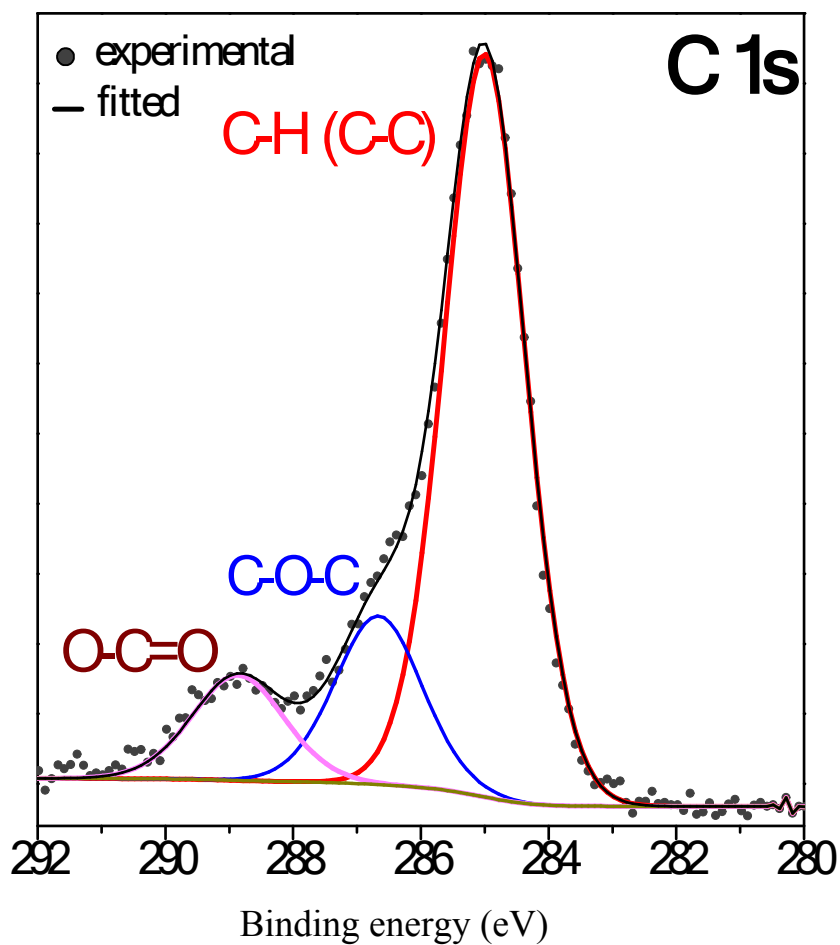


## Electronic Supplementary Information (ESI)

### The main peak-fitting parameters for the XPS spectra

For all the XPS data collected from samples not sputter cleaned prior to the analysis, the peak-fitting of C1s spectra was performed using the following strategy. A single peak (Gaussian (70%)–Lorentzian (30%)), ascribed to alkyl type carbon (C–C, C–H), is fitted to the main peak of the C 1s spectrum for adventitious carbon. A second peak is usually added that is constrained to be 1.5 eV above the main peak and of equal FWHM to the main peak. This higher BE peak is ascribed to alcohol (C–OH) and/or ester (C–O–C) functionality. Further high BE components (e.g. C=O, 2.8–3.0 eV above the main peak, O–C=O, 3.6–4.3 eV above the main peak) can also be added if required. Spectra from all the samples have been charge corrected to give the adventitious C 1s spectral component (C–C, C–H) a BE of 285.0 eV. The process has an associated error of  $\pm 0.1$ – $0.2$  eV. As an example, Figure 1 shows the narrow-scan C 1s spectrum recorded on the surface of the as reanodized alumina-free specimen. Thus, three single peaks centered at 285.0 eV for C-H (C-C), 286.6 eV for C-O-C and 288.9 eV for O-C=O species are used to resolve the C 1s spectrum, with the peak-fitting parameters shown in Table 1. After the first 2 sputter cycles, all these peaks almost disappeared from the C 1s spectra. Similar behavior of the C 1s spectrum was revealed for the vacuum-annealed alumina-free sample (not shown) although the surface concentration of C-O-C and O-C=O species was relatively smaller. This confirms that the carbon-containing species are only present in the outermost layer of organic contamination and are not incorporated in the column material.



**Fig. S1.** Experimental and curve-fitted C 1s spectrum recorded on the surface of the as reanodized alumina-free specimen (derived from an Al/Nb bilayer anodized at 52 V in 0.2 mol dm<sup>-3</sup> H<sub>2</sub>C<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub> and then reanodized in 0.1 mol dm<sup>-3</sup> H<sub>3</sub>PO<sub>4</sub> to 300 V)

**Table S1.** The main peak-fitting parameters for C 1s spectrum components of nanostructured niobium oxide sample derived from Al/Nb layers anodized at 52V in 0.2 mol dm<sup>-3</sup> H<sub>2</sub>C<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub> and then reanodized in 0.1 mol dm<sup>-3</sup> H<sub>3</sub>PO<sub>4</sub> to 300V

sample	C 1s (eV)	FWHM (eV)	conc. (%)	chemical bond
alumina-free	285.0	1.5	71.3	C-H (C-C)
	286.6	1.5	17.3	C-O-C
	288.9	1.7	11.4	O-C=O

**Table S2.** The main peak-fitting parameters for Nb 3d spectrum components of the unspattered surfaces of niobium oxide samples derived from Al/Nb layers anodized at 52V in 0.2 mol dm<sup>-3</sup> H<sub>2</sub>C<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub> and then reanodized in 0.1 mol dm<sup>-3</sup> H<sub>3</sub>PO<sub>4</sub> to 300V.

