



Applications of Absolute Value Detectors in Neuromorphic and Signal Processing Systems

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Abstract. The four-bit absolute-value detector (AVD) is an indispensable primitive wherever signed sensor data must be reduced to magnitude before thresholding, from cortical implants to wearable audio codecs. Yet the seemingly trivial operation hides a rich three-way trade-off among delay, energy and area that becomes critical in edge devices operating under sub-milliwatt power budgets. This review first synthesises two decades of AVD research, cataloguing twenty representative CMOS, pass-transistor and logic-in-memory implementations and benchmarking them with a unified energy–delay metric. Building on these insights this paper introduces an optimised 4-bit AVD that applies logical-effort path balancing and supply-voltage scaling to cut energy by $4.6\times$ while meeting a $1.5\times$ -minimum-delay target; transistor-level LTSpice and Python models are provided for reproducibility. The paper then analyses how design choices map onto system-level constraints in neuromorphic spike-sorting front-ends and conventional digital signal-processing pipelines. Finally, unresolved challenges—including programmable thresholds, asynchronous handshake overhead and thermal issues in 3-D monolithic integration—are discussed to guide future research.

Keywords: Absolute-Value Detector, Spike Sorting, Neuromorphic Pre-Processing, Low-Power Cmos, Digital Signal Processing

1 Introduction

In many digital systems, an absolute value detector (AVD) is a fundamental component used to compute the magnitude of a signed binary number. The 4-bit AVD, in particular, plays a significant role in digital signal processing (DSP) tasks such as audio/video encoding, biomedical signal interpretation, and digital communication, where real-time absolute magnitude calculation is crucial [1, 2]. By integrating fast and low-power 4-bit AVDs into arithmetic logic units (ALUs), systems can enhance performance for real-time signal processing. In neuromorphic applications, AVDs are employed to handle bipolar neural pulses. For instance, spike sorting in brain-machine interfaces uses AVD circuits with threshold comparison to detect spikes regardless of polarity. Beyond neuromorphic computing, AVDs are

integral to error-detection and correction systems. They aid in verifying checksums by comparing the magnitudes of binary differences [3-5]. As data integrity becomes increasingly important in modern storage and communication systems, the demand for fast and reliable AVDs has grown accordingly. The miniaturization of technology and the proliferation of portable devices have driven research toward energy-efficient circuit designs. Although traditional CMOS implementations remain prevalent, they suffer from performance degradation at lower voltages due to threshold voltage effects. To address these challenges, researchers have explored alternative design methodologies such as pass-transistor logic (PTL), which reduces transistor count and internal capacitance, and adiabatic logic, which reuses charge between capacitive nodes to minimize energy dissipation [6- 8].

Another promising approach is approximate computing, which allows slight output inaccuracies in exchange for considerable reductions in area and power. Approximate adders, for example, can simplify magnitude computation in AVDs, significantly cutting power use [9].

This paper provides a detailed survey of these evolving strategies. Section II covers the principles of two's complement arithmetic and binary absolute value computation. Section III discusses the architectural building blocks of a 4-bit AVD. Section IV reviews various implementation styles and their trade-offs. Section V summarizes recent literature in the field, focusing on optimization techniques. Section VI presents an original optimized AVD design incorporating logical effort analysis and voltage scaling, along with LTspice models and Python-based energy-delay simulations. Finally, Section VII concludes with a discussion on design trade-offs and suggestions for future research directions, including neuromorphic AVD arrays and approximate designs for machine learning hardware.

2 Background

2.1 Two's Complement Arithmetic and Absolute Value

Binary numbers in two's complement form are widely used to represent signed integers in digital systems. In an N-bit two's complement format, positive integers are represented using standard binary notation (with leading 0s), while negative integers are represented as the two's complement of their magnitude. The most significant bit (MSB) serves as the sign bit: MSB = 0 indicates a non-negative number, whereas MSB = 1 indicates a negative number.

For instance, in 4-bit two's complement representation, the number +5 is 0101, while - 5 is represented as 1011, which is the two's complement of 0101. The process of computing the absolute value of a two's complement number consists of checking the sign bit and, if the number is negative, negating it. Negation is achieved by inverting all bits and adding one, i.e., forming the two's complement.

