

Switchable and Tunable Radiative Cooling: Mechanisms, Applications, and Perspectives

Xuzhe Zhao,[#] Jiachen Li,[#] Kaichen Dong,^{*} and Junqiao Wu^{*}



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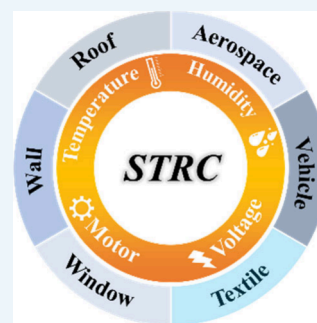
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ABSTRACT: The cost of annual energy consumption in buildings in the United States exceeds 430 billion dollars (*Science* 2019, 364 (6442), 760–763), of which about 48% is used for space thermal management (<https://www.iea.org/reports/global-status-report-for-buildings-and-construction-2019>), revealing the urgent need for efficient thermal management of buildings and dwellings. Radiative cooling technologies, combined with the booming photonic and micro-fabrication technologies (*Nature* 2014, 515 (7528), 540–544), enable energy-free cooling by radiative heat transfer to outer space through the atmospheric transparent window (*Nat. Commun.* 2024, 15 (1), 815). To pursue all-season energy savings in climates with large temperature variations, switchable and tunable radiative coolers (STRC) have emerged in recent years and quickly gained broad attention. This Perspective introduces the existing STRC technologies and analyzes their benefits and challenges in future large-scale applications, suggesting ways for the development of future STRCs.

KEYWORDS: radiative cooling, all-season energy savings, switchable and tunable radiative coolers (STRC)



INTRODUCTION

Temperature regulation of buildings and dwellings has played a crucial role throughout the human history.⁵ Technological advances in recent centuries have brought in more efficient and convenient thermal regulation approaches, such as electrical heaters,⁶ gas heating,⁷ and air conditioners.⁸ However, these energy-consuming devices are responsible for the over-consumption of fossil fuels as well as the resultant greenhouse gas emissions.⁹ According to the data by the U.S. Energy Information Administration, more than 51% of annual household site energy consumption goes to space heating and cooling.¹⁰ Therefore, the development and deployment of eco-friendly thermal regulation technologies have become an urgent demand for our society.¹¹

Among these technologies, radiative cooling is already mature enough with commercially available products and a booming global market.^{1,3,12} The basis of radiative cooling technology lies in the fact that the cold outer space (~3 K) acts as a vast heat sink for the radiative cooling of terrestrial objects.¹³ Radiative coolers feature materials with nearly ideal thermal emissivity for maximal outgoing thermal radiation to the cold outer space through the mid-infrared (MIR) atmospheric transparency window (8–13 μm).¹⁴ Meanwhile, solar reflectance by the radiative coolers is maximized for minimal solar heating.^{3,15}

The photonic principles and heat exchange processes in radiative coolers are illustrated in Figure 1. Taking the daytime

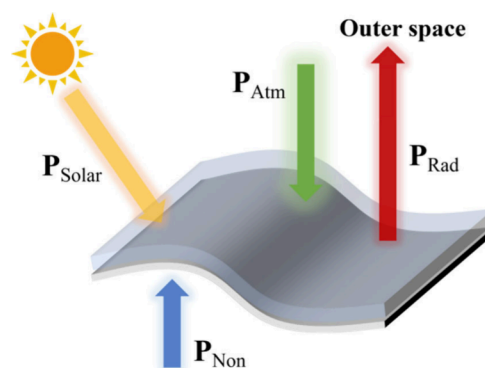


Figure 1. Schematic diagram of the daytime thermal equilibrium for radiative coolers.

as an example, the thermal equilibrium equation for the radiative cooler is as follows,

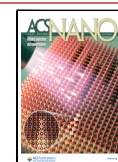
$$P_C = P_{\text{Rad}} - P_{\text{Atm}} - P_{\text{Solar}} - P_{\text{Non}} \quad (1)$$

