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Version Post-Print/Accepted Manuscript

Citation (published version) Sutherland, B., Hoogland, S., Adachi, M., Kanjanaboos, P., Wong, C., & McDowell, J. et al. (2014). Perovskite Thin Films via Atomic Layer Deposition. *Advanced Materials*, 27(1), 53-58. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/adma.201403965>

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Article type: Communication

Perovskite thin films via atomic layer deposition

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Keywords: perovskites, atomic layer deposition, optical gain, transient absorption

Lead iodide perovskites are an attractive material for thin film optoelectronic devices due to their facile methods of fabrication, high absorption per unit length, and remarkable efficiency in charge carrier transport. We report the fabrication of CH₃NH₃PbI₃ perovskite thin films via a new materials processing route—perovskite atomic layer deposition (ALD). The new process, which relies on a place-exchanged-based conversion of ALD PbS to PbI₂, generates films having material properties comparable to the best previously-reported CH₃NH₃PbI₃ perovskite thin films. We examine the remarkable properties of this material, elucidating the optical gain dynamics using ultrafast pump-probe spectroscopy. We obtain a net optical gain coefficient of $3200 \pm 830 \text{ cm}^{-1}$, an impressive number for a polycrystalline material and indeed comparable to material gain in the best single-crystal semiconductors used in lasing and optical amplification.

Deposited via facile fabrication methods from the solution or gas phase, CH₃NH₃PbI₃ is a direct-bandgap semiconductor with exceptional optoelectronic material properties.^[1] It combines an optical bandgap in the near-infrared at 1.55 eV,^[2] a remarkably high absorption

per unit length exceeding 10^4 cm^{-1} just above the bandedge,^[3,4] and charge carrier diffusion lengths up to and exceeding $1 \text{ }\mu\text{m}$.^[4,5] The latter attests to a bandgap substantially free of charge-trapping defect states that are otherwise normally present in materials deposited under non-epitaxial growth conditions.^[2]

Lead organohalide perovskites— $\text{CH}_3\text{NH}_3\text{PbI}_3$ and mixed-halide derivatives—have enabled great strides towards low-cost, high-efficiency photovoltaic cells, surging from solar cell power conversion efficiencies of 6.5%, to a certified 17.9% all in the short span of three years (Aug 2011 – May 2014).^[1–3,6–11] The impressive physical properties of this material have further been leveraged towards radiative devices: light-emitting diodes,^[12] and lasers.^[13–15] Perovskites are of increasing interest in light-emissive technology by virtue of their spectral tunability,^[15] high photoluminescence yield,^[13] long photogenerated carrier lifetimes,^[13] and ambipolar charge transport.^[4]

Lead-iodide perovskites are typically fabricated using one of three methods: 1) sequential deposition of solution processed PbI_2 followed by a solution^[1] or gas phase^[16] exposure to $\text{CH}_3\text{NH}_3\text{I}$, 2) directly from a lead-halide perovskite precursor solution,^[2] or 3) through simultaneous co-evaporation of a lead-halide salt and $\text{CH}_3\text{NH}_3\text{I}$.^[9] These fabrication strategies have led to solid state thin films of high purity and crystallinity, resulting in a new class of efficient optoelectronic devices utilizing perovskites as an active medium.

Here we pursued a perovskite fabrication strategy that would leverage atomic layer deposition (ALD), a low-vacuum and low-temperature deposition technique with a wide process window capable of uniform, conformal growth of films over large areas with atomic thickness precision. Attractively, it is a proven technology, now adopted in the electronics industry in semiconductor manufacturing. Further, ALD has demonstrated viability in high-throughput, roll-to-roll compatible processes, indicating its potential in manufacturing scale-up.^[17]