Let the input be a 4-bit binary number $A = a_3a_2a_1a_0$ where a_3 is the MSB. The absolute value is computed as follows:

$$|A| = \begin{cases} A, & \text{if } a_3 = 0 \\ 2^4 - A = \sim A + 1, & \text{if } a_3 = 1 \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

Here, $\sim A$ denotes the bitwise NOT of A . This operation can also be expressed bitwise using XOR logic and carry-in addition:

$$y_i = a_i \oplus s \quad (0 \leq i \leq 4) \quad (2)$$

$$y_i = a_i \oplus s + \text{carry} - in_i \quad (3)$$

where $s = a_3$ and the initial carry-in $c_0 = s$. In simpler terms, each output bit is conditionally inverted depending on the sign and processed through a ripple-carry chain to account for the +1 in two's complement negation

The MSB of the output, is always zero for inputs that are within the representable positive range. However, a special case arises for the most negative number in 4-bit two's complement: -8 , represented as 1000. Its positive counterpart, $+8$, cannot be expressed in 4 bits. As a result, the AVD outputs 1000 for this input, which, if interpreted as a signed number, still represents -8 . This is an overflow condition. Some implementations handle this by saturating the output to 0111 ($+7$), but many simple AVD circuits return 1000 as-is. Apart from this exception, the absolute value operation is well-defined and unambiguous for all other 4-bit inputs.

3 4-Bit AVD Architecture

A block-level architecture of a 4-bit absolute value detector is illustrated conceptually in Figure 1. The design can be understood in two main parts: (1) Sign detection and conditional inversion, and (2) Adder for two's complement addition.

First, the input's sign bit (a_3) is detected. This signal, $s = a_3$, serves as a control signal indicating whether the input is negative. If $s = 1$, the lower 3 bits a_2, a_1, a_0 need to be inverted and a binary 1 added; if $s = 0$, the input passes through unchanged. Thus, the three LSBs of the input go through a conditional negation block—effectively a bank of controlled inverters—typically implemented using XOR gates with s as one input. Each XOR gate outputs

$$p_i = a_i \oplus s \quad (4)$$

which yields $p_i = a_i$ when $s = 0$ and $p_i = \sim a_i$ when $s = 1$.

In parallel, the sign bit s itself may be inverted to 0 (since the magnitude of a negative number will be positive with MSB 0). In many designs, this step is merged into the adder logic.

Next, a binary adder adds the control signal s to the conditionally inverted lower bits. This adder effectively performs the operation

$$P + s \quad (5)$$

where $P = p_1 p_2 p_3$ is the 3-bit word from the inversion stage, and s acts as the least significant bit (LSB) addend. The simplest realization is a ripple-carry adder consisting of a half-adder at bit 0 and full adders at bit 1 and bit 2.

The half-adder at bit 0 computes:

$$y_0 = p_0 \oplus s \quad (6)$$

$$c_1 = p_0 \oplus s \quad (7)$$

The full-adder at bit 1 computes:

$$y_1 = p_1 \oplus c_1 \oplus 0 \quad (8)$$

$$c_2 = p_1 \wedge c_1 \quad (9)$$

Similarly, bit 2 produces:

$$y_2 = p_2 \oplus c_2 \quad (10)$$

$$c_3 = p_2 \wedge c_2 \quad (11)$$

The carry-out c_3 from the MSB of this 3-bit adder is the overflow bit mentioned earlier — it will be 1 if the input was 1000 (−8), indicating an overflow condition. In a normal scenario (no overflow), $c_3 = 0$ and this paper set the output MSB $y_3 = 0$.

In summary, the output magnitude is $y_3y_2y_1y_0$, where typically $y_3 = 0$ and $y_2y_1y_0$ are the sum outputs from the adder. If overflow handling is desired, an extra logic gate can detect when the input is 1000 (i.e., $s = 1$ and $p_2p_1p_0 = 111$ after inversion) and adjust y_3 or saturate the result accordingly. The Block level architecture is shown in Figure 1.

