

Design of Self-supporting Surfaces

Abstract

Self-supporting masonry is one of the most ancient and elegant techniques for building curved shapes. Because of the very geometric nature of their failure, analyzing and modeling such structures is more a geometry processing problem than one of classical continuum mechanics. In this paper we use the thrust network method of analysis and present an iterative nonlinear optimization algorithm for efficiently approximating freeform shapes by self-supporting ones. The rich geometry of thrust networks leads us to close connections between different topics of discrete differential geometry, such as a finite-element discretization of the Airy stress potential, perfect graph Laplacians, and the problem of computing admissible loads via curvatures of polyhedral surfaces. This geometric viewpoint allows us, in particular, to remesh self-supporting shapes by self-supporting quad meshes with planar faces.

CR Categories: I.3.5 [Computer Graphics]: Computational Geometry and Object Modeling—Curve, surface, solid, and object representations;

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1 Introduction

Vaulted masonry structures are among the simplest and at the same time most elegant solutions for creating curved shapes in building construction. For this reason they have been an object of interest since antiquity; large, non-convex examples of such structures include gothic cathedrals. They continue to be an active topic of research today.

Our paper is concerned with a combined geometry+statics analysis of *self-supporting* masonry and with tools for the interactive modeling of freeform self-supporting structures. Here “self-supporting” means that the structure, considered as an arrangement of blocks (bricks, stones), holds together by itself, with additional support present only during construction. This analysis is based on the following assumptions, which follow the classic [Heyman 1966]:

Assumption 1: Masonry has no tensile strength, but the individual building blocks do not slip against each other (because of friction or mortar). On the other hand, their compressive strength is sufficiently high so that failure of the structure is by a sudden change in geometry and not by material failure.

Assumption 2 (The Safe Theorem): If a system of forces can be found which is in equilibrium with the load on the structure and which is contained within the masonry envelope then the structure will carry the loads, although the actual forces present may not be those postulated by that system.

Our approach is twofold: We first give an overview of the continuous case of a smooth surface under stress, which turns out to be governed locally by the so-called Airy stress function. This mathematical model is called a membrane in the engineering literature and has been applied to the analysis of masonry before. The surface is self-supporting if and only if stresses are entirely compressive (i.e.,

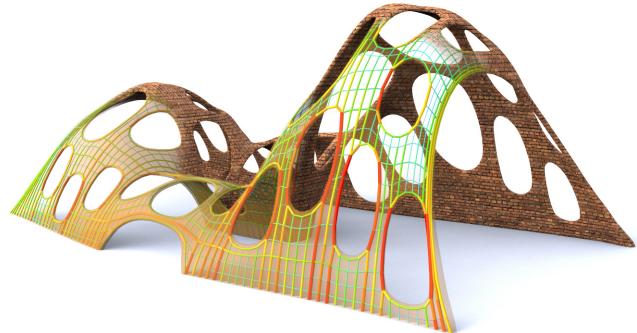


Figure 1: Surfaces with irregularly placed holes almost never stand by themselves when built from bricks; for those that do, stability is not obvious by inspection. The surface shown is produced by finding the nearest self-supporting shape from a given freeform geometry. The image also illustrates the fictitious thrust network used in our algorithm, with edges’ cross-section and coloring visualizing the magnitude of forces (warmer colors represent higher stresses.)

the Airy function is convex). For computational purposes, stresses are discretized as a fictitious *thrust network* [Block and Ochsendorf 2007] contained in the masonry structure; this network is a system of forces in equilibrium with the structure’s deadload. It can be interpreted as a finite element discretization of the continuous case, and it turns out to have very interesting geometry, with the Airy stress function becoming a polyhedral surface directly related to a reciprocal force diagram.

While previous work in architectural geometry was mostly concerned with aspects of rationalization and purely geometric side-conditions which occur in freeform architecture, the focus of this paper is design with *statics* constraints. In particular, our contributions are the following:

Contributions.

