

Untwisting the Boerdijk–Coxeter Helix

Robert L. Read read.robert@gmail.com

Abstract. The Boerdijk–Coxeter helix (BC helix, or tetrahelix) is a face-to-face stack of regular tetrahedra forming a helical column. Considering the edges of these tetrahedra as structural members, the resulting structure is attractive and inherently rigid, and therefore interesting to architects, mechanical engineers, and robotocists. A formula is developed that matches the visually apparent helices forming the outer rails of the BC helix. This formula is generalized to a formula convenient to designers. Formulae for computing the parameters that give edge-length minimax-optimal tetrahelices are given, defining a continuum of tetrahelices of varying curvature. The endpoints of the optimality of this continuum are the BC helix and a structure of zero curvature, the *equitrapeam*. Numerically finding the rail angle from the equation for pitch allows optimal tetrahelices of any pitch to be designed. An interactive tool for such design and experimentation is provided: <https://pubinv.github.io/tetrahelix/>. A formula for the inradius of optimal tetrahelices is given. Utility for static and variable geometry truss/space frame design and robotics is discussed.

Key words. Boerdijk–Coxeter helix, tetrahelix, robotics, tetrobot, unconventional robots, structural engineering, mechanical engineering, tensegrity, variable-geometry truss

AMS subject classifications. 51M15

1. Introduction. The Boerdijk–Coxeter helix[3] (BC helix), is a face-to-face stack of tetrahedra that winds about a straight axis. Because architects, structural engineers, and robotocists are inspired by and follow such regular mathematical models but can also build structures and machines of differing or even dynamically changing length, it is useful to develop the mathematics of structures formed from tetrahedra where we relax regularity.

The vertices of the tetrahedra lie upon three helices about the central axis. The glussbot[11] (or Tetrobot)[8] uses the regularity of this geometry to make a tentacle-like robot that can crawl like a slug or mollusc. The Tetrobot uses mechanical actuators which can change their length, connected by special joints, such as the 3D printable Song-Kwon-Kim[15] joint, or the CMS joint[7] which allow many members to meet in a single point. Such machines can follow purely regular mathematical models such as the Boerdijk-Coxeter helix or the Octet Truss[4].

Buckminster Fuller called the BC helix a *tetrahelix*[5], a term now commonly used. In this paper we reserve *BC helix* to mean the purely regular structure and use *tetrahelix* to refer to any structure isomorphic to the BC helix.

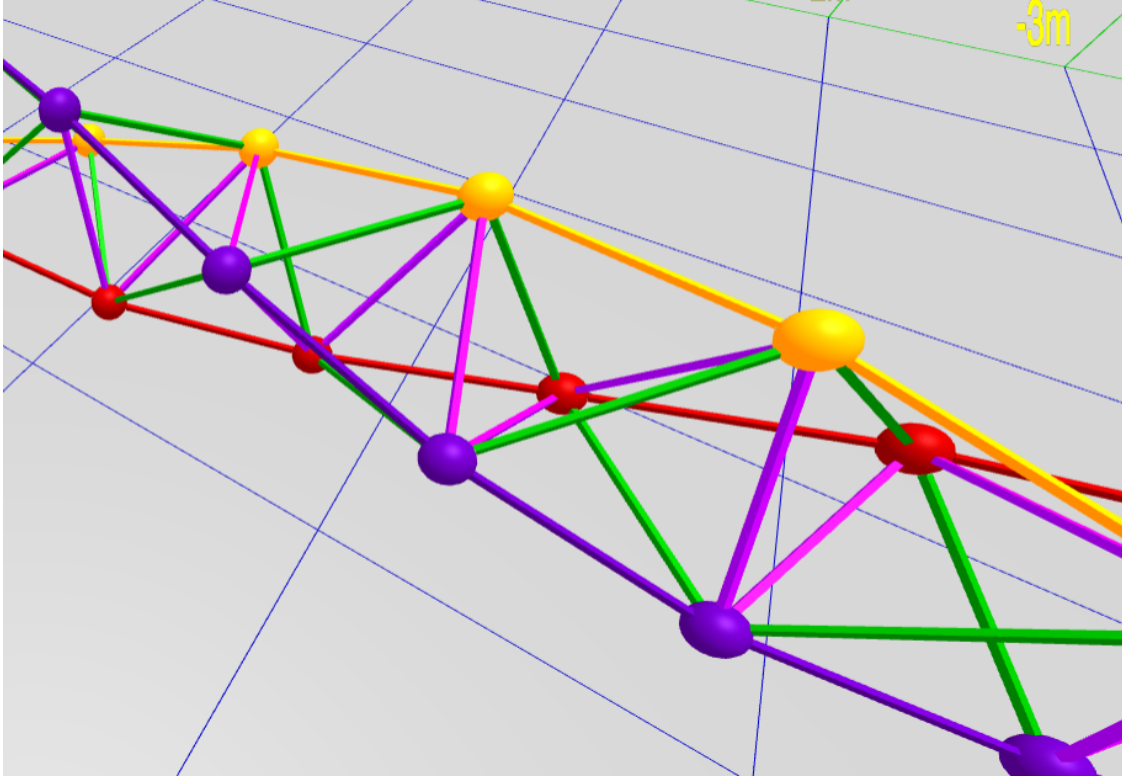


Figure 1. *BC Helix Close-up (partly along axis)*

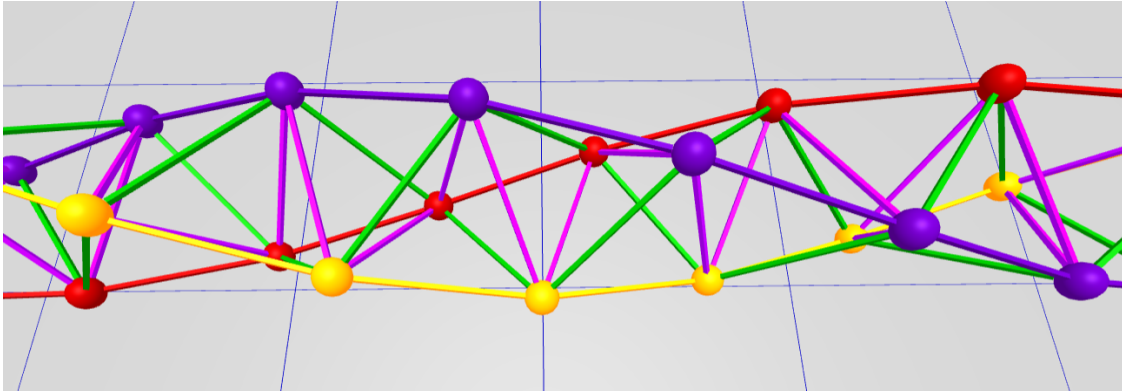


Figure 2. *BC Helix Close-up (orthogonal)*

33 Imagining [Figure 2](#) as a static mechanical structure, we observe that it is useful to the
 34 mechanical engineer or robotocist because the structure remains an inherently rigid, omni-
 35 triangulated space frame, which is mechanically strong. Imagine further in [Figure 2](#), that each
 36 static edge was replaced with an actuator that could dynamically become shorter or longer in
 37 response to electronic control, and the vertices were a joint that supported sufficient angular
 38 displacement for this to be possible. An example of such a machine is a glussbot, shown in
 39 [Figure 11](#).