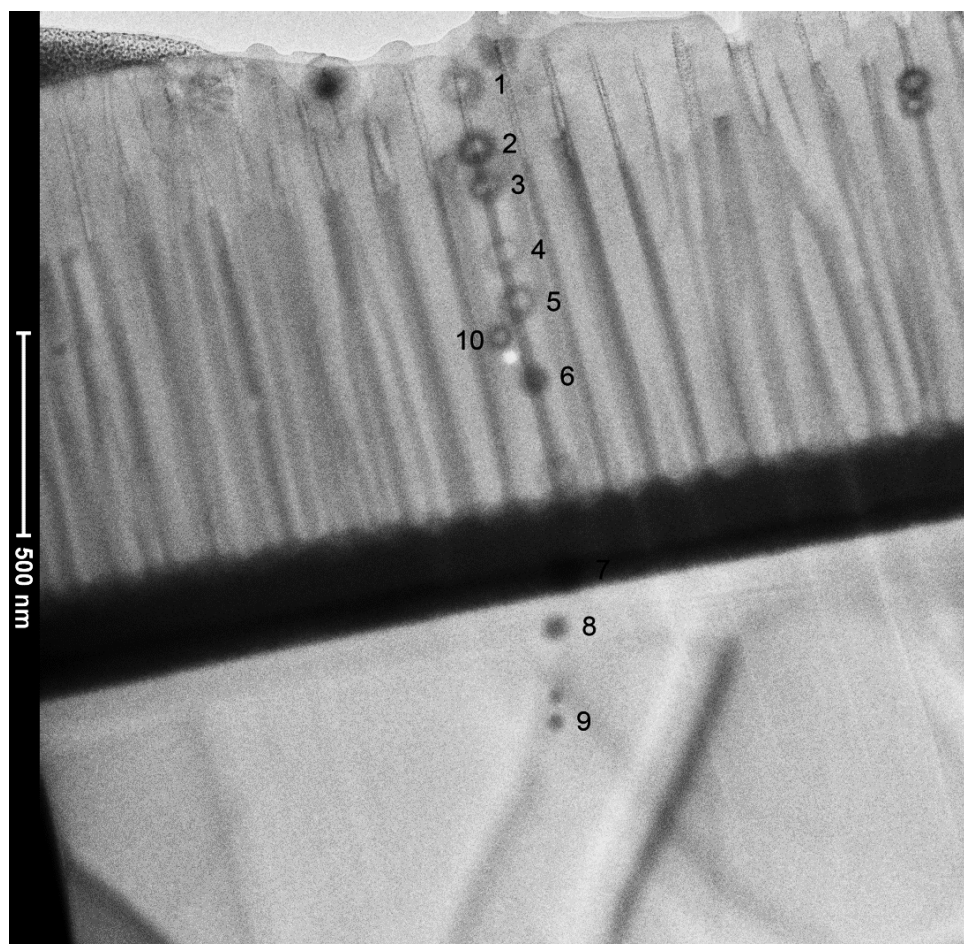
sample	Nb 3d <sub>5/2</sub> (eV)	Nb 3d <sub>3/2</sub> (eV)	FWHM (eV)	conc. (%)	compound
alumina-free sample	207.30	210.05	1.13	98.0	Nb <sub>2</sub> O <sub>5</sub>
	205.65	208.40	1.20	2.0	NbO <sub>2</sub>
pore free sample	207.20	209.95	1.07	100.0	Nb <sub>2</sub> O <sub>5</sub>
vacuum-annealed alumina-free	207.35	210.1	1.10	90.5	Nb <sub>2</sub> O <sub>5</sub>
	203.85	206.60	1.25	5.8	NbO <sub>2</sub>
	205.50	208.25	1.25	3.7	NbO

**Table S3.** The main peak-fitting parameters for O 1s spectrum components of nanostructured niobium oxide sample derived from Al/Nb layers anodized at 52V in 0.2 mol dm<sup>-3</sup> H<sub>2</sub>C<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub> and then reanodized in 0.1 mol dm<sup>-3</sup> H<sub>3</sub>PO<sub>4</sub> to 300V.