- We connect the physics of self-supporting surfaces with vertical loads to the geometry of isotropic 3-space, with the direction of gravity as the distinguished direction (§2.3). Taking the convex Airy potential as unit sphere, one can express the equations governing self-supporting surfaces in terms of curvatures.
- We consider the known constructions of polyhedral thrust networks and their reciprocal diagrams, and give an interpretation of the equilibrium conditions in terms of discrete curvatures (§2.4).
- The graph Laplacian derived from a thrust network with compressive forces is a “perfect” one (§2.2). We show how it appears in the analysis and establish a connection with mean curvatures which are otherwise defined for polyhedral surfaces.
- We present an optimization algorithm for efficiently finding a thrust network near a given arbitrary reference surface (§3), and build a tool for interactive design of self-supporting surfaces based on this algorithm (§4).
- We exploit the geometric relationships between a self-supporting surface and its stress potential in order to find particularly nice families of self-supporting surfaces, especially planar quadrilateral representations of thrust networks (§5).

- 87 • We demonstrate the versatility and applicability of our approach
 88 to the design and analysis of large-scale masonry and steel-glass
 89 structures.

90 **Related Work.** Unsupported masonry has been an active topic of
 91 research in the engineering community. The foundations for the
 92 modern approach were laid by Jacques Heyman [1966] and are
 93 available as the textbook [Heyman 1995]. The theory of reciprocal
 94 force diagrams in the planar case was studied by Maxwell [Maxwell
 95 1864]; a unifying view on polyhedral surfaces, compressive forces
 96 and corresponding “convex” force diagrams is presented by [Ash
 97 et al. 1988]. F. Fraternali [2002], [2010] established a connection
 98 between the continuous theory of stresses in membranes and the
 99 discrete theory of forces in thrust networks, by interpreting the lat-
 100 ter as a certain non-conforming finite element discretization of the
 101 former.

102 Several authors have studied the problem of finding discrete com-
 103 pressive force networks contained within the boundary of masonry
 104 structures; previous work in this area includes [O’Dwyer 1998]
 105 and [Andreu et al. 2007]. Fraternali [2010] proposed solving for
 106 the structure’s discrete stress surface, and examining its convex
 107 hull to study the structure’s stability and susceptibility to cracking.
 108 Philippe Block’s seminal thesis introduced *Thrust Network Analy-
 109 sis*, which pioneered the use of thrust networks and their reciprocal
 110 diagrams for efficient and practical design of self-supporting mason-
 111 ry structures. By first seeking a reciprocal diagram of the top
 112 view, guaranteeing equilibrium of horizontal forces, then solving
 113 for the heights that balance the vertical loads, Thrust Network Anal-
 114 ysis linearizes the form-finding problem. For a thorough overview
 115 of this methodology, see e.g. [Block and Ochsendorf 2007; Block
 116 2009]. Recent work by Block and coauthors extends this method
 117 in the case where the reciprocal diagram is not unique; for different
 118 choices of reciprocal diagram, the optimal heights can be found us-
 119 ing the method of least squares [Van Mele and Block 2011], and the
 120 search for the best such reciprocal diagram can be automated using
 121 a genetic algorithm [Block and Lachauer 2011].

122 Other approaches to the interactive design of self-supporting struc-
 123 tures include modeling these structures as damped particle-spring
 124 systems [Kilian and Ochsendorf 2005; Barnes 2009], and mirroring
 125 the rich tradition in architecture of designing self-supporting
 126 surfaces using hanging chain models [Heyman 1998]. Alterna-
 127 tively, masonry structures can be represented by networks of rigid
 128 blocks [Livesley 1992], whose conditions on the structural feasibil-
 129 ity were incorporated into procedural modeling of buildings [Whit-
 130 ing et al. 2009].