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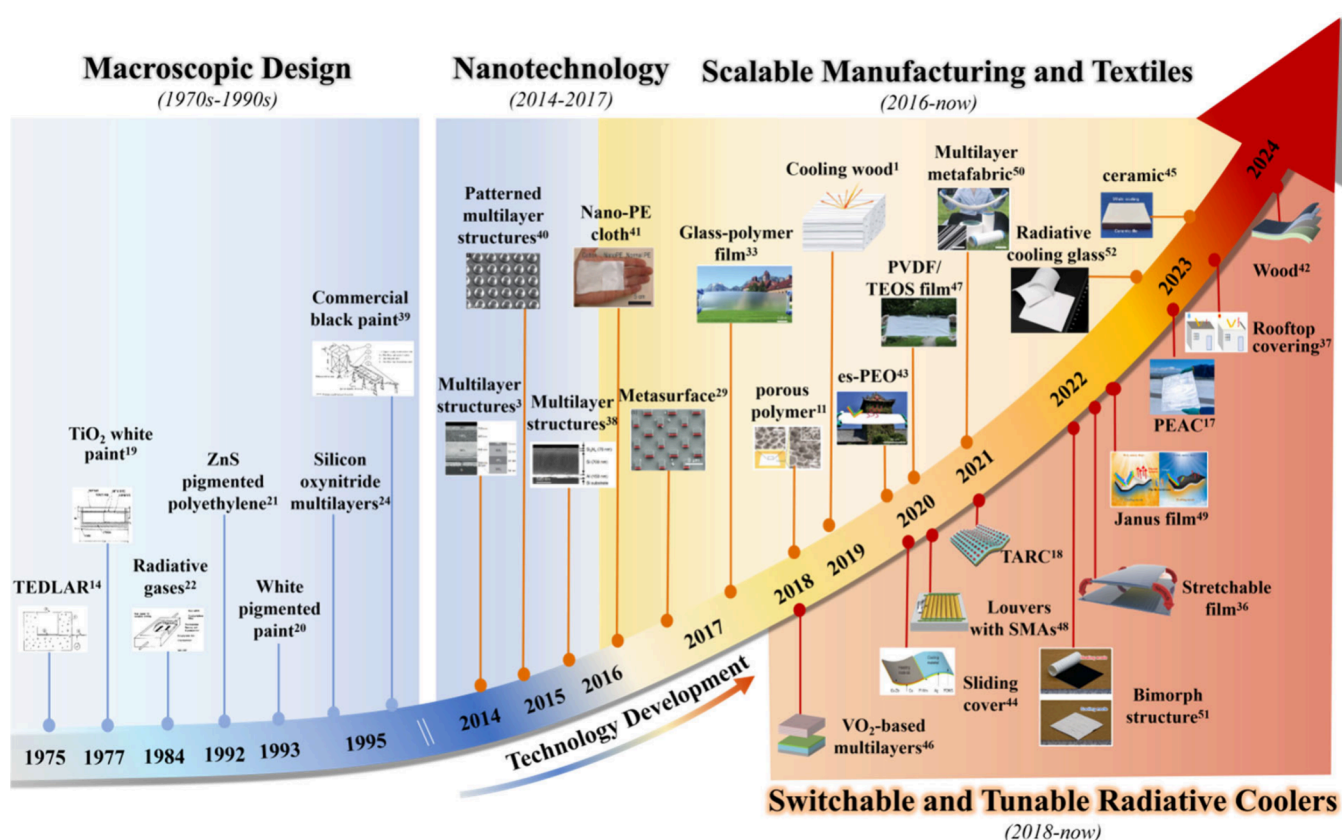


Figure 2. Timeline showing the development of radiative cooling technologies of four generations: macroscopic design, nanotechnology, scalable manufacturing and textiles, and switchable and tunable radiative coolers. Reprinted with permission from ref 1. Copyright [2019] [American Association for the Advancement of Science]. Reprinted with permission from ref 3. Copyright [2014] [Springer Nature]. Reprinted with permission from ref 11. Copyright [2018] [American Association for the Advancement of Science]. Reprinted with permission from ref 14. Copyright [1975] [Elsevier]. Reprinted with permission from ref 17. Copyright [2023] [Elsevier]. Reprinted with permission from ref 18. Copyright [2021] [American Association for the Advancement of Science]. Reprinted with permission from ref 19. Copyright [1978] [Elsevier]. Reprinted with permission from ref 20. Copyright [1993] [Elsevier]. Reprinted with permission from ref 21. Copyright [1992] [Elsevier]. Reprinted with permission from ref 22. Copyright [1984] [Optica Publishing Group]. Reprinted with permission from ref 24. Copyright [1996] [Elsevier]. Reprinted with permission from ref 29. Copyright [2017] [Wiley-VCH]. Reprinted with permission from ref 33. Copyright [2017] [American Association for the Advancement of Science]. Reprinted with permission from ref 36. Copyright [2022] [Elsevier]. Reprinted with permission from ref 37. Copyright [2023] [Elsevier]. Reprinted with permission from ref 38. Copyright [2016] [Springer Nature]. Reprinted with permission from ref 39. Copyright [1995] [Elsevier]. Reprinted with permission from ref 40. Copyright [2015] [Wiley-VCH]. Reprinted with permission from ref 41. Copyright [2016] [American Association for the Advancement of Science]. Reprinted with permission from ref 42. Copyright [2024] [American Chemical Society]. Reprinted with permission from ref 43. Copyright [2020] [Springer Nature]. Reprinted with permission from ref 44. Copyright [2020] [Springer Nature]. Reprinted with permission from ref 45. Copyright [2023] [American Association for the Advancement of Science]. Reprinted with permission from ref 46. Copyright [2018] [Optica Publishing Group]. Reprinted with permission from ref 47. Copyright [2019] [Wiley-VCH]. Reprinted with permission from ref 48. Copyright [2020] [American Chemical Society]. Reprinted with permission from ref 49. Copyright [2022] [Wiley-VCH]. Reprinted with permission from ref 50. Copyright [2021] [American Association for the Advancement of Science]. Reprinted with permission from ref 51. Copyright [2022] [Springer Nature]. Reprinted with permission from ref 52. Copyright [2023] [American Association for the Advancement of Science].

where P_C represents the net radiative cooling power of the cooler, P_{Rad} represents the thermal emission power of the cooler, P_{Atm} represents the absorbed atmospheric radiation, P_{Solar} represents the power of the solar radiation absorbed by the cooler, and P_{Non} represents all nonradiative heat exchanges.

The thermal emission power of the cooler (P_{Rad}) can be calculated by

$$P_{\text{rad}}(T) = A_{\text{emitter}} \int d\Omega \cos \theta \int_0^\infty I_{\text{BB}}(T, \lambda) \varepsilon(\lambda, \theta) d\lambda \quad (2)$$

where A_{emitter} represents the surface area of the cooler, $I_{\text{BB}}(T, \lambda)$ denotes the thermal radiation intensity of an ideal blackbody at a given temperature and wavelength, and $\varepsilon(\lambda, \theta)$

refers to the emissivity that is based on the wavelength and angle.