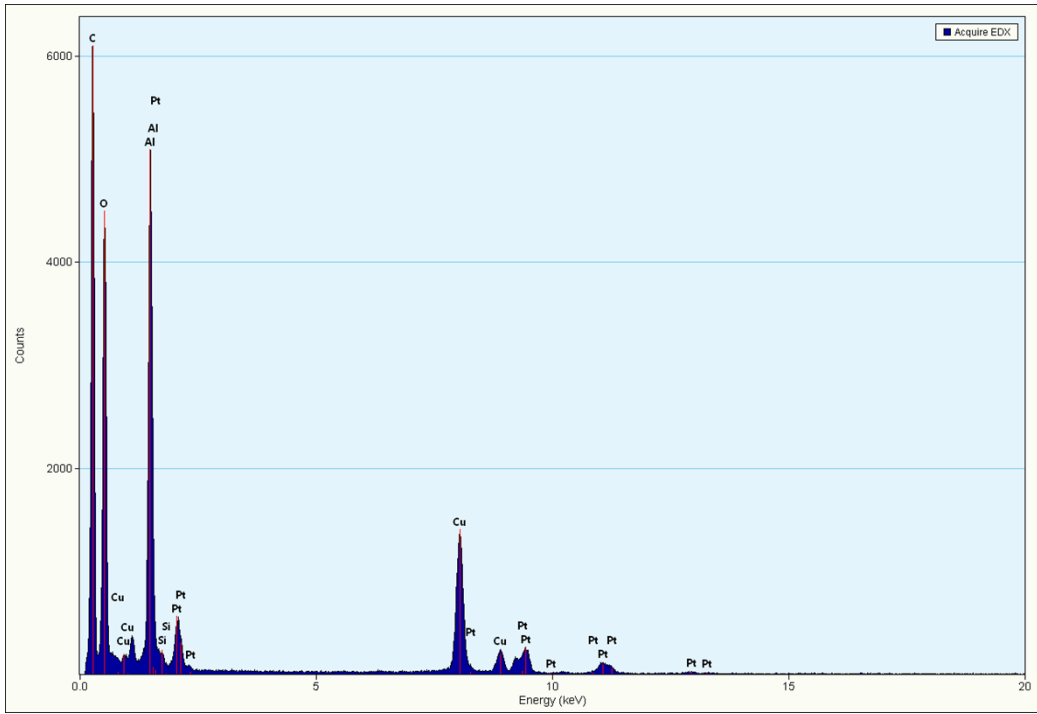
sample	O 1s (eV)	FWHM (eV)	conc. (%)	chemical bond
as reanodized	533.5	1.3	5.1	H <sub>2</sub> O
alumina-free (unetched) sample	532.4	1.3	15.6	OH
	531.6	1.3	29.6	Al-O
	530.5	1.3	49.7	Nb-O
as reanodized	532.8	1.5	5.8	OH
alumina-free	531.5	1.3	19.0	Al-O
Ar-ion etched sample	530.7	1.2	75.2	Nb-O

### Details of EDX point analysis of the FIB-made lamella

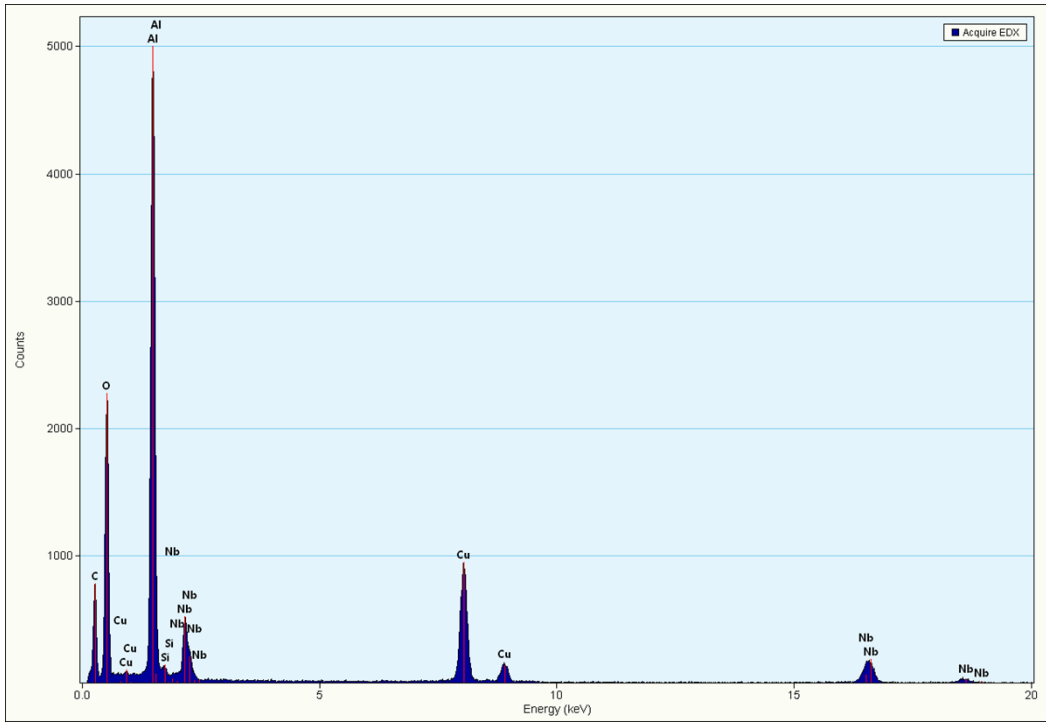
Prior to sectioning by FIB, a layer of platinum, about 300 nm thick, was deposited over the sample surface for preventing top-surface damage. For TEM observations the sample sections were collected on a copper grid. This explains why there are peaks of Pt and Cu in some of the EDX spectra shown below.