131 Algorithmic and mathematical methods relevant to this paper are
 132 work on the geometry of quad meshes with planar faces [Glymph
 133 et al. 2004; Liu et al. 2006], discrete curvatures for such meshes
 134 [Pottmann et al. 2007; Bobenko et al. 2010], in particular curva-
 135 tures in isotropic geometry [Pottmann and Liu 2007]. Schiftner and
 136 Balzer [2010] discuss approximating a reference surface by a quad
 137 mesh with planar faces, whose layout is guided by statics properties
 138 of that surface.

2 Self-supporting Surfaces

140 This section is the theoretical basis of the paper. Subsections 2.1
 141 and 2.2 explain the mathematical model we use and its discretiza-
 142 tion, which is essential for our modeling algorithms with self-sup-
 143 porting surfaces. The connection with isotropic geometry (§2.3 and
 144 §2.4) is important for the later Section 5, which deals with self-sup-
 145 porting PQ meshes and moment-free steel/glass constructions.

146 2.1 The Continuous Theory

147 In this paper we model masonry as a surface given by a height field
 148 $s(x, y)$ defined in some planar domain Ω . We assume that there are
 149 vertical loads $F(x, y)$ — usually F represents the structure’s own
 150 weight. By definition this surface is self-supporting if and only if
 151 there exists a field of compressive stresses which are in equilibrium
 152 with the acting forces. This is equivalent to existence of a field
 153 $M(x, y)$ of 2×2 symmetric positive semidefinite matrices satisfy-
 154 ing

$$\operatorname{div}(M \nabla s) = F, \quad \operatorname{div} M = 0, \quad (1)$$

155 where the divergence operator $\operatorname{div} \begin{pmatrix} u(x,y) \\ v(x,y) \end{pmatrix} = u_x + v_y$ is under-
 156 stood to act on the columns of a matrix (see e.g. [Fraternali 2010],
 157 [Giaquinta and Giusti 1985]).

158 The condition $\operatorname{div} M = 0$ says that M is locally the Hessian of a
 159 real-valued function ϕ (the *Airy stress potential*): With the notation

$$M = \begin{pmatrix} m_{11} & m_{12} \\ m_{12} & m_{22} \end{pmatrix} \iff \widehat{M} = \begin{pmatrix} m_{22} & -m_{12} \\ -m_{12} & m_{11} \end{pmatrix}$$

160 it is clear that $\operatorname{div} M = 0$ is an integrability condition for \widehat{M} , so
 161 locally there is a potential ϕ with

$$\widehat{M} = \nabla^2 \phi, \quad \text{i.e.,} \quad M = \widehat{\nabla^2 \phi}.$$

162 If the domain Ω is simply connected, this relation holds globally.
 163 Positive semidefiniteness of M (or equivalently of \widehat{M}) character-
 164 izes *convexity* of the Airy potential ϕ . The Airy function enters
 165 computations only by way of its derivatives, so global existence is
 166 not an issue.

167 *Remark:* Stresses at boundary points depend on the way the sur-
 168 face is anchored: A fixed anchor means no condition, but a free
 169 boundary with outer normal vector \mathbf{n} means $\langle M \nabla s, \mathbf{n} \rangle = 0$.

170 **Stress Laplacian.** Note that $\operatorname{div} M = 0$ yields $\operatorname{div}(M \nabla s) =$
 171 $\operatorname{tr}(M \nabla^2 s)$, which we like to call $\Delta_\phi s$. The operator Δ_ϕ is sym-
 172 metric. It is elliptic (as a Laplace operator should be) if and only if
 173 M is positive definite, i.e., ϕ is strictly convex. The balance condi-
 174 tion (1) may be written as $\Delta_\phi s = F$.

