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Advanced Instrumentation Lectures: PCB Design with KiCad

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Laboratory / Caltech Optical
Observatories

Outline



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Session 1

- **Recap on PCB basics**
- **Intro to KiCad**
- **Comparison of KiCad to other programs**
- **Quirks / drawbacks to be aware of in KiCad**
- **KiCad workflow options – symbols, footprints etc**
- **Component suppliers & BOM considerations**
 - **RS, Farnell, Mouser, Digikey**
 - **Octopart**
- **PCB Manufacturing Houses**
 - **Newbury/PCBTrain (UK)**
 - **The “boutique” shops (UK)**
 - **China: example Seedstudio Fusion**
- **KiCad install & Schematic Editor demo**

Session 2

- **KiCad Schematic Editor demo (continued, with SPICE)**
- **KiCad PCB Editor demo (routing, netclasses)**
- **Exporting for Manufacture (gerbers, BOM)**
- **Exporting for mechanical CAD**

PCB Basics recap



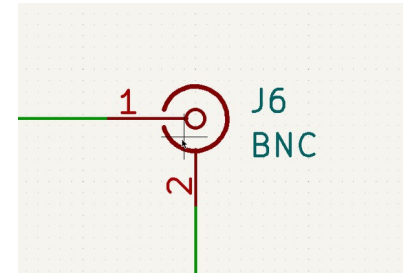
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Talk by Sneha Naik earlier in this series:

<https://indico.cern.ch/event/1401451/contributions/5891103/>

Make sure you know the basics of the following words (ask if any are unclear):

Schematic, Board artwork, Symbol, Footprint, Layer, ERC, DRC, BOM



Copper

- Minimum clearance: 0 mm
- Minimum track width: 0.125 mm
- Minimum annular width: 0.05 mm
- Minimum via diameter: 0.4 mm
- Copper to hole clearance: 0.25 mm
- Copper to edge clearance: 0.025 mm

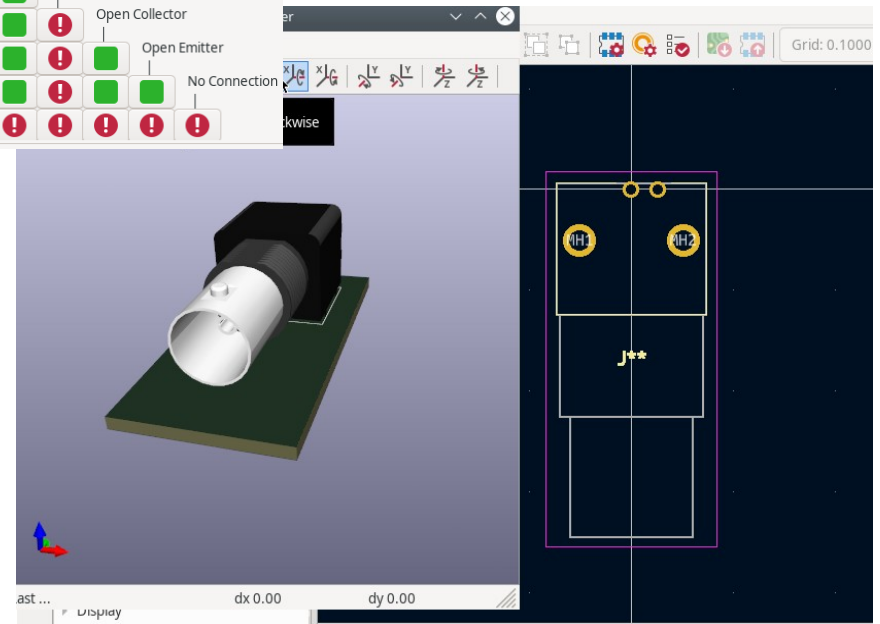
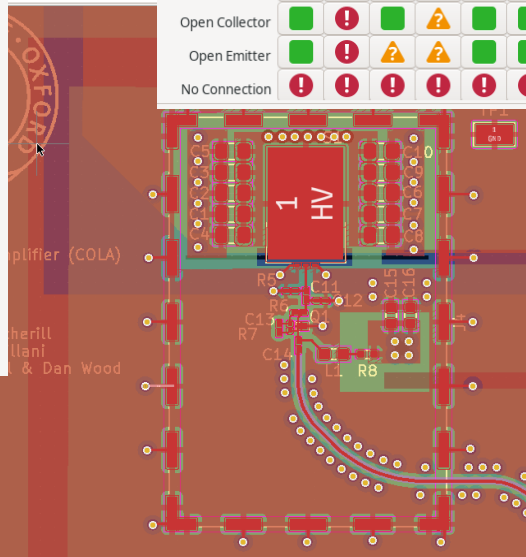
Holes

- Minimum through hole: 0.3 mm
- Hole to hole clearance: 0.25 mm

uVias

- Minimum uVia diameter: 0.2 mm

Input Pin	Output Pin	Bidirectional Pin	Tri-State Pin	Passive Pin	Free Pin	Unspecified Pin	Power Input Pin	Power Output Pin	Open Collector	Open Emitter	No Connection



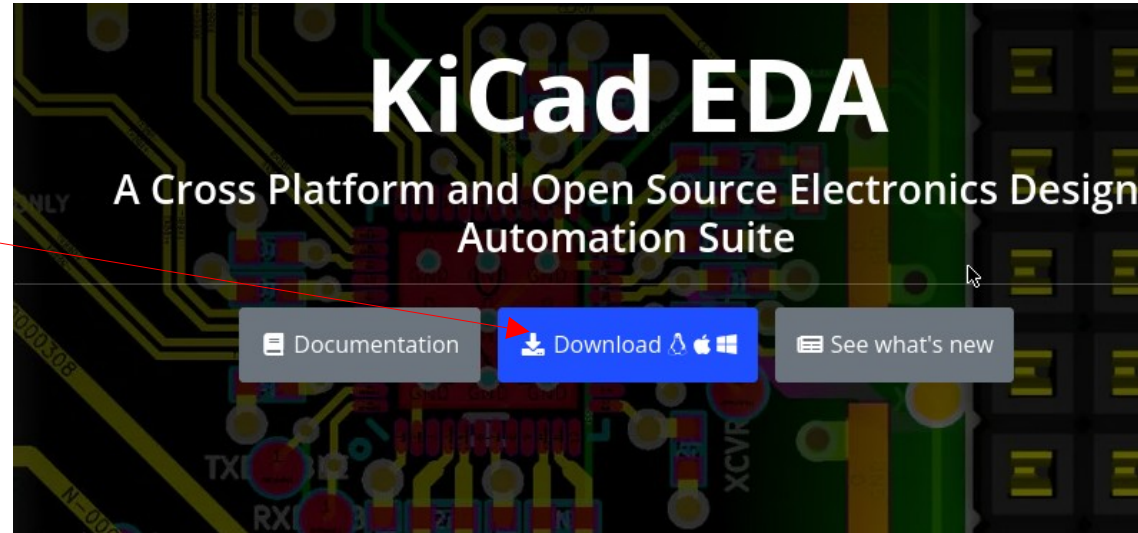
Intro to KiCad

Get kiCAD here (we're using version 10)

<https://www.kicad.org/>

Good place to get help on KiCAD usage:

<https://forum.kicad.info/>



KiCad (pronounced “key-CAD” by original authors) began development in 1992 (!!)

by Jean-Pierre Charras. Since ~2015 managed by Wayne Stambaugh + a team of developers (including at CERN). It is open source and you can contribute fixes & code.

Probably the best known, supported and widely used free, open source PCB design software.

Please try and download and install now if you Haven't already

CERN contribution:

<https://ohwr.org/project/cern-kicad/wikis/home>



Other Programs vs KiCad



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Very popular, free version available. Similar in features to KiCad (more advanced in some ways). Widely supported

See also: diptrace, designspark

But: every new version since Autodesk takeover gets more “locked down”. Free version limited in layer count & board size. Kicad can (quite well) import Eagle projects

Much more advanced “professional level” features that Kicad lacks (controlled impedance, stackup management, integrated parts database etc etc). Very good interface but with some learning curve.

Nb – I’m back to using Altium nearly daily at COO now. Whilst it’s still got a lot that Kicad lacks, I find myself occasionally now missing features from Kicad in Altium!



Recommend starting with a simpler tool (like KiCad) to design some simple boards and perhaps pick up something like Altium later. Kicad can import Altium projects pretty well as of version 9, with some (fairly major) limitations

See also: OrCAD / Cadence Allegro, Mentor Graphics (PADS)

Interoperability



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From mechanical CAD, you may be familiar with STEP / IGES, which allow (reasonable) interchange of designs between programs & for manufacturers. You need to be (vaguely) aware of some of this as it may affect exchanging designs with colleagues & fabrication houses.

For PCB design, the story is not quite as good. Good news is, it used to be much worse. Kicad has improved drastically in this area in the last few years. There is no good “schematic + PCB” export but there are some options:

- **Gerber “RS-274X/X2”** – the standard format that you will send to most board houses. Exports PCB artwork so it can be manufactured, but doesn’t really know anything about the circuit connectivity (no schematic information). **NB some board houses not accepting “plain” Gerber anymore!**
- **ODB++** - many “pro” level CAD programs support this and can exchange designs between them. **Since version 9, Kicad supports ODB++ output! I have now tested it with fabricated boards!**
- **IPC-2581** – “next generation” export format, which (may) eventually replace Gerber. **Since version 8 KiCAD can export AND import this!!**
- **IPC-D-356A** – this is a netlist (rather than PCB artwork) format. Some board houses that do electrical test want it, KiCad **can export this**
- **Gerber “X3”** – the latest Gerber spec includes information similar to IPC-2581. Kicad **fully supports Gerber X3** . Sadly, most other programs do not, as it has not gained as much popularity as IPC-2581.
- Some board fabrication houses (e.g. in China) accept KiCad project files directly! However, most of them don’t yet accept version 6.0/7.0/8.0/9.0/10.0 (only version 5.0), so ideally **steer clear of this!**

Interoperability #2



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~~(My personal recommendation)~~

~~As of version 8,~~

~~IPC-2581 export means KiCad can interoperate with most other modern fab houses and software! This should be your first choice, if you need something other than Gerber X2~~

~~Update for 2025:~~

~~As of version 9, Kicad has ODB++ export facilities. If you can't use Gerber X2, and you also can't use IPC-2581 which is an open standard, use ODB++.~~

~~NB I haven't had a chance to have a board made using kicad's ODB++ facilities yet so I can't personally vouch for their accuracy~~

Update for 2026: This is no longer an issue at all, even for board houses that only accept ODB++. Kicad 10 can export everything you'd want outside of truly esoteric scenarios.

Things to beware of in KiCad



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- **Not much physical layer stackup Awareness**
Actually, KiCad (6+) does have layer stackup! And it can be included in basic constraints. BUT, not very good support yet for automatic controlled impedance traces (they can be done manually with some effort though, and is). A nice plugin implements (approximate) parasitic impedance calculation for traces. **Kicad 10 update:**
- **Have to choose a library workflow**
Disagreements in community about whether to use “atomic” or “default” type parts (see later). Have to be careful with either choice (can mix & match to some extent)
- **Backward/Forward Compatibility Issues**
Old versions of KiCad cannot open newer file versions. But new versions can import and migrate old projects very well
- **Some functionality needs plug-ins**
Many of the really useful and advanced stuff is in community plugins. Over time more has moved into core (e.g. curved traces are now built in, but things like RF via stitching are still done through a plugin)
- **Included “standard” libraries are often not very good**
~~The built in standard part library only includes a weird and narrow selection and KiCAD is not as good as Eagle or Altium when it comes to getting new parts.~~ **Update for 2026: CERN just released their internal Kicad library of >17000 parts, many of which are relevant for detector related stuff! I am still exploring it but already found many parts I wanted.**

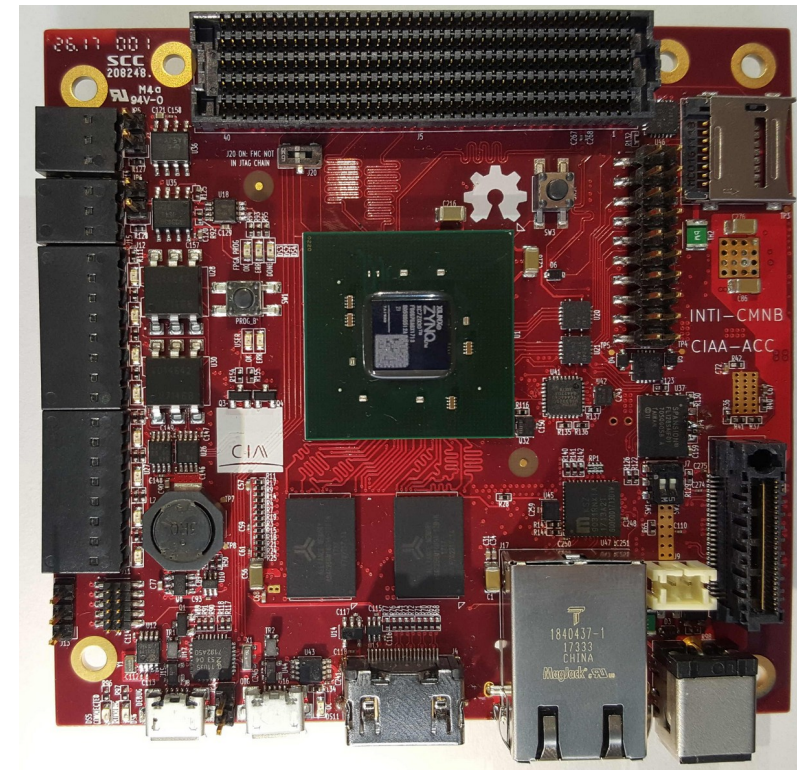
...And the Good News!



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- **Huge community of users** – lots of people on the forums, IRC, around and about use this software
- **Open Source, no limits on “free” version** – no limits on board size, layers etc etc
- **Usable on “real” designs and in industry** – though it is a bit more limited than e.g. Altium, make no mistake KiCad is a professional grade tool
- **Text based file formats** – compatible with git version control! (And visual diff tools available, so merging is possible!)
- **Scriptable** – you can write plugins and processing tools in the python language to do custom features in KiCad. Many very useful plugins out there
- **pretty good (manual) routing experience**- advanced push’n’shove and other modern routing techniques are very well implemented and very usable. Better IMO than Eagle or Diptrace
- **No built-in autorouter** – autorouters almost ALWAYS get everything wrong anyway. An external autorouter (FreeRouting) is available if you really want it **2026 update: easy to install via plugin**

(right) – CIAA-ACC 12 layer board with Xilinx 7000 Series SOC and kintex-7 FPGA. Running at GHz speed, A “very serious” design” done in KiCad!



KiCad Part workflow options



Kicad has no “built in” concept of a **part** (i.e. **footprint + symbol**). You can associate any schematic symbol with any footprint! This can be useful for quick designs and parts available in alternate footprints but **it is easy to make very bad errors which ERC will not save you from!**

Many serious people refuse to use KiCad for this exact reason (same applies to Eagle and, especially, DipTrace). Personally I don't mind it but have fallen prey to a pinout error a couple of times over the years!

Luckily, if you want to use **atomic parts**, KiCad can support this! Tools such as componentsearchengine (see later) let you download parts in kind of atomic format

Atomic parts

Every different part (including different footprints of the same part), has a separate symbol & footprint in your KiCad library. Each symbol is associated to one (and ONLY one) footprint.

Pro: it's very hard to make a very silly pinout mismatch error

Con: maintaining this parts library is a HUGE amount of work. Gets staggeringly annoying for “jewellery” like caps & resistors

KiCad default

Each symbol in the schematic must be manually associated with a footprint when you design the board (but usually they have a default)

Pro: much quicker to get up and running, easier and more flexible to alter designs later

Con: you MUST DOUBLE CHECK FOOTPRINT ASSOCIATION VERY VERY CAREFULLY

Buying Components - UK



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Sorting out the BOM is (usually) actually the most tedious part of a PCB Design project!

My personal recommendation – start with Farnell! (<https://uk.farnell.com/>)
Good search interface, wide selection, reasonable price.

