **200,300** specifically dedicated to the task of temporarily removing storage containers **106** from a storage column **105**. Once the target storage container **106** has been removed from the storage column **105**, the temporarily removed storage containers can be repositioned into the original storage column **105**. However, the removed storage containers may alternatively be relocated to other storage columns **105**.

[0027] When a storage container **106** is to be stored in the grid **104**, one of the container handling vehicles **200,300** is instructed to pick up the storage container **106** from the delivery column **120** and to transport it to a grid location above the storage column **105** where it is to be stored. After any storage containers positioned at or above the target position within the storage column stack **107** have been removed, the container handling vehicle **200,300** positions the storage container **106** at the desired position. The removed storage containers may then be lowered back into the storage column **105** or relocated to other storage columns **105**.

[0028] A container accessing station may typically be a picking or a stocking station where product items are removed from or positioned into the storage containers **106**. In a picking or a stocking station, the storage containers **106** are normally never removed from the automated storage and retrieval system **1** but are returned into the storage grid **104** once accessed. For transfer of storage containers out or into the storage grid **104**, there are also lower ports provided in a delivery column, such lower ports are e.g. for transferring storage containers **106** to another storage facility (e.g. to another storage grid), directly to a transport vehicle (e.g. a train or a lorry), or to a production facility.

[0029] The picking and stocking operation at the container accessing station may be performed by a human operator. Despite measures being in place already to reduce a risk that the human operator may injure himself/herself, improvements are always desirable. In addition, as robotic operators, such as robotic arms, become more common in these areas, it is also desirable to avoid damage to those devices, wherever possible.

[0030] An objective of the invention is therefore to provide an automated storage and retrieval system which is more effective than prior art systems, provides safety to the operator and increases the delivery capacity to the access point.

[0031] Another object of the invention is to provide a system that enables effective packing of items held in storage containers for further transport of the packed items.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0032] The present invention is directed to a delivery system for transport of a container to an access point for handling of items held in the container by a human and/or robotic operator.

[0033] The delivery system comprising: [0034] a delivery rail grid comprising at least a first set of parallel rails arranged in a horizontal plane (**P1**) and extending in a first direction (**X**), and at least a second set of parallel rails arranged in the horizontal plane (**P1**) and extending in a second direction (**Y**) which is orthogonal to the first direction (**X**), the at least first and second sets of rails together defining a plurality of delivery grid cells, [0035] a delivery vehicle adapted for carrying the container and operating on the delivery rail grid, and [0036] a container accessing station comprising the access point, and [0037] at least one conveyor line extending into the access point and operationally connected to the delivery rail grid.

[0038] The delivery vehicle is arranged for delivering/receiving the container to/from the at least one conveyor line and wherein the at least one conveyor line is arranged for transport of the container between the delivery vehicle and the access point.

[0039] The container may be a storage container, a KLT box, a packing box, etc. Thus, the term “container” is related to any container suitable for holding one or more items. The “container” may be made of any material suitable for the purpose of holding at least one item, such as plastic, metal, wood, paper, etc.

[0040] A KLT box is an industrial stacking container conforming to the VDA 4500 standard. The most common sizes are 600 mm×400 mm and 400 mm×300 mm, meaning that these containers stacked upon each other will fill a Euro-pallet measuring 1200 mm×800 mm. These containers may be stacked and are manufactured typically in grey polypropylene or another thermoplastic by injection molding.

[0041] The term “operationally connected” means that the container may be transported between two connected areas, i.e. the at least one conveyor and the delivery grid. Even though the at least

one conveyor and the delivery grid are not located on the same level.

[0042] The delivery system of the present invention may be arranged for transport of a container between a first location and a second location which may be the access point.

[0043] The first location may be an external location in relation to the delivery system. The external location is reachable by the delivery vehicle operating on the delivery system. Thus, the external location may be connected to the delivery system such that the delivery vehicle may retrieve or deliver a container from/to the external location. There may be one or more external locations connected to the delivery system.

[0044] The external location may be any location on or external to the delivery system that is arranged or set up to perform a certain task (such as assembling, production, shipment, etc.) in relation to the storage and retrieval system. Thus, a defined area on the delivery system set up to perform a certain task (packing, assembling, production, etc.) may be defined as an external location.

[0045] The one or more external location may be a high priority area which may be an area linked to an automated storage and retrieval system for packaging and shipment, distribution, sales or production purposes.

[0046] The one or more external location may be at least any one of: a storage grid, a packing and assembling area, an expedition location, a production area, a shipment and transport area, etc.