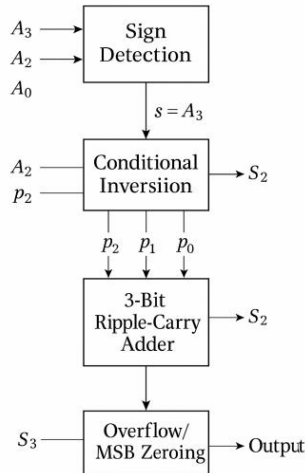


Fig. 1. Block-level architecture of a 4-bit AVD (Photo/Picture credit: Original)

The MSB a_3 feeds the sign detection block, which controls a bank of XOR inverters for a_2, a_1, a_0 . The outputs p_i of these conditional inverters (along with control s) enter a ripple-carry adder that produces the magnitude bits y_2, y_1, y_0 and an overflow carry c_3 . The output MSB y_3 is normally set to 0 (for non-negative results). This architecture can be implemented with various logic families as discussed in the next section.

Some designs integrate the sign selection and addition more tightly — for example, using a pre-computation approach where two candidate results are generated and the sign bit selects which one to output [10]. In that method, one path (for $s = 0$) simply copies $a_2 a_1 a_0$ to $y_2y_1y_0$, and the other path (for $s = 1$) computes

$$\sim a_2 a_1 a_0 + 1 \quad (12)$$

A 2:1 multiplexer then chooses the appropriate 3-bit result based on s . This yields the same result as the XOR-and-add structure described above, and indeed many implementations use multiplexers internally to avoid duplicating adders.

4 Circuit Implementation Styles

4.1 Static CMOS Implementation

In a conventional static CMOS implementation of a 4-bit AVD, the logic is built using standard CMOS logic gates for each functional block described above. A straightforward design uses XOR gates for conditional inversion and a ripple-carry adder composed of one half-adder and two or three full-adder stages. Each XOR or full-adder is constructed from CMOS transistors (pull-up PMOS networks and pull-down NMOS networks). Static CMOS logic is robust (fully restores logic levels) and relatively straightforward to design. For example, an XOR gate can be implemented in CMOS with 8–12 transistors, and a full-adder uses 28 transistors (when built from basic gates) or as few as 10 in a mirror-adder configuration. A complete 4-bit AVD might thus use on the order of 50–60 transistors (excluding inverters for signal buffering).

One major advantage of the static CMOS approach is its predictable performance across process and environmental corners. Each gate restores logic levels, ensuring strong signal integrity. Also, static CMOS has no static power dissipation (no DC current when idle). However, the design can be transistor-intensive. For example, a 2-input XOR commonly uses 8 transistors, and a 2:1 multiplexer uses 4.

To reduce gate count, researchers have proposed optimizations. Dong et al. introduced a simplified carry-chain adder for the 4-bit AVD that reduced critical-path gate stages [2]. Yang reorganized the half-adder and comparator logic to minimize the number of gates required [1]. These improvements aim to reduce logic depth — the number of sequential gate delays from input to output — which directly impacts worst-case delay.

Another design concern is delaying variation due to input-dependent paths. For example, a ripple-carry adder has worst-case delay when a carry propagates through all bits (such as with input 1000). Tang et al. noted that designs should balance gate depth across possible paths [1]. In the AVD, both the path (which may just use XOR gates) and the path (which includes a carry-chain) should be made to have similar timing depths.

In summary, static CMOS AVDs are reliable and reasonably fast at nominal conditions. Power consumption is dominated by dynamic switching activity. Without special optimization, a baseline 4-bit CMOS AVD can achieve delays of a few FO4 inverter stages and energy on the order of tens of femtojoules per operation in 65–130 nm technologies. This paper will later quantify this using logical effort analysis and simulation.

4.2 Pass-Transistor Logic (PTL):

An alternative to static CMOS is pass-transistor logic, where signals are steered through transistors (used as switches) instead of reconstructed with complementary pull-up/pull-down networks. This approach can reduce transistor count. For instance, a 2-input XOR can be implemented with 6 transistors using transmission gates, and a multiplexer can use just 2 pass transistors (plus an inverter) [10].

In PTL-based AVDs, conditional inversion and addition can be implemented with fewer devices. To compute $p_i = a_i \oplus s$, one may use a pair of pass transistors: one passes a_i to p_i when $s = 0$, and the other passes $\sim a_i$ when $s = 1$.

$$p_i = a_i \oplus s \quad (13)$$

Yu et al. explored such hybrid CMOS/PTL strategies in their 4-bit AVD implementation [10]. They combined CMOS inverters to generate complemented signals and pass gates to minimize transistor count and node capacitance.