The screenshot shows the Farnell website search results for the part number 'tl081'. The search bar at the top contains 'tl081' and a search icon. Below the search bar, there are navigation links for 'All Products', 'Manufacturers', 'Resources', and 'Communities'. The search results are displayed in a table with columns for Manufacturer Part No, Order Code, Description / Manufacturer, Availability, Price For, Price (ex VAT), Quantity, No. of Amplifiers, Bandwidth, Slew Rate, Supply Voltage Range, Amplifier Case Style, and No. of Pins. Three results are shown: TL081ID (Operational Amplifier, 1 Amplifier, 3 MHz, 13 V/μs, 7V to 36V, SOIC, 8 Pins), TL081CP (Operational Amplifier, 1 Amplifier, 4 MHz, 13 V/μs, 7V to 36V, DIP, 8 Pins), and TL081CD (Operational Amplifier, Single, 1 Amplifier, 3 MHz, 13 V/μs, 7V to 36V, SOIC, 8 Pins). The first result is in stock, while the others are available for back order.

Manufacturer Part No	Order Code	Description / Manufacturer	Availability	Price For	Price (ex VAT)	Quantity	No. of Amplifiers	Bandwidth	Slew Rate	Supply Voltage Range	Amplifier Case Style	No. of Pins
TL081ID	3005131	Operational Amplifier, 1 Amplifier, 3 MHz, 13 V/μs, 7V to 36V, SOIC, 8 Pins TEXAS INSTRUMENTS	In stock	Each	1+ £1.08 10+ £0.933 50+ £0.757 100+ £0.733 250+ £0.708	1	1 Amplifier	3MHz	13V/μs	7V to 36V	SOIC	8Pins
TL081CP	3117808	Operational Amplifier, 1 Amplifier, 4 MHz, 13 V/μs, 7V to 36V, DIP, 8 Pins TEXAS INSTRUMENTS	Available for back order. More stock available week commencing 29/05/23	Each	1+ £0.563 10+ £0.496 100+ £0.352 500+ £0.299 1000+ £0.24	1	1 Amplifier	4MHz	13V/μs	7V to 36V	DIP	8Pins
TL081CD	3117806	Operational Amplifier, Single, 1 Amplifier, 3 MHz, 13 V/μs, 7V to 36V, SOIC, 8 Pins TEXAS INSTRUMENTS	Available for back order. More stock available week commencing 29/05/23	Each	1+ £1.45	1	1 Amplifier	3MHz	13V/μs	7V to 36V	SOIC	8Pins

If a part is not on Farnell, it is likely on Mouser (www.mouser.co.uk) or digikey (www.digikey.co.uk). In some circumstances, it might be on RS (<https://uk.rs-online.com/web/>)

2026 note: I'm now in the US so my knowledge of UK suppliers is a bit out of date. If you are in the US, Mouser and digikey are also good. Farnell is a joke over here, buh.

STRONG RECOMMENDATION: include both MPN (“manufacturer part number”) and the order code for a particular supplier in your schematic. Then, stock issues can be more easily sorted out via OctoPart or by the board assembly house

Octopart



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Always put a manufacturer part number (MPN) in your schematic data!
You can use the tool www.octopart.com to find this part on many different suppliers, and sometimes to obtain CAD data downloads.

The screenshot shows the KiCad PCB Editor interface. The main window displays a schematic diagram of an OPA858 op-amp circuit. The op-amp is labeled U15. It is configured with a feedback network consisting of a resistor R72 (10k) and a capacitor C56 (100nF). The output is labeled OUT. The schematic also shows a capacitor C58 connected to the non-inverting input. The properties dialog box for the OPA858 component is open, showing the MPN field set to OPA858IDSGR.

Name	Value	Show	H Align	V Align	Italic	Bol
Footprint	SPIRIT:WSON-8-1EP_2x2mm_P0.5mm_EP0.9x1.6mm	<input type="checkbox"/>	Left	Center	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Datasheet	http://www.ti.com/product/OPA858?utm_source=google&	<input type="checkbox"/>	Center	Center	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
mouser	595-OPA858IDSGT	<input type="checkbox"/>	Center	Center	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
MPN	OPA858IDSGR	<input type="checkbox"/>	Center	Center	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

General

Unit:

Alternate symbol (De Morgan)

Angle:

Mirror:

Pin Text

Show pin numbers

Show pin names

Attributes

Exclude from bill of materials

Exclude from board

Update Symbol from

Change Symt

Edit Symbo

Edit Library Syr

Octopart



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Octopart Categories OPA858 API BOM Tool F

All Parts (6)

Amplifiers - Op Amps, Buffer, Instrumentation 6

Distributor Manufacturer Lifecycle Status CAD Models Number of Pins Input Offset Voltage (Vos) Min Supply Voltage Max Supply Voltage + Add More Filters

Prices Specs Currency: GBP Sort: Relevance Availability: All 6 results | Distributor links are sponsored

OPA858IDSGT - Purchase at the lowest online price* on TI.com ti.com

Texas Instruments OPA858IDSGR GBP 2.848 + Add to BOM Datasheet at TI.com 3 CAD Models
Volt Feedback Amp Single 2000V/us 3.3V to 5.25V 8-Pin WSON T/R

Distributor	SKU	Stock	MOQ	Pkg		1	10	100	1,000	10,000	Updated
★ Arrow Electronics	OPA858IDSGR	1,096	1	Cut Tape	GBP *	5.670	5.053	3.998	2.865	2.865	<1m
★ Texas Instruments	OPA858IDSGR	3,000	1	Cut Tape	GBP *	3.380	3.380	2.755	1.837	1.837	<1m
★ Mouser	595-OPA858IDSGR	3,755	1	Tape & Reel	GBP	5.180	4.650	3.810	2.840	2.830	<1m
★ Digi-Key	296-OPA858IDSGRCT-ND	3,781	1	Cut Tape	GBP	5.320	4.780	3.916	3.316	3.316	<1m
★ Verical	OPA858IDSGR	1,096	3		GBP *		5.053	3.998	2.865	2.865	<1m

Show All Specs Descriptions Manufacturer Page Reference Designs

There are various BOM tools and plugins available for KiCAD that can find supplier part numbers and price a BOM from the MPNs in your schematic.

Component Search Engine




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<https://componentsearchengine.com>

Very useful tool to obtain
(mostly basic but usable)
Footprints, symbols and 3D
models of parts that are not in
KiCad's built in libraries
(which is very often!)

Search by keywords, technical specifications or part number Search

[← back to results](#)



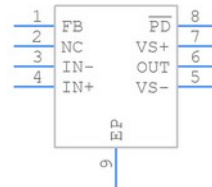
OPA858IDSGR - Texas Instruments

Description: 5.5 GHz Gain Bandwidth Product, Decompensated Transimpedance Amplifier with FET Input

[Download ECAD Model](#) [Schematic symbols](#) [PCB footprints](#) [3D models](#)

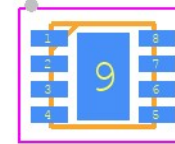
Alert me if there are changes to this model
Email notifications will be applied after download.

Symbol



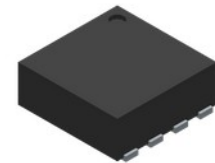
[click to zoom](#)

PCB Footprints



[click to zoom](#)

3D Models



[click to zoom](#)

Manufacturing a PCB in the UK



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Reasonably priced, fast turnaround available, online quotes that are pretty good: <https://www.pcbtrain.co.uk> (a.k.a Newbury Electronics). Can do fabrication and assembly, upload your design and BOM details and get a quote in your inbox in a couple of minutes

Product Family: 1 layer 2 layer **4 layer** 6 layer 8 layer 10 layer 12 layer Express laser stencil service Stainless Steel

Service: Standard Express

Copper Weight: (Finish Microns) 35 70

Material: FR4 (150 deg C) middle Tg

Thickness: 0.8mm 1.2mm **1.6mm** 2.4mm 3.2mm

Finish: IS **ENIG**

Circuit Size X x Y*: 100 X 100 mm

Solder Resist: Green Red **Blue** Black White

Legend: White **Yellow**

RESET NEXT STEP

YOUR ORDER DETAILS

Product Name: 4 layer FR4 (150 deg C) middle Tg 1.6mm ENIG Blue White

Supply in panels: No

Product Family:	4 layer	Copper Weight:	35
Material:	FR4 (150 deg C) middle Tg	Thickness:	1.6 mm
Circuit Size X:	100 mm	Circuit Size Y:	100 mm
Legend:	White	Solder Resist:	Blue
Service:	Standard	Finish:	ENIG
Quantity:	1		

Price in GBP, exclusive of carriage

W/Days	1 Qty	2 Qty	3 Qty	4 Qty
4	£ 425.55	£ 476.88	£ 528.21	£ 579.52
5	£ 312.71	£ 357.28	£ 401.85	£ 446.44
7	£ 278.44	£ 317.62	£ 356.79	£ 395.96
10	£ 227.04	£ 258.10	£ 289.17	£ 320.24
15	£ 184.21	£ 208.52	£ 232.83	£ 257.16

Manufacturing a PCB in the UK



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A range of more expensive & boutique manufacturers who can do more custom things and guarantee to verified IPC quality levels, including electrical test etc.

Careful, these get very expensive very fast.



Word of warning: **express circuits**, whilst a very good manufacturer (in my experience), now **REQUIRES** your data in non-gerber format, and as such right now it is **hard, though not impossible** to directly send them designs from KiCad.

This will improve within a few months hopefully.



Recommendation for “boutique” manufacturer: Cambridge Circuit Company.

Cost typically ~2-3x as much as Newbury

Manufacturing from China



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Chinese “prototype” level manufacturers, including e.g. JLPCB and OSHPark should **not be discounted**. The manufacturing quality is typically very high, and cost much lower than UK manufacturers. Shipping is generally not that bad either. **However**, be prepared for them to manufacture **exactly** what you send them, mistakes and all!

You will not get an email saying “are you really sure you want this”?

Example: my personal favourite based on experience, SeeedStudio fusion (<http://www.seeedstudio.com/pcb-assembly.html>)

(Right: ~same spec as Newbury/PCBTrain)

Newbury: 10 off in 10 w/days £506.60

Seeedstudio: 10 off in 7 w/days (then shipping):
\$130 ~ £103 (+ shipping)

2026 recommendation: Aivon PCB (www.aivon.com). Excellent online quote tools, excellent customer service and rapid turnaround, price very good

PCB Cost	USD\$129.90
Base Material	FR-4 TG130
No. of Layers	4 layers
PCB Dimensions	100mm * 100mm
PCB Quantity	10
No. of Different Designs	1
PCB Thickness	1.60mm
PCB Color	Blue
Surface Finish	ENIG
Minimum Solder Mask Dam	0.1mm↑
Copper Weight	1oz.
Inner Copper	0.5oz.
Minimum Drill Hole Size	0.3mm
Trace Width / Spacing	6/6 mil
Plated Half-holes / Castellated Holes	No
Impedance Control	No
Sub-Total	USD\$129.90
Production Time ⓘ	5 ~ 7 Working Days
Weight	0.32kg
Shipping	Calculated at Checkout

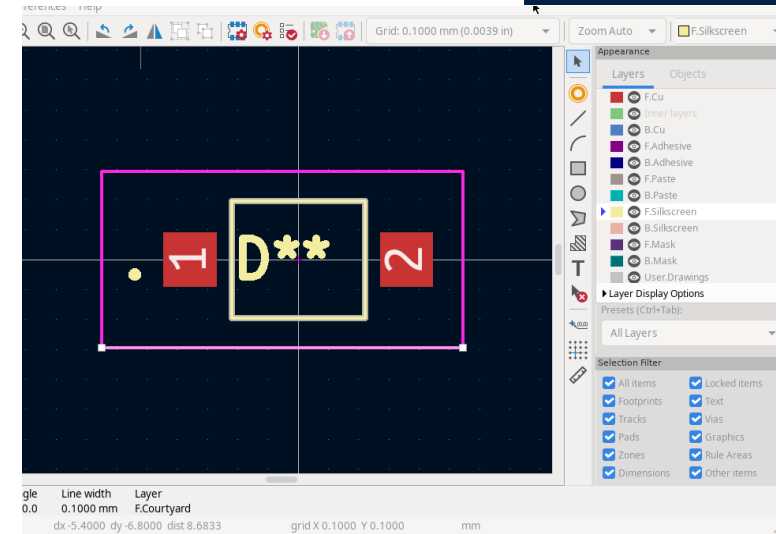
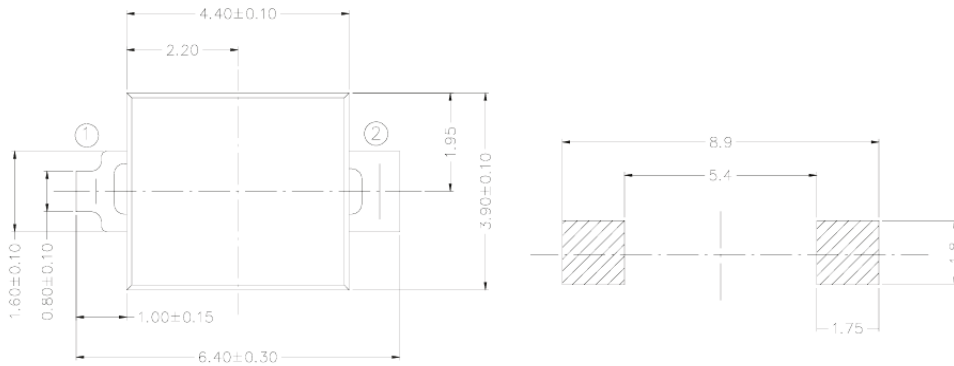
Add to Cart

KiCad part creation example

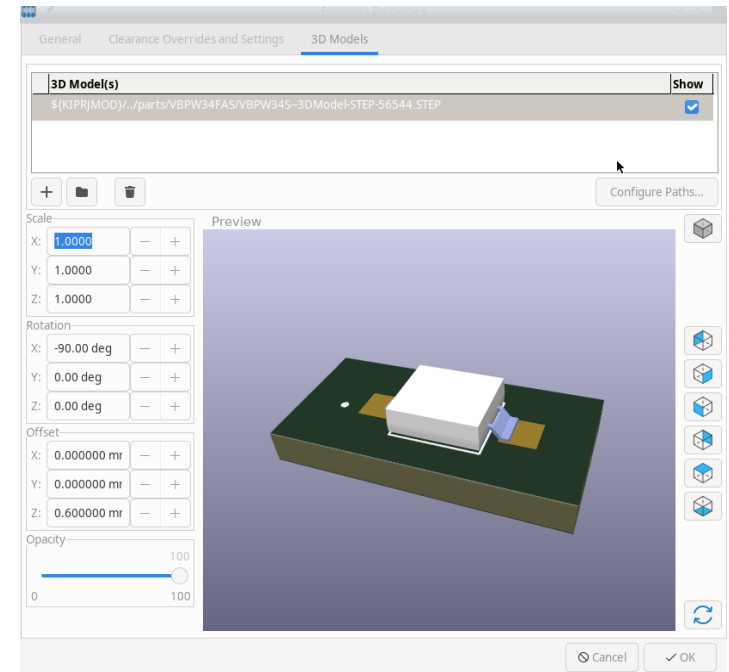


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Drawing & Land pattern from datasheet (VBPW34FAS)



Above right:
Draw (or download) footprint and CHECK against datasheet



Below Right:
Download (or draw!!!) 3D model for MCAD integration

Below:
Use “generic” symbol,
And associate MPN,
Footprint and BOM data in schematic

Schematic symbol for a photodiode (D1) and its associated BOM data table. The symbol is a red triangle with a vertical line through it, labeled 'D1', 'VBPW34FAS', and '782-VBPW34FAS'. The BOM data table is as follows:

Name	Value	Show
Reference	D1	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Value	VBPW34FAS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Footprint	cosmic_ray_detector_lib:VBPW34FAS	<input type="checkbox"/>
Datasheet	https://componentsearchengine.com/Datasheet	<input type="checkbox"/>
Description	PIN Photodiode 780-1050nm SMD2 GW Vishay	<input type="checkbox"/>
Height	1.4	<input type="checkbox"/>
Manufacturer_Name	Vishay	<input type="checkbox"/>
MPN	VBPW34FAS	<input type="checkbox"/>
Farnell	1779701	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mouser	782-VBPW34FAS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Kicad Schematic Tips



This applies not just to KiCad but schematic drawing for “real” PCBs in general.