[0047] The external location may be reached by a delivery vehicle via the delivery rail grid.

[0048] The external location may be located on a different level than the delivery rail grid.

[0049] The external location may be connected to the delivery system such that the delivery vehicle may receive a container from the external location for transport across the delivery rail grid, and vice versa.

[0050] The delivery vehicle may receive a container from a container handling vehicle for transport across the delivery rail grid. Accordingly, the delivery vehicle may deliver a container to a container handling vehicle for transport to an external location, such as a storage grid.

[0051] The delivery vehicle may comprise a motorized vehicle body and a container carrier provided above the motorized vehicle body for carrying the container.

[0052] The container carrier may comprise a conveyor arranged to convey the container on and off the container carrier in a horizontal direction.

[0053] The conveyor may comprise a plurality of parallel oriented rolls having a common longitudinal direction perpendicular to one or more side walls. In this way the rolls allow one or more containers to be shifted into or off the container carrier while being guided by the side walls. The conveyor may be connected to a motor for rotation of one or more of the rolls. Other types of conveyor are also possible such as belt or chain.

[0054] In the following, rollers may also include belt or chain drive.

[0055] The conveyor motor may operate reversibly for moving the rollers in an opposite direction.

[0056] The delivery vehicle may further comprise: [0057] a first set of wheels, arranged at first opposite portions of the delivery vehicle for moving the delivery vehicle along a first direction (X) on the delivery rail grid; and [0058] a second set of wheels, arranged at second opposite portions of the delivery vehicle for moving the delivery vehicle along a second direction (Y) on the delivery rail grid, the second direction (Y) being perpendicular to the first direction (X).

[0059] The at least one conveyor line may comprise at least any one of: rollers, belt, chain, etc. The at least one conveyor line is operated by a drive motor.

[0060] The drive motor may be reversible for moving the rollers, belt, chain, etc., in an opposite direction.

[0061] An upper surface of at least one conveyor line is provided at same height as an upper surface of the container carrier that the container is carried on. This allows the container to easily enter or exit the at least one conveyor line from the delivery vehicle.

[0062] The container may be transported on the rollers to/from the access point on the same

conveyor line. That means that the drive motor drives the rollers for transporting the container to the access point, and after the container has been accessed, the drive motor is reversed for transporting the container in opposite direction, away from the access point and towards the point on the conveyor line where the container may be picked up by a delivery vehicle.

[0063] The conveyor line may also be arranged in a loop (U-turn) with an entering port and an exit port for the container. The system may comprise a first conveyor line and a second conveyor line arranged in parallel and operationally connected to each other such that a container may be moved from the first conveyor line to the second conveyor line, and vice versa. For example, the container may enter at one end of the first conveyor line and transported to the access point. After the container has been accessed at the access point, it may move over to the second conveyor line and transported further to a point of the second conveyor line where it may be picked up by a delivery vehicle.

[0064] The system may comprise a third conveyor line comprising rollers arranged perpendicular to the rollers of the first and second conveyor. The access point may be provided at the third conveyor line, such that the container may be accessed before it is transported on the third conveyor line to the second conveyor line. Thus, the container may enter at the first conveyor line, move to the second conveyor line, via the third conveyor line, and exit from the second conveyor line. The third conveyor line may be operated separate from the first and second conveyor line.

[0065] The third conveyor line may comprise a lift or tilt mechanism for lifting (lowering)/tilting the third conveyor line (rollers) relative to the first and second conveyor line, for allowing the container to enter into or exit from the third conveyor line.

[0066] The system may comprise a lift device for lifting the container such that is not in contact with the rollers (conveyor) at the access point. The lift device comprises a motorized band or chain for moving the container from one conveyor line to another.

[0067] The first and second conveyor line may each have a length so that it can transport two or more containers in a row. The length of the first conveyor line may increase the delivery capacity of storage containers to the access point in that the delivery vehicles may work efficiently by continuously delivering containers to the first conveyor line for transport to the access point. Each container, after been handled at the access point, moves over to the second conveyor line and waits in line to be collected by a delivery vehicle for further transport.

[0068] The container accessing station may comprise walls or enclosure panels arranged about the access point and at least a section of the at least one conveyor line.

[0069] The container accessing station may comprises two or more conveyor lines arranged separate, side by side, and in parallel. Separate means that they are not connected, and that the container may enter and exit from the same conveyor line.

[0070] The two or more conveyor lines comprises a first conveyor line and a second conveyor line arranged in the same horizontal plane (P2).