175 2.2 Discrete Theory: Thrust Networks

176 We discretize a self-supporting surface by a mesh $\mathcal{S} = (V, E, F)$
 177 (see Figure 2). Loads are again vertical, and we discretize them as
 178 force densities F_i associated with vertices \mathbf{v}_i . The load acting on
 179 this vertex is then given by $F_i A_i$, where A_i is an area of influence
 180 (using a prime to indicate projection onto the xy plane, A_i is the
 181 area of the Voronoi cell of \mathbf{v}'_i w.r.t. V'). We assume that stresses
 182 are carried by the edges of the mesh: the force exerted on the vertex
 183 \mathbf{v}_i by the edge connecting $\mathbf{v}_i, \mathbf{v}_j$ is given by

$$w_{ij}(\mathbf{v}_j - \mathbf{v}_i), \quad \text{where} \quad w_{ij} = w_{ji} \geq 0.$$

184 The nonnegativity of the individual weights w_{ij} expresses the com-
 185 pressive nature of forces. The balance conditions at vertices then
 186 read as follows: With $\mathbf{v}_i = (x_i, y_i, s_i)$ we have

$$\sum_{j \sim i} w_{ij}(x_j - x_i) = \sum_{j \sim i} w_{ij}(y_j - y_i) = 0, \quad (2)$$

$$\sum_{j \sim i} w_{ij}(s_j - s_i) = A_i F_i. \quad (3)$$

187 A mesh equipped with edge weights in this way is a discrete *thrust*
 188 *network*. Invoking the safe theorem, we can state that a masonry
 189 structure is self-supporting, if we can find a thrust network with
 190 compressive forces which is entirely contained within the structure.

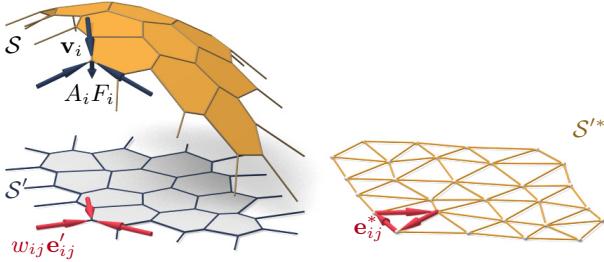


Figure 2: A thrust network \mathcal{S} with dangling edges indicating external forces (left). This network together with compressive forces which balance vertical loads $A_i F_i$ projects onto a planar mesh \mathcal{S}' with equilibrium compressive forces $w_{ij} \mathbf{e}_{ij}'$ in its edges. Rotating forces by 90° leads to the reciprocal force diagram \mathcal{S}'^* (right).

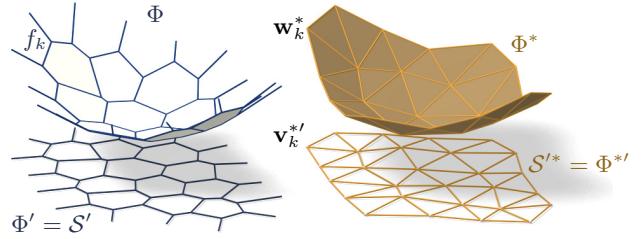


Figure 3: Airy stress potential Φ and its polar dual Φ^* . Φ projects onto the same planar mesh as \mathcal{S} does, while Φ^* projects onto the reciprocal force diagram. A primal face f_k lies in the plane $z = \alpha x + \beta y + \gamma \iff$ the corresponding dual vertex is $w_k^* = (\alpha, \beta, -\gamma)$.

191 **Reciprocal Diagram.** Equations (2) have a geometric interpretation: with edge vectors
192

$$\mathbf{e}'_{ij} = \mathbf{v}'_j - \mathbf{v}'_i = (x_j, y_j) - (x_i, y_i),$$

193 Equation (2) asserts that vectors $w_{ij} \mathbf{e}'_{ij}$ form a closed cycle. Rotating them by 90 degrees, we see that likewise
194

$$\mathbf{e}'^*_{ij} = w_{ij} J \mathbf{e}'_{ij}, \quad \text{with } J = \begin{pmatrix} 0 & -1 \\ 1 & 0 \end{pmatrix},$$

195 form a closed cycle (see Figure 2). If the mesh \mathcal{S} is simply connected, there exists an entire reciprocal diagram \mathcal{S}'^* which is a
196 combinatorial dual of \mathcal{S} , and which has edge vectors \mathbf{e}'^*_{ij} . Its
197 vertices are denoted by \mathbf{v}'^*_i .
198

199 *Remark:* If \mathcal{S}' is a Delaunay triangulation, then the corresponding
200 Voronoi diagram is an example of a reciprocal diagram.