- A schematic for an actual, real PCB that will be built is quite different from the “conceptual” schematic you jot down on paper or see in a textbook. The “little details” are important
- Any reasonably sized schematic doesn’t nicely fit on one page, and though it’s personal preference I like my schematic pages to not be crowded.
- KiCad supports multi sheet design in two ways: **flat** multi-page designs with global labels, and **hierarchical** designs with hierarchical labels. I prefer this latter and again that’s personal preference but for the purposes of today this is how we will look at it.
- Associate as much data with the schematic before layout as possible, this includes: footprints, BOM data, datasheets and netclasses.
- Just like writing a computer program, put **text** comments on your schematic to indicate intent.
- Make sure to **label** important nets with useful names so you can easily see them whilst in layout

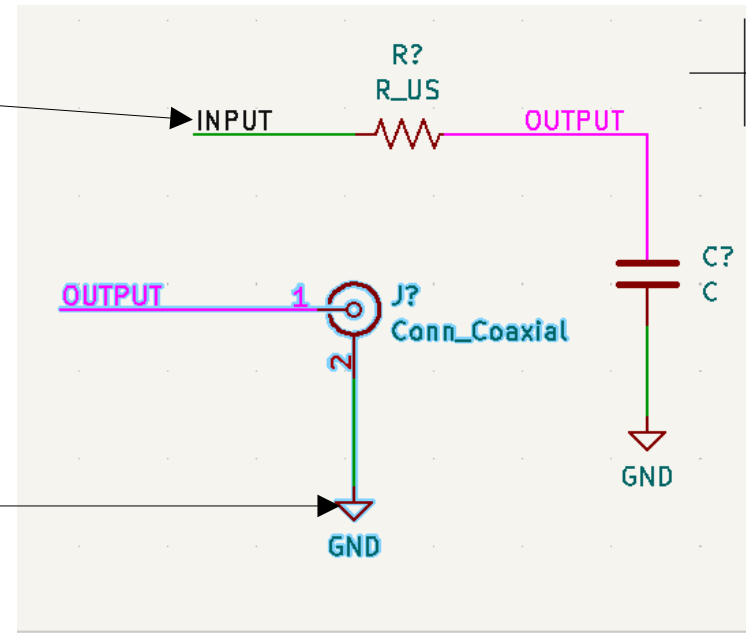
Schematic Labels

Normal labels: the two nets labelled "OUTPUT" are **electrically connected**

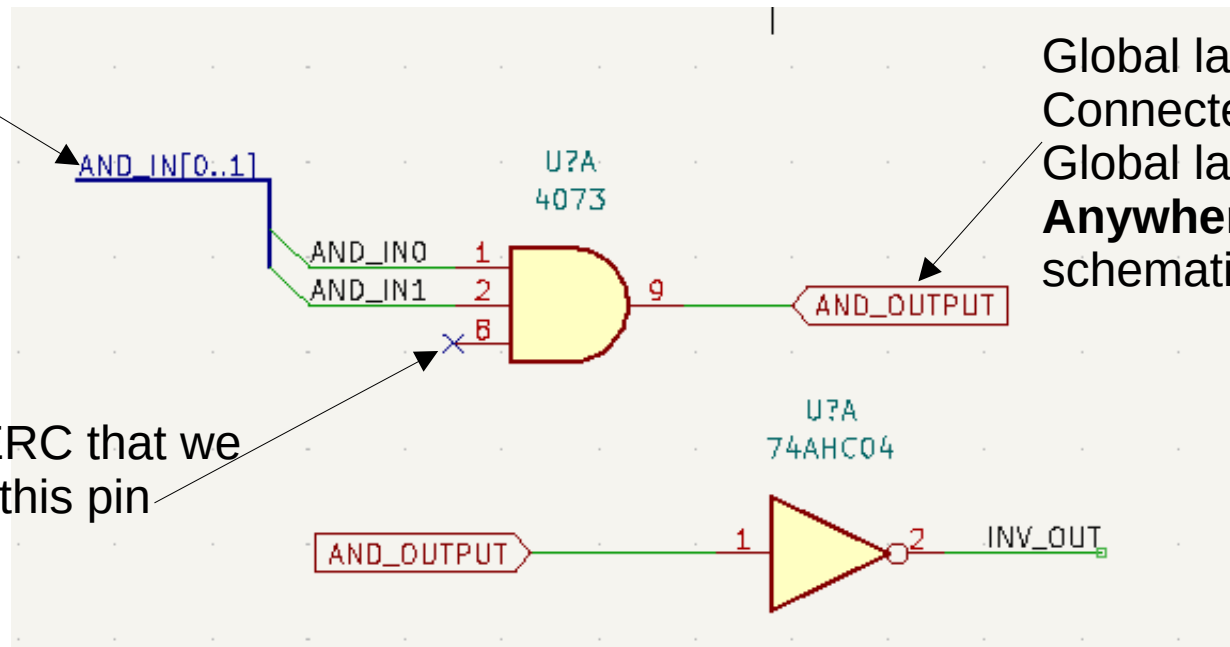
(this is common in most modern PCB Software, simplifies schematic spaghetti).

But, ONLY if they are on the same sheet!

ALL power symbols (e.g. "GND") with The same name are connected **globally** Throughout the schematic.



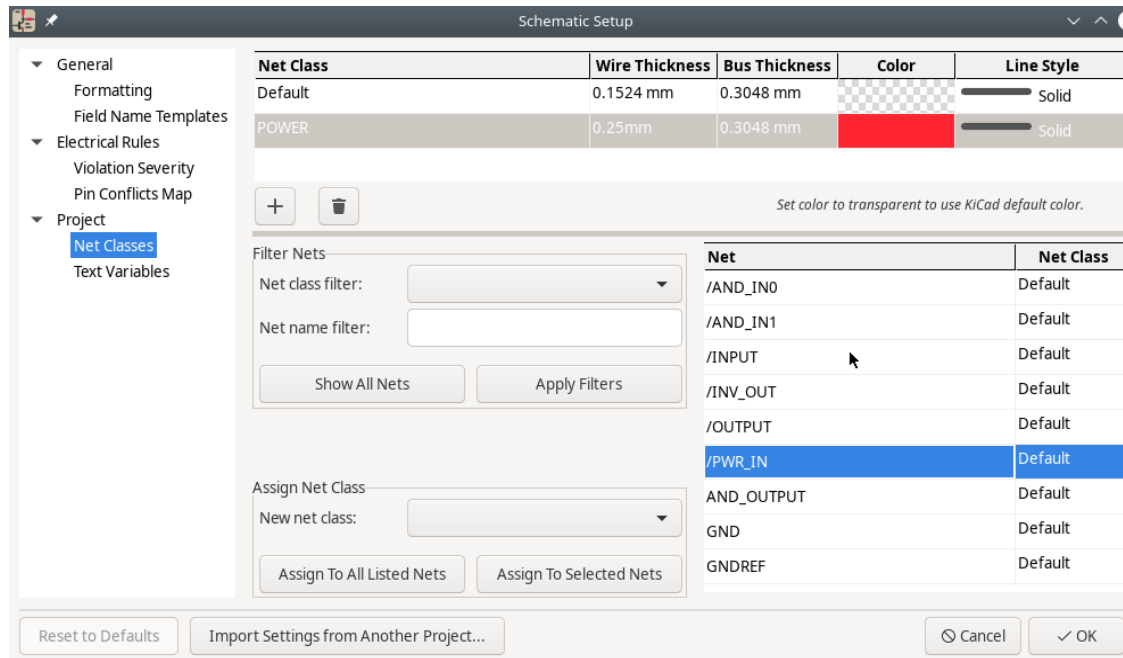
Buses – groups of similar signals



Global labels - Connected to Global labels of same name **Anywhere** in a multi-page schematic`

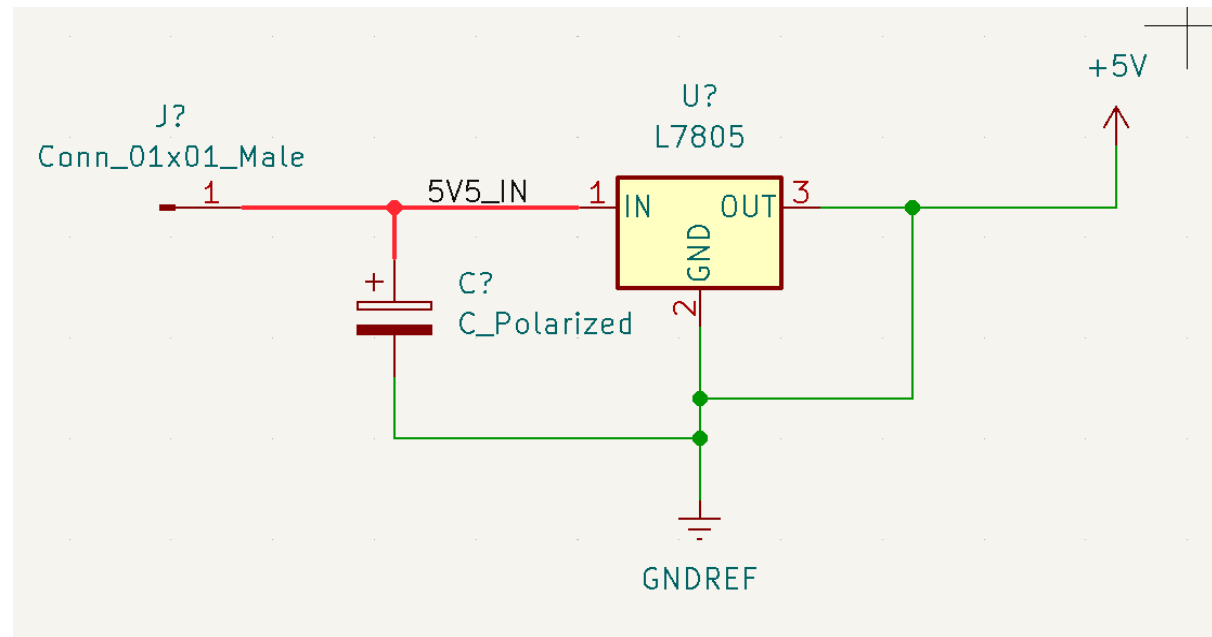
NC symbol - Indicates to the ERC that we Will not be using this pin

Netclasses



Netclasses are just “types” of net, that we might want later for PCB routing purposes (e.g. to make all power input nets have thicker and more separated traces). We set them up in the “Schematic Setup” dialog

Right: We have assigned the “5V5_IN” net to the POWER netclass, this gets transferred to the PCB routing



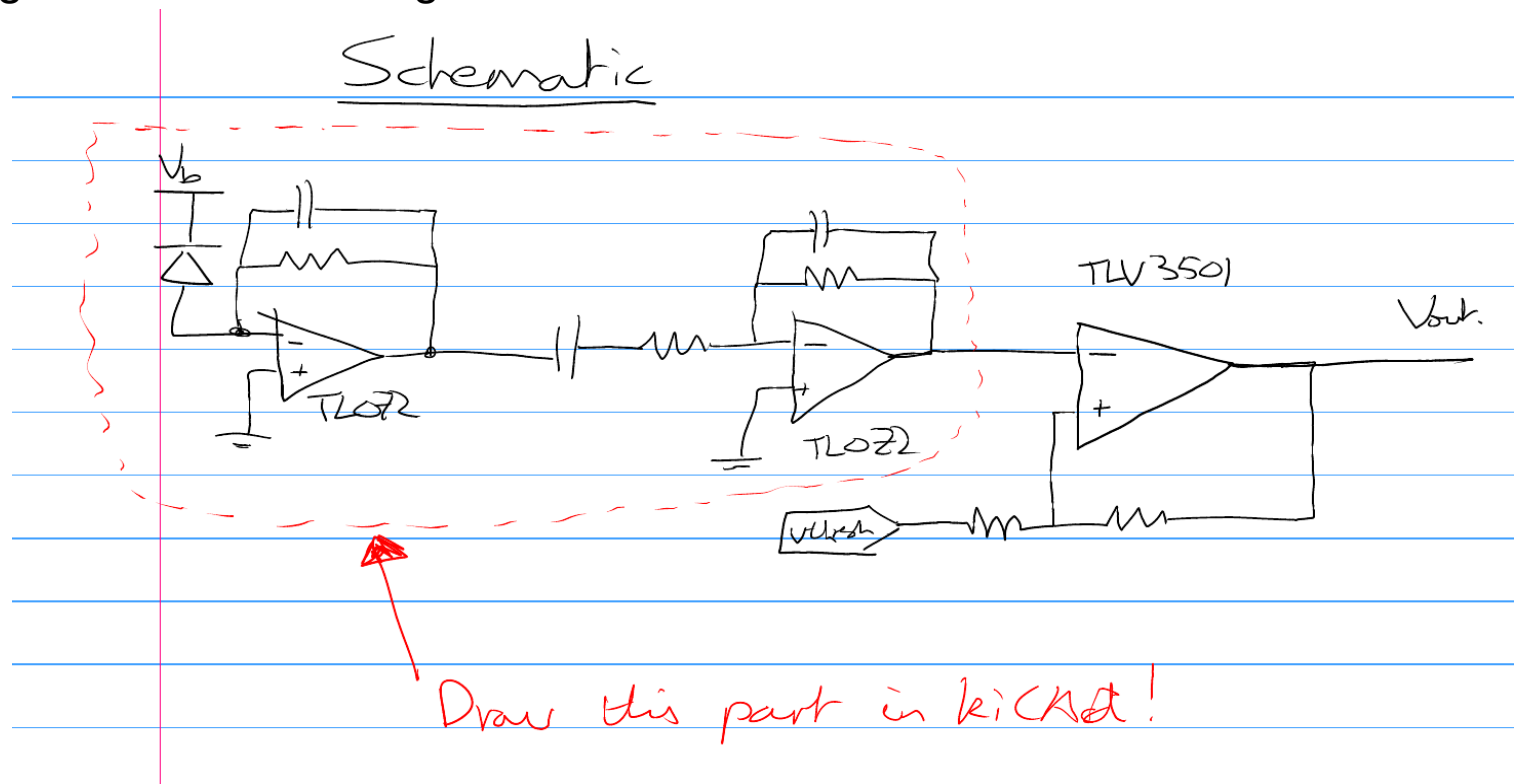
Walkthrough KiCad Schematic

On the Indico page, you will find two .zip files:

1) a KiCAD project for a “PIN diode based gamma ray detector” which has a pretty complete schematic, including data for parts, MPNs, footprints etc “schem_proj_complete.zip”

2) the same project but with a crucial part of the schematic missing – the frontend for the detector! The challenge is to draw in the missing part of the schematic. “schem_proj_nofrontend.zip”

We will talk through how to do this together to learn some of the KiCad basics.



Schematic Steps Overview



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1) Draw basic circuit – the symbols should all already be included in the project in the “cosmic_ray_symbols” library

2) Label & kconnect – add suitable net labels and connect the new sheet into the hierarchy properly

3) Annotate – annotate the schematic (assign specific designators to each part)

4) Pass ERC – run the ERC and tweak until there are no more errors!

5) Assign Footprints & add BOM data - associate each schematic symbol to a physical footprint and part to order

6) Assign netclasses – We will assign some netclasses for traces like “power” and “bias” to associate custom design rules with them at layout time

7) Set up sheet block and export drawings for review

Thanks!



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To be continued in a few minutes where we get to the fun – layout!