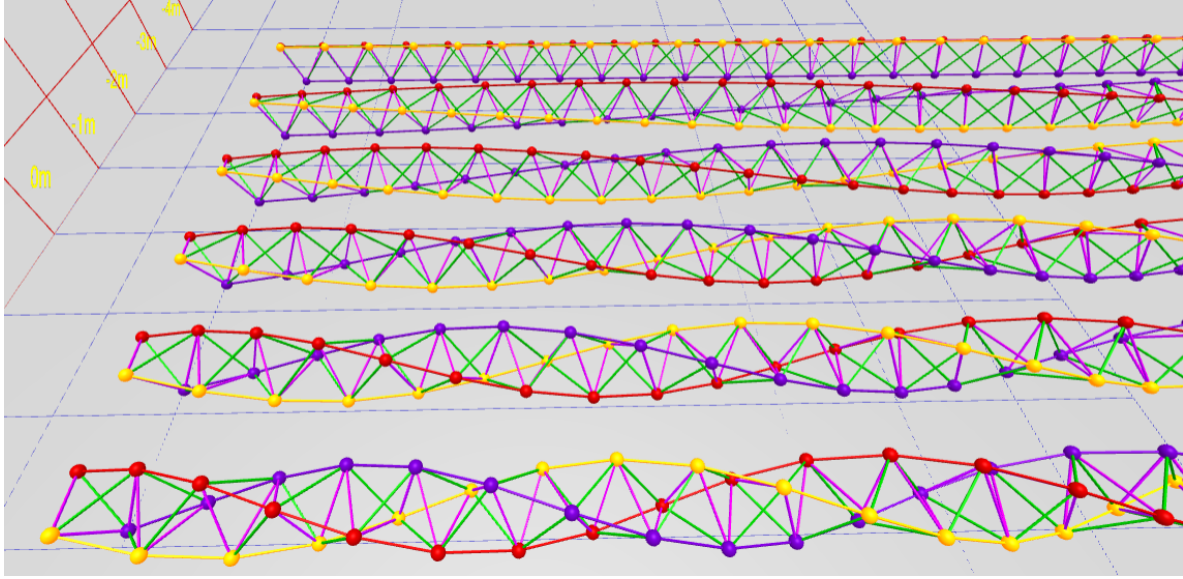


Figure 3. *A Continuum of Tetrahelices*

A BC helix does not rest stably on a plane. It is convenient to be able to “untwist” it and to form a tetrahelix space frame that has a flat planar surface. By making length changes in a certain way, we can untwist a tetrahelix to form a *tetrabeam* which has planar faces and has, for example, an equilateral triangular profile. This paper develops the equations needed to untwist the tetrahelix. All math developed here is available in JavaScript and demonstrated by an interactive design website <https://pubinv.github.io/tetrahelix/>[12], from which Figure 2 and the figures below are taken.

Figure 3 displays a continuum of tetrahelices optimal in a certain sense, which is the result of this paper. The closest helix is the BC helix, and the furthest is the equitetrabeam, defined in section 6.

2. A Designer’s Formulation of the BC Helix. We would like to design nearly regular tetrahelices with a formula that gives the vertices in space. Eventually we would like to design nearly regular tetrahelices by choosing the lengths of a small set of members. In a space frame, this is a static design choice; in a tetrobot, it is a dynamic choice that can be used to twist the robot and/or exert linear or angular force on the environment.

Ideally we would have a simple formula for defining the nodes based on any curvature or pitch we choose. It is a goal of this paper to relate these two approaches to generating a tetrahelix continuum.

H.S.M Coxeter constructs the BC helix[3] as a repeated rotation and translation of the tetrahedra, showing the rotation is:

$$\theta_{bc} = \arccos(-2/3)$$

61 and the translation:

$$62 \quad h_{bc} = 1/\sqrt{10}$$

63 θ_{bc} is approximately $0.37 \cdot 2\pi$ radians or 131.81 degrees. The angle θ_{bc} is the rotation of
 64 *each* tetrahedron, not the tetrahedra along a rail. In [Figure 2](#), each tetrahedron has either a
 65 yellow, blue, or red outer edge or rail. That is, a blue-rail tetrahedron is rotated slightly more
 66 than a 1/3 of a revolution to match the face of the yellow tetrahedra.

67 R.W. Gray's site[6], repeating a formula by Coxeter[3] in more accessible form, gives the

68 Cartesian coordinates $\begin{bmatrix} x \\ y \\ z \end{bmatrix}$ for a counter-clockwise BC Helix:

$$69 \quad (1) \quad V(n) = \begin{bmatrix} r_{bc} \cos n\theta_{bc} \\ r_{bc} \sin n\theta_{bc} \\ nh_{bc} \end{bmatrix}, \text{ where: } \begin{aligned} r_{bc} &= \frac{3\sqrt{3}}{10} \approx 0.5196 \\ h_{bc} &= 1/\sqrt{10} \approx 0.3162 \\ \theta_{bc} &= \arccos(-2/3) \end{aligned}$$

70 where n represents each integer numbered node in succession on every colored rail.

71 The apparent rotation of a vertex an outer-edge, $V(n)$ relative from $V(n+3)$ for any
 72 integer n in (1), is $3\theta_{bc} - 2\pi$.

73 This formula defines a helix, but it is not any of the apparent helices, or *rail* helices, of the
 74 BC helix, but rather one that winds three times as rapidly through all nodes. To a designer of
 75 tetrahelices, it is more natural to think of the three helices which are visually apparent, that
 76 is, those three which are closely approximated by the outer edges or rails of the BC helix. We
 77 think of each of these three rails as being a different color: red, blue, or yellow. This situation
 78 is illustrated in [Figure 4](#), wherein the black helix represents that generated by (1), and the
 79 colored helices are generated by (2).

80 In order to develop the continuum of slightly irregular tetrahelices described in [section 7](#),
 81 we need a formula that gives us the nodes of just one rail helix, denoted by color c and integer
 82 node number n :

$$83 \quad (\forall n \in \mathbb{Z}, \forall c \in \{0, 1, 2\} : H_{BC\text{colored}}(n, c) = V(3n + c))$$

84 Such a helix can be written:

$$85 \quad (2) \quad H_{BC\text{colored}}(n, c) = \begin{bmatrix} r_{bc} \cos((3\theta_{bc} - 2\pi)n + c\theta_{bc}) \\ r_{bc} \sin((3\theta_{bc} - 2\pi)n + c\theta_{bc}) \\ 3h_{bc}(n + c/3) \end{bmatrix}, \text{ where } \begin{aligned} r_{bc} &= \frac{3\sqrt{3}}{10} \\ h_{bc} &= 1/\sqrt{10} \\ \theta_{bc} &= \arccos(-2/3) \end{aligned}$$

86 In this formula, integral values of n may be taken as a node number for one rail and
 87 used to compute its Cartesian coordinates. Allowing n to take non-integer values defines a
 88 continuous helix in space which is close to the segmented polyline of the outer tetrahedra
 89 edges, and equals them at integer values.