201 **Polyhedral Stress Potential.** We can go further and construct a
202 convex polyhedral “Airy stress potential” surface Φ with vertices
203 $\mathbf{w}_i = (x_i, y_i, \phi_i)$ combinatorially equivalent to \mathcal{S} by requiring that
204 a primal face of Φ lies in the plane $z = \alpha x + \beta y + \gamma$ if and only if
205 (α, β) is the corresponding dual vertex of \mathcal{S}'^* (see Figure 3). Ob-
206 viously this condition determines Φ up to vertical translation. For
207 existence see [Ash et al. 1988]. The inverse procedure constructs
208 a reciprocal diagram from Φ . This procedure works also if forces
209 are not compressive: we can construct an Airy mesh Φ which has
210 planar faces, but it will no longer be a convex polyhedron.

211 The vertices of Φ can be interpolated by a piecewise-linear function
212 $\phi(x, y)$. It is easy to see that the derivative of $\phi(x, y)$ jumps by the
213 amount $\|\mathbf{e}'^*_{ij}\| = w_{ij} \|\mathbf{e}'_{ij}\|$ when crossing over the edge \mathbf{e}'_{ij} at right
214 angle, with unit speed. This identifies Φ as the Airy polyhedron in-
215 troduced by [Fraternali et al. 2002] as a finite element discretization
216 of the continuous Airy function (see also [Fraternali 2010]).

217 If the mesh is not simply connected, the reciprocal diagram and
218 the Airy polyhedron exist only locally. Our computations do not
219 require global existence.

220 **Polarity.** Polarity with respect to the Maxwell paraboloid $z =$
221 $\frac{1}{2}(x^2 + y^2)$ maps the plane $z = \alpha x + \beta y + \gamma$ to the point $(\alpha, \beta, -\gamma)$.
222 Thus, applying polarity to Φ and projecting the result Φ^* into the xy
223 plane reconstructs the reciprocal diagram $\Phi'^* = \mathcal{S}'^*$ (see Fig. 3).

224 **Discrete Stress Laplacian.** The weights w_{ij} may be used to de-
225 fine a graph Laplacian Δ_ϕ which on vertex-based functions acts as

$$\Delta_\phi s(\mathbf{v}_i) = \sum_{j \sim i} w_{ij} (s_j - s_i).$$

226 This operator is a perfect discrete Laplacian in the sense of [War-
227 detzky et al. 2007], since it is symmetric by construction, Equa-
228 tion (2) implies linear precision for the planar “top view mesh” \mathcal{S}'
229 (i.e., $\Delta_\phi f = 0$ if f is a linear function), and $w_{ij} \geq 0$ ensures
230 semidefiniteness and a maximum principle for Δ_ϕ -harmonic func-
231 tions. Equation (3) can be written as $\Delta_\phi s = AF$.

232 Note that Δ_ϕ is well defined even when the underlying meshes are
233 not simply connected.

2.3 Surfaces in Isotropic Geometry

235 It is worthwhile to reconsider the basics of self-supporting surfaces
236 in the language of dual-isotropic geometry, which takes place in \mathbb{R}^3
237 with the z axis as a distinguished vertical direction. The basic ele-
238 ments of this geometry are planes, having equation $z = f(x, y) =$
239 $\alpha x + \beta y + \gamma$. The gradient vector $\nabla f = (\alpha, \beta)$ determines the
240 plane up to translation. A plane tangent to the graph of the function
241 $s(x, y)$ has gradient vector ∇s .