Questions, comments etc greatfully received:

Dan.weatherill@caltech.edu

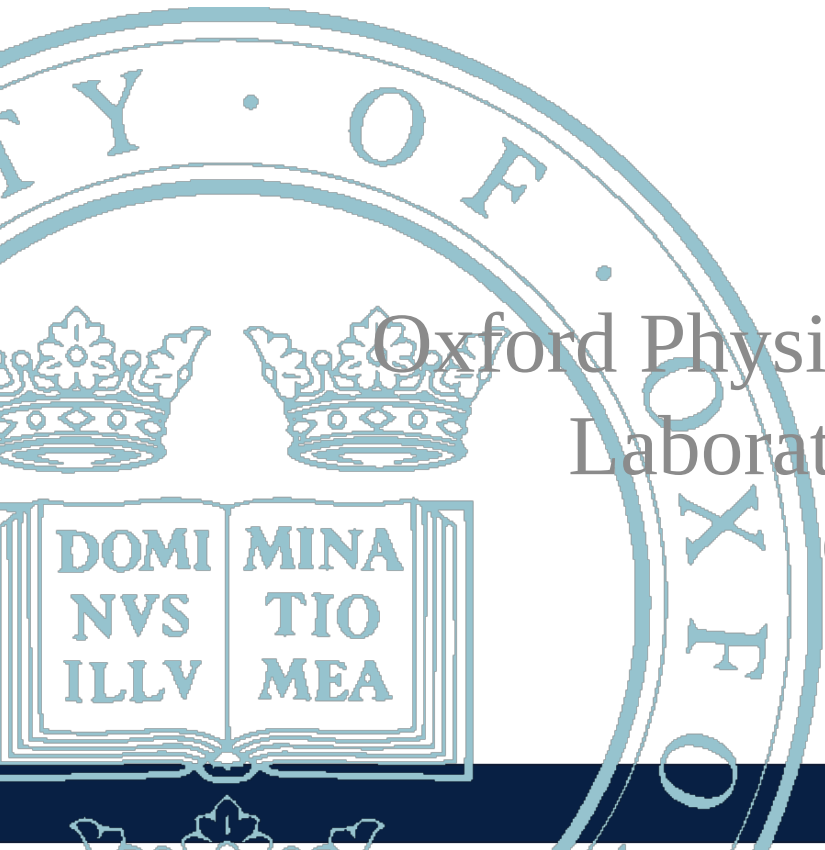
Very happy to be contacted about “stupid questions” re: KiCad or any PCB designs. I’ve done somewhere around 30 (2026 update: 35!) over the years now (in KiCad, Altium, Eagle, DipTrace- urrrgh) so do know a little bit about what I’m doing



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Advanced Instrumentation Lectures: PCB Design with KiCad Session #2

Dan Weatherill

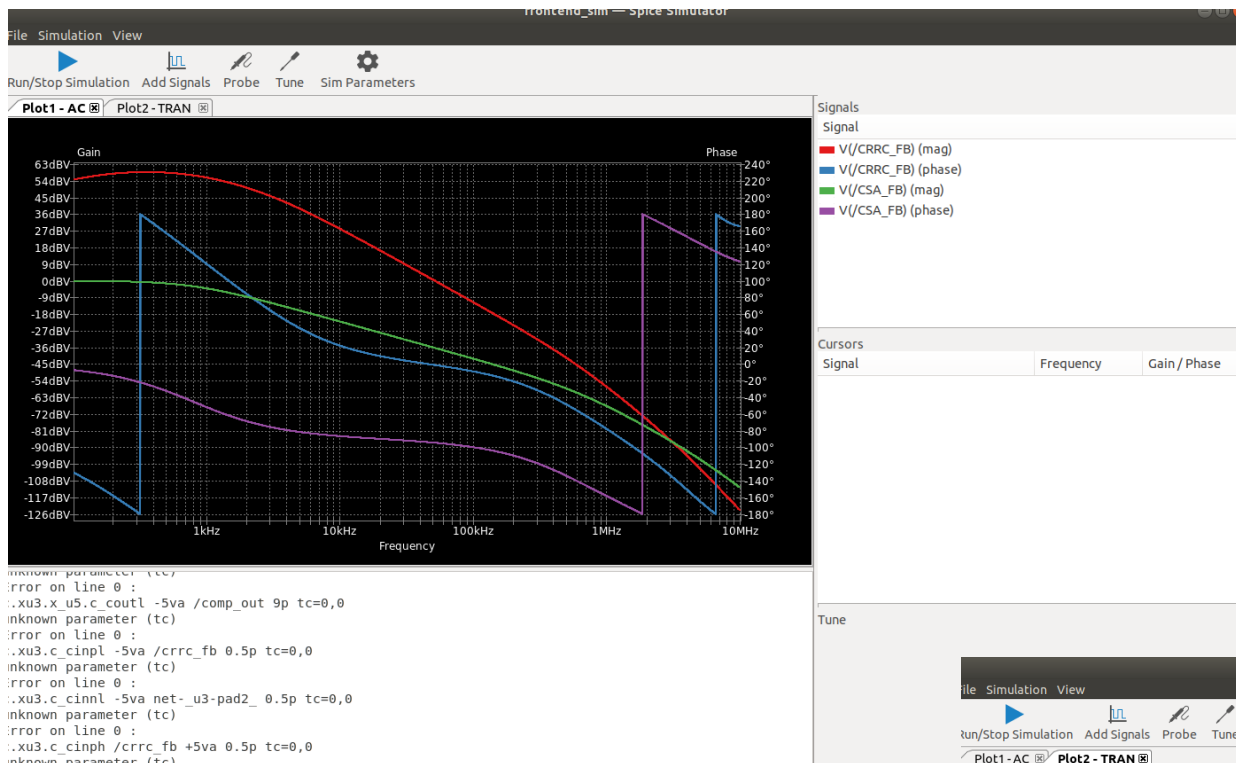


Oxford Physics Microstructure Detector
Laboratory / Caltech Optical
Observatories

Kicad SPICE simulation example

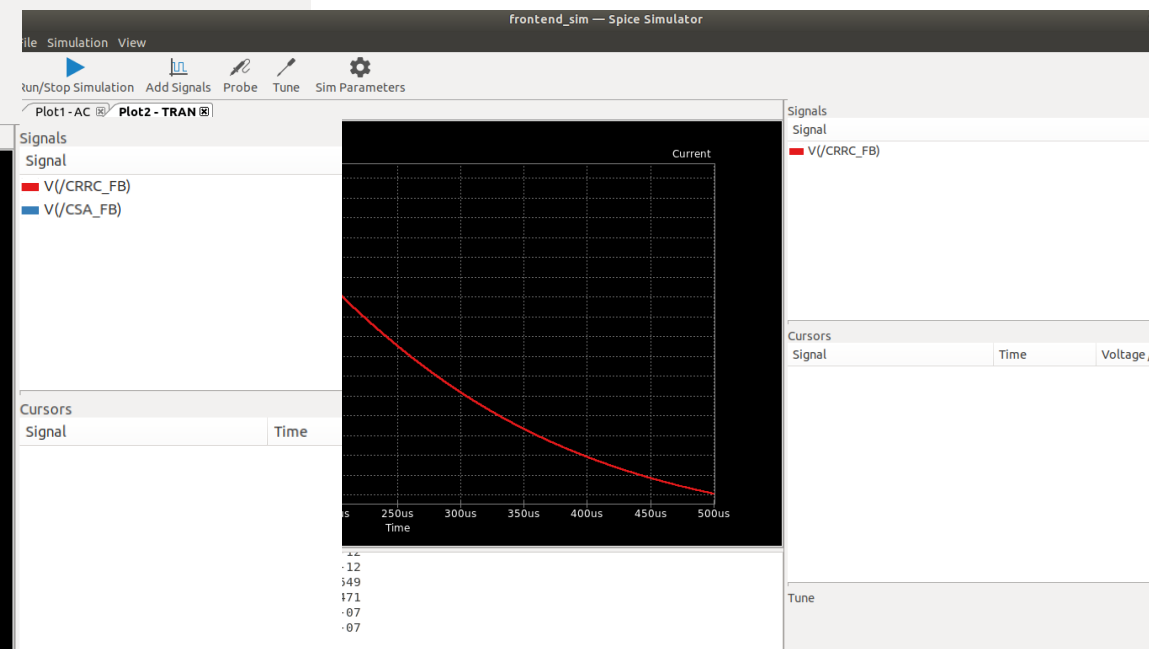
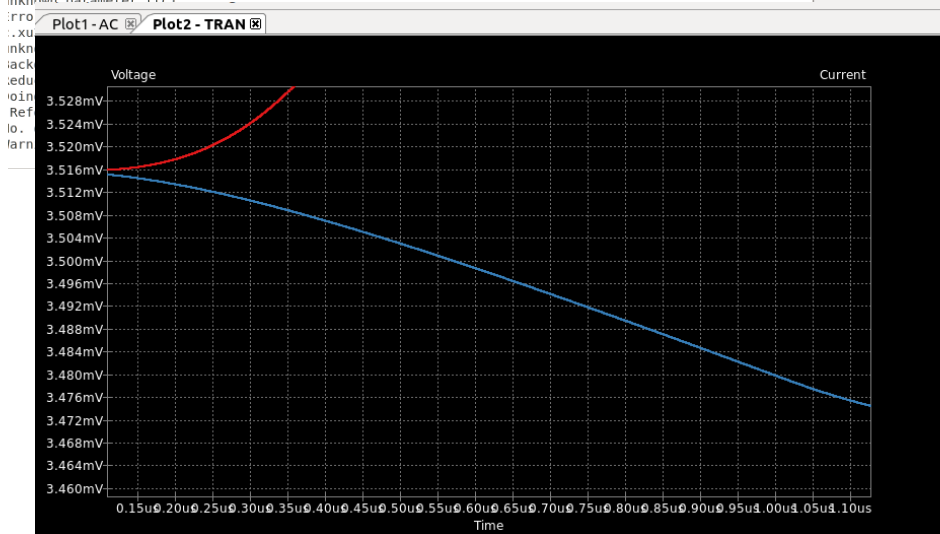


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Built in access to the ngspice simulator, which is quite nice (though not effort free!). Ability to probe and adjust values directly from a KiCad schematic.

No time to go over in detail today unless someone really wants a demo, but example included on Indico



KiCAD PCB layout - layers



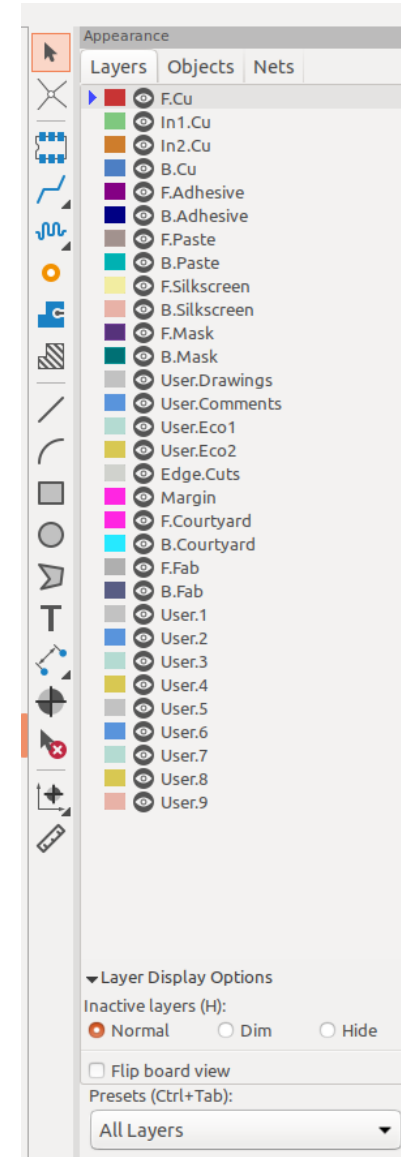
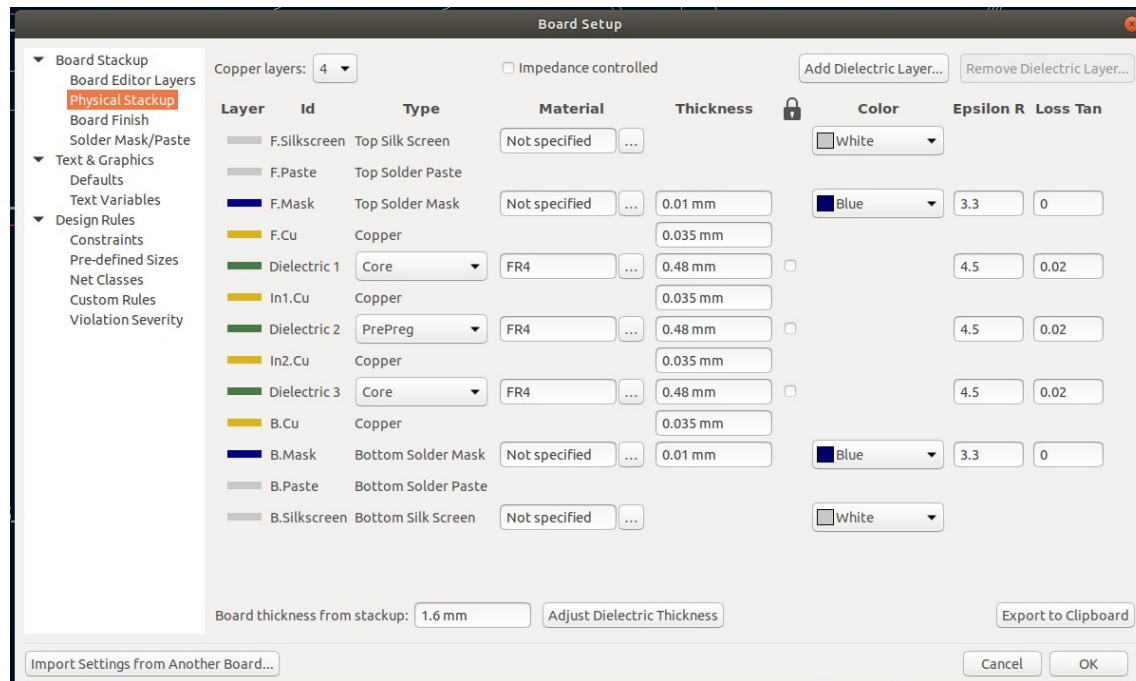
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<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	F.Fab	Off-board, manufacturing
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	F.Adhesive	On-board, non-copper
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	F.Paste	On-board, non-copper
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	F.Silkscreen	On-board, non-copper
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	F.Mask	On-board, non-copper
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	F.Cu	signal
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	In1.Cu	power plane
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	In2.Cu	power plane
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	B.Cu	mixed
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	B.Mask	On-board, non-copper
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	B.Silkscreen	On-board, non-copper

Be sure to setup layer names, intent and stackup thicknesses in the “board setup” dialog.

(currently impedance settings don't do much beyond add to export data and adjust 3D view, “true” impedance is planned in a future version)

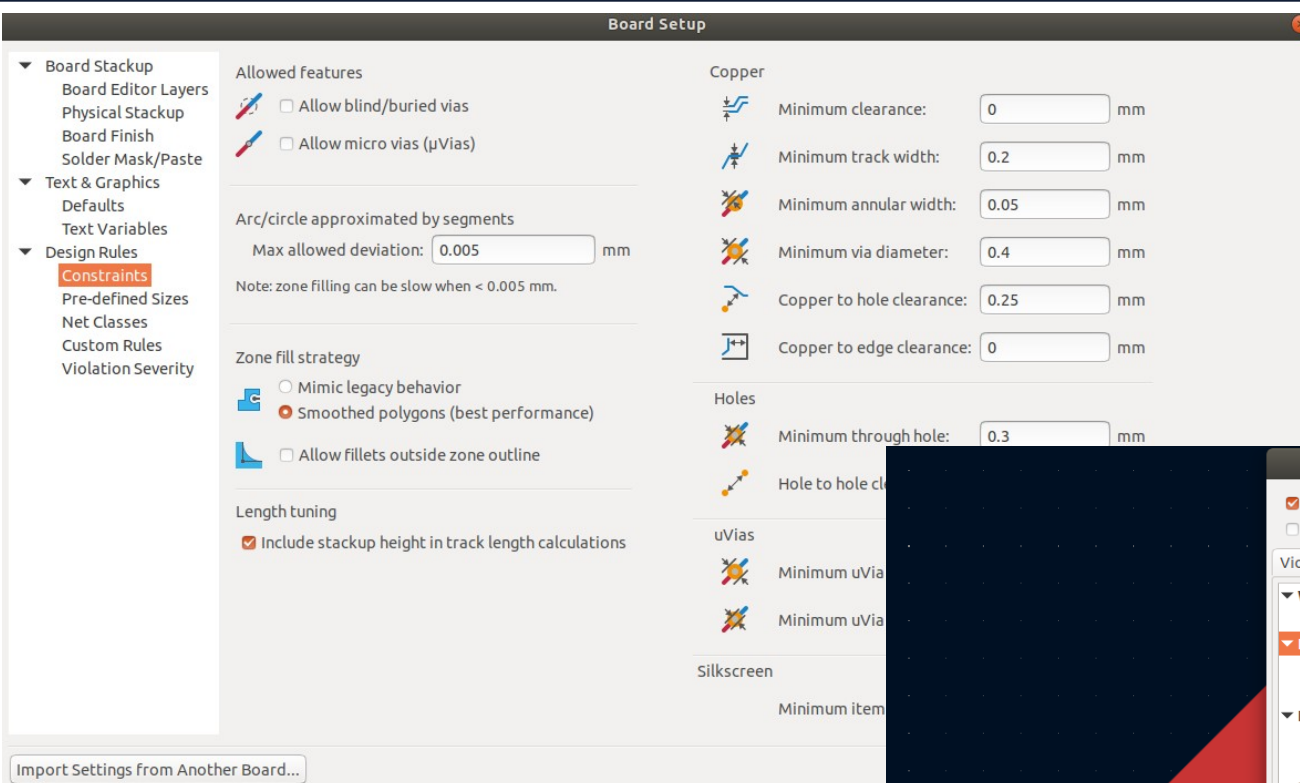
(**RIGHT**): lots of display options available, tweak to however you need