90 [Figure 4](#) illustrates this difference with a 7-tetrahedra BC helix, which is in fact the same
 91 geometry as the robot illustrated in [Figure 11](#). Although the nodes coincide, (1) evaluated
 92 at real values generates the black helix which runs through every node, and (2) defines the
 93 red, yellow, and blue helices. (In this figure these rail helices have been rendered at a slightly

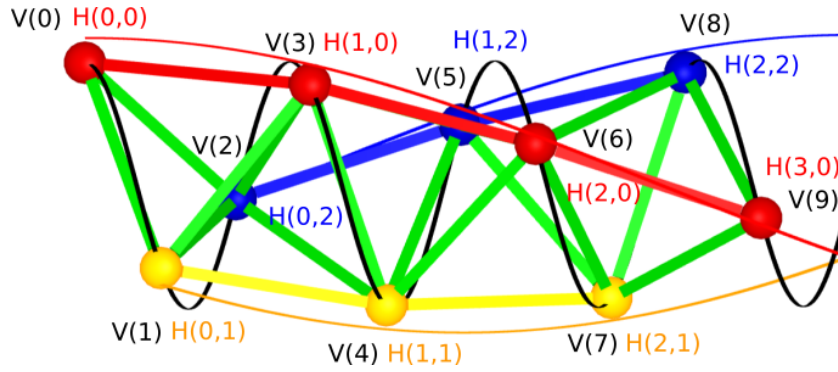


Figure 4. Rail helices (H) vs. Coxeter/Gray helix (V)

94 higher radius than the nodes for clarity; in actuality the maximum distance between the
 95 continuous, curved helix and the straight edges between nodes is much smaller than can be
 96 clearly rendered.)

97 The quantity $(3\theta_{bc} - 2\pi) \approx 35.43^\circ$ is the angular shift between $V(3n+c) = H_{BC\text{colored}}(n, c)$
 98 and $V(3(n+1)+c) = H_{BC\text{colored}}(n+1, c)$. This quantity appears so often that we call it the
 99 “rail angle ρ ”. For the BC helix, $\rho_{bc} = (3\theta_{bc} - 2\pi)$.

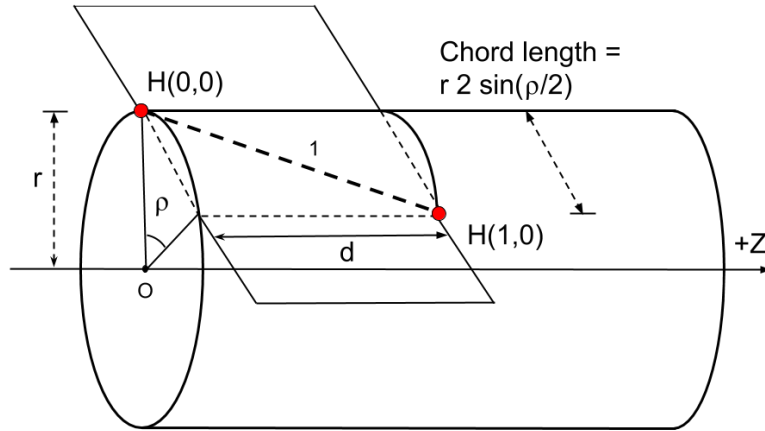


Figure 5. Rail Angle Geometry

100 Note in Figure 5 the z -axis travel for one rail edge is denoted by d . In (1) and (2), the
 101 variable h is used for one third of the distance we name d . We will later justify that $d = 3h$.
 102 In this paper we assume the length of a rail is always 1 as a simplification. (We make the rail
 103 length a parameter in our JavaScript code in <https://github.com/PubInv/tetrahelix/blob/>

104 `master/js/tetrahelix_math.js` [12].)

105 The $H_{BC\text{colored}}(n, c)$ formulation can be further clarified by rewriting directly in terms of
 106 the rail angle ρ_{bc} rather than θ_{bc} . Intuitively we seek an expression where $c/3$ is multiplied by
 107 a $1/3$ rotation plus the rail angle ρ . We expand the expressions θ_{bc} and ρ_{bc} in (2) and seek to
 108 isolate the term $c2\pi/3$.

$$\begin{aligned} 109 \quad c\theta_{bc} &= \{\text{we aim for 3 in denominator, so we split...}\} \\ 110 \quad (c/3)(3\theta_{bc}) &= \{\text{we want } 2\pi \text{ in numerator, so add canceling terms...}\} \\ 111 \quad (c/3)((3\theta_{bc} - 2\pi) + 2\pi) &= \{\text{definition of } \rho_{bc}\}... \\ 112 \quad (c/3)\rho_{bc} + c2\pi/3 &= \{\text{algebra...}\} \\ 113 \quad c(\rho_{bc} + 2\pi)/3 & \end{aligned}$$

114

116 This allows us to redefine:

$$117 \quad (3) \quad H_{BC\text{colored}}(n, c) = \begin{bmatrix} r \cos \rho_{bc}n + c(\rho_{bc} + 2\pi)/3 \\ r \sin \rho_{bc}n + c(\rho_{bc} + 2\pi)/3 \\ (n + c/3)h_{bc} \end{bmatrix}, \text{ where } \begin{matrix} \rho_{bc} = (3\theta_{bc} - 2\pi) \\ h_{bc} = 1/\sqrt{10} \end{matrix}$$

118 Recall that $c \in \{0, 1, 2\}$, but n is continuous (rational or real-valued.) We can now assert
 119 that in Figure 4 the black helix winds at $\frac{3\theta_{bc}}{\rho_{bc}} \approx 11.16$ times the rate of a rail helix.

120 From this formulation it is easy to see that moving one vertex on a rail ($H_{BC\text{colored}}(n, c)$)
 121 to $H_{BC\text{colored}}(n + 1, c)$ for any n and c) moves us ρ_{bc} radians around a circle. Since:

$$122 \quad \frac{2\pi}{\rho_{bc}} \approx 10.16$$

123 we can see that there are approximately 10.16 red, blue or yellow tetrahedra on one rail in a
 124 single revolution.