Presently, there are no processes for the growth of halide compounds via ALD. Therefore, neither the direct growth of $\text{CH}_3\text{NH}_3\text{PbI}_3$ nor of PbI_2 for subsequent conversion to $\text{CH}_3\text{NH}_3\text{PbI}_3$, is available. To overcome this, we sought to deposit a seed layer to the formation of PbI_2 which could then be converted to $\text{CH}_3\text{NH}_3\text{PbI}_3$ thin films. Possible candidates with known ALD-enabled processes are PbO and PbS . We chose to pursue PbS since it has a lower bond dissociation energy ($D^\circ_{\text{PbS}} = 3.3 \text{ eV}$, $D^\circ_{\text{PbO}} = 4.1 \text{ eV}$)^[18] and is thus more likely to react completely with reagents in subsequent processing. Atomic layer deposition of lead sulfide has yielded thin films with controlled thickness, high purity, and distinct crystallographic orientations.^[19–21]

A chief benefit of ALD is its compatibility with a broad range of substrates by reason of strong adhesion under normal processing conditions. We chose glass due to its wide availability, its electrically insulating character, and its low refractive index, enabling relevant studies on the optical gain dynamics of the film. Figure 1 details the perovskite ALD process. We begin with atomic layer deposition of a seed film of lead sulfide from controlled alternating pulses of H_2S and $\text{Pb}(\text{tmhd})_2$ ALD precursors. The glass substrate has been treated with O_2 plasma immediately prior to deposition for final cleaning and enhanced reactivity with H_2S due to increased hydroxyl surface passivation. Layers of PbS are grown with each cycle at a measured growth rate of $1.3 \text{ \AA} / \text{cycle}$, ~ 0.2 monolayers / cycle, consistent with prior reports.^[19] Once the desired thickness of PbS has been grown, the entire film is then converted to PbI_2 through exposure to iodine gas generated by subliming solid iodine in a closed system. The PbI_2 is then converted to $\text{CH}_3\text{NH}_3\text{PbI}_3$ (MAPbI_3) through a 60 s dip in methylammonium iodide (MAI) in IPA. This process is summarized in **Figure 1a**. Atomic force microscopy (AFM) is used to measure the grain-size (D) and arithmetic mean roughness (R_a) of PbS , PbI_2 , and MAPbI_3 , as detailed in Figure 1b. All three films form polycrystalline domains with R_a and D values, respectively: PbS [1.8 nm , $30 \pm 5 \text{ nm}$], PbI_2 [1.1 nm , 51 ± 8

nm], and MAPbI₃ [18.7 nm, 140 ± 80 nm]. The final MAPbI₃ perovskite film morphology is thus governed by the MAI treatment. Insets show images of the films at each stage on a glass substrate after 330 cycles of ALD PbS (~43 nm). The thicknesses of the PbI₂ and MAPbI₃ films were measured to be 40 nm and 75 nm respectively. The film thicknesses at each stage are consistent with variations in the crystal lattice parameters of PbS ($a = c = 5.936 \text{ \AA}$, JCPDS 02-0699), PbI₂ ($a = 4.557, c = 6.979 \text{ \AA}$, JCPDS 07-0235), and CH₃NH₃PbI₃ ($a = 8.78 \text{ \AA}, c = 12.70 \text{ \AA}$, ref [22]). Assuming random crystal orientations across a lateral micron-scale (over which thickness is sampled via profilometry), the average lattice constants are: PbS: 5.936 Å, PbI₂: 5.768 Å, and CH₃NH₃PbI₃: 10.74 Å. For each film, the ratio of the averaged lattice constant, a_{avg} , to film thickness, d , are in excellent agreement, supporting the expectation of a complete place-exchange. a_{avg}/d for PbS, PbI₂, CH₃NH₃PbI₃ respectively: 72.4 ± 3.03 , 69.3 ± 1.91 , and 69.8 ± 17.4 . The increase in uncertainty for ratios with MAPbI₃ is a result of the increased surface roughness of those films.

In Figure 2 we examine the spectroscopic properties of the thin films in the perovskite ALD process to confirm their chemical makeup, confirm complete stepwise conversion, and assess their phase purity. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy confirms the elemental presence of Pb, I, S, and N in each of the expected films: PbS, PbI₂, and MAPbI₃ (Figure 2a).