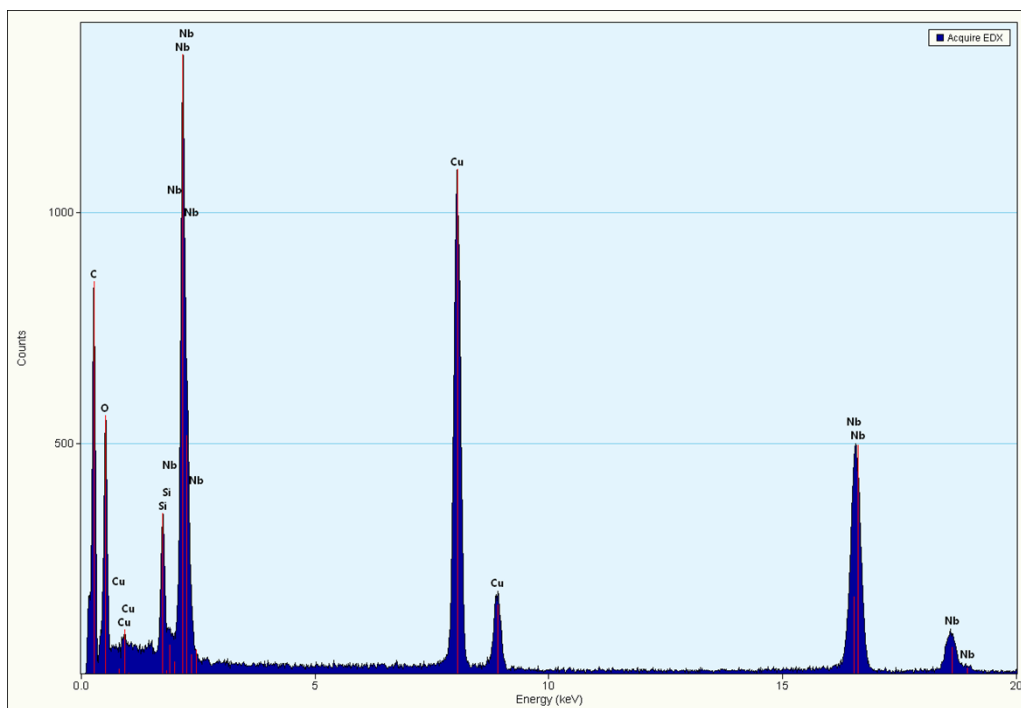
**Fig. S2.** TEM image of FIB-made lamella of a sample derived from Al/Nb layers on an oxide-coated Al foil anodized at 52 V in  $0.2 \text{ mol dm}^{-3} \text{ H}_2\text{C}_2\text{O}_4$  and then reanodized to 450 V in  $0.1 \text{ mol dm}^{-3} \text{ H}_3\text{PO}_4$  solution (referred to in the main text as the reanodized sample). The spots labelled with digits are the areas of interaction of the electron beam with the sample during the EDX point analysis.



a



b



c

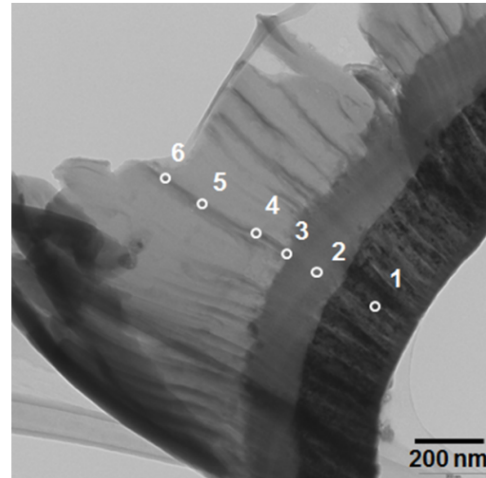
**Fig. S3.** X-ray spectra recorded in (a) spot 1, (b) spot 6, and (c) spot 7 within the FIB-made lamella shown in **Figure S2**.

### **Details of EDX point analysis of the ultramicrotomed film sections**

Ultramicrotomed sections of the anodized Al/Nb bilayers formed on the oxide-coated aluminium foils were prepared using a Reichert-Nissei Ultracuts/FCS ultramicrotome. Fragments of the anodized specimens, encapsulated individually in an epoxy resin, were trimmed initially with a glass knife and suitably thin sections, about 30 nm thick, were prepared by sectioning in a direction approximately parallel to the metal-oxide interface with a diamond knife. Ultramicrotomed sections, collected onto copper grids, were examined in a JEOL JEM-2000FX transmission electron microscope with EDX facilities.

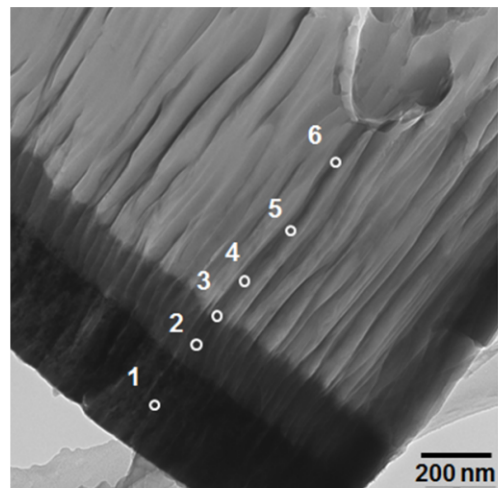
### Position B (spot size ~5 nm)

Spot			
1	Nb	76.29 at%	Nb <sub>1</sub> O <sub>0.271136</sub>
	Al	1.21 at%	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>
	O	22.50 at%	
2	Nb	30.31 at%	Nb <sub>1</sub> O <sub>2.159023</sub>
	Al	1.70 at%	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>
	O	67.99 at%	
3	Nb	23.91 at%	Nb <sub>1</sub> O <sub>2.596821</sub>
	Al	5.60 at%	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>
	O	70.49 at%	
4	Nb	10.80 at%	Nb <sub>1</sub> O <sub>4.93287</sub>
	Al	14.37 at%	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>
	O	74.83 at%	
5	Nb	13.42 at%	Nb <sub>1</sub> O <sub>3.687779</sub>
	Al	14.84 at%	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>
	O	71.75 at%	
6	Nb	13.82 at%	Nb <sub>1</sub> O <sub>3.343343</sub>
	Al	15.99 at%	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>
	O	70.19 at%	