Through the analysis of power flow in a cooler under thermal equilibrium, it is imperative to enhance P_{Rad} to realize a high radiative cooling power. This requires the cooler to have a high emissivity in the 8–13 μm wavelength range because this atmospheric transparency window overlaps with the peak wavelength of blackbody radiation curve at 300 K. Concurrently, it is essential to diminish P_{Solar} and P_{Atm} . The former demands that the cooler possesses high reflectance in the solar wavelength range, while the latter necessitates a reduction in the cooler's emissivity beyond the atmospheric transparency window to mitigate the impact of atmospheric radiation.

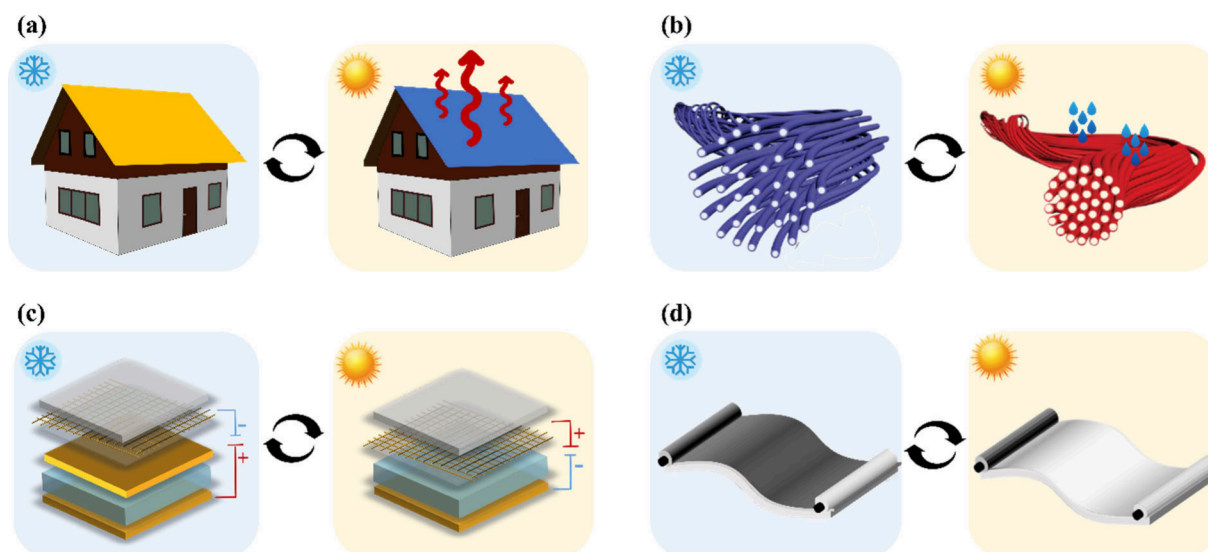


Figure 3. Schematic diagram of the four main regulation methods used in STRC. (a) Temperature-adaptive. (b) Humidity-adaptive. (c) Voltage-controlled. (d) Motor-controlled. Reprinted with permission from ref 18. Copyright [2021] [American Association for the Advancement of Science]. Reprinted with permission from ref 44. Copyright [2020] [Springer Nature]. Reprinted with permission from ref 55. Copyright [2019] [American Association for the Advancement of Science]. Reprinted with permission from ref 66. Copyright [2023] [Springer Nature].

However, these static radiative coolers can only cool objects and continue to radiative cool at cold nights or winter times, hence failing to satisfy the heat-retaining requirements in those conditions.¹⁶ In recent years, efforts to meet the requirements of all-season passive thermal regulation have led to the invention of STRC technologies. It is worth noting that Li et al.¹⁷ and Tang et al.¹⁸ have conducted numerical simulations of STRCs in 15 climate zones of the United States, respectively, finding that for most climate zones, STRCs offer higher energy savings compared to static radiative cooling materials, especially in regions with significant temperature variations. However, for areas with consistently high temperatures, the energy savings of STRCs are almost comparable to those of static radiative cooling materials.

In this Perspective, we briefly summarize the mechanisms of up-to-date STRC technologies. We analyze their common technical challenges, which hinder wide commercialization and real-world deployment, and we discuss future research directions in this field. This Perspective analyzes the mechanism, benefits, challenges, and future directions of STRC that could potentially help advance the sustainability of our society and ease challenges from climate change.

HISTORY

The development of radiative cooling technologies can be divided into four stages, as shown in Figure 2.

Tremendous efforts have been made from 1970s to 1990s with experimental realization of various radiative cooling materials, including (pigmented) paints,^{19,20} (pigmented) polymers,²¹ radiative gases,²² etc. Although subambient cooling could be achieved,²³ the solar reflectivity and thermal emissivity of those radiative coolers are far below unity²⁴ and thus their radiative cooling performance is far from satisfactory.