Through a complementary x-ray diffraction analysis, we further confirmed the material composition at each step and demonstrated that the conversion processes of PbS to PbI₂, and PbI₂ to MAPbI₃, is complete, with no signatures of prior crystalline phases in subsequent films. Figure 2b correlates the measured XRD spectrum for the films at each step of the conversion process to the literature standards for PbS (JCPDS 02-0699), PbI₂ (JCPDS 07-0235), and MAPbI₃ (ref. [1,9,10,23]). ALD PbS shows one dominant (200) phase, and one secondary (400) peak (Figure 2b, bottom). After I₂ gas exposure, these peaks are no longer present, and characteristic hematite PbI₂ (001), (101), (003), and (004) signatures emerge.

Following the treatment with MAI all previous peaks are absent and characteristic MAPbI₃ signatures appear: dominant (110) and (220) peaks, with a smaller (202) peak, and residual signatures of (312), (224), and (314). This confirms that the materials at each step of the perovskite ALD process are as designed and that the stepwise conversion produces a complete place-exchange.

A 45 degree scanning electron microscope image shows the polycrystalline grains on the surface of the fabricated MAPbI₃ films (Figure 3a). The spectral absorption coefficient, $\alpha(E)$ is shown in Figure 3b. The fabricated perovskite thin films have an absorption onset at 1.55 eV, with α exceeding $1.75 \times 10^4 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ at the absorption knee at 1.66 eV, comparable to values reported in high-performance photovoltaic MAPbI₃ active layers.^[4,11] The temperature dependent photoluminescence (PL) is shown in Figure 3c. The room-temperature PL is centered at 1.63 eV, and decreases with decreasing temperature. A phase change from tetragonal to orthorhombic occurs between 150 and 125 K, after which the bandgap-temperature coefficient also changes from positive to negative, consistent with prior reports.^[24]

To elucidate gain dynamics, we studied the transient evolution of the film absorption using ultrafast pump-probe spectroscopy. We excited our sample with an optical pump of energy 2.70 eV, with 180 fs pulses at a repetition rate of 2.5 kHz, and probed the absorption with a white light source spanning 1.38 – 2.75 eV.

A representative 2D map of the transient absorption spectrum is shown in Figure 3a. Here, the change in absorbance ΔA is shown as a color height-map as a function of wavelength and delay time. The excitation fluence was $4.5 \mu\text{J cm}^{-2}$. Broad photoinduced absorption is observed between 500 and 700 nm. A short-lived derivative-like feature near the optical bandgap (see blue-red transition 750 - 790 nm in the first ~picosecond) indicates an excitation-induced red-shift of the bandgap during the first few hundred femtoseconds. The

most prominent feature is a strong absorption bleach near the bandgap that results from state-filling. For this relatively low fluence the absorption bleach is long-lived.

To investigate material gain we focus on the total absorbance $A(E,t) = \Delta A(E,t) + A_0(E)$, where $A_0(E)$ is the linear absorption spectrum. Material gain is achieved when a negative total absorbance is observed. Figure 3b shows total absorption spectra at various pump-probe delay times obtained at a pump fluence of $70 \mu\text{J cm}^{-2}$. Gain is observed between approximately 1.5 and 1.6 eV and shows a maximum at pump-probe delay time of ~ 3 ps, after which it decays.

To assess the spectral position of the maximum gain as a function of fluence, we show (Figure 3c) the total absorption spectrum at a 3 ps time delay for various excitation fluences. Figure 3d shows the time evolution of the absorbance plotted at the dotted line in Figure 3c at 1.58 eV, a photon energy just above the gain maximum. At fluences well above the gain threshold (36 and $70 \mu\text{J cm}^{-2}$), gain is seen to last as long as 200 ps.