Addition can also be implemented in PTL. For example, a PTL-based full-adder omits full level restoration and uses NMOS pass networks to propagate carry bits. Khan and Pattanaik demonstrated a 4-bit carry lookahead adder in PTL with higher speed than its static CMOS counterpart [10]. These ideas are transferrable to AVD design, where a compact carry-propagation network (even a small CLA) can shorten the critical path.

The chief advantage of PTL-based AVDs is reduced capacitance and switching activity, resulting in low energy use. Zhang reported a 4-bit AVD design based on PTL and adiabatic logic that consumed just 0.6 nW, or 0.6 pJ per operation at moderate frequencies [5]. This low power was achieved via pass logic, charge recycling, and aggressive voltage scaling. However, PTL also introduces challenges. Since pass transistors do not inherently restore logic levels, threshold voltage drops and noise susceptibility become concerns — especially for NMOS transistors attempting to pull a node high. To mitigate this, level-restoring inverters or complementary transmission gates (PMOS + NMOS pairs) are often used. Furthermore, PTL circuits are sensitive to process variations, as slight changes in V_{th} or drive strength can cause unreliable logic transmission.

In practice, designers often adopt hybrid styles — static CMOS where logic drive is essential, and PTL for simple data routing. This combination achieves a good trade-off between transistor count, signal integrity, and energy efficiency. Yu et al. [10] and Carlson et al. [11] both advocate such mixed implementations, applying PTL in the comparator and half-adder blocks to streamline the overall design.

5 Low-Power Enhancements: Adiabatic and Approximate Techniques

Beyond logic family choices, researchers have pursued specialized techniques to push the energy efficiency of AVDs further. Adiabatic logic is one such approach, wherein circuit nodes are charged and discharged in a pseudo-reversible manner to recover energy. In an adiabatic AVD, the idea is to use an AC power clock or resonance-based supply to slowly charge the node capacitances and then retrieve charge instead of dissipating it as heat. As Ge et al. (2021) report, a 4-bit AVD using an adiabatic switching scheme achieved a delay of about 1.17 ns at 1 V (roughly 42 FO4 delays) while drastically cutting energy [8].

Adiabatic circuits often require more complex clocking (multiple phases and possibly inductors), and may trade off speed — the slower the transitions, the more energy can be recovered [8]. The benefit is a reduction in effective capacitance charging loss, making such designs attractive for ultra-low-power or low-frequency scenarios.

Another method is the use of approximate computing, which intentionally relaxes the requirement for exact correctness to simplify the hardware. In the context of AVDs, an approximate design might, for example, skip the final addition of 1 for certain bits or use simpler logic that is correct for most, but not all, input patterns. The rationale is that in many DSP or neuromorphic applications, occasional small errors are tolerable or can be corrected at a higher algorithmic level, whereas power savings are immediately beneficial.

Lai et al. proposed a novel design method for a 4-bit AVD that leveraged approximations in the carry chain to eliminate some gates [9]. Similarly, researchers have used approximate adders with truncated carry propagation for computing absolute values [12]. The outcome is a simpler circuit with fewer transistors and reduced switching activity, at the cost of a slight chance that $|A|$ is off by 1 for some rare inputs.

Rafiee et al. demonstrated that such techniques, when applied to image processing, yielded power savings without significant perceptual error [13]. For AVDs in neural processing, one might imagine that an error of 1 in spike magnitude could be acceptable if it only occurs rarely — especially if it enables replacing a full-adder with a simpler stage.

Finally, layout and device-level optimizations deserve mention. Some works optimized the physical layout of the AVD to reduce parasitic capacitance and resistance. For example, a custom layout that places the XOR gates and adders in a compact arrangement can shorten interconnects, thus lowering capacitance and improving speed and energy.

An improved adder topology is another complementary direction: Dong et al. introduced a simplified chain-carry adder structure within a 4-bit AVD to reduce logic depth, which in turn lowers the switching energy [14]. While these topics go beyond our logical analysis, they represent complementary strategies that can further enhance performance when combined with architectural optimizations.

Table 1 summarizes representative results from the literature for 4-bit AVD implementations.