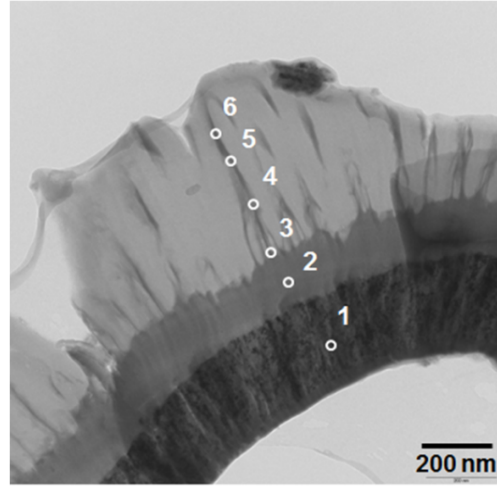
### Position A (spot size ~5 nm)

Spot			
1	Nb	79.30 at%	Nb <sub>1</sub> O <sub>0.188083</sub>
	Al	2.31 at%	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>
	O	18.38 at%	
2	Nb	38.92 at%	Nb <sub>1</sub> O <sub>1.403006</sub>
	Al	2.59 at%	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>
	O	58.49 at%	
3	Nb	22.22 at%	Nb <sub>1</sub> O <sub>2.317507</sub>
	Al	10.51 at%	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>
	O	67.26 at%	
4	Nb	4.67 at%	Nb <sub>1</sub> O <sub>7.704497</sub>
	Al	23.74 at%	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>
	O	71.59 at%	
5	Nb	4.75 at%	Nb <sub>1</sub> O <sub>6.929474</sub>
	Al	24.93 at%	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>
	O	70.31 at%	
6	Nb	1.72 at%	Nb <sub>1</sub> O <sub>18.11337</sub>
	Al	26.85 at%	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>
	O	71.43 at%	



## Position C (spot size ~5 nm)

Spot			
1	Nb	81.41 at%	Nb <sub>1</sub> O <sub>2.214224</sub>
	Al	0.46 at%	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>
	O	18.13 at%	
2	Nb	25.33 at%	Nb <sub>1</sub> O <sub>2.881767</sub>
	Al	0.67 at%	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>
	O	74.00 at%	
3	Nb	20.67 at%	Nb <sub>1</sub> O <sub>2.855346</sub>
	Al	8.12 at%	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>
	O	71.20 at%	
4	Nb	18.81 at%	Nb <sub>1</sub> O <sub>2.935407</sub>
	Al	10.39 at%	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>
	O	70.80 at%	
5	Nb	19.39 at%	Nb <sub>1</sub> O <sub>2.414647</sub>
	Al	13.52 at%	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>
	O	67.10 at%	
6	Nb	8.93 at%	Nb <sub>1</sub> O <sub>4.341545</sub>
	Al	20.93 at%	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>
	O	70.15 at%	



**Fig. S4.** TEM images of 3 positions of an ultramicrotomed section prepared from an Al/Nb bilayer onto an oxide-coated aluminum foil which had been sequentially anodized/reanodized at 52V/300V. The spots marked on the sections are approximate positions of the electron probes used for EDX analysis. The atomic concentrations of elements in the Al-Nb-O system detected in the 6 spots of each section are given in the relevant tables together with the empirical formulas of niobium oxides in the film material. The Al atoms are supposed to be coordinated with O atoms in aluminum oxide Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>.

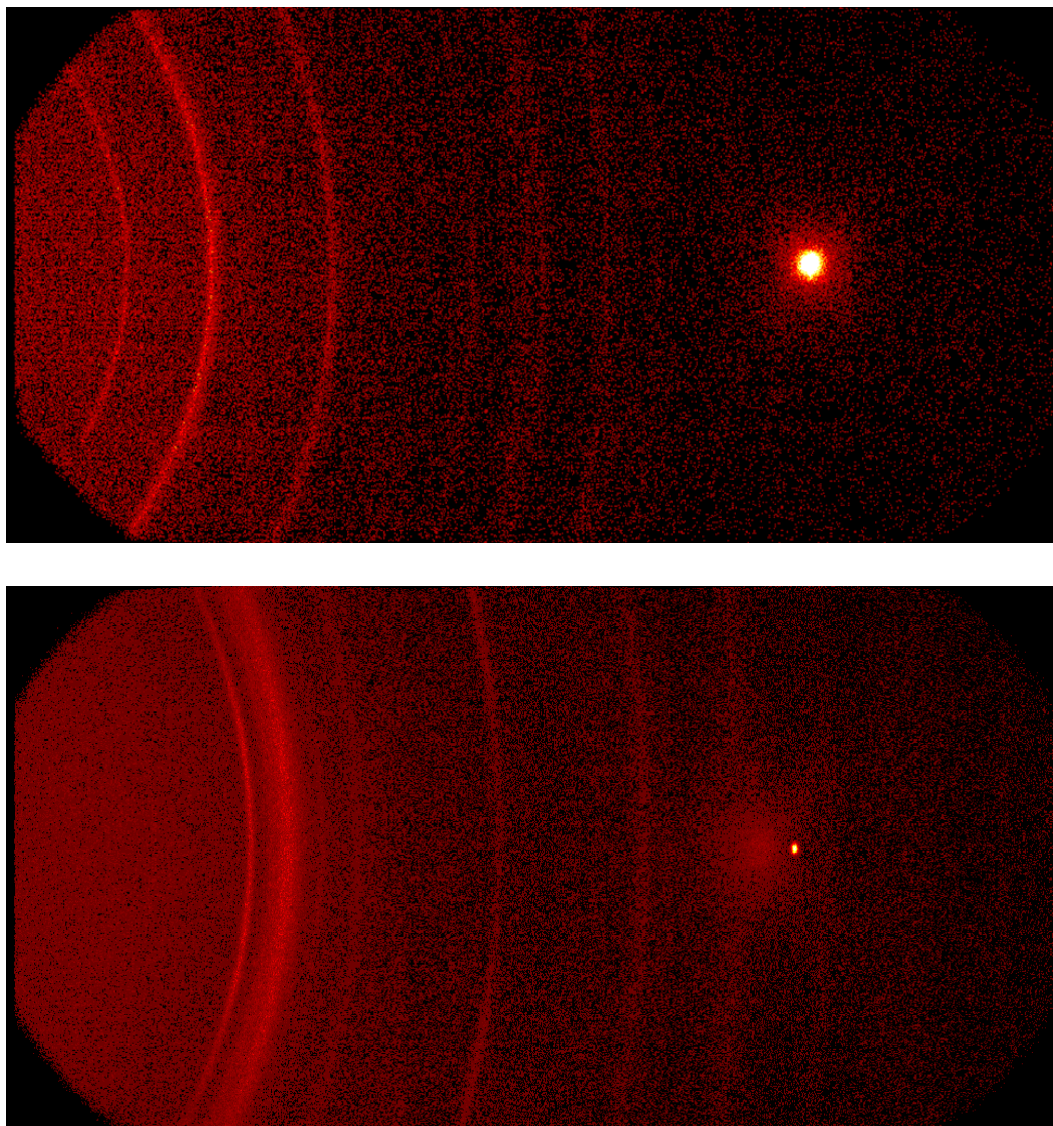
### 2-D diffractograms and details of interpretation of the XRD results