At the lowest fluence, the decay of the absorption back to the linear absorption level is well-described by a single exponential with a 2 ns lifetime, in line with photoluminescence lifetimes previously published for lead-iodide perovskites.^[13] At higher fluences, the decay becomes increasingly rapid, indicative of higher-order recombination.

The inset in Figure 3d shows the minimum absorbance value (i.e. maximum gain) as a function of fluence, together with a 3rd order polynomial fit as a guide for the eye. A gain threshold of approximately $16 \mu\text{J cm}^{-2}$ is obtained. The maximum observed gain has a value of 10 mOD, together with the measured film thickness of this sample of 72 nm, this corresponds to a gain coefficient of $3200 \pm 830 \text{ cm}^{-1}$. This value is comparable to single-crystal semiconductors used in commercial optical amplification technology.^[25] This is, once again, a testament to the well-defined band edges of the perovskite film, despite the fact that it is a polycrystalline material.

Organometallic perovskite ALD is a versatile process for the deposition of perovskite thin films possessing exceptional materials quality for applications in next-generation optoelectronics. In particular, the impressive optical gain coefficient further highlights the potential for perovskites broadly in semiconductor-optical amplifiers and lasers. Utilizing perovskite ALD, facile integration of perovskites into a CMOS defined optical framework containing rib-waveguides and on-chip cavities such as elliptical and spherical resonators can be achieved. Atomic layer deposition for low-temperature, conformal, large-area growth of perovskites across a wide process-window offers promise in light emission and beyond.

Experimental Section

ALD perovskite sample fabrication. Glass substrates were prepared by first sonicating in acetone, then isopropyl alcohol, and then deionized water, each for 15 minutes. Samples were exposed to a 10 minute 100 mTorr oxygen plasma treatment immediately prior to atomic layer deposition.

CH₃NH₃PbI₃ perovskite films have been fabricated on these substrates by a three-step method.

A) PbS deposition: Cleaned glass slides are placed into a Cambridge Savannah S100 atomic layer deposition system with the sample chamber held at 150 °C and 1 mTorr base pressure (with no inlet flow). Alternating pulses of Pb(tmhd)₂ and H₂S precursors (0.5 s pulse duration for both) build up the PbS film of a desired thickness. The purge time between precursor pulses was 20 s, and a nitrogen carrier gas was used at a volumetric flow rate of 10 sccm. B)

PbI₂ conversion: 100 mg of iodine chips are placed into a 250 mL container which contains the ALD PbS films. The container is sealed and heated on a 120 °C hotplate for 16 hours. After treatment, the samples are completely yellow and have been converted to PbI₂. C)

MAPbI₃ conversion: The PbI₂ films are dipped into a 30 mg/mL solution of CH₃NH₃I

dissolved in isopropyl alcohol (IPA) for 60 s, immediately dipped into IPA for another 60 s, and then dried on a hot plate at 70 °C for 30 minutes.

Atomic force microscopy (AFM). AFM measurements were performed using PeakForce Tapping and PeakForce Quantitative Nanomechanical Property Mapping on Bruker Catalyst. Fast force curves were performed as the AFM scanned the samples' surfaces. Prior to measurement, the cantilever tip's radius and reflection sensitivity were measured via imaging on a rough surface and a force curve measurement on a quartz standard. In addition, the spring constant was measured via thermal vibration measurement. Sharp cantilevers with tip radius smaller than 10 nm were used.

X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy. A PHI-5500 XPS system was used to confirm the incorporation of Pb, I, S, and N in PbS, PbI₂, and CH₃NH₃PbI₃. A monochromated Al K α radiation source (1486.7 eV) was used to excite photoelectrons under ultrahigh vacuum (10⁻⁹ Torr).

X-ray diffraction. Phase purity was confirmed by powder XRD patterns collected with a Rigaku Miniflex diffractometer equipped with a Cu K α X-ray tube operated at 40 kV and 15 mA with a time per step of 3 s. Samples were rotated during data collection. Under these conditions, the intensity of the strongest reflection was approximately 1000 counts.