125 The *pitch* of any tetrahelix, defined as the axial length of a complete revolution where
 126 $\rho \neq 0$ is:

$$127 \quad (4) \quad p(\rho) = \frac{2\pi \cdot d}{\rho}$$

128 The pitch of the Boerdijk–Coxeter helix of edge length 1 is the length of three tetrahedra
 129 times this number:

$$130 \quad \frac{3h_{bc} \cdot 2\pi}{\rho_{bc}} = \frac{6\pi}{\sqrt{10}\rho_{bc}} \approx 9.64$$

132 The pitch is less than the number of tetrahedra because the tetrahedra are not lined
 133 up perfectly. It is a famous and interesting result that the pitch is irrational. A BC helix
 134 never has two tetrahedra at precisely the same orientation around the z -axis. However, this
 135 is inconvenient to designers, who might prefer a rational pitch. The idea of developing a

rational period by arranging solid tetrahedra by relaxing the face-to-face matching has been explored[13]. We develop below slightly irregular edge lengths that support, for example, a pitch of precisely 12 tetrahedra in one revolution which would allow an architect to design a column having a basis and a capital in the same relation to the tetrahedra they touch at the bottom and top of the column.

3. Optimal Tetrahelices are Triple Helices. We use the term *tetrahelix* to mean any structure made of vertices and edges which is isomorphic to the BC helix and in which the vertices lie on three helices. We further demand that all edge lengths be finite, as we are only interested in physically constructable tetrahelices. By isomorphic we mean there is a one-to-one mapping between both vertices and edges in the two tetrahelices. One could consider various definitions of optimality for a tetrahelix, but the most useful to us as robotocists working with the Tetrobot concept is to minimize the maximum ratio between any two edge lengths, because the Tetrobot uses mechanical linear acutators with limited range of extension.

A *triple helix* is three congruent helices that share an axis. We show that optimal tetrahelices are in fact triple helices with the same radius, so that all vertices are on a cylinder. In, stages, we demonstrate that optimal tetrahelices:

1. have the same pitch,
2. have parallel axes,
3. share the same axis,
4. have the same radius.

Suppose that all three rails do not have the same pitch. Starting at any shortest edge between two rails, as we move from node to node away from our start edge the edge lengths between rails must always lengthen without bound, which cannot be optimal. So we are justified in talking about the *pitch* of the optimal tetrahelix as the pitch of its three rail helices, even though there are three such helices of equivalent pitch.

Similarly, if the axes are not parallel, there is an edge of unbounded length in the structure, so we do not consider such cases.

Since the axes are parallel, we may define the *inradius*, represented by the letter i , of a tetrahelix to be the radius of the largest cylinder parallel to this axis that is surrounded by each tetrahelix and penetrated by no edge. Define a *minimax edge-length optimal tetrahelix* or just an *optimal tetrahelix* to be a tetrahelix for which there exists no other tetrahelix of the same inradius and pitch with a lower maximum ratio between its edge lengths.

We wish to show that in an optimal tetrahelix, all vertices lie on the cylinder of radius r , regardless of where they lie on the z -axis.

Since all three rails have the same rail edge length, no matter how we move the rails in the xy plane if we shorten the xy distance between vertices we shorten the total distance. Our tool for thinking about this is to collapse the z dimension to form a two-dimensional figure of nodes and non-rail edges (see ??.) Consider the projection along the z axis of all vertices and non-rail edges into the xy plane, which will be a figure of dots and connecting segments in the xy plane. The convex hull for any one helix projection will be a circle (if its pitch is irrational) or a polygon if rational, or a point if the helix has zero curvature. Each of these figures by definition lies outside the circle of inradius r_{in} in the xy plane.

As a little lemma for the proof below, observe that a tetrahelix of zero radius, where all

179 points lie on the same line, is not as optimal as a tetrahelix of a small radius. The edges
 180 between rails will be shorter than the rail edges, and moving them apart slightly lengthens
 181 the between-edge rails.

182 **Theorem 1.** *Any optimal tetrahelix with a rail angle of magnitude less than π has all three*
 183 *axes conincident.*

184 *Proof.* Case 1: Suppose that ρ is zero. Then for any given inradius, the figure in the
 185 XY -plane of an equilateral triangle is the minimax solution for all non-rail edges. Since all
 186 rail edges are of length 1, this is the minimax solution for the entire set. Since the vertices of
 187 an equilateral triangle lie on a circle, all points in three-space lie on a cylinder.

188 Case 2: Suppose that ρ is positive but less than π . In this case each rail helix has
 189 curvature. The projection of points in the XY plane creates a figure guaranteed to have
 190 point on either side of any line through the axis of such a helix, because the figure is either
 191 an n -gon or a circle. We show that the three helices share a common axis.

192 Without loss of generality define the Red helix to have its axis on the z -axis. Without
 193 loss of generality define the Blue helix to be a helix that has an edge connection to the Red
 194 helix that is either a maximum or a minimum. Let B' be the blue helix translated in the
 195 XY -plane so that its axis is the z -axis and coincident with the red helix R . Let D be the
 196 distance between the axis of the Blue helix B and B' . We will show that if $D > 0$ then B
 197 “wobbles” in a way that cannot be optimal. Define a wobble vector by:

$$198 \quad W(n) = B(n) - B'(n)$$

199 where $B(n)$ is the cartesian vector $\begin{bmatrix} x \\ y \end{bmatrix}$ for the projection of the n th blue vertex. Note that
 200 $\|R(n) - B'(n + k)\|$ is a constant for any k , because R and B' have the same pitch and the
 201 same axis, even if they do not have the same radius (which we are currently proving.)

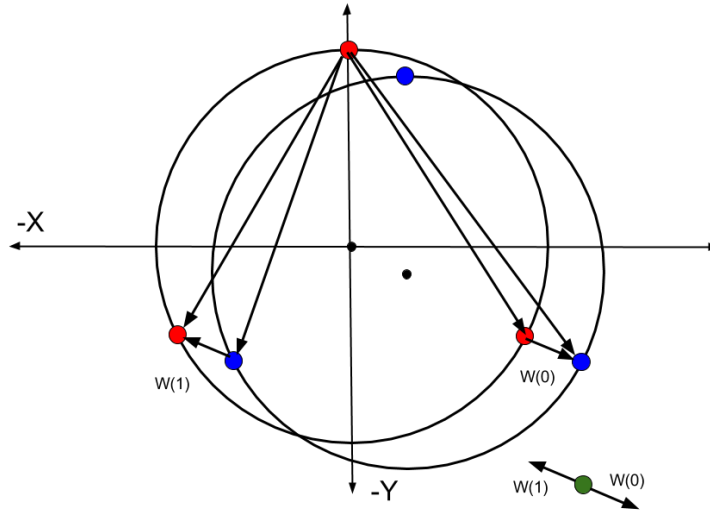


Figure 6. Wobble Vectors from Non-Coincident Axes

202 Since $-\pi < \rho < \pi$, each rail helix rotates about its axis as a function of n and defines at
 203 least 3 unique points when projected onto the XY -plane around its axis. If $2\pi/\rho$ is irrational,
 204 it defines a circle. If $2\pi/\rho$ is rational it defines an n -gon in the XY -plane, where n is at least
 205 3 (when $\rho = 2\pi/3$). The set of wobbles $\{W(n)|\text{for any } n\}$ thus contains at least three vectors,
 206 pointing in different directions. For any point not at the origin, at least one of these vectors
 207 moves closer to the point and at least one moves further away.