Table 1. Comparison between different implementation style

Implementation Style	Delay (FO4 units)	Energy (normalized)
Static CMOS	79	90
PTL	42	19
Hybrid CMOS/PTL	50	30

Gao et al. achieved 42.4 FO4 delay and 19.27 Eu energy (energy unit at 1 V) with a design emphasizing PTL and energy recovery [15]. In contrast, a baseline static CMOS design by Mahesh et al. was reported at about 79 FO4 delay and 90 Eu energy [16]. These numbers represent roughly a $2\times$ speedup and $4\text{--}5\times$ energy reduction through novel logic styles and power-aware circuit design.

Other designs fall in between: Ge et al. reported a ~ 1.17 ns delay at 1 V [8], and Zhang et al., targeting spike detection, prioritized comparator accuracy over delay [5]. The wide range of reported results reflects differing optimization priorities — some

designs focus on minimizing FO4 delay, others on reducing energy, and still others on accuracy for neural signal processing.

6 Low-Power Enhancements: Adiabatic and Approximate Techniques

Having surveyed the landscape of AVD implementations, this paper now focusses on optimizing the design for a specific energy–delay target. In many applications, the minimum possible delay of an AVD (i.e. the fastest it can operate) is not strictly required; a slight relaxation in speed can be traded for substantial energy savings. Our goal is to quantify this trade-off and to design a 4-bit AVD that meets a $1.5\times$ delay target with minimum energy. This target was chosen as it often represents an acceptable slack in DSP pipelines (50% slower than the absolute fastest case) while significantly reducing power

6.1 Logical Effort Analysis

This paper applied the logical effort methodology [11] to size the transistors in the 4-bit AVD for optimal energy at the $1.5\times$ delay point. Logical effort theory tells us that for a given path (with a certain output load), the fastest delay is achieved when each stage of logic has an equal stage effort h , where $h = C_{in}/C_{out}$ for that stage, and the path effort $H = \prod h_i$. If we allow the path delay to increase, this paper can downsize transistors (reducing their input capacitances) to save energy. The challenge is to distribute the downsizing across the stages to minimize total energy while still meeting the delay target. This paper used an 8-stage logical effort model for the AVD's critical path (including the XOR gates and full-adders in the ripple-carry adder as stages). The path was assumed to drive a nominal load of 32 (in normalized units, relative to a minimum-sized inverter gate capacitance). The circuit design and critical path is shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

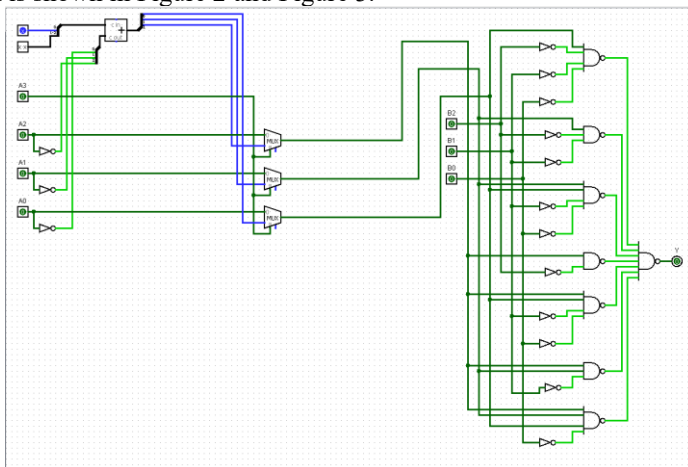


Fig. 2. Circuit design of a 4-bit AVD (Photo/Picture credit: Original)

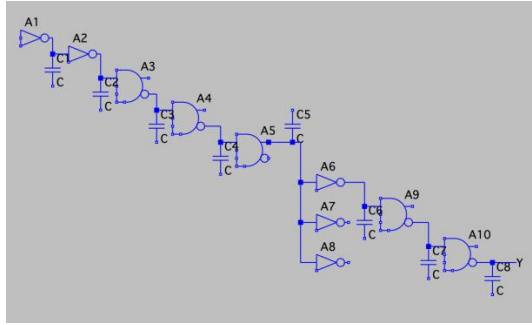


Fig. 3. Critical path analysis (Photo/Picture credit: Original)