Scanning electron microscopy (SEM). A FEI Quanta FEG 250 environmental-SEM at an accelerating voltage of 10 kV, a working distance of 10 mm, and a pressure of 6.3 x 10⁻⁴ Pa was used sample imaging.

Absorption coefficient. The optical density, A_{OD} , of the perovskite film was measured with a Perkin Elmer Lambda 950 spectrophotometer with an integrating sphere. A DekTak 3 profilometer was used to measure the film thickness, d . This was used to calculate the absorption coefficient, $\alpha = \log_{10}(e) \cdot A_{OD}/d$. Uncertainty was estimated from the measured surface roughness of the film.

Photoluminescence. Perovskite samples were excited with a frequency-tripled Nd:YAG 355 nm laser with a pulse duration of 2 ns and a repetition rate of 100 Hz. Photoluminescence was collected with an Ocean Optics USB 2000+ spectrometer. Samples were cooled to cryogenic temperatures using a home-built liquid nitrogen cryostat.

Ultrafast pump-probe spectroscopy. A Light Conversion Pharos laser with an optical parametric amplifier (Orpheus, Lightconversion) and a Helios white-light transient absorption spectrometer from Ultrafast Systems were used for pump-probe measurements. The pump beam was a 460 nm laser source with 180 fs pulse duration and 2.5 kHz repetition rate. Transient absorption spectra in the visible (450 - 900 nm) were recorded with an Ultrafast Systems HELIOS spectrometer at a repetition rate of 5000 Hz using broadband probe pulses generated in a sapphire crystal pumped by the 1030 nm fundamental of the laser. The sample was held in an air-tight N_2 filled cell. To correct for chirp on the probe pulse a bare glass substrate was measured. The time-zero was determined for each wavelength based on the coherent artifact. We subtracted a third-order polynomial fit to this coherent artifact from the raw data to obtain the chirp-corrected image shown in Figure 3a.

Acknowledgements

This publication is based in part on work supported by an award (KUS-11-009-21) from the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), by the Ontario Research Fund Research Excellence Program and by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) of Canada. The authors thank Cambridge Nanotech, Fritz Prinz, and Orlando Trejo for their advice on ALD PbS film fabrication. The authors thank L.T. Kunneman for his assistance in the data analysis of the transient absorption measurements. The authors also thank M. Yuan, H. Dong, R. Wolowiec, and D. Kopilovic for their help during the course of the study.

Received: ((will be filled in by the editorial staff))

Revised: ((will be filled in by the editorial staff))

Published online: ((will be filled in by the editorial staff))