208 The set of all lengths in the tetrahelix is a superset of: $L = \{||R(n) - B(n)||\}$, which by
 209 our choice has at least one longest or shortest length. $L = \{||R(n) - (B'(n) + W(n))||\}$ and
 210 so $L = \{||R(n) - B'(n) - W(n)||\}$. But $R(n) - B'(n)$ is a constant, so the minimax value of
 211 L is improved as $||W(n)||$ decreases. By our choice, this improves the minimax value of the
 212 total tetrahelix.

213 This process can be carried out on both the Blue and Yellow helices (perhaps simulta-
 214 neously) until $W(n)$ is zero for both, finding a tetrahelix of improved overall minimax value
 215 at each step. So a tetrahelix is optimal only when $W(n) = 0$, and therefore when $D = 0$
 216 $B(n) = B'(n)$, all three axes are coincident. ■

217 Note that ?? is not true when ρ is an odd integer multiple of π .

218 Note: This is not a proof that they have the same radius, I will have to add that.

219 Now that we have shown that any optimal tetrahelix vertices are on helices of the same
 220 axes and pitch, we see that the vertices of any optimal tetrahelix will lie on a cylinder, or a
 221 circle when axis dimension is projected out. Therefore it is reasonable to now speak of the
 222 radius r of a tetrahelix as the radius of the cylinder, as distinct from the inradius r_{in} .

223 Now that we have coincident axes, the same pitch, and the same radius, we can go on to
 224 the harder proof about where vertices occur along the z -axis.

225 We show that in fact the nodes must be distributed in even thirds along the z -axis, as in
 226 fact they are in the regular BC helix.

227 Note that from the point of view of a single edge, we are on a slanted cylinder, when
 228 $\rho \neq 0$. This means from its point of view a cross section is an ellipse. So we have to be very
 229 careful in comparing lengths of edges relative to the tetrahedron, because a change in position
 230 along the edge changes the length of a line, but in a complicated way depending on where it
 231 is relative to the ellipse.

232 In principle in any 3 helices with the same axis of the same radius having any relative
 233 displacement along the z axis there are 9 distinct edge classes. If when projecting all vertices
 234 on the the z -axis, the interval defined by the z axis value of its endpoints contains no other
 235 vertices, we call it a *one-hop* edge, and if it does contain another vertex we call it a *two-hop*
 236 edge. Then there are 3 rail edges, 3 one-hop lengths between each pair of 3 rails, and 3 two
 237 hop lengths between each pair of 3 rails, where the two-hop length is at least the one-hop
 238 length. However, we have already shown the rail lengths are equal in any optimal tetrahelix.

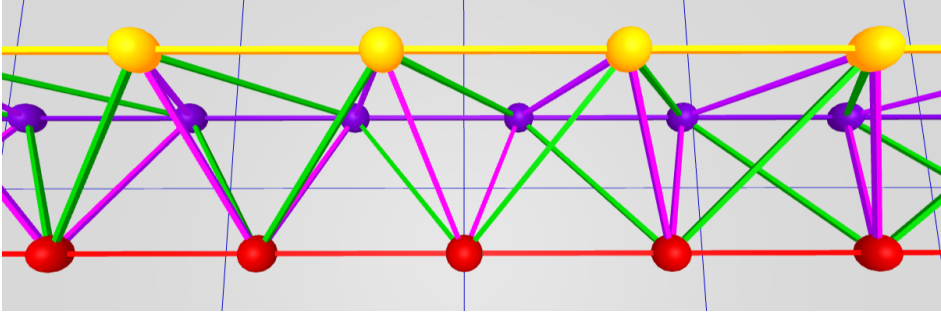


Figure 7. Equitetrabeam

239 Figure 7 shows the equitetrabeam, which is defined in section 6, but also conveniently
 240 illustrates the one-hop and two-hop edge definitions. The green edges are the two-hop edges
 241 and the purple edges are the one-hop edges. Note that the green edges are slightly longer
 242 than the purple edges.

243 **Theorem 2.** *An optimal tetrahelix of any rail angle $\rho < \pi$ is a triple helix with all vertices*
 244 *evenly spaced at $d/3$ intervals on the z axis. Any one tetrahedron in a tetrahelix has 1 rail*
 245 *edge, 2 one-hop edges connected to the rail and 2 two-hop edges connected to the rail. The*
 246 *edge opposite of the rail edge is a one-hop edge.*

247 **Proof.** Consider the tetrahelix in which the vertices are evenly spaced at $d/3$ intervals on
 248 the z axis. Every edge is either a rail edge, or it makes one hop, or it makes two hops. All of
 249 the one-hop edges are equal length. All of the two-hop edges are equal length.

250 Every vertex is connected to 4 non-rail edges. There is a one-hop edge in both the positive
 251 and negative z direction. Likewise there is a two-hop edge in both the positive and negative
 252 z direction. Let A be the set of edge lengths, which has only 3 members, represented by
 253 $A = \{o, t, r\}$ for the one-hop, two-hop, and rail edge lengths.

254 Any attempt to move any rail in either z direction lengthens one two-hop edge to t' , where
 255 $t' > t$ and shortens one one-hop edge $o' < o$. Let $B = \{o', t'\} \cup A$ be new edges. The minimax

of B is greater than the minimax of A since there is a single rail length which cannot be both greater than t' and o' and less than t' and o' . Therefore, any optimal tetrahelix has all one-hop edges between all rails equal to each other, and all two-hop edges equal to each other, and the z distances between rails equal, and therefore $d/3$ from each other.

As each helix is congruent to the others and shares an axis and are evenly spaced, an optimal tetrahelix is a *triple helix*. ■

Note that based on [Theorem 2](#), there are only 3 possible lengths in an optimal tetrahelix, and we are justified in classifying edge lengths as *rail*, *one-hop*, or *two-hop*. The one-hop edges are the edges between rails that are closest on the z -axis, and the two-hop edges are those that skip over a vertex.

By [Theorem 2](#) every optimal tetrahelix has vertices lying on helices expressible in the form:

$$V_{\text{optimal}}(n, c) = \begin{bmatrix} r \cos(n\alpha + c2\pi/3) \\ r \sin(n\alpha + c2\pi/3) \\ \frac{d(n+c/3)}{3} \end{bmatrix}, \text{ where: } c \in \{0, 1, 2\}$$

where we have not yet investigated in the general case the relationships between α , r , and d in this formulation. However, we understand that when $\alpha = 0$, the helices are degenerate, having curvature of 0, and we have the equitetrabeam.