KiCAD PCB layout – design rules



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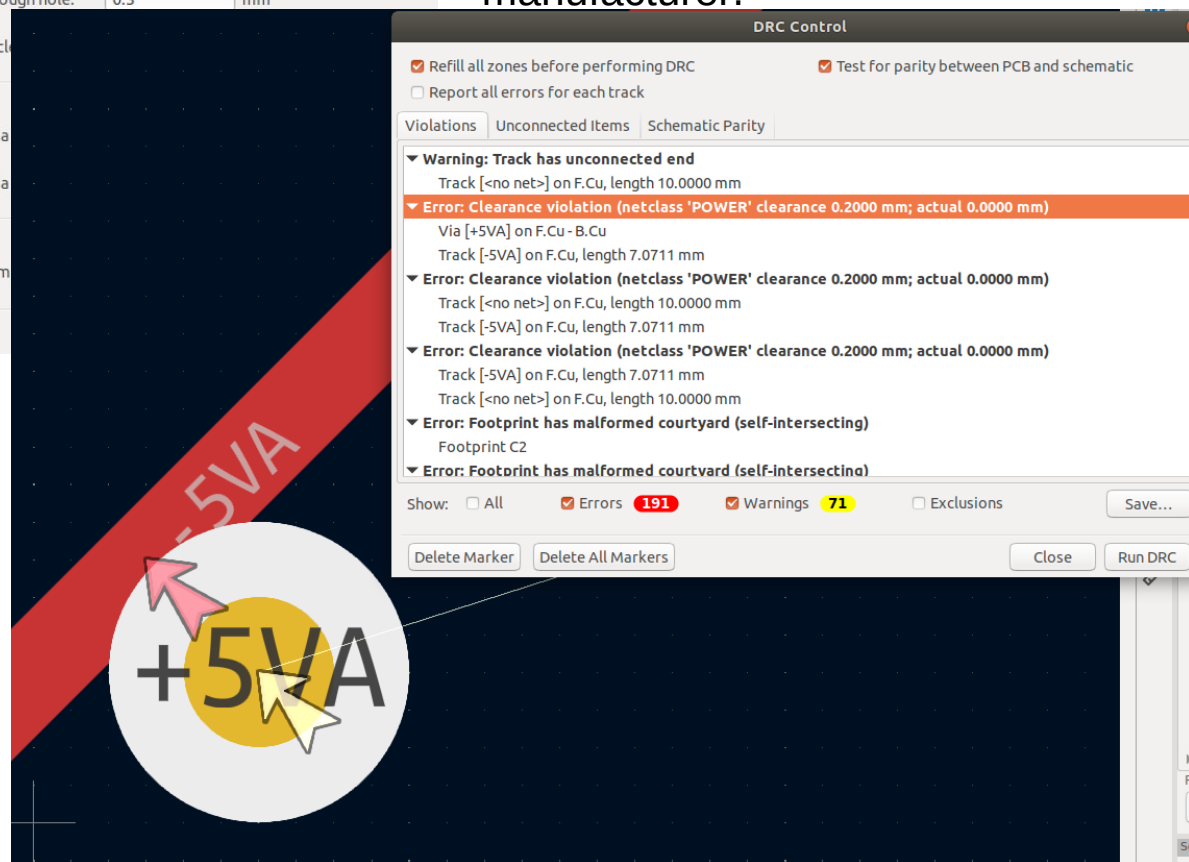


Set up your design rules according to your manufacturer's stated capabilities (again in "board setup" dialog). You can import DRC settings from a previous project – so e.g. keep a "template" project for each manufacturer.

Set up DRC **before** doing any routing to avoid disappointment!

Using the minimum allowed is not always best strategy!

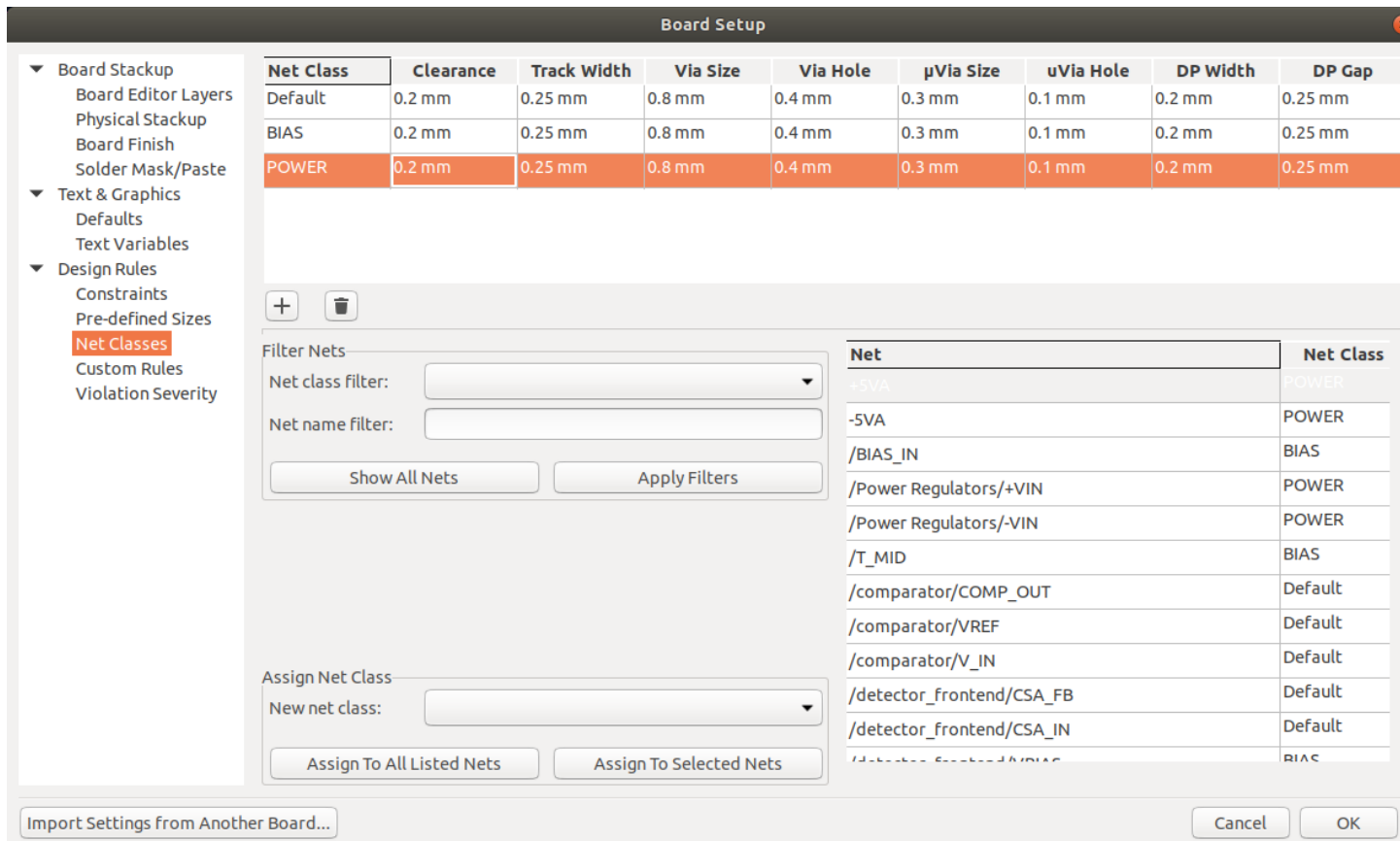
The interactive router does generally prevent you from violating clearance but you can force it to, and hit it at DRC time (right)



KiCAD – netclass rules



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Netclasses you created in the schematic appear also in “board setup”, and can have different sets of design constraints applied to them (**left** we have power traces with higher thickness and clearance than default)

In fact, you can actually write completely custom DRC rules to suit many needs – **right** Newbury has a different minimum hole clearance on inner layers than outer ones, this isn’t available in the default setup but a simple rule can be written to enforce it!

DRC rules:

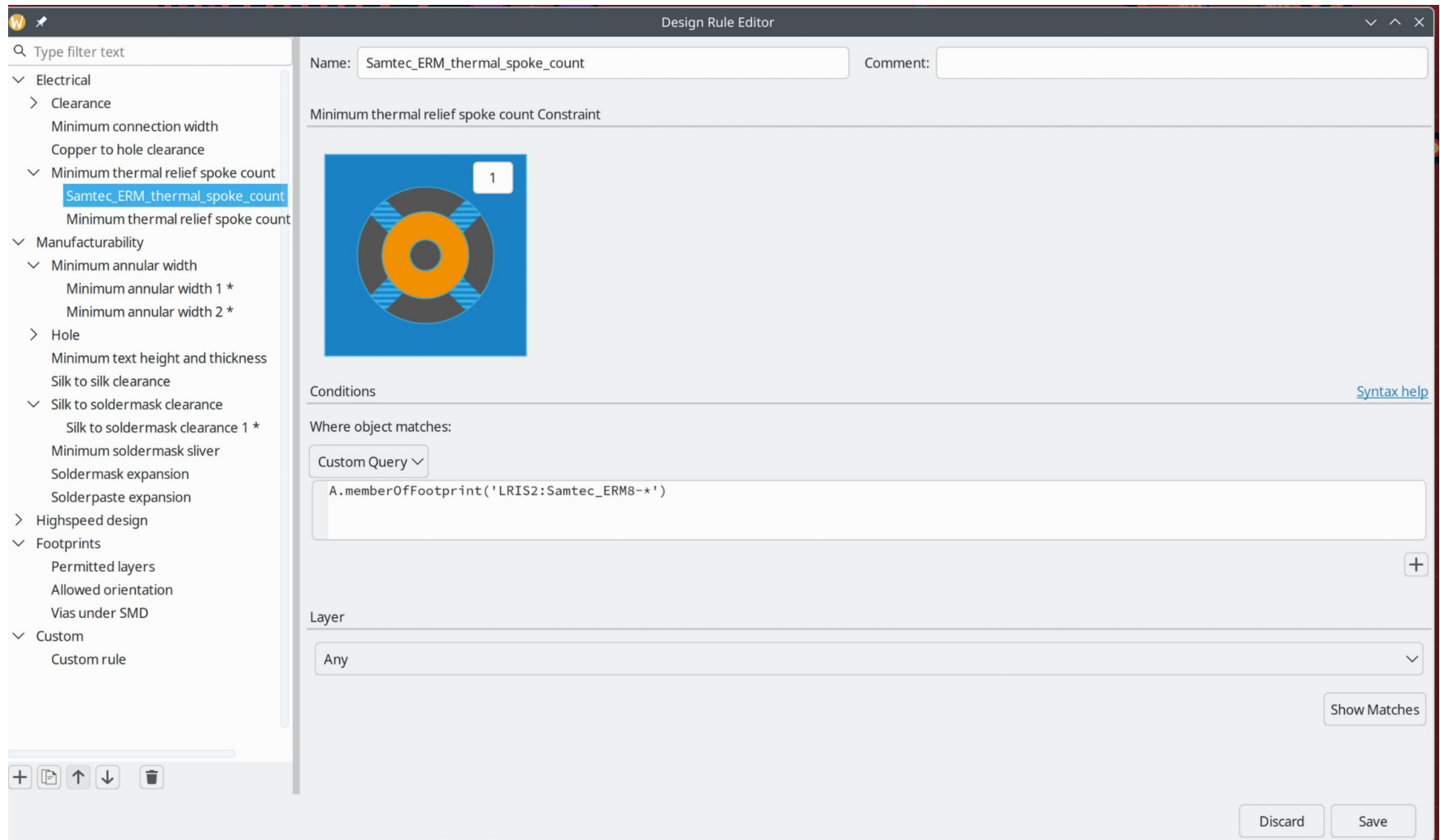
```
1 (version 1)
2 (rule inner_layer_hole_track
3     (layer inner)
4     (constraint hole_clearance (min 0.5mm))
5 )
6 |
```

Custom DRC in V10

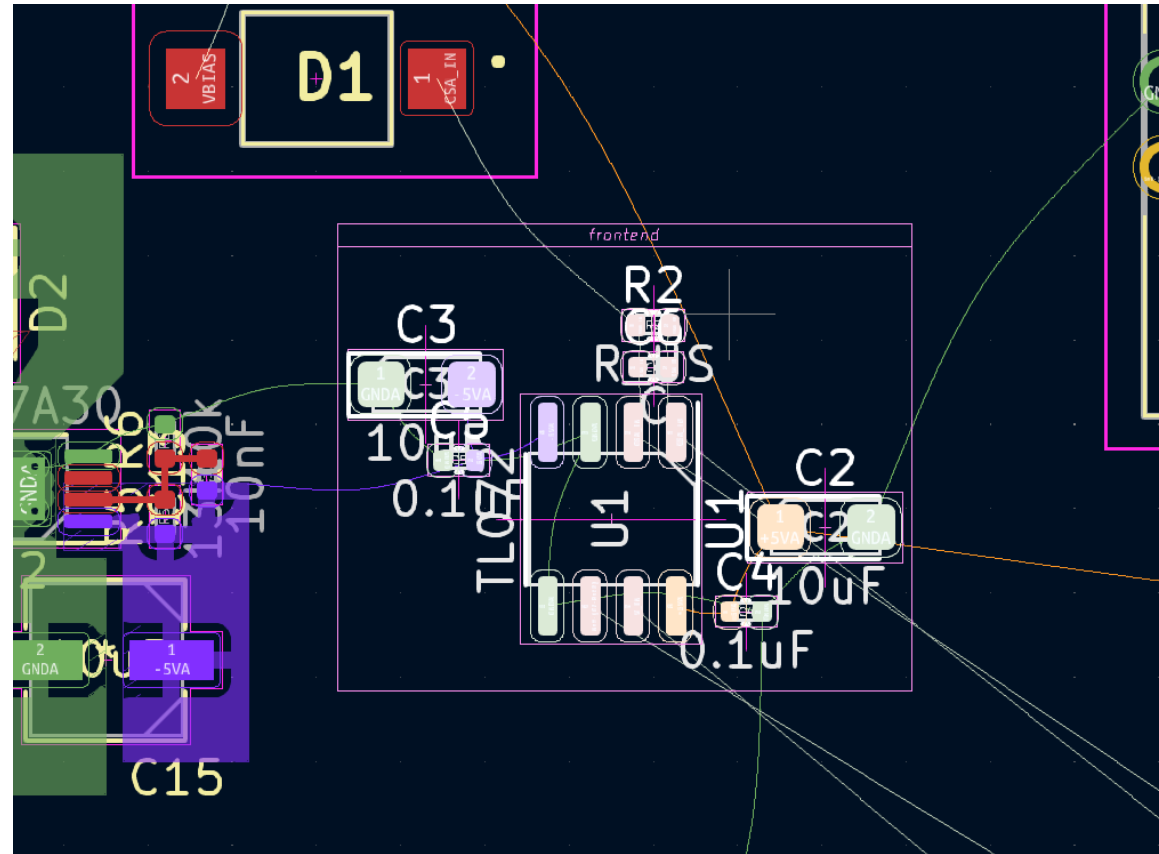
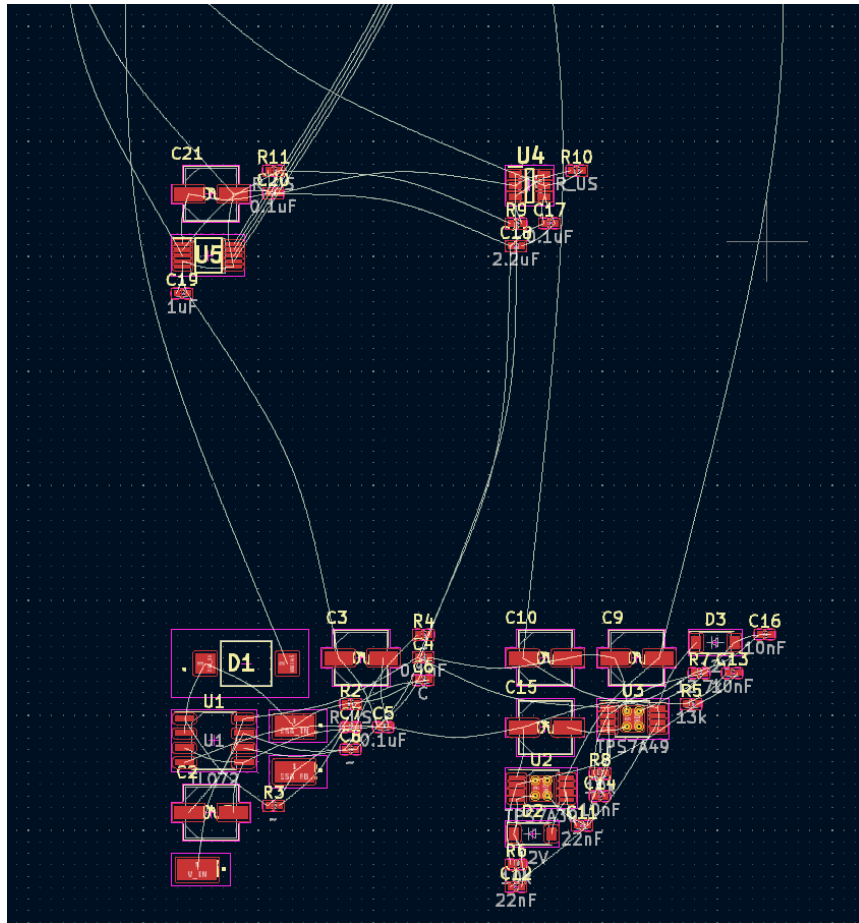


In v10, there's a new GUI that helps with writing custom DRC rules (very reminiscent of Altium's similar UI for this).