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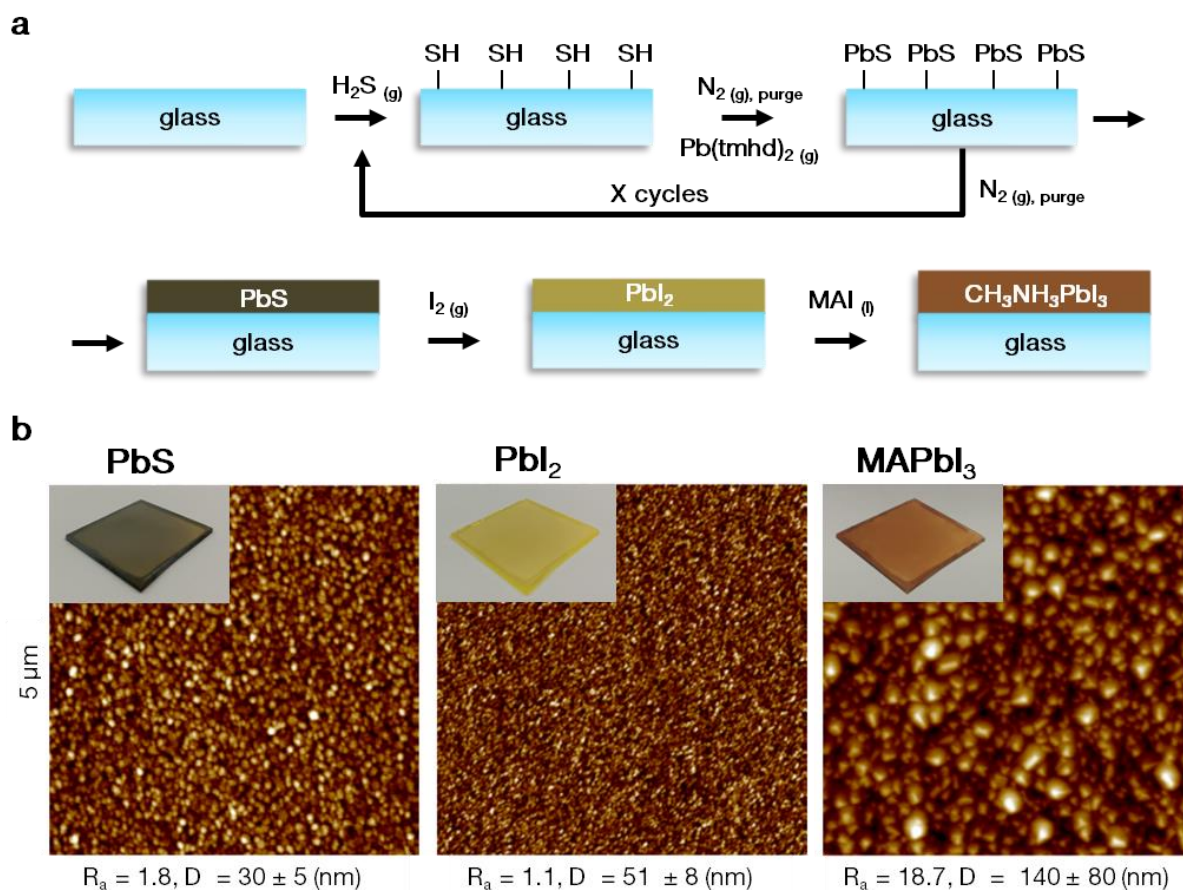


Figure 1. Perovskite ALD. a) Atomic layer deposition of $\text{CH}_3\text{NH}_3\text{PbI}_3$. ALD PbS is deposited from alternating cycles of H_2S and $\text{Pb}(\text{tmhd})_2$ vapor on a glass substrate. The PbS sample is sealed in a nitrogen-atmosphere closed system with iodine chips sublimated at 120°C to generate $\text{I}_2(\text{g})$, converting the film to PbI_2 . The PbI_2 films are dipped in $\text{CH}_3\text{NH}_3\text{I}$ in IPA, resulting in full conversion to MAPbI_3 . d) Atomic force microscopy study. $5 \times 5 \mu\text{m}$ windows are scanned to study the surface topology development during material processing. The arithmetic mean roughness, R_a , and the mean grain size, D , is shown below each image.

