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CLAIMS:

1. A support device for supporting a set of integrated circuit units, the device comprising :

a support member having a metal surface, said surface having an array of recesses;

a soft material layer, overlaying the recesses of the metal surface so as to protect the units from damage caused by contact with the metal surface, and;

a vacuum means in communication with said recesses, such that the vacuum means supports each unit within a respective recess, wherein

the soft material layer is formed of a plurality of independent inserts, each insert engageable with at least one recess. using engagement means for engaging each insert with the at least one recess.

2. The support device according to claim 1 wherein the engagement means includes one or both of mechanical engagement and chemical bonding engagement.

3. The support device according to claim 2 wherein the mechanical engagement includes a press fitting between the insert and at least one recess.

4. The support device according to any one of the preceding claims wherein each insert is engageable with a single recess.

5. The support device according to any one of claims 1 to 4 wherein the insert is engageable with at least two recesses.

6. The support device according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the soft material is one or a combination of natural rubber, polyurethane or silicone.

7. The support device according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the inserts include a second stiff material bonded to the soft material for facilitating the engagement means.

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8. The support device according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the vacuum means includes a vacuum pump in communication with the support member for creating a negative pressure within an internal chamber of the support member, such that each recess, and each portion of the insert corresponding to each recess, includes an aperture through which the negative pressure acts so as to draw in and engage with a unit corresponding to the recess.

9. An insert for use with a support device, said support device for supporting a set of integrated circuit units, the device comprising :
a support member having the metal surface, said surface having an array of recesses;
a soft material layer, overlaying the recesses of the metal surface so as to protect the units from damage caused by contact with the metal surface, and;
a vacuum means in communication with said recesses, such that the vacuum means supports each unit within a respective recess, wherein
the soft material layer is formed of a plurality of the independent inserts, each insert engageable with at least one recess.

10. A method of repairing a support device, said support device used to support a set of integrated circuit units, the method comprising the steps of:
removing a damaged or worn insert from a recess of a support member of the support device, said support member having a metal surface with an array of said recesses;
selecting a replacement insert for re-engagement with the recess;
engaging the insert with the recess, so as to permit a vacuum means in communication with said recesses to support a unit within the respective recess, wherein
the replacement insert completes a soft material layer on the metal surface, said layer comprising a plurality of independent inserts.