Example below: I can easily make a rule that causes a specific type of connector to override global thermal relief rules



General PCB layout -ratsnest



Generally, best to start by getting components placed reasonably well before drawing tracks. The “ratsnest” is a good guide for placement and rotation

In some circumstances it makes sense to “group” a block of layout so it can be moved freely around and piece together the whole layout later. Be careful, though, this can often lead to unoptimised layout. **Since v10, you can ask Kicad to automatically generate these groups for schematic sheets or component classes**

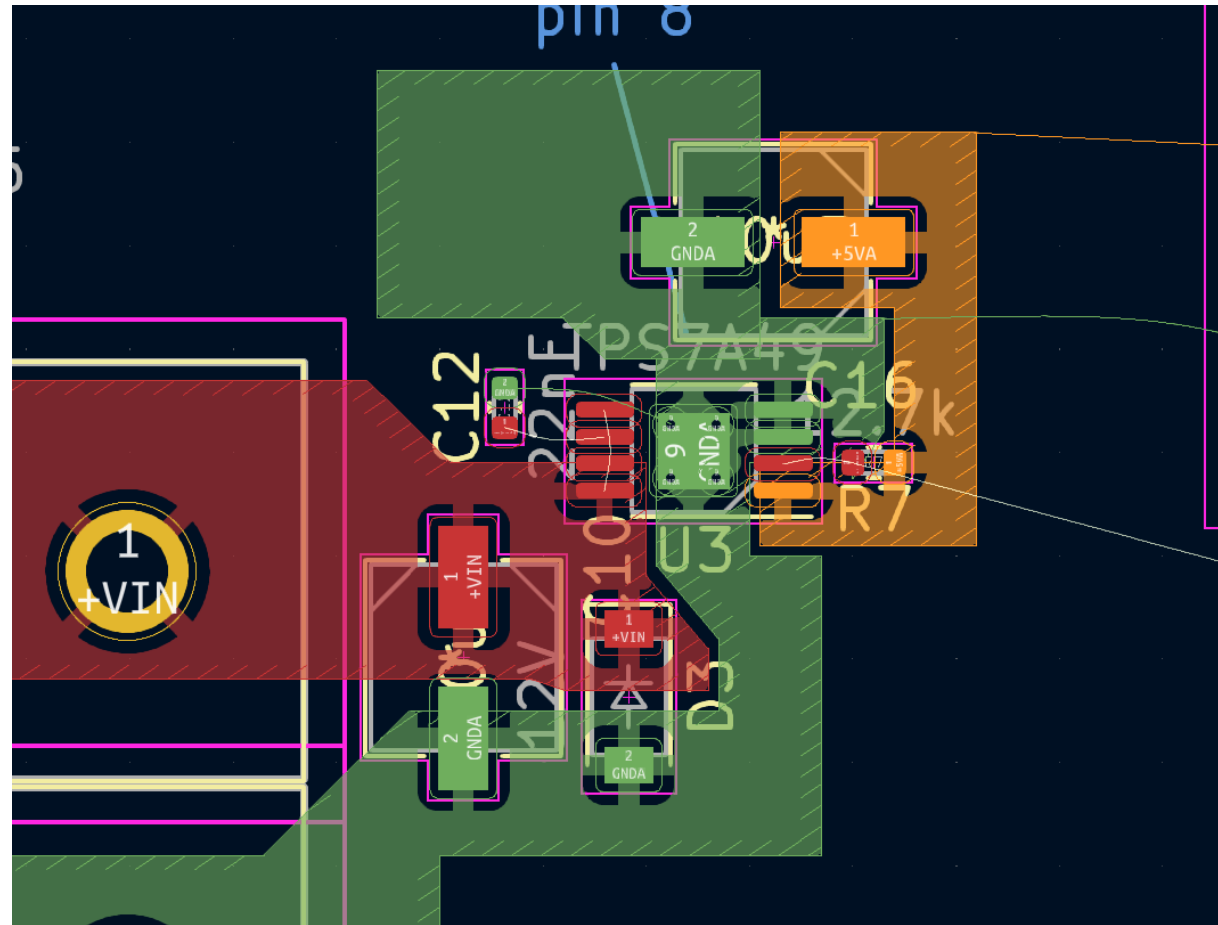
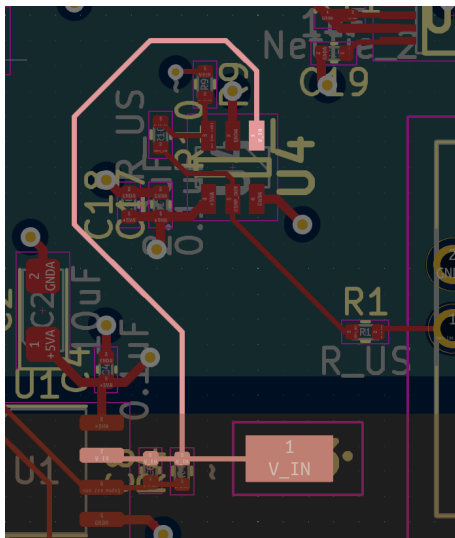
General PCB Layout – zones/pours



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Always follow instructions for layout in component datasheets carefully, particularly for anything that deals with power. For modern SMD designs you will likely want quite a few “pours”, large areas covered in copper. Be sure to tweak the parameters how you want them (e.g. make sure to have thermal relief rather than solid connections in big zones or soldering them will be a nightmare). In addition, try to fill up empty board space with copper pours and even out the copper mass on both sides of the PCB: this will prevent warping over time

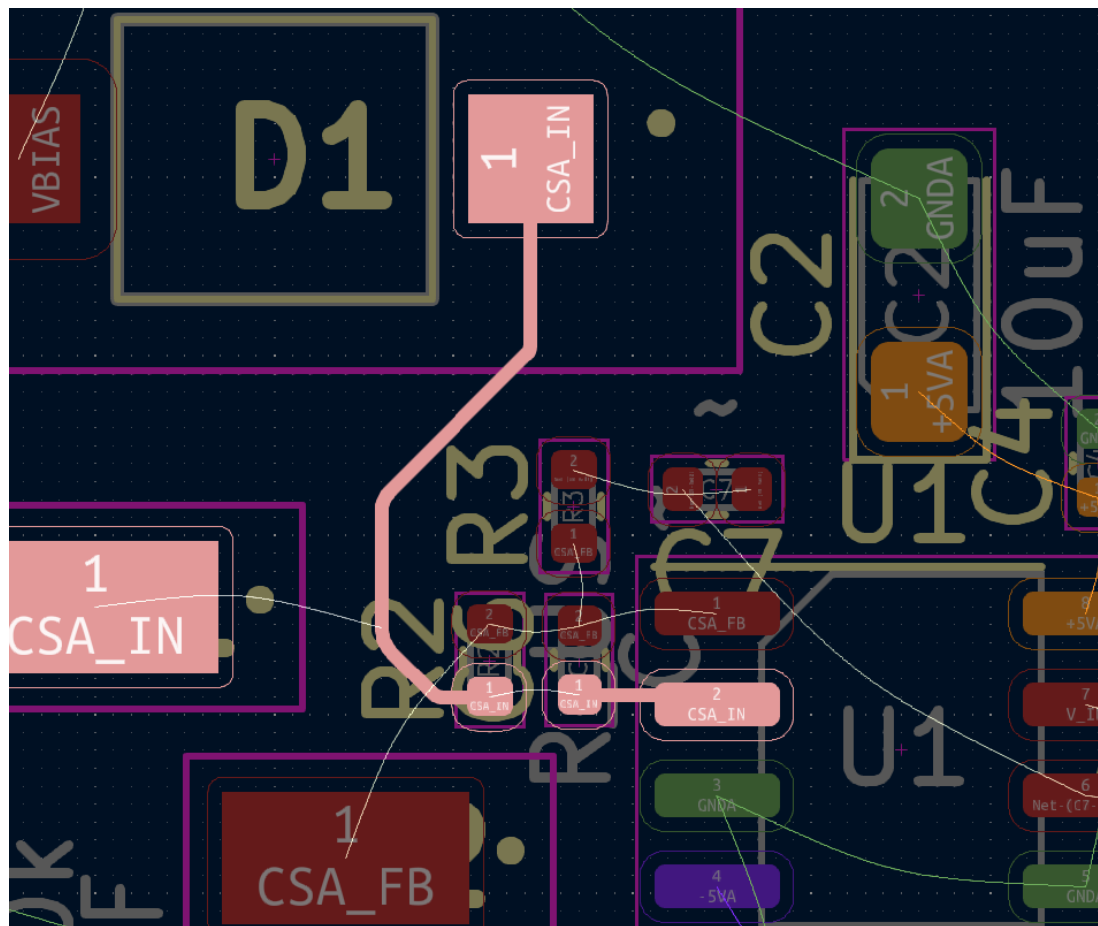
When using PCB software, take advantage of the ability to adjust the display – e.g. on the **right** I have set the colouring to be by net rather than by layer (which is the default). **Below** we have set the display to only some layers and highlighted an important net we are working on



KiCAD Layout – Routing



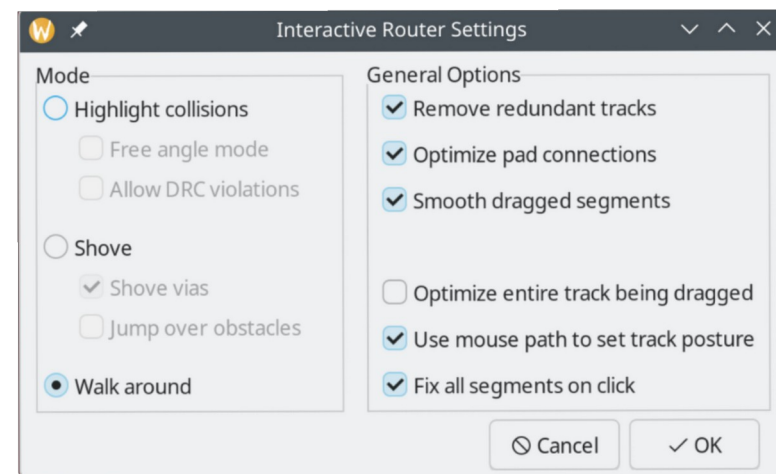
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The interactive router has a few settings you will be changing often.

Getting to know keyboard shortcuts is a great time saver!

Generally, route important tracks first, or those with electrical constraints (impedance, length etc)



The default (and probably most useful) mode is “walk around”, which routes tracks according to the design rules by optimising their geometry. The “shove” mode allows the track you’re currently routing to push others out of the way – useful for priority tracks.

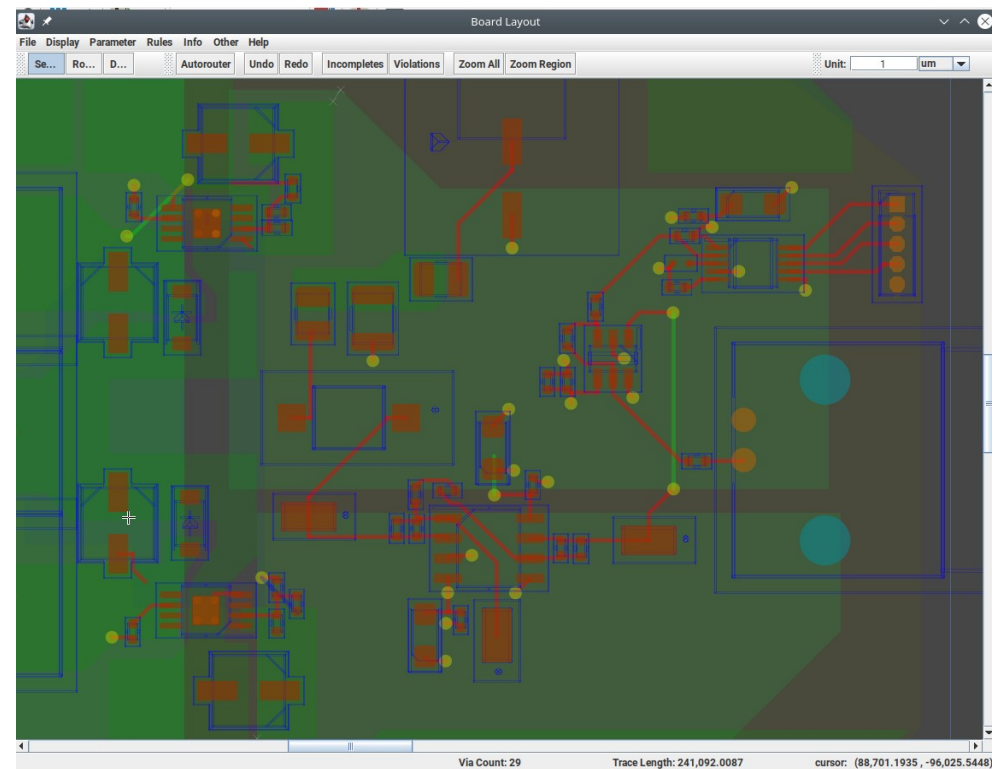
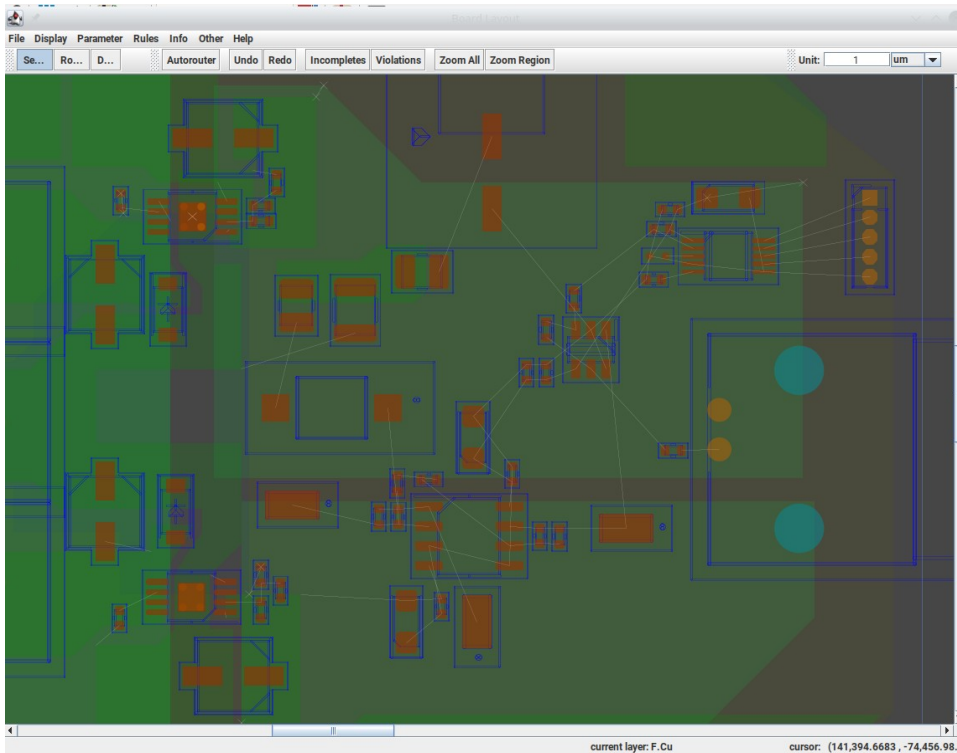
Occasionally you need the “highlight collisions” mode, which allows you to break the DRC and just let you know you are doing so