[0071] The delivery vehicle may be arranged to deliver a first container to the first conveyor line and move to the second conveyor line to receive a second container which has been handled at the access point.

[0072] An advantage of the present invention is that it is able to provide a delivery system that is effective, provides safety for the operator, and increases the delivery capacity to the access point. It achieves this by increasing the availability of a delivery vehicle by reducing the time period of waiting, while situated at the access point. Thus, the delivery vehicle does not need to stay occupied at the access port but may move in order to perform other tasks.

[0073] Instead of waiting for the human and/or robotic operator while they are performing handling of items stored in the container, the delivery vehicle may move to a second conveyor line for collecting another storage container which has already been handled at the access point.

[0074] At the access point, the items stored in the storage container may be put into packaging boxes for further transport and handling. By including the storage container and the packaging box

at the container accessing station provides a compact and flexible workspace where the containers are close to the operator and the handling may be performed faster.

[0075] This saves operational time, since the delivery vehicle may, after it has delivered the storage container, move to an adjacent location for collecting another container (storage container or packaging box) which has already been handled at the access point.

[0076] The invention is also related to an automated storage and retrieval system comprising a storage grid for storage of storage containers and a delivery system as described above.

[0077] The storage grid comprises: [0078] a container handling vehicle rail system for guiding a plurality of container handling vehicles, the container handling vehicle rail system comprising at least a first set of parallel rails arranged in a horizontal plane (P) and extending in a first direction (X), and at least a second set of parallel rails arranged in the horizontal plane (P) and extending in a second direction (Y) which is orthogonal to the first direction (X), which first and second sets of rails form a grid pattern in the horizontal plane (P) comprising a plurality of adjacent container handling vehicle grid cells, each container handling vehicle grid cell comprising a container handling vehicle grid opening defined by a pair of neighboring rails of the first set of rails and a pair of neighboring rails of the second set of rails; and [0079] a delivery column adapted for transfer of a storage container between a container handling vehicle operating on the container handling vehicle rail system and a delivery vehicle operating on the delivery vehicle rail system.

[0080] The storage containers may be stored in a stack of storage containers in a storage column of the storage and retrieval grid.

[0081] The container handling vehicle may be arranged to retrieve a storage container from a storage location in the storage and retrieval grid and transport it to the delivery column for transfer through the delivery column to a delivery vehicle located at the lower end of the delivery column. Accordingly, the container handling vehicle may retrieve the storage container from a delivery vehicle, through the delivery column, for transport to a storage location in the storage and retrieval grid.

[0082] The container handling vehicle may deliver the container through the delivery-or transfer column and directly to a delivery vehicle. The container handling vehicle may accordingly retrieve a container from a delivery vehicle directly through the delivery- and transfer column and transport the container to a storage location within the storage grid.

[0083] A delivery port may be located at the lower end of the delivery column.

[0084] The remotely operated delivery vehicle may be arranged to transport the storage container from the delivery port of the delivery column of the storage grid, across the delivery grid to the at least one conveyor line and return it or a different storage container, to the delivery port of the delivery column, for storage within the storage grid.

[0085] The remotely operated delivery vehicle may also pick up another container (which is not a storage container) for transport to an external location.

[0086] The delivery system may comprise a first delivery rail grid and a second delivery rail grid.

[0087] The first delivery rail grid may be located within the grid structure (vertically below) of the storage grid and the second delivery rail grid is located outside the grid structure of the storage grid.

[0088] The first and the second delivery rail grids are connected such that the delivery vehicle may operate between the first and second delivery rail grids.

[0089] The container accessing station and the access point may be located on the second delivery rail grid.

[0090] The access point may be part of a container accessing station, the container accessing station comprising one of a row of access points in the container accessing station each able to hold a container whilst it is being accessed.

[0091] The container accessing station may comprise two rows of access points, one arranged opposite the other and spaced apart by between three and five container lengths. An operator may

access several containers for collecting items into one packaging box or KLT containers.

[0092] The container accessing station may comprise a further row of access points arranged at ninety degrees to the other two rows of access points (the conventional picking station). An operator may access several containers delivered to the access points from different locations.

[0093] The invention is also related to a method of transporting a container to an access point of a delivery system as described above. The access point being a location on the delivery rail grid for a robotic or human operator to access an item held in the container that has been delivered to the access point. The method comprises the step of: [0094] a) operating the delivery vehicle carrying a first container to direct the delivery vehicle to the at least one conveyor line; [0095] b) operating the delivery vehicle to deliver the first container to the conveyor line for transport to the access point; [0096] c) operating the delivery vehicle to receive a second container that has been handled at the access point from the at least one conveyor line, [0097] d) transporting the second container to an external location.