4. Parameterizing Tetrahelices via Rail Angle. We seek a formula to generate optimal tetrahelices that accepts a parameter that allows us to design the tetrahelix conveniently. Please refer back to [Figure 5](#). The pitch of the helix is an obvious choice, but is not defined when the curvature is 0, an important special case. The radius or the axial distance between two nodes on the same rail are possible choices, but perhaps the clearest choice is to build formulae that takes as their input the “rail angle” ρ . We define ρ to be the angle formed in the X,Y plane $\angle H(0,0)OH(0,1)$ projecting out the z axis and sighting along the positive z axis. In other words, ρ controls how far a rail edge of a tetrahelix deviates from being parallel with the axis, or the “twistiness” of the tetrahelix. We use the parameter $\chi = 1$ to indicate a chirality of counter-clockwise, and $\chi = -1$ for clockwise.

The quantities ρ, r, d are related by the expression:

$$(5) \quad \begin{aligned} 1^2 &= d^2 + (2r \sin \rho/2)^2 \\ d^2 &= 1 - 4r^2(\sin \rho/2)^2 \end{aligned}$$

Checking the important special case of the BC helix, we find that this equation indeed holds true (treating d in this equation as $3h_{bc}$ as defined by Gray and Coxeter, that is, $d_{bc} = 3h_{bc}$, where they are using h for the axial height from one node to the next of a different color, but we use d to mean distance between nodes of the same color).

The rail angle ρ also has the meaning that $2\pi/\rho$ is the number of tetrahedra in a full revolution of the helix.

In choosing ρ , one greatly constrains r and d , but does not completely determine both of them together, so we treat both as parameters.

Rewriting our formulation in terms of ρ :

$$(6) \quad H_{general}(\chi, n, c, \rho, d_\rho, r_\rho) = \begin{bmatrix} r_\rho \cos(\chi \cdot (n\rho + c(\rho + 2\pi)/3)) \\ r_\rho \sin(\chi \cdot (n\rho + c(\rho + 2\pi)/3)) \\ d_\rho(n + c/3) \end{bmatrix}$$

where: $1 = d_\rho^2 + 4r_\rho^2(\sin \rho/2)^2$
 $\chi \in \{-1, 1\}$

$H_{general}$ forces the user to select three values: ρ , r_ρ , and d_ρ satisfying (5).

Note that when $\rho = 0$ then $d_\rho = 1$, but r_ρ is not determined by (5).

Theorem 3. *The tetrahelices generated by $H_{general}$ are optimal in terms of minimum maximum ratio of member length when r_ρ is chosen so that the length of the one-hop edge is equal to the rail length.*

Proof. This is proved by a minimax argument.

By Theorem 2, we can compute the (at most) three edge-lengths of an optimal tetrahelix by formula universally quantified by n and c :

$$\begin{aligned} \text{rail} &= \text{dist}(H_{general}(n, c, \rho, d_\rho, r_\rho), H_{general}(n + 1, c, \rho, d_\rho, r_\rho)) = 1 \\ \text{one-hop} &= \text{dist}(H_{general}(n, c, \rho, d_\rho, r_\rho), H_{general}(n, c + 1, \rho, d_\rho, r_\rho)) \\ \text{two-hop} &= \text{dist}(H_{general}(n, c, \rho, d_\rho, r_\rho), H_{general}(n, c + 2, \rho, d_\rho, r_\rho)) \end{aligned}$$

where dist is the Cartesian distance function.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{one-hop} &= \text{dist}(H_{general}(n, c, \rho, d_\rho, r_\rho), H_{general}(n, c + 1, \rho, d_\rho, r_\rho)) \\ \text{one-hop} &= \sqrt{\frac{d_\rho^2}{9} + r_\rho^2(\sin^2(\rho/3 + \frac{2\pi}{3}) + (1 - \cos(\rho/3 + \frac{2\pi}{3}))^2)} \\ \text{but: } d_\rho^2 &= 1 - 4r_\rho^2(\sin(\rho/2))^2 \text{ ...so we substitute:} \\ \text{one-hop} &= \sqrt{\frac{1}{9} + r_\rho^2(-\frac{4(\sin^2(\rho/2))}{9} + \sin^2(\rho/3 + \frac{2\pi}{3}) + (1 - \cos(\rho/3 + \frac{2\pi}{3}))^2)} \end{aligned}$$

By similar algebra and trigonometry:

$$\text{two-hop} = \sqrt{\frac{4}{9} + r_\rho^2(-\frac{16(\sin^2(\rho/2))}{9} + \sin^2(2\rho/3 + \frac{4\pi}{3}) + (1 - \cos(2\rho/3 + \frac{4\pi}{3}))^2)}$$

We would really like to know the partial derivative of the two-hop - one-hop with respect to the radius to be able to understand how to choose the radius to form the minimimax optimum.

Let:

$$f_\rho = -\frac{4(\sin^2(\rho/2))}{9}$$

$$g_\rho = -\frac{16(\sin^2(\rho/2))}{9}$$

$$j_\rho = \sin^2(\rho/3 + \frac{2\pi}{3}) + (1 - \cos(\rho/3 + \frac{2\pi}{3}))^2$$

$$k_\rho = (\sin^2(2\rho/3 + \frac{4\pi}{3}) + (1 - \cos(2\rho/3 + \frac{4\pi}{3}))^2)$$

Then:

$$\text{two-hop} - \text{one-hop} = \sqrt{\frac{4}{9} + r_\rho^2(g_\rho + j_\rho)} - \sqrt{\frac{1}{9} + r_\rho^2(f_\rho + k_\rho)}$$

By graph inspection using Mathematica, we see the partial derivative of this with respect to radius r_ρ is always negative. Since the partial derivative of two-hop – one-hop with respect to the radius r_ρ is negative up until ρ_{bc} where it is 0, we optimize the overall minimax distance by choosing the largest radius up until one-hop = 1, the rail-edge length.