An revolutionary improvement of radiative cooling technologies started from 2014 which can be considered as the “renaissance” of radiative coolers.³ In only 1–2 years, both the solar reflectivity and thermal emissivity of nanostructured radiative coolers quickly approached unity.²⁵ Various designs

of radiative coolers with nearly perfect cooling performance were theoretically proposed and/or experimentally implemented, such as multilayer nanostructures,^{26–28} metamaterials and metasurfaces.^{29–34} The rapid and successful development of radiative cooling technology during that time “was standing on the shoulders of giants”: advances in nanophotonics, micro/nanofabrication, and materials sciences. Nevertheless, these high-performance implementations were unable to be applied in real scenarios because they mostly rely on lithography or thin-film deposition techniques with requirements of carefully controlled micro/nanosized features.³⁵

As the full cooling potential of terrestrial radiative coolers approaches saturation, research was then focused on scalable manufacturing of radiative coolers that are lithography-free with lower fabrication costs.⁴³ For example, Zhai et al. reported a mass-manufactured glass–polymer film with 93 W/m² cooling power under direct sunshine.³³ Later on, scalable radiative cooling textiles for clothes and tents were invented for the cooling of human bodies in the summer^{53–55} with some success in commercialization.⁴¹ It is worth noting that promoting the trend toward mass-production of radiative coolers would require low-cost nanostructuring approaches.

Though conventional radiative cooling technologies keep buildings and human bodies cool on hot days, the static radiative cooling power cannot be turned off, leading to undesirable “overcooling” at low temperatures,⁵⁶ thus exacerbating the heating power consumption as heating load penalties in those conditions.^{57,58} To tackle this challenge, STRCs were intensively investigated since 2018.⁴⁶ Initial attempts were mostly theoretical^{46,59,60} or power-consuming (active),^{61,62} and several energy-free (passive) STRCs were experimentally implemented in the lab without field tests.^{63,64} In 2021, Tang et al. and Wang et al. demonstrated energy-free, flexible, temperature-adaptive radiative coatings with field tests and presented year-round energy-saving simulations,^{18,65} which quantitatively showed that, in areas with large daily or seasonal temperature variations, smart thermal regulation based on STRCs is preferred due to higher year-round energy savings.

MECHANISMS

Depending on the specific physical mechanisms and principles, STRCs can be classified into several categories (Figure 3): temperature-adaptive, humidity-adaptive, voltage-controlled, and motor-controlled. These coolers are applicable in diverse domains, encompassing roofs, windows, walls, and advanced textiles as well in the fields of electric vehicles and aerospace.

Temperature-Adaptive STRCs. Temperature-adaptive STRCs with temperature-responsive materials can dynamically adjust their infrared (IR) emissivity according to temperature changes, including dual-mode bimorph structures,^{51,67} phase-change materials (PCM),²³ and shape memory alloys (SMAs).^{48,51} Figure 3(a) illustrates the regulation method for temperature-adaptive STRCs. When used as a roofing material, at low temperatures, the emissivity of the temperature-adaptive STRC in the MIR band (especially the atmospheric transparent window) is rather low to effectively keep the building warm. When the temperature rises, it automatically switches to a high emissivity mode due to the dramatic refractive index change, thereby achieving strong radiative cooling and maintaining a cool indoor environment.

Dual-mode bimorph structures rely on stress changes in an additional temperature-responsive layer to achieve automatic switching between radiative cooling in high-temperature environments and solar heating in low-temperature environments.^{51,67} Though the complicated design may not be conducive to large-scale production, the bimorph structure enriches the functionality of temperature-adaptive STRCs with excellent thermoregulation performance. On the other hand, PCMs (including VO₂,⁶⁸ GST,^{69–71} and perovskites^{72,73}) are more widely used in temperature-adaptive STRCs for their temperature-sensitive optical properties in the IR range. For example, VO₂ undergoes temperature-driven and reversible metal–insulator phase change upon heating across its transition temperature with a drastic contrast in IR refractive index.⁷⁴ Typically, photonic structures such as Fabry–Pérot cavities,^{18,59} metasurfaces,⁶⁴ and optical antennas¹⁷ are used to amplify the phase-transition properties of VO₂, resulting in various structures of VO₂-based STRCs. In addition, to enable VO₂-based STRC to undergo phase transitions at room temperatures, a variety of methods to reduce the phase-transition temperature of VO₂ could be adopted, such as metal doping,⁷⁵ ultraviolet irradiation,⁷⁶ and noncatalytic hydrogenation.⁷⁷

Besides that, STRCs based on SMA actuators are also temperature-adaptive.⁴⁸ Xia et al. used a temperature shape memory spring (TSMS) to drive the opening angle of metal plates for adaptive radiation.⁴⁸

Humidity-Adaptive STRCs. Humidity-adaptive, or water-absorptive is another way to achieve passive STRCs. Such radiative coolers could find applications as smart fabrics for personal thermal management as the human body secretes sweat upon temperature rises.^{55,78} Figure 3(b) demonstrates the regulation method of humidity-adaptive STRCs for personal thermal management. At cold temperatures, perspiration is minimal and the STRC is in an off state. The distance between humidity-sensitive STRC fibers is large, leading to weak electromagnetic coupling with a low emissivity. Conversely, when the temperature rises, perspiration increases, and the distance between the humidity-sensitive fibers decreases, causing an enhancement in electromagnetic coupling with a high emissivity for excellent radiative cooling

performance. For example, Zhang et al.⁵⁵ designed a smart fabric by coating a thin layer of cellulose triacetate bilayer fibers with carbon nanotubes, achieving over 35% IR emissivity modulation depth based on a modest humidity change. The dynamic infrared pass effect is primarily caused by the distance-sensitive electromagnetic coupling between adjacent coated fibers in the textile yarn, providing an alternative perspective for personal thermal management.