[0098] As described earlier, the external location may comprise a high priority area.

[0099] The high priority area of the external location may be at least any one of a: storage grid, production area, packing and assembling area, expedition area, etc.

Description

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0100] Following drawings are appended by way of example only to facilitate the understanding of the invention.

[0101] FIGS. **1A-1D** are perspectives views of a prior art automated storage and retrieval system, where FIG. **1 A** and FIG. **1 C** shows the complete system and

[0102] FIG. **1 B** and FIG. **1 D** shows examples of system operable prior art container handling vehicles.

[0103] FIGS. **2A-2C** are views from top of a grid cell comprising a set of parallel rails arranged to guide movement of a remotely operated vehicle.

[0104] FIGS. **3A-3C** show different versions of a remotely operated delivery vehicle arranged for transporting a storage container between a first location and a second location which is an access point.

[0105] FIGS. **4A-4B** are perspective views of other automated storage and retrieval grids and delivery systems for transporting storage containers between the storage grid and a container accessing station.

[0106] FIGS. **5** shows a container accessing station comprising a plurality of conveyor lines which are connected such that the container may enter on one conveyor line and exit on another.

[0107] FIGS. **6** shows container accessing station comprising a further row of access points arranged at ninety degrees to the other two rows of access points, such that the operator may access several containers delivered to the access points from different locations.

[0108] FIGS. **7-9** shows the system of FIG. **6** from different angles.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0109] In the following, embodiments of the invention will be discussed in more detail with reference to the appended drawings. It should be understood, however, that the drawings are not intended to limit the invention to the subject-matter depicted in the drawings.

[0110] Furthermore, even if some of the features are described in relation to the delivery vehicle only, it is apparent that they are valid for the system and related methods as well, and vice versa.

[0111] With reference to FIGS. **1A-1D** the storage grid **104** of each storage structure **1** constitutes a framework **100** of in total **143** grid columns **112**, where the width and length of the framework corresponds to the width and length of **13** and **11** grid columns **112**, respectively. The top layer of

the framework **100** is a rail system **108** onto which a plurality of container handling vehicles **200,300** are operated. The framework **100** of the storage system **1** is constructed in accordance with the above mentioned prior art framework **100** described above, i.e. a plurality of upright members **102** and a plurality of horizontal members **103** which are supported by the upright members **102**, and further that the horizontal members **103** includes the rail system **108** of parallel rails **110,111** in the X direction and the Y direction, respectively, arranged across the top of storage columns **105**. The horizontal area of a single grid cell **122**, i.e. along the X and Y directions, may be defined by the distance between adjacent rails **110** and **111**, respectively (see also FIG. 2B and 2C). In FIGS. 1A and 1C, such a grid cell **122** is marked on the rail system **108** by thick lines.

[0112] The rail system **108** allows the container handling vehicles **200,300** to move horizontally between different grid locations, where each grid location is associated with a grid cell **122**.

[0113] In FIGS. 1A and 1C the storage grid **104** is shown with a height of eight cells. It is understood, however, that the storage grid **104** can in principle be of any size. In particular it is understood that storage grid **104** can be considerably wider and/or longer than disclosed in FIGS. 1A and 1C. For example, the grid **104** may have a horizontal extent of more than 700×700 grid cells **122**. Also, the grid **104** can be considerably deeper than disclosed in FIGS. 1A and 1C. For example, the storage grid **104** may be more than twelve grid cells deep.

[0114] The storage container vehicles **200,300** may be of any type known in the art, e.g. any one of the automated container handling vehicles disclosed in WO2014/090684 A1, in NO317366 or in WO 2015/193278A1.

[0115] The rail system **108** may be a single rail system, as is shown in FIG. 2A. Alternatively, the rail system **108** may be a double rail system, as is shown in FIG. 2B. The rail system **108** may also be a combination of single and double rails. Details of the single and double rail system are disclosed this specification under the section of background and prior art.

[0116] FIGS. 3A-3C shows an embodiment of a remotely operated delivery vehicle **30**, hereinafter referred to as a delivery vehicle **30**.

[0117] The delivery vehicle **30** is configured for transport of a storage container **106** (not shown in FIG. 3C) between an automated storage and retrieval grid **104** (see FIG. 4A and 4B) configured to store a plurality of stacks **107** of storage containers **106**, hereinafter referred to as a storage grid **104**, and an access point **65** provided in a container accessing station **60** for handling of the storage container **106** by at least one of a robotic operator and a human operator.