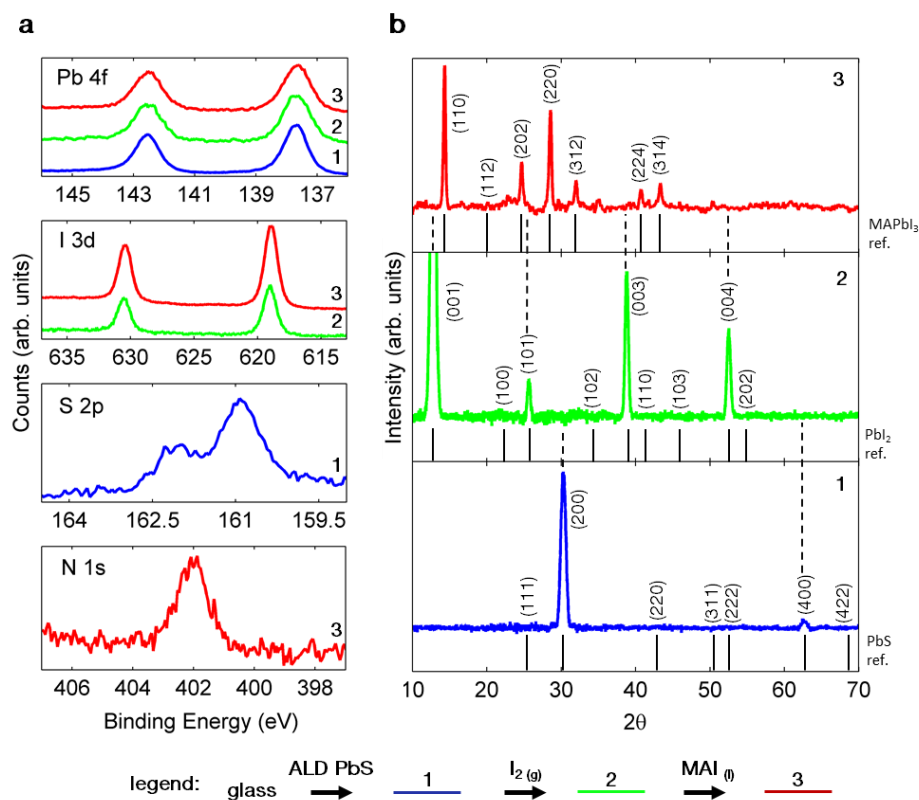


Figure 2. Material spectroscopy on the ALD perovskite process. a) X-ray photoelectron spectroscopic analysis. Pb4f signatures are observed in all films, I3d is present in PbI₂ and MAPbI₃, S2p is present in PbS, and N1s is present in MAPbI₃. b) X-ray diffraction analysis. The presence of expected crystallographic planes relative to the material references confirms the material at each stage of the ALD perovskite process. Further, no prior crystal phases are present in subsequent films after processing from PbS to PbI₂ to MAPbI₃.

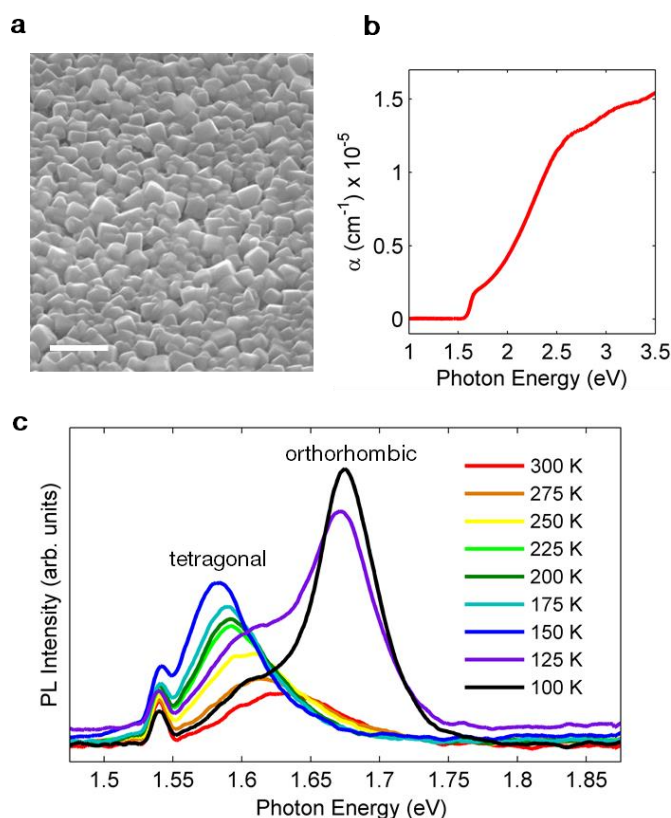


Figure 3. SEM, absorption, and photoluminescence of ALD perovskite thin films. a) a 45-degree SEM image of an ALD perovskite film. b) Absorption coefficient, α , of ALD perovskite films. The absorption onset is at 1.55 eV and α exceeds 10^{-4} cm^{-1} at the absorption knee at 1.66 eV, indicative of a strongly-absorbing, high-quality perovskite film. c) Temperature dependent photoluminescence shows a dominantly tetragonal room-temperature phase with a phase transition to orthorhombic between 150 and 125 K. The spectral feature at 1.54 eV is a unfiltered harmonic of the pump laser.