Autorouting



Kicad has no built in auto-router, but it can export the Specctra “DSN” file, to use with external tools. One such is freerouting: <https://github.com/freerouting/freerouting>

Since kicad 10, it can directly be installed via the built in plugin manager. It isn't that bad! **BUT:** autorouting generally only produces good results if you've already done a nice job with placing components and placing zones for ground, power planes etc. Even then, you will mostly want to “tweak” the results quite significantly. **Below:** exporting a KiCad design to freerouting, and 1 click autorouting it. The result can be re-imported back to KiCad



KiCAD routing - DRC



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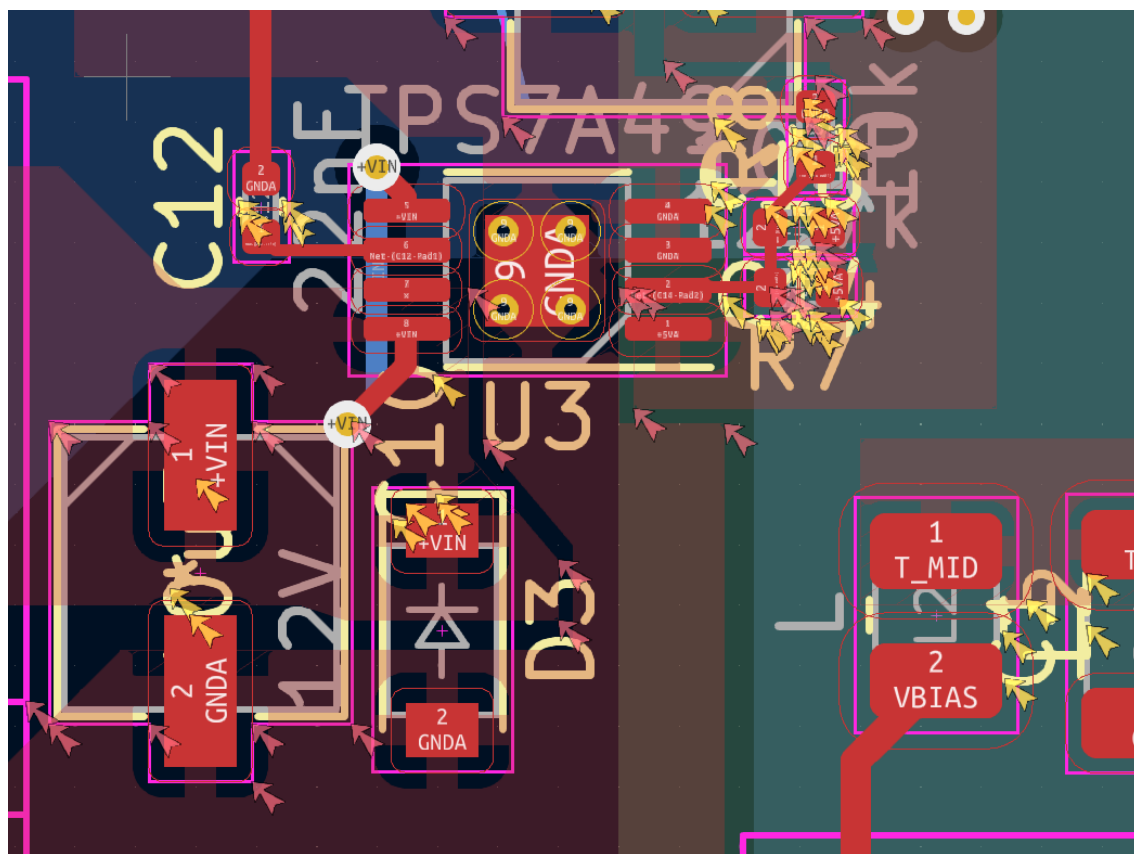
Getting to “0 DRC” can be daunting but it is mostly worth it!

Look through the errors, many are real and useful!

To get rid of the rest, you can:

- Adjust library symbols so that the clearances are improved
- Add specific exclusions for the times you **know** you meant to break the rules (e.g. the overlapping connectors on the cosmic ray detector board)

Note that KiCad’s DRC isn’t quite as smart as Altium’s – one misplaced component can create a LOT of arrows!



KiCad external plugin – via fence

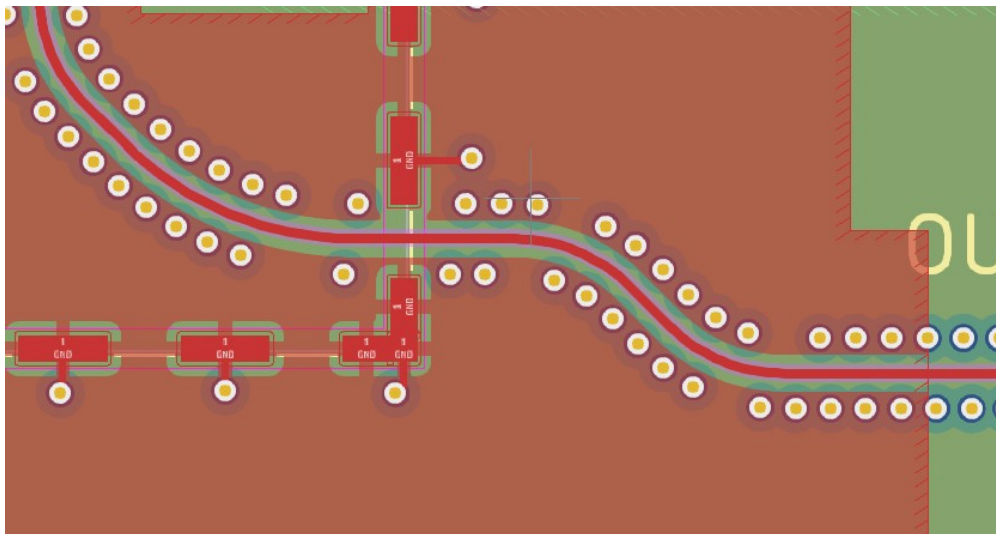
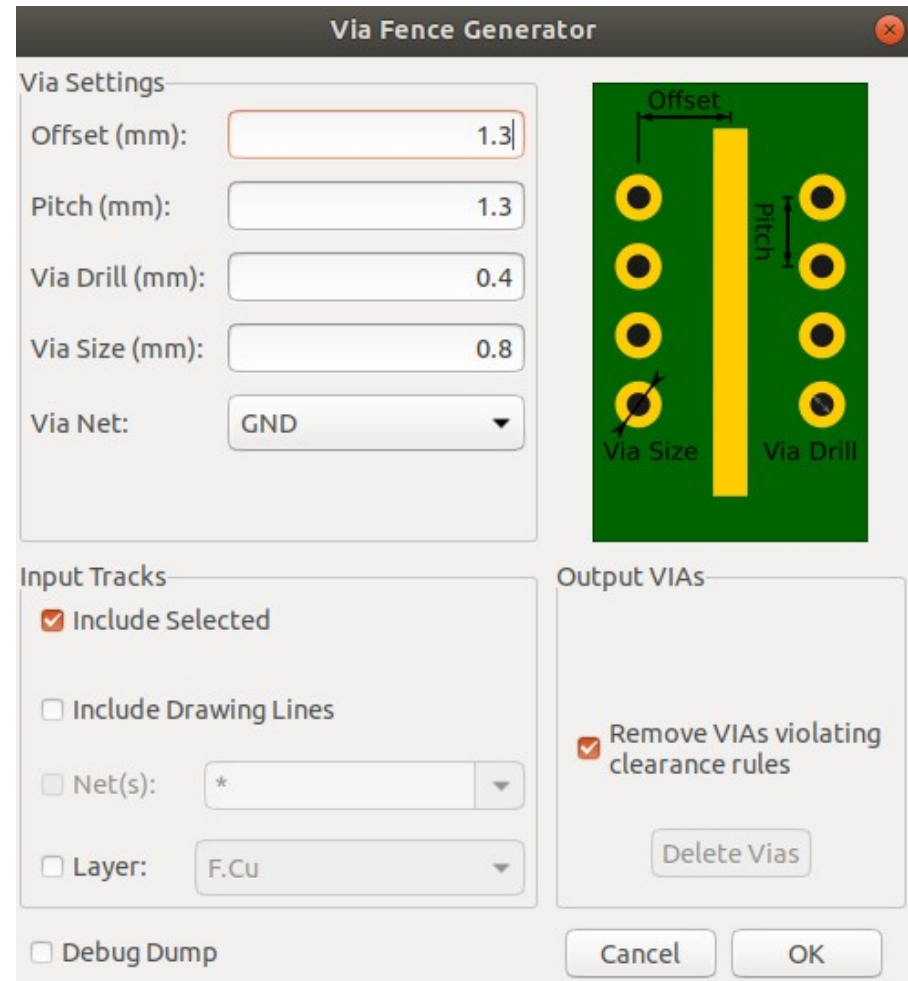


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<https://github.com/easyw/RF-tools-KiCAD>

Excellent plugin (though at moment has to be manually installed, not available through the built in “plugin” menu), that contains several tools useful for high frequency/RF design, notably the **below** via fenced and mask removed traces.

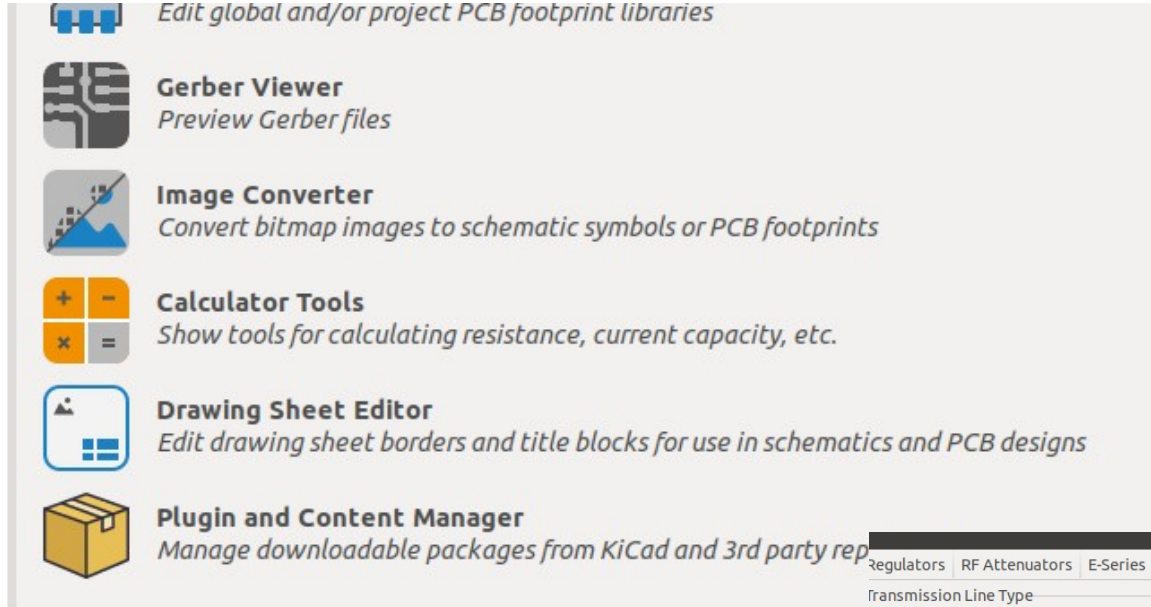
NB the below design is for an LGAD amplifier that should work up to ~10GHz. So far we’ve only tested it to about ~4GHz, but that is another story.



Trace thickness calculation



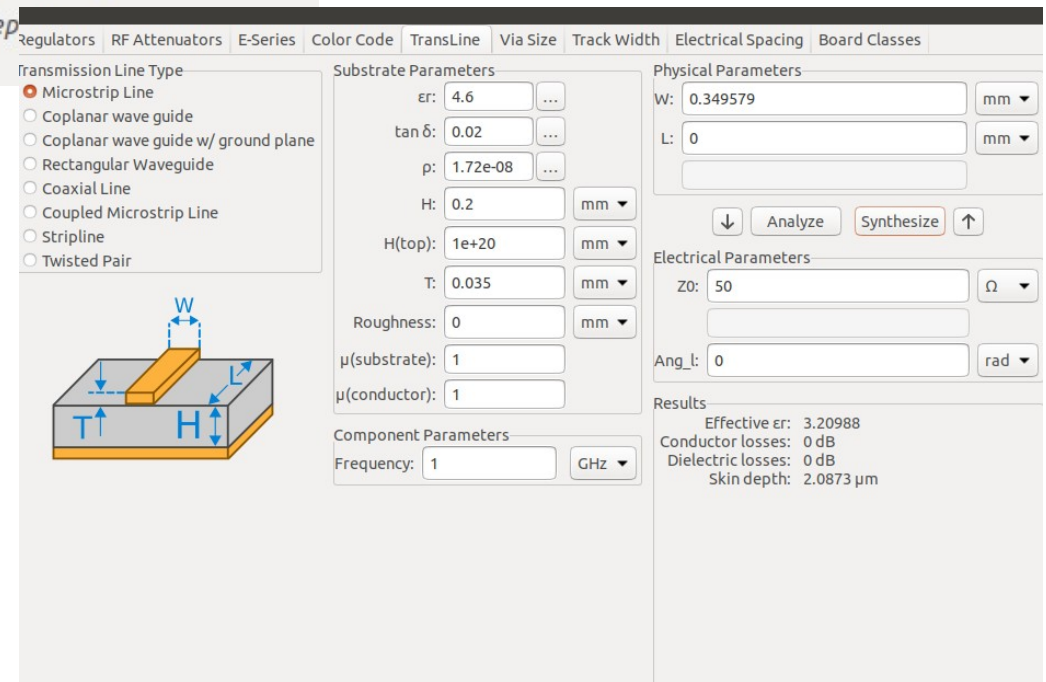
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Lots of useful utilities hidden towards the bottom of the initial KiCad project window!

Though we don't (yet) have built-in support for calculating controlled impedance traces, we DO have this handy calculator that can synthesize length & width parameters after inputting board information (under "PCB calculator, TransLine").

We also **do** have built in length tuning in the PCB editor (ask for demo if I forget!) but you have to know the length you want in advance.