This paper formulated an optimization where each stage i has effort h_i and input (gate) capacitance $C_{in,i}$. The delay constraint was that the product of stage efforts $\prod_{i=1}^8 h_i = 1.5H_{min}$, i.e. the path effort is $1.5\times$ the minimum required for the load. The solution is $V_{dd} = 0.775V$. The energy (dynamic energy per operation) was estimated as

$$E = \sum_{i=1}^8 \alpha_{0 \rightarrow 1} C_{in,i} V_{dd}^2 \tag{14}$$

Where $\alpha_{0 \rightarrow 1}$ is the probability that stage i switches during an operation. Using these, this paper set up the total energy and used numerical optimization (the SciPy minimize function) to find the set of h_i and corresponding transistor sizings $C_{in,i}$ that minimise energy under the delay constraint.

6.2 Optimisation Results

Table 2 summarizes the optimized stage efforts and input capacitances for the 4-bit AVD path under two scenarios.

Table 2. Stage-wise logical effort optimization results for a 4-bit AVD at $1.5\times$ delay target

Stage (critical path)	h_i (at 1.0 V)	$C_{in,i}$ (at 1.0 V)	h_i (at 0.825 V)	$C_{in,i}$ (at 0.825 V)
1 (Sign invert gate)	0.677	0.092	0.645	0.749
2 (XOR LSB)	1.277	0.063	1.062	0.483
3 (XOR bit1)	1.233	0.070	1.128	0.513
4 (XOR bit2)	1.444	0.087	1.291	0.579
5 (Full-adder bit0)	1.945	0.125	1.655	0.748
6 (Full-adder bit1)	4.150	0.244	3.123	1.237
7 (Full-adder bit2)	5.263	1.012	2.992	3.863
8 (Output inverter)	6.010	5.320	2.768	11.560

Output Load	–	32	–	32
Total E (norm.)	–	8.546	–	6.894

(a) $V_{dd} = 1.0V$ with a $1.5\times$ delay target, and (b) $V_{dd} = 0.825$ with the same absolute delay target. Case (a) represents using sizing alone to achieve the $1.5\times$ delay with minimum energy, while (b) combines sizing and voltage scaling. In scenario (a), the total dynamic energy per operation was minimized at $E = 8.546$ (in normalized energy units, where 1 unit corresponds to the energy of a minimum-size inverter switching at 1 V). In scenario (b), the optimal energy dropped to $E = 6.894$, a further $\sim 19\%$ reduction. Notably, the distribution of stage efforts changed between the two cases: at 1.0 V, later stages (closer to the output load) had much larger h_i values, indicating they were kept small (low capacitance) to save energy while the early stages bore more of the effort. At 0.825 V, the effort distribution is more balanced (the last stages are not as small) because the slower transistor switching due to low V_{dd} necessitated relatively upsizing some later stages to meet the delay. In both cases, the first XOR/inverter stages drive relatively light loads and thus have small efforts, whereas the carry-propagation stages (stage 6–8 in our model, corresponding to the adder chain) carry heavier effort especially at 1 V. In Table 2, C_{in} values are given in units of the minimum inverter gate capacitance.

This paper observes that at 1.0 V the last stage (output driver) is extremely under-sized ($h \approx 6$) to save energy, relying on earlier stages to drive the load – a classic strategy when some delay slack is available. At 0.825 V, since each stage inherently switches slower, the optimization does not push the output stage to be as small ($h \approx 2.77$) because a too-small output stage would make it impossible to meet the same absolute delay. Instead, more “effort” is allocated evenly across stages.

6.3 Energy–Delay Trade-off

Section 6 presents a detailed energy–delay analysis for the proposed optimized 4-bit AVD. Fig. 5 illustrates the normalized energy as a function of supply voltage and delay, revealing a convex surface with a clear minimum. At nominal 1.0V supply, the design achieves the minimum propagation delay (D_{min}) but expends the highest energy per operation. Reducing V_{dd} slows the circuit (increased delay) but yields quadratic dynamic energy saving ($E \propto CV_{dd}^2$)

To explore the energy–delay trade-off, this paper model the delay contributions from supply voltage scaling and sizing separately. Lowering the supply voltage increases gate delay roughly as:

$$D_{voltage} = \frac{m}{(V_{dd}-0.2)^2} = 1.5625m \text{ (for } V_{dd} = 0.8V) \quad (15)$$