[0118] In the following, a container accessing station will also be referred to as a container handling station.

[0119] Said delivery vehicle **30** comprises; a vehicle body **31**, at least one rolling device **32a, 32b** connected to the vehicle body **31**, at least one rolling device motor for driving the rolling device **32a, 32b** in a horizontal plane (P), and a power source (not shown) connected to the rolling device motor. The power source should provide sufficient power to the rolling device motor (not shown) to propel the rolling device **32a, 32b** over a set route from the storage grid **104**, for example, to the container accessing station **60**.

[0120] The delivery vehicle **30** may further comprise a container carrier **35** mounted above the vehicle body **31**. The container carrier **35** should be configured to receive the storage container **106**, for example, onto or within the container carrier **35**, such that the storage container **106** is prevented from sliding in a horizontal plane (P1) with respect to the delivery vehicle **30**.

[0121] The container carrier **35** may comprise a container supporting device supporting the storage container **106** from below.

[0122] In FIGS. 3A-3B the container carrier **35** is disclosed in the form of a storage container receiving compartment having a bottom/base and side walls. The volume of the compartment is shown in this exemplary configuration such that it may receive and contain the entire horizontal extent of the storage container and at least a part of the vertical extent of the storage container.

[0123] The particular configuration of the container carrier **35** disclosed in FIGS. 3A-3B allows the

delivery vehicle **30** to transport storage containers **106** having different heights.

[0124] Note that the size of the compartment within the container carrier **35** may easily be adapted for receiving and supporting a multiple number of storage containers **106** in one operation.

[0125] FIG. **3C** shows yet another exemplary configuration of the remotely operated delivery vehicle **30**. In this configuration the container carrier **35** comprises a base plate, a conveyor arranged on the base plate and two side walls protruding upwards from the base plate. The rolling device **32** and the vehicle body **31** are the same as or similar to the rolling device **32** and the vehicle body **31** described above.

[0126] The conveyor may be set up by inter alia a plurality of parallel oriented rolls **36** having a common longitudinal direction perpendicular to the two side walls. In this way the rolls **36** allow one or more containers **70** to be shifted into or off the container carrier **35** while being guided by the side walls. The conveyor may be connected to a conveyor motor allowing rotation of one or more of the rolls.

[0127] The container carrier **35** shown in FIGS. **3A-3C** may all be adapted to carry different types of containers **70**, such as KLT boxes, packaging boxes, in addition to storage containers **106** and other style of containers with main purpose of holding items.

[0128] Perspective views of an automated storage and retrieval system are shown in FIGS. **4A-4B**. The system comprises a storage grid **104** and a delivery system **140** comprising a delivery rail grid **50**, and a plurality of delivery vehicles **30** operating on the delivery rail grid **50**.

[0129] The storage grid **104** is or may be the same as or similar to the prior art storage grid **104** as described above, i.e. a storage grid **104** comprising a rail system **108**; a plurality of stacks **107** of storage containers **106**, a plurality of container handling vehicles **300** for lifting and moving storage containers **106** stacked in the stacks **107** and a delivery column **119,120** configured to receive a storage container **106** from a container handling vehicle **300**.

[0130] The delivery system **140** comprises one or more of the delivery vehicles **30** as described above, i.e. delivery vehicles **30** configured to receive and support a storage container **106** for transport between one or more delivery columns **119,120** and one or more container handling stations **60** located outside the storage grid **104**. The container handling station **60** may be located in any predetermined position suitable for handling containers.

[0131] The delivery system **140** may further comprise a delivery rail grid **50** situated below a delivery port **150** of the one or more delivery columns **119,120**.

[0132] The delivery system **140** is arranged such that storage containers **106** delivered through the delivery column **119,120** by container handling vehicles or a lift, may effectively be received by a delivery vehicle **30** below the delivery port **150** and transported away on the delivery rail grid **50** to the container accessing station **60**, thereby avoiding congestion of storage container **106** at the delivery columns **119,120**.

[0133] As shown in FIGS. **4A-4B**, the delivery rail grid **50** may be constructed in the same way or a similar way as the rail system **108** for the container handling vehicles **200,300**. The delivery rail grid **50** extends at least from the delivery port **150** of one or more delivery columns **119,120**, and to the at least one container accessing station **60**, such that each storage container **106** can be transported into the container accessing station **60** where items held in the storage container **106** may be accessed.