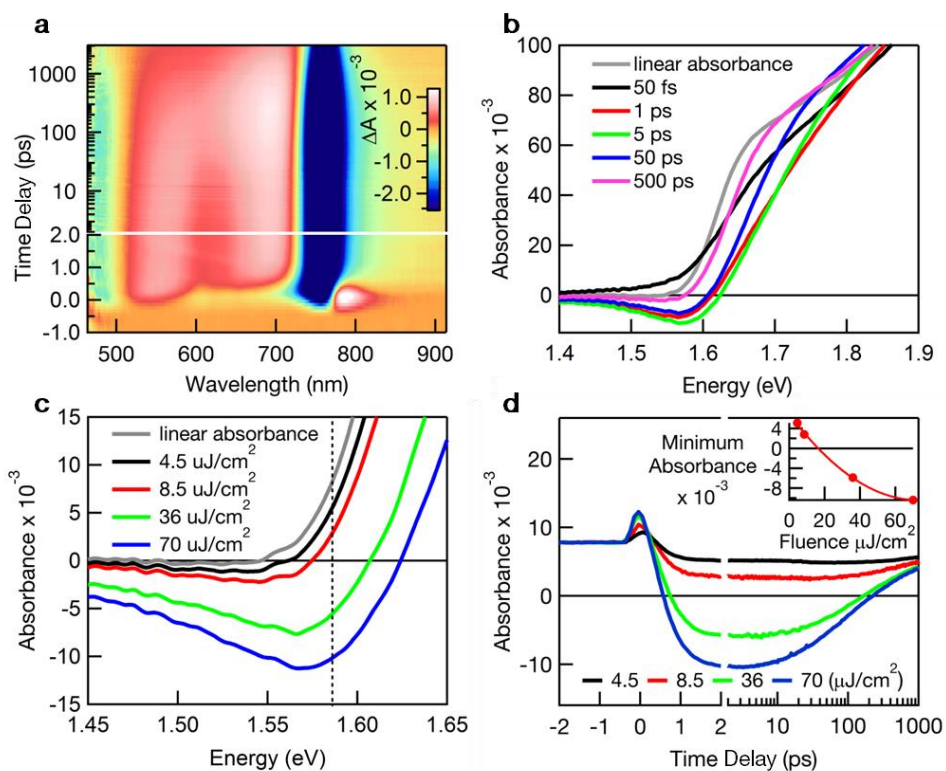


Figure 4. Ultrafast transient absorption measurements on ALD perovskites. a) 2D transient absorption image displaying the change in absorption (color-map) vs. wavelength and time delay. The measurement was obtained with 460 nm pump pulses at a fluence of $4.5 \mu\text{J}/\text{cm}^2$

cm^{-2} . b) Non-linear absorption spectra obtained at a fluence of $70 \mu\text{J}/\text{cm}^2$. Gain (negative absorbance) appears after 500 fs, reaches a maximum around 3 ps and subsequently decays, disappearing after 500 ps. c) Gain spectra at 3 ps (the time delay of maximum absorption bleach) for various fluences. For high photon fluence, gain with a large bandwidth is observed. d) Time dependent nonlinear absorption plotted at the just above the gain maximum (dotted line in c. at 1.58 eV) for various fluences. At this energy the two highest fluences exhibit gain over a period of 200 ps. The inset shows the minimum absorption vs. fluence. The red solid line is a 3rd order polynomial fit that serves to guide the eye. A measured gain threshold of $\sim 16 \mu\text{J}/\text{cm}^2$, and an optical gain coefficient of $3200 \pm 830 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ is demonstrated at 1.58 eV.

ToC figure