The background (Chebychev polynomial order 7), sample displacement, cell parameters, crystallite size peak broadening, and the Rietveld scale factor were adjusted in each diffractogram. All the phases possess a remarkable preferred orientation (PO) of the crystallites, as it was firstly deduced from the 2-D diffractograms (Figure S5), where the Debye rings did not show a constant intensity along  $\gamma$ -angle<sup>1</sup>.

The crystal structures for each phase detected in the samples are presented in Table S4 together with the results of quantitative analysis of the experimental diffraction patterns. The March-Dollase model<sup>2</sup> was used to correct such preferred orientation in the Rietveld analysis summarized in Table 4. The term  $PO_{hkl}$  gives the refined orientation parameter to be applied in a specific [hkl] direction.  $PO_{hkl} > 1$  means that this direction is not favored while  $PO_{hkl} = 1$  means



that there is no preferred orientation in this direction. From the table, each phase has a preferred orientation as it can be expected for a thin layer.



**Fig. S5.** 2-dimensional diffractograms of (top) the air-annealed alumina-free sample (as in Figure 3f of the paper) and (bottom) the vacuum-annealed alumina-free sample showing the Debye rings of polycrystalline phases and the spots corresponding to the Si single crystal wafers

**Table S4. Structural data and refined parameters from the experimental diffractograms: space group, Inorganic Crystal Structure Data file number, cell parameter, mean crystallite size, preferred orientation [hkl] direction with refined correction, and wt% of phases**

Phase	Space group	ICSD	Cell (Å)	Crystal. size (nm)	Preferred orientation $PO_{hkl}$	wt %
Vacuum-annealed alumina-free sample:						
Nb	Im-3m	076554	a: 3.3882(9)	5.1(2)	[011] 0.25(2)	74.6
NbO	Fm-3m	076560	a: 4.238(1)	14.1(9)	[111] 1.59(4)	15.6
$\beta$ -NbO <sub>2</sub>	I4 <sub>1</sub>	035181	a: 9.670(2)	54(3)	[101] 0.25(4)	6.9
			c: 5.984(1)		[111] 0.33(1)	
Nb <sub>2</sub> O <sub>5</sub>	Pbam	001840	a: 6.27(1)	63 <sup>a)</sup>	[010] 0.71(5)	2.7
			b: 28.66(2)			
			c: 3.939 <sup>a)</sup>			
Air-annealed alumina-free sample:						
Nb <sub>2</sub> O <sub>5</sub>	Pbam	001840	a: 6.182(2)	26(1)	[010] 0.825(6)	100
			b: 29.248(8)			
			c: 3.939(1)			

a) these parameters were not refined due to the low intensity of the phase in the diffractogram

## Gas-sensor performance analysis

Here we present a comparative analysis of the responses to hydrogen and ethanol gases achieved with the laboratory gas sensor fabricated in the present work with the best responses of niobium-oxide and other metal-oxide gas sensors reported in the literature (references provided)

**Table S5. Response time for H<sub>2</sub> detection measured with the nanostructured NO-based laboratory gas sensor fabricated in this work and with the different nanostructured metal-oxide (including niobium oxide)-based sensors found in the literature**

Sensing material	Type of nanostructure <sup>a</sup>	H <sub>2</sub> concentration (ppm)	Response time (s)	Ref.
<i>Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub><sup>b</sup></i>	<i>NCs</i>	<i>1000</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>This paper</i>
ZnO	NRs	500	resistance is not stabilized after 15 min of gas exposure	[3]
SnO <sub>2</sub>	NW	10	100	[4]
ZnO	NR	1000	600	[5]
ZnO	NW	100	~60	[6]
Pt-coated W <sub>18</sub> O <sub>49</sub>	NW	1000	~60	[7]
Nb <sub>2</sub> O <sub>5</sub>	NW	2000	127	[8]
Nb <sub>2</sub> O <sub>5</sub>	NP	10000	90	[9]
Nb <sub>2</sub> O <sub>5</sub>	NP	1000	300	[10]
Nb <sub>2</sub> O <sub>5</sub>	thin film	8000	120	[11]

a) NC=nanocolumns, NB= nanobelts, NW= nanowires, NR= nanorods, NP= nanopores

b) Parameters of the material presented in this paper

**Table S6. Detection limit for C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>5</sub>OH measured with the nanostructured NO-based laboratory gas sensor fabricated in the present work and with the different nanostructured metal-oxide (including niobium oxide)-based sensors found in the literature**