Therefore we decrease the minimax length of the whole system as we increase the radius up to the point that the shorter, one-hop distance is equal to the rail-length (1). Therefore, to optimize the whole system so long as $\rho \leq \rho_{bc}$, we equate one-hop to 1 to find the optimum radius:

$$(7) \quad 1 = \frac{\sqrt{\frac{1}{9} + r_{opt}^2(-\frac{4(\sin^2(\rho/2))}{9} + \sin^2(\rho/3 + \frac{2\pi}{3}) + (1 - \cos(\rho/3 + \frac{2\pi}{3}))^2)}}{2}$$

$$r_{opt} = \frac{\sqrt{\frac{9}{2} \cdot (\sqrt{3}\sin(\rho/3) + \cos(\rho/3)) + \cos(\rho) + 8}}{\sqrt{\frac{9}{2} \cdot (\sqrt{3}\sin(\rho/3) + \cos(\rho/3)) + \cos(\rho) + 8}}$$

We can now give a formula for d_{opt} computed from ρ, r_{opt} via the rail angle equation (5):

$$(8) \quad d_{opt}^2 = 1 - 4\left(\frac{2}{\sqrt{\frac{9}{2} \cdot (\sqrt{3}\sin(\rho/3) + \cos(\rho/3)) + \cos(\rho) + 8}}\right)^2(\sin \rho/2)^2$$

$$d_{opt}^2 = 1 - \frac{16(\sin \rho/2)^2}{9(\sqrt{3}\sin(\rho/3) + \cos(\rho/3)) + \cos(\rho) + 8}$$

$$d_{opt} = \sqrt{1 - \frac{16 \sin^2(\rho/2)}{\cos(\rho) + 9(\sqrt{3}\sin(\rho/3) + \cos(\rho/3)) + 8}}$$

354 Thus, by computing r_{opt} and d_{opt} as a function of ρ from this equation, we can construct
 355 minimax optimal tetrahelix for an $0 \leq \rho \leq \rho_{bc}$. ■

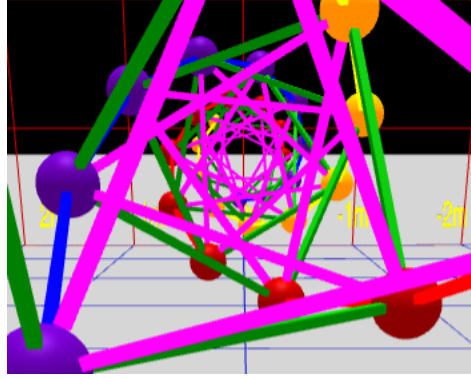


Figure 8. Axial view of a BC-Helix

356 **5. The Inradius.** If we look down the axis of an optimal tetrahelix as shown in Figure 8, it
 357 happens that only one of the one-hop edges (rendered in purple in our software) comes closest
 358 to the axis. In other words, they define the radius of the incircle of the projection, or the
 359 radius of a cylinder that would just fit inside the tetrahelix. A formula for the inradius of the
 360 tetrahelix is useful if you are designing it as a structure that bears something internally, such
 361 as a firehose, a pipe, or a ladder for a human. The inradius $r_{in}(\rho)$ of an optimal tetrahelix is
 362 a remarkably simple function of the radius r and the rail angle ρ :

$$363 \quad (9) \quad r_{in}(\rho) = r \sin \frac{\pi - \rho}{6}$$

364 Which can be seen from the trigonometry of a diagram of the projected one-hop edges con-
 365 necting four sequentially numbered vertices:

Then:

$$1 = \sqrt{\frac{1}{9} + 3r^2} \quad \text{solved by...}$$

$$r = \sqrt{\frac{8}{27}} \quad \approx 0.54$$

This radius¹ produces a two-hop rail length of $\frac{2}{\sqrt{3}}$. The difference between this and 1 is $\approx 15.47\%$. The inradius of the equitetrabeam of unit rail length from both Equation (9) and the fact that the inradius of an equilateral triangle is half the circumradius is $\sqrt{\frac{8}{27}}/2$, or $\frac{\sqrt{6}}{9}$.

In Figure 3, the furthest tetrahelix is the optimal equitetrabeam. Figure 7 is a closeup of an equitetrabeam.

To the extent that we value tetrabeams (that is, tetrahelices with a rail angle of 0, and therefore zero curvature and curvature) as mathematical or engineering objects, we have motivated the development of $H_{general}$ as a transformation of $V(n)$ defined by Equation (1) from Gray and Coxeter. It is difficult to see how the $V(n)$ formulation could ever give rise to a continuum producing the tetrabeam, since setting the angle in that equation to zero can produce only collinear points.

The equitetrabeam may possibly be a novel construction. The fact that 6 members meet in a single point would have been a manufacturing disadvantage that may have dissuaded structural engineers from using this geometry. However, the advent of additive manufacturing, such as 3D printing, and the invention of two distinct concentric multimember joints[15, 7] has improved that situation.

Note that the equitetrabeam has chirality, which becomes important in our attempt to build a continuum of tetrahelices.

7. An Untwisted Continuum. We observe that Equations (7) and (8) compute r_{opt} and d_{opt} which create an optimal tetrahelix for any rail angle ρ between 0, which gives the equitetrabeam and $\rho_{bc} \approx 35.43^\circ$, which gives the BC helix.

Because the equitetrabeam which has a rail angle of 0 still has chirality, that is, one still must decide to connect the one-hop edge to the clockwise or the counter-clockwise node, it is not possible to build a smooth continuum where ρ transitions from positive to negative which remains optimal. One can use a negative ρ in $H_{general}$ but it does not produce minimax optimal tetrahelices. In other words, untwisting a counter-clockwise tetrahelix to rail angle 0 and then going even further does produce a clockwise tetrahelix, but one in which the one-hop and two-hop lengths in the wrong places (that is, two-hop becomes shorter than one-hop.) Likewise, $\rho > \rho_{bc}$ generates a tetrahelix, but minimax optimality is not guaranteed by $H_{general}$.

The pitch of a helix (see (4), for a fixed z -axis travel d , is trivial. However, if one is computing z -axis travel from (8) the pitch is not simple. It increases monotonically and smoothly with decreasing ρ , so Equation (4) can be easily solved numerically with a Newton-

¹Another interesting but non-optimal solution is derived by setting $(\text{one-hop} + \text{two-hop})/2 = 1$, occurs at $r = \sqrt{35}/4$ which produces three length classes of 11/12, 12/12, 13/12.

Raphson solver, as we do on our website. For a pitch at least $p \geq \frac{3\sqrt{2}\pi}{\sqrt{5}\rho_{bc}} \approx 9.64$, using (8) produces minimax optimal tetrahelices.

In this way a rail angle can be chosen for any desired (sufficiently large) pitch, yield the optimum radius, one-hop, and two-hop lengths an engineer needs to construct a physical structure.

The curvature of a rail helix is foramlly given by:

$$(10) \quad \frac{|r_\rho|}{r_\rho^2 + (d_\rho/\rho)^2}$$

which goes to 0 as ρ approaches 0 (the equitetra-beam.) As ρ increase up to ρ_{bc} the curvature increases smoothly until the BC Helix is reached.

Perhaps surprisingly, the optimal untwisting is accomplished only by changing the length of the two-hop member, leaving the one-hop member and rail length equivalent within this continuum.² However, it should be noted that an engineer or architect may also use $H_{general}$ directly and interactively, and that minimax length optimality is a mathematical starting point rather than the final word on the beauty and utility of physical structures. For example, a structural engineer might increase radius past optimality in order to resist buckling.

If an equitetra-beam were actually used as a beam, an engineer might start with the optimal tetra-beam and dilate it in one dimension to “deepen” the beam. Similarly, simple length changes curve the equitetra-beam into an “arch”. The “colored” approach of (6) exposes these possibilities more than the approach of (1).