[0134] The delivery system **140** may comprise a first delivery rail grid and a second delivery rail grid, wherein the first delivery rail grid is located directly below a grid structure of the storage grid **104** and the second delivery rail grid is located outside the grid structure of the storage grid **104**, the first and the second delivery rail grids being connected such that the delivery vehicle **30** can operate between the first and second delivery rail grids, as shown in FIG. **4B**.

[0135] While FIG. **4A** shows a first delivery rail grid located within (directly below) the storage grid structure and a second delivery rail grid extending into the access container accessing station **60** (not shown).

[0136] The access point **65** may be one or more delivery grid cells **52** located on the second delivery rail grid.

[0137] The container accessing station **60** may comprise a cabinet **61** comprising walls and a top cover supported thereon, as shown in FIGS. **4A-4B**. The items held in the storage containers **106** carried by the delivery vehicle **30** and transported to the access point **65** of the container accessing station **60** are reachable through an access opening **63** in the top cover of the cabinet **61**.

[0138] The cabinet **61** is arranged adjoining the storage grid **104**, where the delivery rail grid **50** extends from below the delivery ports **150** and to the access point **65** of the container accessing station **60**.

[0139] As mentioned above, the container carrier **35** of the delivery vehicle **30** may be adapted to carry different type of containers **70**. The term “container” is therefore directed to different type of containers adapted for holding one or more items.

[0140] FIG. **5** shows a delivery system **140** for transport of a container **70** to an access point **65** for handling of items held in the container **70** by a human and/or robotic operator.

[0141] The delivery system **140** comprising: [0142] a delivery rail grid **50** comprising at least a first set of parallel rails arranged in a horizontal plane (**P1**) and extending in a first direction (**X**), and at least a second set of parallel rails arranged in the horizontal plane (**P1**) and extending in a second direction (**Y**) which is orthogonal to the first direction (**X**), the at least first and second sets of rails together defining a plurality of delivery grid cells **52**, [0143] a delivery vehicle **30** is adapted for carrying the container **70** and operating on the delivery rail grid **50**, and [0144] a container accessing station **60** comprising the access point **65**, and [0145] at least one conveyor line **66** extending into the access point **65** and operationally connected to the delivery rail grid **50**.

[0146] The delivery vehicle **30** is arranged for delivering/receiving the container **70** to/from the at least one conveyor line **66** and wherein the at least one conveyor line **66** is arranged for transport of the container **70** between the delivery vehicle **30** and the access point **65**.

[0147] The container carrier **35** of the delivery vehicle **30**, in FIG. **3C**, may comprise a conveyor **36** arranged to convey the container **70** on and off the container carrier **35** in a horizontal direction.

[0148] The conveyor **69** of the at least one conveyor line **66** may comprise a plurality of parallel oriented rolls having a common longitudinal direction perpendicular to a side wall. In this way the rolls allow one or more containers **70** to be shifted into or off the container carrier **35** while being guided by the side walls. The conveyor **69** may be connected to a conveyor motor (not shown) allowing rotation of one or more of the rolls in both directions.

[0149] The container accessing station may comprise four conveyor lines **66** arranged separately, side-by-side, and in parallel, as shown in FIGS. **5-7** and **9**. Each conveyor line **66** comprises an access point **65** provided at an end of the conveyor line **66**. The container **70** may be delivered to the end of the conveyor line **66** located opposite of the access point **65** and transported on motorized rollers to the access point **65**. After the container **70** has been handled or accessed at the access point **65**, the container **70** is transported back to the end of the conveyor line **66** to be picked up by any available delivery vehicle **30**. The conveyor lines **66** may be separated by walls such that the container **70** may only enter and exit from the same conveyor line **66**. Thus, one container **70** may be located on one single conveyor line **66** at the same time.

[0150] A delivery vehicle **30** may be operated such that it delivers a container **70** to one of the conveyor line **66** and move over to another conveyor line to receive another container **70** which has been accessed or handled at the access point **65**.

[0151] As shown in FIG. **5**, the access point **65** may comprise a lift device **67** for lifting the container **70** such that is not in contact with the rollers (conveyor) **69** at the access point **65**. The lift device **67** may comprise a motorized band **68** for moving the container **70** from a first conveyor line to a second conveyor line **66**.