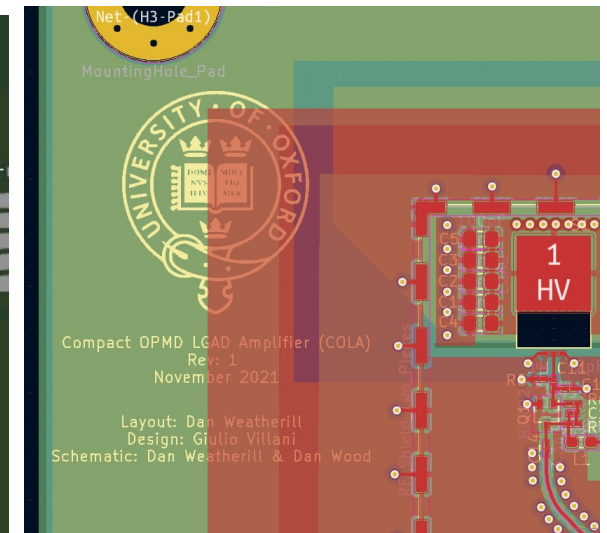
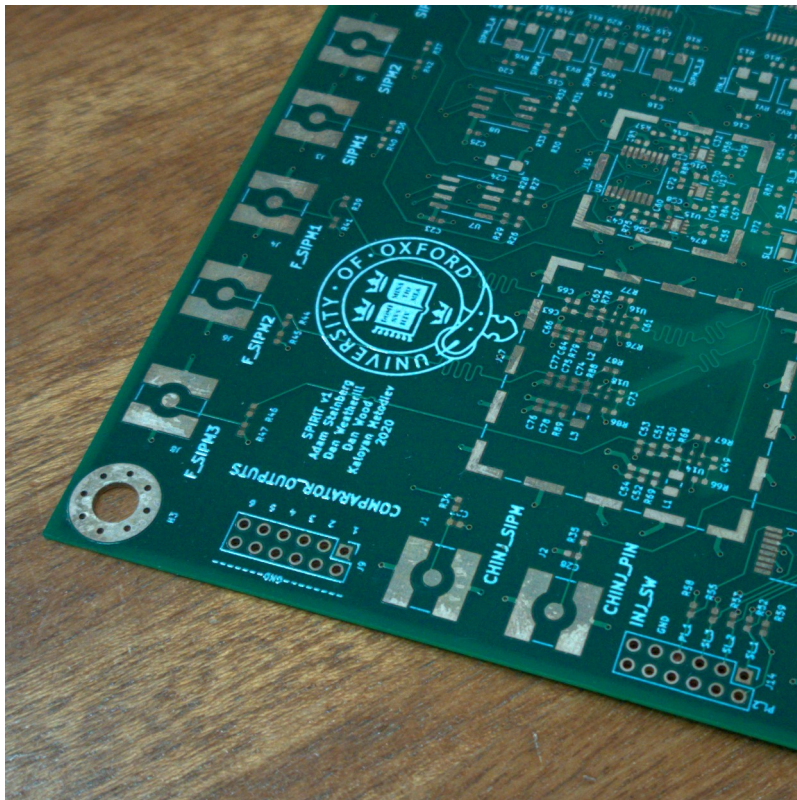
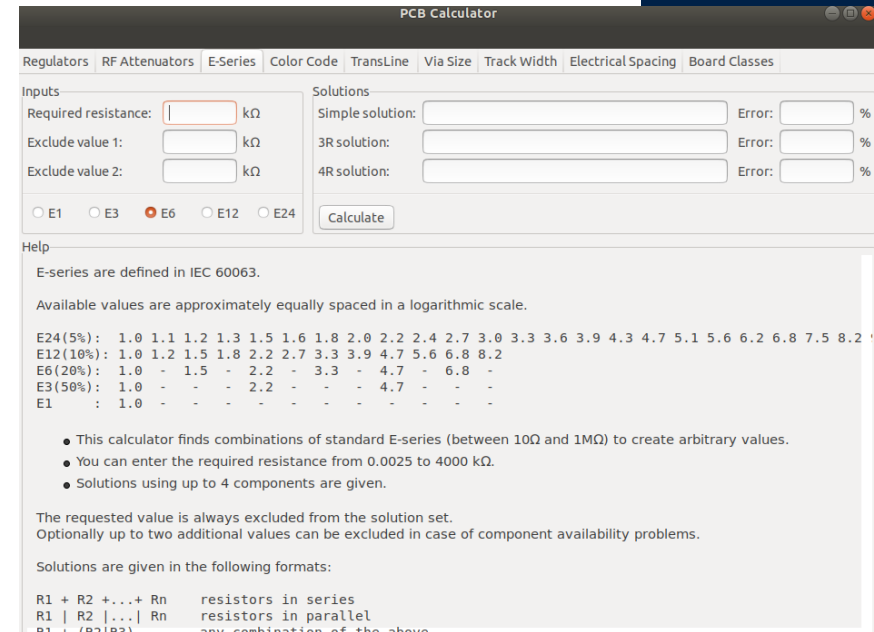


Other Useful Utilities



Other very useful tools towards the bottom of the kiCAD project menu:

- In “PCB calculator” the E-series calculator, tells you what E series resistors you need to make a particular value
- The “Image Converter” utility converts (black & white) PNG images into PCB footprints. That is how we can do e.g. logos (**below**)



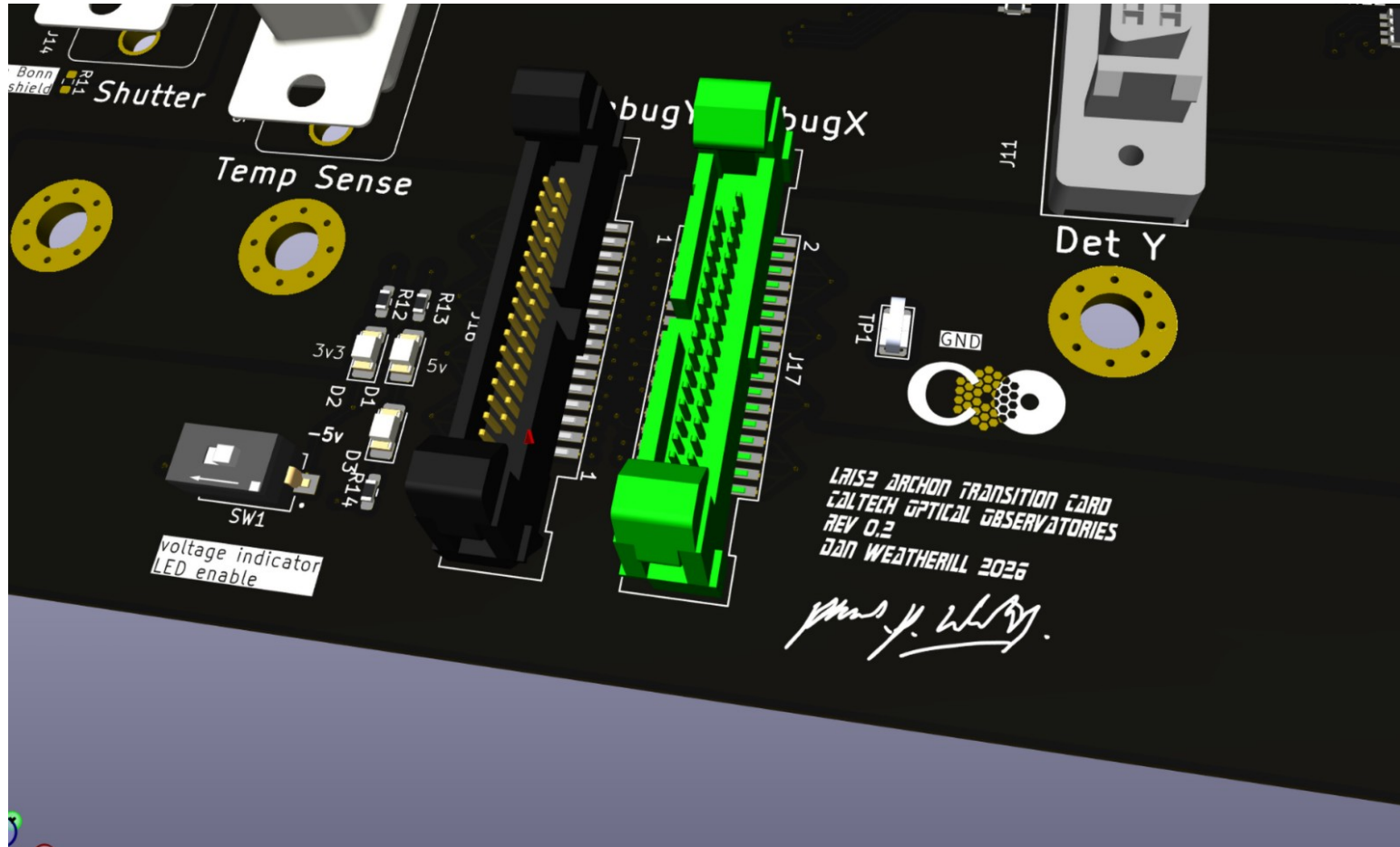
Eye candy continued



As of version 10, we have TrueType font support and full graphics on any layer in Kicad, allowing us to do extravagant and unnecessary things like this:

Anyone old enough to recognise the Star Trek:TNG font?

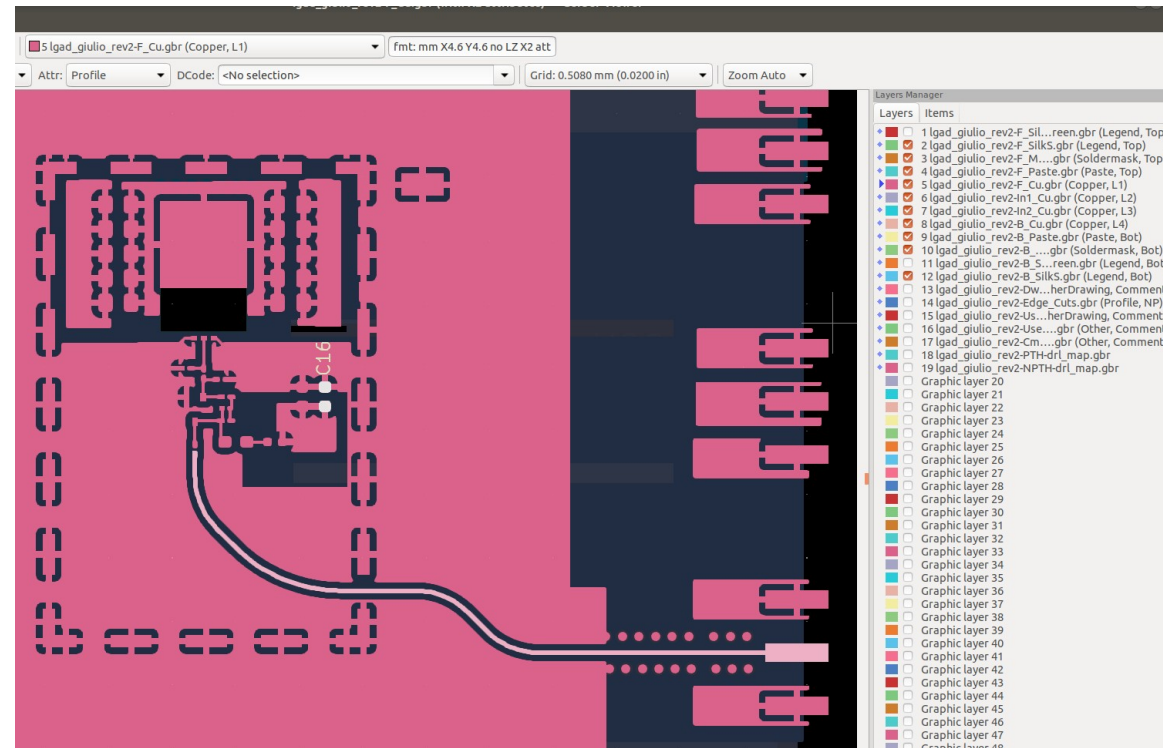
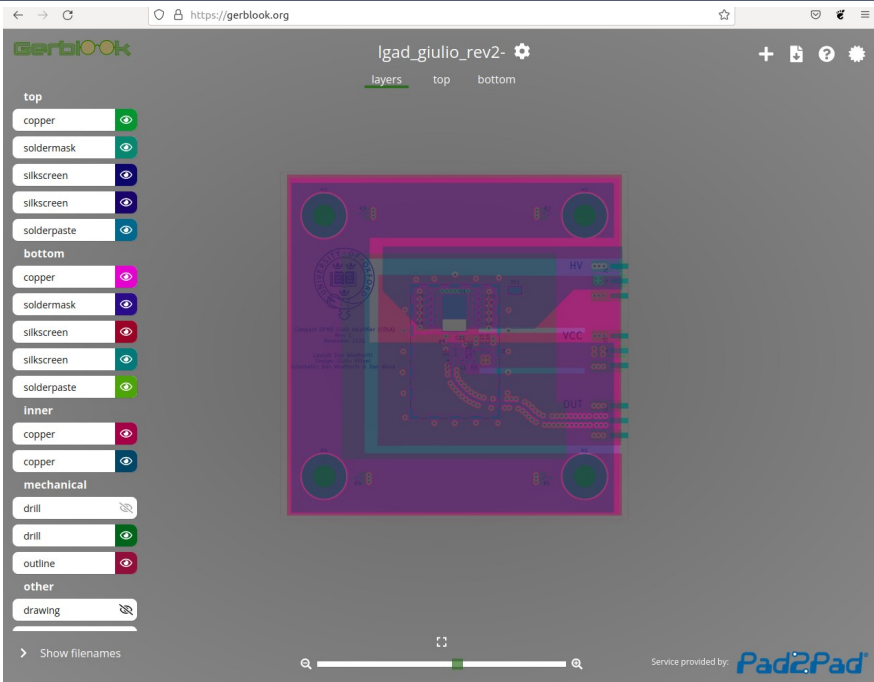
As a side note: that “Rev 0.2” is stored as a text variable so the PCB text automatically updates when we do a new revision



KiCAD – Gerber & Excellion export



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Gerber output is found in the “plot” dialog. KiCad can export full Gerber X2 and includes an advanced viewer – which can even highlight nets and components (this info is included in Gerber X2 files, welcome to 2023 and beyond!

ALWAYS check your gerbers layer by layer with a 2nd tool, be it another offline viewer (e.g. gerbv or CircuitCAM or similar), or an online viewer (<https://gerblook.org>). **MAKE SURE** you understand any unexpected discrepancies before sending them off!

(NB this includes misalignments, you may have got the coordinate origins wrong or similar!)

Latest things to checkout in Kicad



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Some people come back and see this talk multiple times, because I always say what's new in Kicad. V10 was another big release, unfortunately with some bugs, but V10.0.3 seems to have ironed out the real bad ones. Here are the new things I am so far most impressed/ excited about. This is my personal list, see the list on the kicad website for full list of new features:

- Full spacemouse support on all operating systems (previously buggy and windows only)
- Basic “design variant” support (allowing e.g. to do different DNF and BoM parts to different board houses)
- Massively upgraded pin and gate swapping facilities (makes routing many channel designs much easier)
- Altium project import is way, way better now
- Footprint and schematic libraries can now be in folders instead of one big unwieldy file for all parts (better for git workflows)
- Much improved scripting and automatic job output facilities (better than Altium now IMO! At least easier to make it work how you want it)
- Generally improved ergonomics and UI in the PCB editor and schematic editor

Walkthrough PCB Layout



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We will show the basics of laying out a PCB from the project we looked at last time. Again, downloadable from the Indico in several forms:

- 1) “pcb_proj_blank.zip” – nothing done in the PCB except DRC setup and layer setup
- 2) “pcb_proj_noroute.zip” – the hardest part done, all the components placed, you get to do just the fun part, the routing!
- 3) “pcb_proj_noroute_gerber.zip” – the same as above, but with Gerber files for the PCB
- 4) “pcb_proj_complete.zip” – completed PCB routed project, and included output Gerber/Excellion / IPC-D netlist / BOM / drawing / STEP model files for you to look at

Also available on github:

“https://github.com/weatherhead99/AITL_kicad_pcb_design” - there are tags and branches for the various stages of completion shown in the demos & the export files on Indico.

Finally NB: some schematic tweaks and a “magical” BOM export have appeared in these files since last time, so if you carry on from previous project you may find minor differences. Sadly we didn’t have time to go over fully BOM export in these 2 hours)

PCB Layout Steps



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Steps to make a PCB:

- 1) import components from schematic editor. Setup DRC rules, netclass rules & board stackup
- 2) manually draw board outline & place some mounting holes
- 3) place components (will show basics then skip over, this is ~90% of PCB design time)
- 4) route tracks (will demo the manual "PnS" router), tidy up silkscreen, mask & solder layers
- 5) Tidy up silkscreen, check mask, solder paste layers etc
- 6) make the DRC pass! (repeat steps 3,4,5 as needed)
- 6) export for manufacture (gerbers, netlist, PCB drawing & MCAD model)
- 7) review gerbers

Thanks!



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Happy PCB Designing!

Questions, comments etc greatfully received:

Daniel.weatherill@physics.ox.ac.uk

Very happy to be contacted about “stupid questions” re: KiCad or any PCB designs. I’ve done somewhere around 32 over the years now (in KiCad, altium, Eagle, DipTrace-urrrgh) so do know a little bit about what I’m doing

The docs for kicad are now quite good: <https://docs.kicad.org/10.0/en/>

There are also pretty good free video tutorials online, and in addition a very good (but pricy ~£50) commercial eBook and course teaching you the details of the program available here: <https://techexplorations.com/kicad/>

This course also includes a lot of “basic” PCB design stuff so is probably not ideal for experienced designers coming from other programs