<b>Sensor Material</b>	<b>Type of nanostructure<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Detection limit of C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub>O (ppm)</b>	<b>Ref.</b>
<i>Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub><sup>b</sup></i>	<i>NC</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>This paper</i>
V <sub>2</sub> O <sub>5</sub>	NB	5	[12]
ZnO	NR	10	[13]
In <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	NW	100	[14]
MoO <sub>3</sub>	NR	30	[15]
In <sub>2</sub> O <sub>5</sub>	thin film	10	[16]

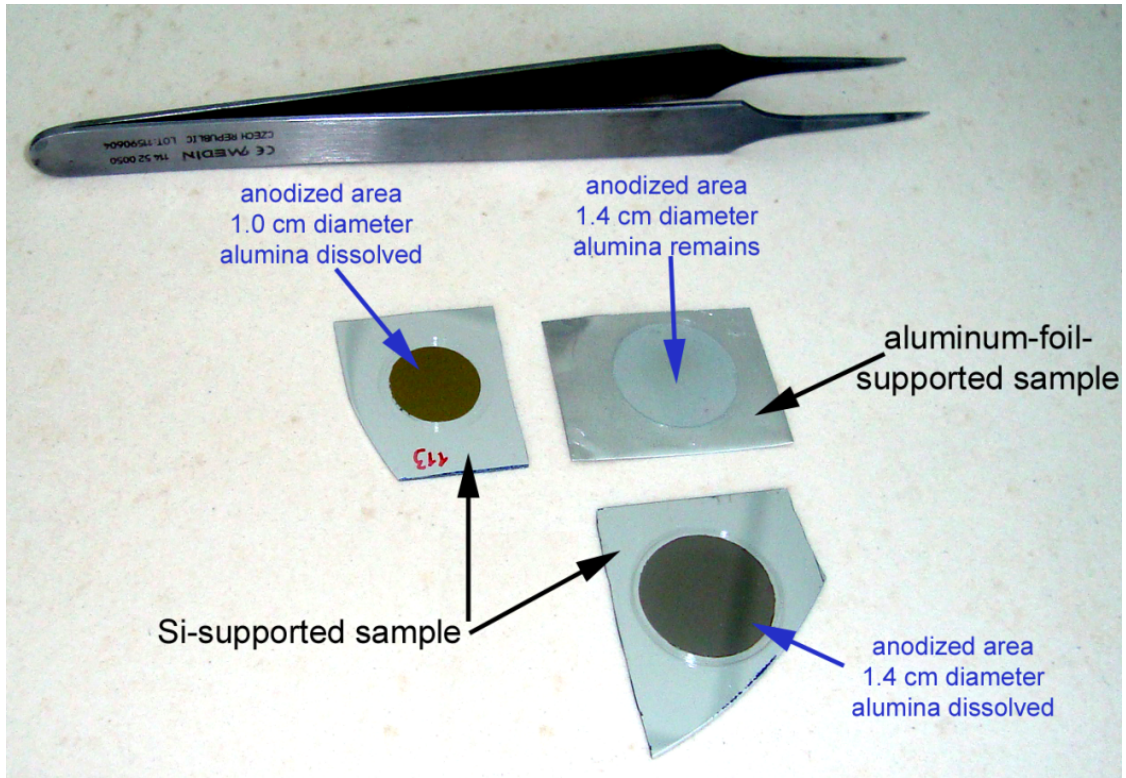
- a) NC=nanocolumns, NB= nanobelts, NW= nanowires, NR= nanorods, NP= nanopores  
b) Parameters of the material presented in the paper