Trusses and space frames remain an important design field in mechanical and structural engineering[10], including deployable and moving trusses[2].

8. Utility for Robotics. Starting twenty years ago, Sanderson[14], Hamlin,[8], Lee[9], and others created a style of robotics based on changing the lengths of members joined at the center of a joint, thereby creating a connection to pure geometry. More recently NASA has experimented with tensegrities[1], a different point in the same design spectrum. These fields create a need to explore the notion of geometries changing over time, not generally considered directly by pure geometry.

As suggested by Buckminster Fuller, the most convenient geometries to consider are those that have regular member lengths, in order to facilitate the inexpensive manufacture and construction of the robot. In a plane, the octet truss[4] is such a geometry, but in a line, the Boerdijk–Coxeter helix is a regular structure.

However, a robot must move, and so it is interesting to consider the transmutations of these geometries, which was in fact the motivation for creating the equitetra-beam.

Theorem 5. *By changing only the length of the longer members that connect two distinct rails (the two-hop members), we can dynamically untwist a tetrobot forming the Boerdijk–Coxeter configuration into the equitetra-beam which rests flat on the plane.*

²Before deriving Equation (7), we created a continuum by using a linear interpolation between the optimal radius for the Equitetra-beam and the BC Helix. This minimax optimum of this simpler approach was at most 1% worse than the optimum computed by (7).

456 *Proof.* Proof by our computer program that does this using Equation (6) applied to the
457 7-tet Tetrobot/Glussbot.

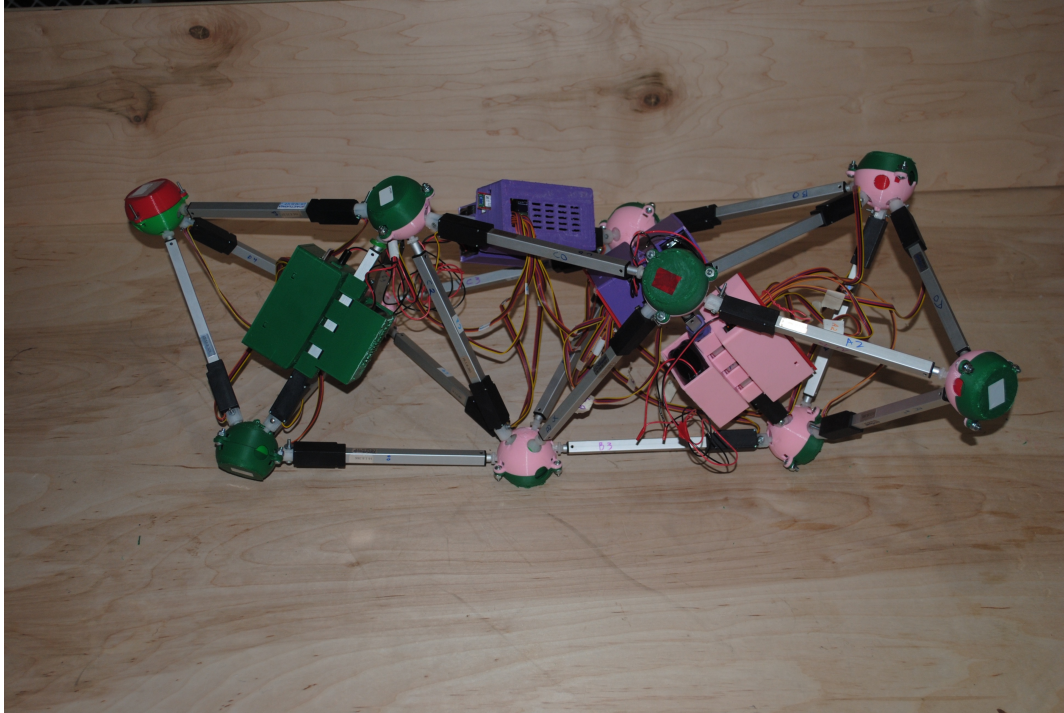


Figure 10. *Glussbot in relaxed, or BC helix configuration*

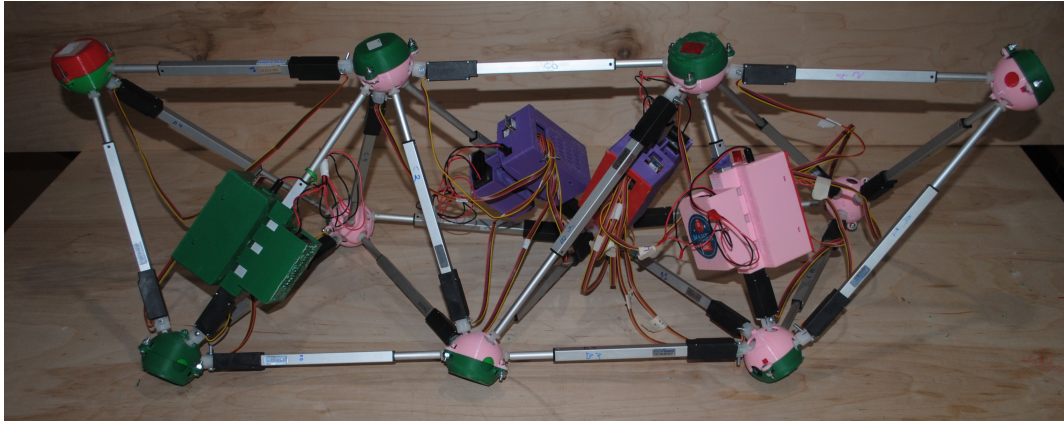


Figure 11. *The Equitetrabream: Fully Untwisted Glussbot in Hexapod Configuration*

458 By untwisting the tetrahelix so that it has a planar surface resting on the ground, we may
459 consider each vertex touching the ground a foot or pseudopod. A robot can thus become a
460 hexapod or n -pod robot, and the already well-developed approaches to hexapod gaits may be
461 applied to make the robot walk or crawl.

9. Conclusion. The BC Helix is the end point of a continuum of tetrahelices, the other end point being an untwisted tetrahelix with equilateral cross section, constructed by changing the length of only those members crossing the outside rails after hopping over the nearest vertex. Under the condition of minimum maximum length ratios of all members in the system, all such tetrahelices have vertices evenly spaced along the axis generated by a simple equation and are in fact triple helices. A machine, such as a robot or a variable-geometry truss, that can change the length of its members can thus twist and untwist itself by changing the length of the appropriate members to achieve any point in the continuum. With a numeric solution, a design may choose a rotation angle and member lengths to obtain a desired pitch.

10. Contact and Getting Involved. The Gluss Project <http://pubinv.github.io/gluss/> is part of Public Invention <https://pubinv.github.io/PubInv/>, a free-libre, open-source research, hardware, and software project that welcomes volunteers. It is our goal to organize projects for the benefit of all humanity without seeking profit or intellectual property. To assist, contact read.robert@gmail.com.

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