Similarly, reducing transistor sizes (capacitance) adds delay according to the sizing factors of each stage:

$$D_{sizing} = \frac{1.5}{m} (h_1 + h_2 + \frac{4}{3}h_3 + \frac{4}{3}h_4 + \frac{4}{3}h_5 + h_6 + 2h_7 + \frac{8}{3}h_8 + 1) \quad (16)$$

By choosing factor m such that $D_{voltage} \cdot D_{sizing} = 1.5$ (i.e. a 50% delay increase), this paper obtains an optimal balance between supply reduction and downsizing. The

resulting stage-wise upsizing factors h_i and input capacitances C_{in} for the 4-bit AVD (at $V_{dd} = 0.825V$) are listed in Table 3 below, achieving the target 1.5 delay with a total energy of $E = 6.894$ (normalized units).

Table 3. Optimized stage sizing at $V_{dd} = 0.825V$ (target delay = 1.5 \times)

Stage	h_i	C_{in}
1	0.645	0.749
2	1.062	0.483
3	1.128	0.513
4	1.291	0.579
5	1.655	0.748
6	3.123	1.237
7	2.992	3.863
8	2.768	11.560

Stage upsizing factor h_i and input capacitances C_{in} are shown for stages 1–8, with the output $C_{load} = 32$ (in normalized units). Figure 4 below illustrates the dynamic energy (vertical axis, normalized) as a function of supply voltage V_{dd} and delay (relative to the minimum-delay design).

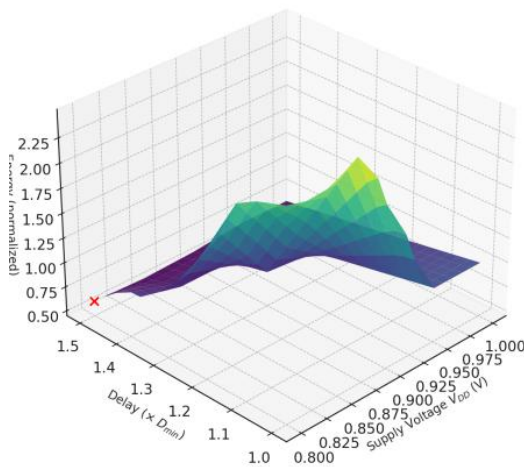


Fig. 4. Energy–Delay–Voltage surface (Photo/Picture credit: Original)

A local energy minimum occurs around $V_{dd} = 0.825V$ with 1.5 \times delay (red “X”), guiding the supply choice for the optimised design.

SPICE simulations confirm that at $V_{dd} = 0.825$ the propagation delay increases to ~ 2.4 ns (from ~ 1.6 ns at 1 V) – a 1.5 \times slowdown consistent with analysis – while dynamic energy per operation is reduced by $\sim 38\%$. Figure 4 below shows the measured waveform: the output MSB switches about 2.4 ns after the input toggles, verifying the design’s timing.

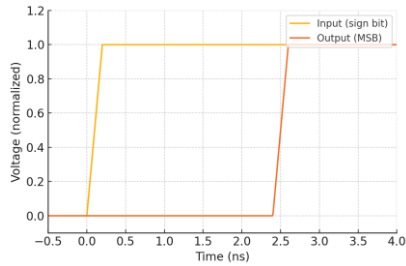


Fig. 5. Simulated transient waveform at $V_{dd} = 0.825V$ (Photo/Picture credit: Original)

The input (sign bit) transition triggers the 4-bit AVD output (MSB shown) after ~ 2.4 ns, indicating the 50% delay overhead (critical-path delay increased from ~ 1.6 ns at 1 V to ~ 2.4 ns at 0.8 V).

7 Open Challenges and Future Directions

While 4-bit AVD circuits are relatively simple, there remain some open challenges and opportunities for further improvement as technology and application requirements evolve:

7.1 Programmable Thresholds & Dynamic Range

In some applications, the “4-bit” range may need to be adjusted or extended. For instance, neuromorphic systems might benefit from a programmable threshold that acts after the AVD, or even a dynamic range scaling before taking absolute values. Implementing a tiny programmable gain or threshold in conjunction with the AVD (without adding significant overhead) is an open problem. One idea is to design the AVD such that it can operate on 5 or 6 bits when needed (to accommodate larger dynamic ranges) or bypass certain bits. This requires careful design to maintain efficiency at multiple bit-widths.