Voltage-Controlled STRCs. While passive STRCs offer energy-efficient regulation, active-control STRCs are necessary in specific application scenarios where higher control precision and faster responses are required. Though high-speed modulation of thermal emission has been proven challenging because the intensity of thermal emission from an object is typically determined by its temperature,⁷⁹ successful voltage-controlled STRCs were experimentally demonstrated. Figure 3(c) demonstrates a common modulation method and principle for voltage-controlled STRCs. During hot seasons, the top infrared-transparent electrode and the bottom high emissivity aqueous electrolyte can effectively dissipate heat through radiative cooling. On the other hand, during cold seasons, applying a reverse voltage can lead to the deposition of a metal layer on the upper surface, thereby achieving a low emissivity. For instance, electrochromic devices possess the capability of dynamically managing the optical and thermal performance of buildings with an external voltage. Hence, they find vast applications as smart windows,^{66,80–82} smart roofs,⁸³ electro-optical camouflage,⁷⁹ or spacecraft thermal management.^{84,85} Most electrochromic devices were achieved through reversible metal electrodeposition with various structures and composition materials.^{66,79,80,82,83,86}

Motor-Controlled STRCs. In addition to the aforementioned approaches, mechanical braking methods are also used for the dynamic regulation of radiative coolers, with categories including flip-type,^{49,87,88} pulling-type,⁴⁴ and stretch-type.^{36,48} Flip-type is based on the manual flipping of Janus membranes whose two surfaces are of different IR emissivity: one for radiative cooling and the other one for solar heating.^{49,87,88} Besides flipping, pulling is also effective in switching radiative coolers.^{44,88} Figure 3(d) illustrates a pulling-type motor-controlled STRC. During cold seasons, the motor pulls out the low-emissivity coating to keep the mixture warm. Conversely, during hot seasons, the motor pulls out high-emissivity coating to facilitate radiative cooling.

Li et al. controlled a polymer composite sheet with a rotation brake and a wheel control system, so that the desired portion of material can be selectively exposed to the sky for heating or cooling.^{44,88} As an example, Andrew et al. achieved emissivity switching by embedding patterned rectangular and cylindrical dielectric (Si₃N₄) structures into periodic wavy elastic material (PDMS) through stretching.³⁶

CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

Modulation Depth of Thermal Emissivity. Modulation depth of thermal emissivity ($\Delta\epsilon_{TE}$) upon mode-switching is another important indicator for optimizing STRCs, which determines their year-round total energy savings or thermal comfort. As an example of PCMs, VO₂ is integrated into micro/nanostructures to enhance $\Delta\epsilon_{TE}$, leading to VO₂-based multilayer films,¹⁰⁵ core–shell,^{106,107} and metasurfaces.^{18,64,108} Nevertheless, there is still room for further improvement of $\Delta\epsilon_{TE}$, as shown in Figure 4.

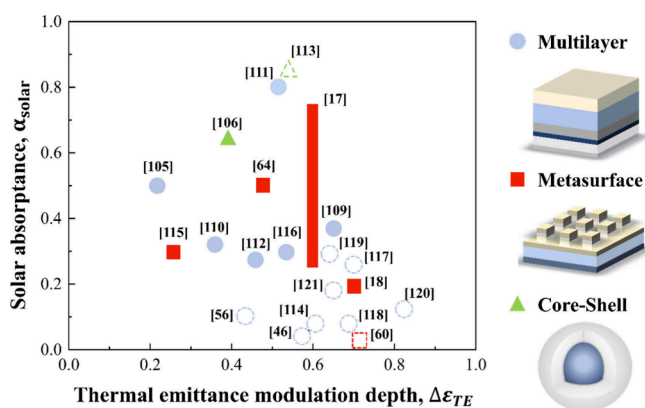


Figure 4. Typical structures of VO₂-based STRCs with their performance: multilayer, metasurface, and core-shell.^{17,18,46,56,60,64,105,106,109–121} Filled symbols correspond to experimentally demonstrated STRCs while open ones indicate theoretical designs without experimental verifications.

Representative multilayer VO₂-based STRCs include VO₂/Al realized $\Delta\epsilon_{TE} = 0.22$ by Kruzelecky et al.¹⁰⁵ To better exploit the IR modulation properties of VO₂, Fabry–Perot (F–P) cavities were proposed to enhance the light–matter interaction. For example, VO₂/SiO₂/Au¹¹⁶ and VO₂/HfO₂/Au¹²² sandwich structures were proposed with $\Delta\epsilon_{TE} = 0.49$ and 0.55, respectively. Although large modulation depths can also be achieved with gradient refractive structures and core-shell structures, fabrication complexity presents a barrier to their large-scale manufacturing. In recent years, metasurfaces have been used to further enhance the $\Delta\epsilon_{TE}$ of VO₂-based STRCs, which are favorable due to the effectively reduced solar absorptance by decreasing the VO₂ surface coverage.¹⁰⁸ For example, Tang et al. designed a WVO₂-based STRC metasurface with F–P cavities, achieving a record-breaking $\Delta\epsilon_{TE} = 0.7$ with field tests.¹⁸