[0152] The lifting device **67** may comprise a frame structure supporting the circumference of the container **70** from below. The frame structure is arranged such that it extends from the first

conveyor line to the second conveyor line and may comprise a conveyor **69** arranged perpendicular to the moving direction of the first and second conveyor lines **66**. When the frame structure is lifted, the container **70** is lifted from the conveyors of the first conveyor line **66** and may move perpendicular such that it is transferred from the first conveyor line to the second conveyor line. [0153] The first and second conveyor line **66** may each have a length that can hold a plurality of containers **70** arranged in a row (see FIG. 5). The length of the first conveyor line may increase the capacity in that the delivery vehicles **30** can deliver more containers **70** to wait in line while travelling to the access point **65**. Correspondingly, the second conveyor line **66** may contain several containers **70** that have been accessed at the access point **65** and waiting in line so that they can be picked up by a delivery vehicle **30**.

[0154] FIGS. **6-9** shows a delivery system **140** according to an embodiment of the invention. The system comprises two container accessing stations **60** according to the present invention, arranged with another container accessing station with a cabinet. An operator may pick items from the different access points **65** provided in the different container accessing stations **60**.

[0155] The access point **65** may be part of an access area, the access point **65** comprising one of a row of access points **65** in the access area each able to hold a container **70** whilst it is being accessed.

[0156] The access area may comprise two rows of access points **65**, one arranged opposite the other and spaced apart by between three and five container lengths. An operator may access several containers for collecting items into one packaging box or KLT containers.

[0157] The access area comprises a further row of access points **65** arranged at ninety degrees to the other two rows of access points (the conventional picking station). An operator may access several containers **70** delivered to the access points **65** from different locations.

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[0158] **30** Delivery vehicle [0159] **31** Vehicle body [0160] **32** Rolling device [0161] **32a** First set of wheels [0162] **32b** Second set of wheels [0163] **35** Container carrier [0164] **36** Rolls of conveyor [0165] **50** Delivery rail grid [0166] **52** Delivery grid cell [0167] **60** Container accessing station [0168] **61** Cabinet [0169] **63** Access opening [0170] **65** Access point [0171] **66** Conveyor line [0172] **67** Lift device [0173] **68** Motorized band [0174] **69** Rollers of conveyor line [0175] **70** Container [0176] **P2** Horizontal plane of conveyor line [0177] **P1** Horizontal plane of delivery rail grid [0178] **100** Framework structure [0179] **102** Upright members of framework structure [0180] **103** Horizontal members of framework structure [0181] **104** Storage grid/three-dimensional grid [0182] **105** Storage column [0183] **106** Storage container [0184] **107** Stack [0185] **108** Rail system [0186] **110** First set of parallel rails in first direction (X) [0187] **111** Second set of parallel rails in second direction (Y) [0188] **115** Grid opening [0189] **119** Delivery column [0190] **120** Delivery column [0191] **122** Grid cell [0192] **140** Delivery system [0193] **150** Delivery port [0194] **200** First container handling vehicle [0195] **201** Wheel arrangement [0196] **300** Second container handling vehicle [0197] **301** Wheel arrangement [0198] **X** First direction [0199] **Y** Second direction [0200] **P** Horizontal plane of rail system

Claims

1. A delivery vehicle for transporting a container, wherein the delivery vehicle is configured to: carry a container and operate on a delivery rail grid, wherein the delivery rail grid comprises at least a first set of parallel rails arranged in a first horizontal plane and extending in a first direction, and at least a second set of parallel rails arranged in the first horizontal plane and extending in a second direction which is orthogonal to the first direction, the first set of parallel rails and the second set of parallel rails together defining a plurality of delivery grid cells, deliver/receive the container to/from at least one conveyor line configured to transport of the container between the delivery vehicle and an access point for handling of items held in the container by a human and/or

robotic operator.