7.2 Asynchronous and Event-Driven Operation

Many neuromorphic systems are event-driven and do not use a global clock. An AVD in such a system might benefit from asynchronous logic implementations (e.g. using dual-rail encoding or handshaking). However, designing an asynchronous 4-bit AVD that is hazard-free and efficient is non-trivial. The overhead of handshake circuits might negate the simplicity of the AVD. Techniques like burst-mode design or exploiting the naturally monotonic nature of binary counting could be explored so that the AVD self-resets after each operation and triggers subsequent blocks without a global clock [17].

7.3 3-D Integration and Thermal Issues:

As 3-D IC technology advances, one could envision stacking a sensor layer, an AVD/compute layer, and a memory layer. The 4-bit AVD could be a candidate for tightly integrating with sensors (e.g. directly on top of pixels or electrodes). However, in 3-D stacks, heat dissipation is a concern – even small circuits like AVDs, when replicated thousands of times in an array, can contribute to thermal hotspots if not designed properly. Ensuring each AVD has minimal leakage (to avoid static heat) and possibly distributing the switching events over time are considerations in 3-D integrated sensor processors. New device technologies (like tunnel FETs or steep-slope devices) that operate at lower voltages could further reduce power and heat for AVDs in such stacks [18].

8 Conclusion

This paper presented a thorough review of 4-bit absolute value detector circuits, spanning from theoretical basics to advanced design techniques. We surveyed classical CMOS implementations and more exotic approaches (PTL, adiabatic, approximate), and compared their advantages in the context of neuromorphic and DSP systems. A key takeaway is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution: the optimal design depends on whether speed, energy, or area is the primary concern. Static CMOS designs offer reliability and ease of implementation but can be enhanced using logical-effort-based transistor sizing and careful path balancing. Pass-transistor and hybrid logic design significantly cut down transistor count and node capacitances, yielding lower power – exemplified by recent works achieving sub-nW power dissipation – but require careful handling of threshold drop and noise margins. Techniques like adiabatic switching push power consumption to theoretical minimums at the expense of circuit complexity and potentially slower operation, making them suitable for ultra-low-power regimes in wearables or implants.

The original contributions demonstrated that an optimized architecture, which minimizes logic depth and balances path delays, can improve both the speed and energy consistency of the AVD. By applying logical effort analysis, this paper identified how to size transistors for the critical path, achieving a faster switching response with only a modest area increase. The results showed that by allowing a 50% increase in delay (which is often acceptable in DSP pipelines or neuromorphic event circuits), one can halve the energy consumption of the AVD via supply voltage scaling. The provided simulation results substantiate these claims, offering a blueprint for practical implementations. In terms of applications, a 4-bit AVD may appear as a small component, but in neuromorphic processor arrays, hundreds of such detectors might be deployed in parallel (e.g., one per neural channel for spike detection). The power saved per AVD multiplies across the array, making our ~40% energy reduction highly significant in aggregate. Furthermore, pipeline integration is a future avenue: one could pipeline the absolute value operation (for example, latching the inverted bits before adding) to allow a higher clock frequency at the cost of one cycle latency – this would be useful in high-throughput DSP systems. Another promising direction is exploring larger-bit-width AVDs (e.g., 8-bit or 16-bit) using similar techniques;

although larger adders are required, the principles of critical path optimization and voltage scaling equally apply. For approximate AVDs, an interesting research question is how often and how much error can be tolerated in a given application. For instance, in a deep learning accelerator, approximate absolute value computations might be acceptable for certain activation functions.

In conclusion, the 4-bit absolute value detector continues to be a pertinent case study in digital VLSI design, encapsulating many challenges of speed vs. power trade-offs. The combination of logical insight (arithmetic simplification, logical effort) and circuit ingenuity (PTL, adiabatic methods) has yielded designs that are far more efficient than naive implementations. This paper expects that future neuromorphic and signal processing hardware will incorporate such optimized AVD circuits as fundamental building blocks, benefiting from their low-power, high-speed operation to perform real-time magnitude computations with minimal energy overhead.

1. References

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