Solar Heating and Aesthetic Requirements. Most conventional static radiative coolers are solely designed for cooling, so they are mostly white for broadband reflectance in the visible spectrum to minimize solar absorptance. However, STRCs account for both heat retaining and passive cooling, so their solar absorption should be optimized,¹²³ instead of simply minimized, for various climates.¹⁸ On the other hand, white coatings are not always favored due to the aesthetic requirements of customers. Therefore, colored STRCs are becoming increasingly popular with more attention.¹²⁴

To achieve colored STRCs, two main strategies could be adopted:¹²⁵ (1) The dye-based method directly applies IR-transparent dyes onto radiative coolers. For instance, Son et al.¹²⁶ manufactured a coating with silicon dioxide-embedded perovskite nanocrystals and applying it to emitters, leading to white, green, and red static radiative cooling materials. Peng et al.¹²⁷ encapsulated IR-transparent nanoparticles such as Prussian iron blue, iron oxide (Fe₂O₃), and silicon (Si) between polymer and Al, leading to radiative cooling films with blue, red, and yellow colors. Similarly, Li et al.¹⁷ applied IR-transparent pigments in the design of STRCs, successfully optimizing solar albedo with aesthetic considerations. (2) The structure-based method adjusts the absorption spectrum of radiative coolers by carefully designed photonic structures.¹²⁸ Chen et al.¹²⁹ proposed a sprayable dual-layer coating that includes a thin visible light-absorbing layer on top of a nonabsorbing solar scattering base layer. The top layer absorbs

specific visible wavelengths to display particular colors, while the bottom layer maximizes the reflection to reduce the level of solar heating.

Costs. Although passive STRCs do not require energy or electricity for a mode-switching operation, the high costs of material production and nanofabrication processes remain a major challenge for further large-scale applications.

To tackle this challenge, organic polymeric materials, such as TPX, PE, PVDF, and PTFE, could be used due to their well-known low costs and compatibility with large-scale manufacturing. For instance, Zhai et al.³³ proposed the combination of polymer and random metamaterials, significantly reducing the production difficulty and costs by a roll-to-roll scalable manufacturing process. While large-scale processing methods such as roll-to-roll manufacturing are adopted, it is necessary to retain the nanophotonic structures to generate strong phonon–polariton resonances. Additionally, electrospinning technologies to produce nanofiber membranes is also effective in reducing the production costs.⁴⁷

Durability and Lifetime. Durability and lifetime are important for STRCs as they determine long-term application costs. They strongly depend on the composition materials as well as the application environments.

In addition to mechanical scratches, STRCs placed on outdoor roofs may experience reduced thermoregulation performance due to dust and precipitates accumulated on the surfaces. Therefore, self-cleaning properties may effectively improve their durability and lifetime.⁸⁹ Zhai et al.⁹⁰ and Chen et al.⁹¹ used a particle coating method to enhance the surface hydrophobicity for excellent self-cleaning performance. The stability of the material and structure is another important factor that affects the lifetime of STRCs. For instance, ultrathin Pt films in reversible electrostatic silver deposition may form nanocracks that affect the thickness of the subsequent silver deposition.⁸³ Besides, polymer films are susceptible to degradation and cross-linking under the influence of common environmental factors such as light, heat, water vapor, oxygen, and their synergistic effects.^{92,93} The use of polymer additives or stabilizers can be advantageous in extending the lifetime of polymers under specific application scenarios.⁹⁴

Sustainability. The materials used in the fabrication of STRCs might have negative environmental implications, hindering their sustainable development.

SiO₂,⁹⁵ TiO₂,⁹⁶ and Al₂O₃⁹⁷ are commonly used to reflect sunlight in radiative cooling due to their low costs. However, inhaling SiO₂ nanofibers may lead to silicosis,⁹⁵ and nanoscale TiO₂ and Al₂O₃ may accumulate in mammalian reproductive organs.⁹⁶ Polymeric materials, with their low cost and high emissivity, are extensively used in radiative coolers,⁹⁷ yet they are typically easily degraded in the environment. Additionally, microplastics can easily contaminate the environment and accumulate in animal and human bodies, affecting metabolism, growth and development.⁹⁸ Therefore, biodegradable polymeric materials such as PLA (poly(lactic acid)) and PBS (polybutylene succinate) may be applicable in the field of STRCs in the future, achieving sustainability at the raw material level.⁹⁹ For example, Li et al.¹⁰⁰ developed a stratified radiative cooling film based on cellulose acetate (CA), with commendable biodegradability. Zhu et al.¹⁰¹ applied micro-fabrication to process natural silk for radiative cooling fabrics. Chen et al.¹⁰² achieved transparent radiative cooling using silk protein. It is thus expected that the use of natural materials will contribute to the sustainable development of STRC. In