2. The delivery vehicle according to claim 1, wherein the delivery vehicle comprises a vehicle body and a container carrier provided above the vehicle body for carrying the container, wherein the container carrier comprises a container supporting device configured to support the container from below.
3. The delivery vehicle according to claim 1, wherein the delivery vehicle is configured to deliver/receive the container to/from at least one conveyor line in a horizontal direction.
4. The delivery vehicle according to claim 1, wherein the delivery vehicle has a footprint corresponding to a lateral area defined by a delivery grid cell.
5. The delivery vehicle according to claim 2, wherein the container carrier comprises a conveyor arranged to convey the container on and off the container carrier in a horizontal direction.
6. The delivery vehicle according to claim 1, wherein the delivery vehicle is configured to transport the container from a delivery column for transferring the container from a container handling vehicle rail system.
7. The delivery vehicle according to claim 1, wherein the delivery vehicle comprises: a first set of wheels, arranged at first opposite portions of the delivery vehicle for moving the delivery vehicle along the first direction on the delivery rail grid; and a second set of wheels, arranged at second opposite portions of the delivery vehicle for moving the delivery vehicle (30) along the second direction on the delivery rail grid.
8. A delivery system for transport of a container to an access point for handling of items held in the container by a human and/or robotic operator, the delivery system comprising: a delivery rail grid comprising at least a first set of parallel rails arranged in a first horizontal plane and extending in a first direction, and at least a second set of parallel rails arranged in the first horizontal plane and extending in a second direction which is orthogonal to the first direction, the first set of parallel rails and the second set of parallel rails together defining a plurality of delivery grid cells; a container accessing station comprising at least one conveyor line extending to the access point, wherein the at least one conveyor line is operationally connected to the delivery rail grid; and a delivery vehicle configured to carry the container and operate on the delivery rail grid, wherein the delivery vehicle is configured to deliver/receive the container to/from the at least one conveyor line, wherein the at least one conveyor line is configured to transport the container between the delivery vehicle and the access point.
9. The delivery system according to claim 8, wherein the delivery vehicle comprises a vehicle body and a container carrier provided above the vehicle body for carrying the container, wherein the container carrier comprises a container supporting device configured to support the container from below.
10. The delivery system according to claim 8, wherein the delivery vehicle is configured to deliver/receive the container to/from at least one conveyor line in a horizontal direction.
11. The delivery system according to claim 8, wherein the delivery vehicle has a footprint corresponding to a lateral area defined by a delivery grid cell.
12. The delivery system according to claim 9, wherein the container carrier comprises a conveyor arranged to convey the container on and off the container carrier in a horizontal direction.
13. The delivery system according to claim 8, wherein the delivery vehicle is configured to transport the container from a delivery column for transferring the container from a container handling vehicle rail system.
14. The delivery system according to claim 8, wherein the delivery vehicle comprises: a first set of wheels, arranged at first opposite portions of the delivery vehicle for moving the delivery vehicle along the first direction on the delivery rail grid; and a second set of wheels, arranged at second opposite portions of the delivery vehicle for moving the delivery vehicle along the second direction on the delivery rail grid.
15. The delivery system according to claim 9, wherein an upper surface of the at least one conveyor

line is provided at a same height as an upper surface of the container carrier.

16. The delivery system according to claim 8, wherein the container accessing station comprises two or more conveyor lines arranged side by side in parallel, wherein the delivery vehicle is configured to deliver a first container to a first conveyor line and move to a second conveyor line to receive a second container which has been handled at the access point.

17. An automated storage and retrieval system comprising a storage grid for storage of storage containers and a delivery system according to claim 8, wherein the storage grid comprises: a container handling vehicle rail system for guiding a plurality of container handling vehicles, the container handling vehicle rail system comprising at least a first set of parallel rails arranged in a second horizontal plane and extending in a first direction, and at least a second set of parallel rails arranged in the second horizontal plane and extending in a second direction which is orthogonal to the first direction, which first set of parallel rails and second set of parallel rails form a grid pattern in the second horizontal plane comprising a plurality of adjacent container handling vehicle grid cells, each container handling vehicle grid cell comprising a container handling vehicle grid opening defined by a pair of neighboring rails of the first set of parallel rails and a pair of neighboring rails of the second set of parallel rails; and a delivery column for transferring a storage container between a container handling vehicle operating on the container handling vehicle rail system and a delivery vehicle operating on the delivery rail system, wherein the delivery vehicle is configured to transport the storage container from the delivery column of the storage grid across the delivery rail grid to the at least one conveyor line.

18. The automated storage and retrieval system according to claim 17, wherein the delivery vehicle is configured to return the storage container or a different storage container to the delivery column for storage within the storage grid, wherein the delivery vehicle can pick up the different storage container from a second conveyor line.

19. A method of transporting a container to an access point of a delivery system according to claim 8, the access point being a location on the delivery rail grid for a robotic or human operator to access an item held in the container that has been delivered to the access point, wherein the method comprises: operating the delivery vehicle carrying a first container to direct the delivery vehicle to the at least one conveyor line; and operating the delivery vehicle to deliver the first container to the at least one conveyor line for transport to the access point.

20. The method of transporting a container according to claim 19, wherein the method comprises; operating the delivery vehicle to receive a second container that has been handled at the access point from the at least one conveyor line; and transporting the second container to an external location.