### **Notes to the porous-anodic-alumina assisted high-potential reanodizing of niobium**

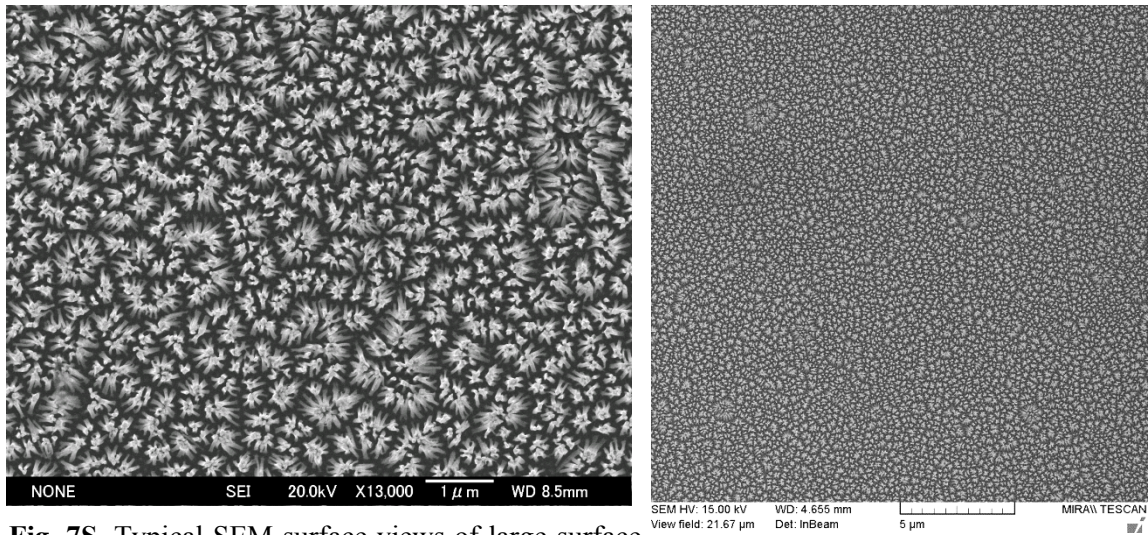
With the selected technological, electrical, and electrolytic conditions, in the potential range up to 450 V reanodizing proceeds smoothly, without potential fluctuations (current overshoots), visible gas evolution, stress-generated physical defects, or destructive field crystallization. Moreover, during the potential-stabilization period, the current decreased to its leakage value without dielectric breakdown and unexpected dissolution at the respective interfaces. The sample surface observed in an optical microscope looks defect-free and uniform in color, which is due to interference of light within the anodic film (Figure S6). After selective dissolution of the alumina overlayer, the columnar film observed in an SEM looks uniform across the whole sample surface, without discontinuities or destroyed areas (Figure S7). The length of the columns is essentially the same across the whole sample surface and is determined by the formation potential value only.

Experiments with anodizing of an Al/Nb bilayer sputtered onto a 100-mm Si wafer revealed an extraordinary uniform anodizing behaviour, as well as a good quality of the anodic film across the wafer surface, without local detachment or destruction of the anodized areas (Figure S8).

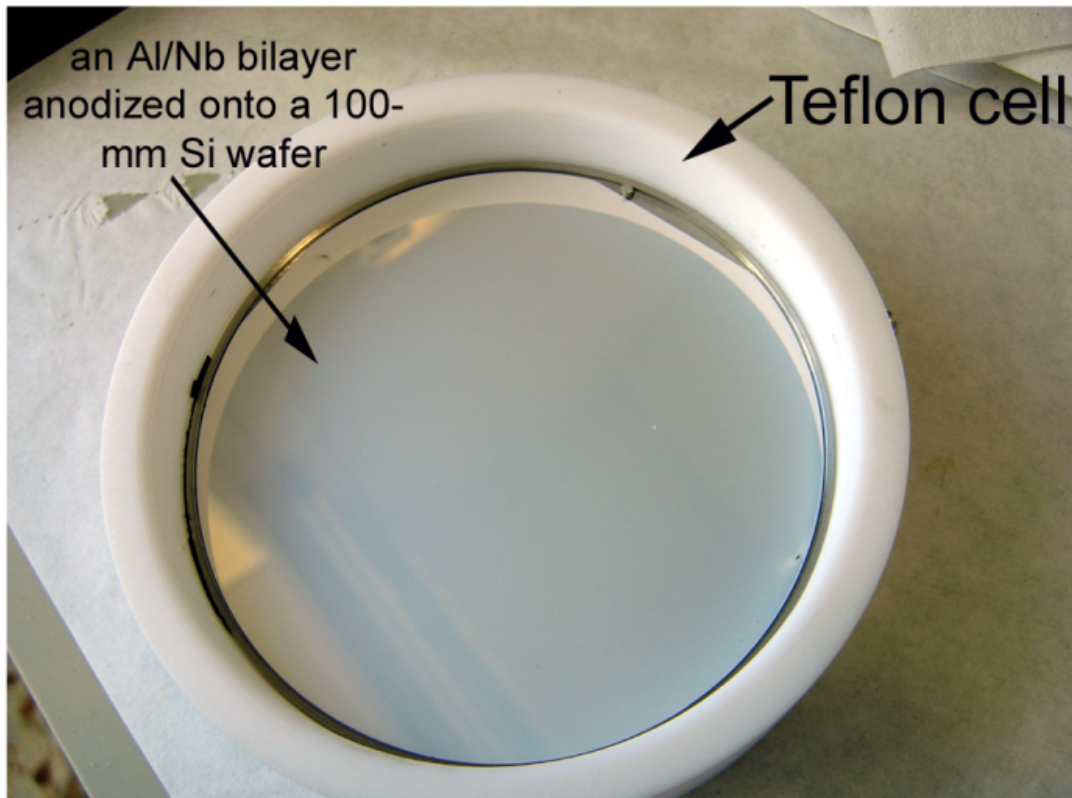




**Fig. S6.** Digital photo of experimental samples prepared via anodizing an Al/Nb bilayer at 52 V in  $0.2 \text{ mol dm}^{-3} \text{H}_2\text{C}_2\text{O}_4$  followed by reanodizing in  $0.1 \text{ mol dm}^{-3} \text{H}_3\text{PO}_4$  to 450 V.



**Fig. 7S.** Typical SEM surface views of large-surface-area fragments of an Al/Nb bilayer which had been anodized at 52 V in  $0.2 \text{ mol dm}^{-3} \text{H}_2\text{C}_2\text{O}_4$ , reanodized in  $0.1 \text{ mol dm}^{-3} \text{H}_3\text{PO}_4$  to 450 V, and treated in the selective etchant to dissolve the porous alumina overlayer.



**Fig. 8S.** Digital photo of an Al/Nb bilayer onto a 100-mm Si wafer anodized/reanodized as mentioned in Figure 7S

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