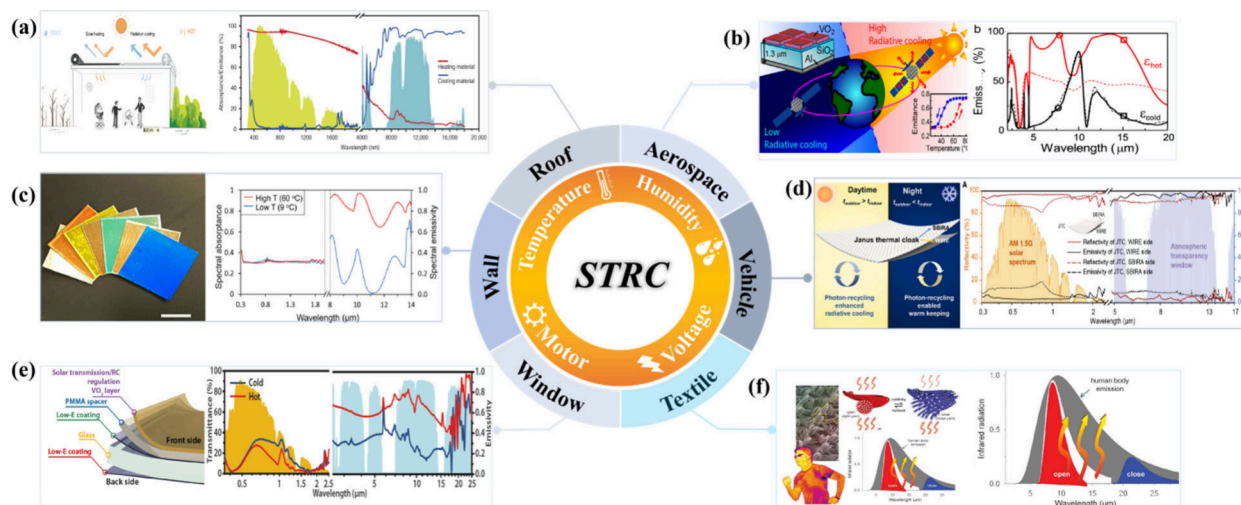


Figure 5. The mechanisms and applications of STRCs. The mechanisms include temperature adaptivity, humidity adaptivity, voltage control, and motor control. The applications range from roofs, walls, and windows to textiles, vehicles, and aerospace. (a) Motor-controlled pulling-type coatings for roof applications. (b) Temperature-adaptive VO₂ metasurfaces for aerospace applications. (c) Temperature-adaptive VO₂ metasurfaces for wall applications. (d) Flip-type Janus coatings for vehicle applications. (e) Temperature-adaptive VO₂ multilayer structures for window applications. (f) Humidity-adaptive metafibers for textile applications. Reprinted with permission from ref 17. Copyright [2023] [Elsevier]. Reprinted with permission from ref 44. Copyright [2020] [Springer Nature]. Reprinted with permission from ref 55. Copyright [2019] [American Association for the Advancement of Science]. Reprinted with permission from ref 64. Copyright [2018] [American Chemical Society]. Reprinted with permission from ref 65. Copyright [2021] [American Association for the Advancement of Science]. Reprinted with permission from ref 150. Copyright [2023] [Elsevier].

addition, it is not sufficient to focus solely on the energy savings and greenhouse gas emission reductions that STRCs bring to the environment.¹⁰³ The environmental impacts throughout the entire life cycle, or life cycle assessment (LCA), should also be considered, including the stages of raw material acquisition, production, use, and eventual disposal. Tang et al. conducted a systematic LCA assessment of MgO radiative cooling paint,¹⁰⁴ which provides insights for STRCs and guides researchers to assess the energy savings and sustainability of their designs by referring to the LCA.

OUTLOOKS

Application beyond Roofs. Though roofs directly facing the sky are among the most suitable applications for STRCs,^{130–134} their future applications may also expand to walls,¹³⁵ windows,⁶⁵ clothes,¹³⁶ tents,¹⁸ (electrical) vehicles,^{34,137,138} and spacecrafts,¹³⁹ as shown in Figure 5.

Walls require directional emission toward the sky. Zhou et al.¹³⁵ proposed a microwedge structure with directional emissivity contrast through magnetic coupling, which has a huge potential to be applied on walls. Besides, graded epsilon near zero (ENZ) material^{140–142} and Brewster metasurfaces^{143,144} could also be used to realize highly directional thermal emission. It is noteworthy that STRCs intended for wall applications must also address the issue of glaring as extensive wall reflection may lead to ocular damage. Consequently, employing STRCs with the capability of color customization is imperative to significantly diminish specular optical reflection, thereby averting glaring and mitigating light pollution.

Metafabrics are of vital importance for human thermoregulation. While conventional applications of PCMs in textile materials^{136,145,146} make use of their high enthalpy of fusion to effectively absorb and release heat through phase transition, STRCs with PCMs allow for personal thermal management via smart radiative cooling. Therefore, broad application prospects

could be expected, such as smart blazers, jackets, and bombers. Moreover, such temperature-adaptive fabric radiators can be used to make tents to meet outdoor needs.

One fatal challenge faced by the thriving electric vehicle (EV) market is the all-season battery thermal management.¹⁴⁷ When the ambient temperature is lowered from 25 °C to −15 °C, the state of charge decreased by ~23%.¹⁴⁸ To avoid possible overcooling issue introduced by conventional static radiative cooling technologies,¹⁴⁹ smart thermoregulation by STRCs have been proposed. Qiao et al.¹⁵⁰ proposed a Janus STRC film by using silica fiber, hexagonal boron nitride and aluminum alloy foil, which can be mass-produced, enabling year-round thermal regulation for EVs. Similarly, Heo et al.³⁴ introduced a Janus STRC film comprised of an Ag-polydimethylsiloxane layer on a micropatterned quartz substrate for smart thermoregulation.

In addition to terrestrial applications, STRCs may also find applications in spacecraft thermal control. With the rapid growth in spacecraft mission, using TARC as a replacement for traditional static thermal control coatings to respond to rapid changes in external thermal conditions has become essential.^{139,151} Among them, Xie et al.¹⁵² proposed a STRC based on VO₂ particles for spacecraft thermal control and Kim et al.¹⁵³ used multilayer VO₂ films to achieve smart thermal control. STRCs proposed by Tang et al.¹⁸ and Li et al.¹³⁵ have significant potential for future aerospace thermal management due to its high modulation depth and mechanical flexibility.

Paint-Form STRCs. The current STRCs predominantly manifest in physical forms such as rigid wafers,²⁵ flexible membranes,⁴⁷ and bulk materials.¹ To better apply STRCs on buildings, products in the form of liquid paint are more desired, because they can then be applied to any solid surface without conformability issues.

So far, static radiative cooling paints have been demonstrated with outstanding single-layer coatings composed of SiO₂ nanoparticles¹⁵⁴ and paint-like porous polymer materials

with all-day cooling capabilities.¹¹ Although these coatings can achieve radiative cooling throughout the day, they are still static and lack self-regulation capabilities. Therefore, there is a pressing need for paint-form STRCs that can achieve temperature-adaptive switching and regulation throughout the seasons. This represents a crucial approach and future research direction for the large-scale application of STRCs on building surfaces.

Tunable Solar Absorption. Apart from utilizing atmospheric transparent windows for radiative cooling, daytime solar radiation power also serves as a clean heat source to harness^{2,155} for thermal management. STRCs with tunable solar absorption have been proposed as a type of device that utilizes both solar absorption (smart heating) and thermal radiation (smart cooling) for high-performance heat management.^{156–159}

Conventional smart materials with tunable solar absorption work in a similar way as STRCs by adjusting the absorption rate of solar irradiance in response to external stimuli.¹⁵⁶ This property limits their application to daytime thermoregulation, which is further constrained by low solar irradiance during certain weather conditions (especially cloudy days), seasons, and wall/window orientations. Therefore, the development of STRCs with tunable solar absorption has become a crucial avenue for future research. For example, Xiang et al.⁴⁹ proposed a Janus STRC film with one solar-absorbing surface and one thermal-emitting surface, which could be switched manually by flipping. The bimorph structure proposed by Zhang et al.⁵¹ utilizes a temperature-sensitive actuating layer to switch between a solar heating mode and a radiative cooling mode, achieving an average heating power of 859.8 W/m².

Although these methods can achieve switching between solar absorbers and thermal emitters, mass-producible, passive STRCs with tunable solar absorption without mechanical moving parts are still in need owing to severe limitations on the stability of mechanical structures, the lifespan of temperature memory metals, and other factors.

CONCLUSIONS

With the rapid development in global economy and urbanization, energy consumption by buildings has surged.¹⁶⁰ By the emission of excess heat into outer space, radiative cooling technologies enable efficient thermal management of buildings for reduced greenhouse gas emissions. To tackle the overcooling problem of static radiative cooling at low environment temperatures, STRCs have been proposed and demonstrated as a potential and practical solution. Based on the external stimuli, STRCs are categorized into passive ones driven by environmental temperature or humidity changes as well as active ones controlled by voltages or motors. Toward commercialization and practical applications, STRCs face challenges ranging from modulation depth of thermal emissivity, solar heating optimization, and aesthetic needs to costs, lifespan, and sustainability. These factors impose high demands on the photonic design, material processing, and scalable manufacturing of STRCs. In summary, the unique advantages of STRCs promise tremendous opportunities in various thermal control applications, including buildings, electric vehicles, clothes, tents, and spacecrafts. Among them, STRCs hold substantial potential as future coating technologies for building roofs, glass windows, car glass roofs, and satellites.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Corresponding Authors

Kaichen Dong – Tsinghua-Berkeley Shenzhen Institute, Institute of Data and Information, Tsinghua Shenzhen International Graduate School, Tsinghua University, Shenzhen, Guangdong 518055, China; Center of Double Helix, Tsinghua Shenzhen International Graduate School, Tsinghua University, Shenzhen, Guangdong 518055, China; orcid.org/0000-0001-5334-4243; Email: dkc22@sz.tsinghua.edu.cn

Junqiao Wu – Department of Materials Science and Engineering, University of California, Berkeley, California 94720, United States; Materials Sciences Division, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, Berkeley, California 94720, United States; orcid.org/0000-0002-1498-0148; Email: wuj@berkeley.edu

Authors

Xuzhe Zhao – Tsinghua-Berkeley Shenzhen Institute, Institute of Data and Information, Tsinghua Shenzhen International Graduate School, Tsinghua University, Shenzhen, Guangdong 518055, China; Center of Double Helix, Tsinghua Shenzhen International Graduate School, Tsinghua University, Shenzhen, Guangdong 518055, China

Jiachen Li – Department of Materials Science and Engineering, University of California, Berkeley, California 94720, United States; Materials Sciences Division, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, Berkeley, California 94720, United States

Complete contact information is available at:

<https://pubs.acs.org/10.1021/acsnano.4c05929>

Author Contributions

*X.Z. and J.L. contributed equally to this work.

Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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ABBREVIATIONS

LCA, life cycle assessment; EV, electric vehicle; ENZ, epsilon near zero; IR, infrared; STRC, switchable and tunable radiative coolers; PCM, phase-change materials; SMAs, shape memory alloys; PLA, poly(lactic acid); PBS, polybutylene succinate; CA, cellulose acetate; TPX, polymethyl pentene; PE, polyethylene; PVDF, polyvinylidene fluoride; PTFE, polytetrafluoroethylene; PDMS, polydimethylsiloxane; VO₂, vanadium dioxide.

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