242 There is the notion of parallel points: $(x, y, z) \parallel (x', y', z') \iff$
243 $x = x', y = y'$.

244 *Remark:* The Maxwell paraboloid is considered the unit sphere of
245 isotropic geometry, and the geometric quantities considered above
246 are assigned specific meanings: The forces $\|\mathbf{e}'^*_{ij}\| = w_{ij} \|\mathbf{e}'_{ij}\|$ are
247 dihedral angles of the Airy polyhedron Φ , and also “lengths” of
248 edges of Φ^* . We do not use this terminology in the sequel.

249 **Curvatures.** Generally speaking, in the differential geometry of
250 surfaces one considers the *Gauss map* σ from a surface S to a con-
251 vex unit sphere Φ by requiring that corresponding points have par-
252 allel tangent planes. Subsequently mean curvature H^{rel} and Gaus-
253 sian curvature K^{rel} relative to Φ are computed from the derivative
254 $d\sigma$. Classically Φ is the ordinary unit sphere $x^2 + y^2 + z^2 = 1$, so
255 that σ maps each point to its unit normal vector.

256 In our setting, parallelity is a property of *points* rather than planes,
257 and the Gauss map σ goes the other way, mapping the tangent
258 planes of the unit sphere $z = \phi(x, y)$ to the corresponding tan-
259 gent plane of the surface $z = s(x, y)$. If we know which point a
260 plane is attached to, then it is determined by its gradient. So we
261 simply write

$$\nabla \phi \xrightarrow{\sigma} \nabla s.$$

262 By moving along a curve $\mathbf{u}(t) = (x(t), y(t))$ in the parameter
263 domain we get the first variation of tangent planes: $\frac{d}{dt} \nabla \phi|_{\mathbf{u}(t)} =$
264 $(\nabla^2 \phi) \dot{\mathbf{u}}$. This yields the derivative $(\nabla^2 \phi) \dot{\mathbf{u}} \xrightarrow{d\sigma} (\nabla^2 s) \dot{\mathbf{u}}$, for all

265 $\dot{\mathbf{u}}$, and the matrix of $d\sigma$ is found as $(\nabla^2\phi)^{-1}(\nabla^2s)$. By definition,
266 curvatures of the surface s relative to ϕ are found as

$$K_s^{\text{rel}} = \det(d\sigma) = \frac{\det \nabla^2 s}{\det \nabla^2 \phi},$$

$$H_s^{\text{rel}} = \frac{1}{2} \text{tr}(d\sigma) = \frac{1}{2} \text{tr} \left(\frac{M}{\det \nabla^2 \phi} \nabla^2 s \right) = \frac{\Delta_\phi s}{2 \det \nabla^2 \phi}.$$

267 The Maxwell paraboloid $\phi_0(x, y) = \frac{1}{2}(x^2 + y^2)$ is the canonical
268 unit sphere of isotropic geometry, with Hessian E_2 . Curvatures relative to ϕ_0 are not called “relative” and are denoted by the symbols
269 H, K instead of $H^{\text{rel}}, K^{\text{rel}}$. The observation
270

$$\Delta_\phi \phi = \text{tr}(M \nabla^2 \phi) = \text{tr}(\widehat{\nabla^2 \phi} \nabla^2 \phi) = 2 \det \nabla^2 \phi$$

271 together with the formulas above implies

$$K_s = \det \nabla^2 s, \quad K_\phi = \det \nabla^2 \phi \implies H_s^{\text{rel}} = \frac{\Delta_\phi s}{2K_\phi} = \frac{\Delta_\phi s}{\Delta_\phi \phi}.$$

272 **Relation to Self-supporting Surfaces.** Summarizing the for-
273 mulas above, we rewrite the balance condition (1) as

$$2K_\phi H_s^{\text{rel}} = \Delta_\phi s = F. \quad (4)$$

274 Let us draw some conclusions:

- 275 • Since $H_\phi^{\text{rel}} = 1$ we see that the load $F_\phi = 2K_\phi$ is admissible
276 for the stress surface $\phi(x, y)$, which is hereby shown as self-
277 supporting. The quotient of loads yields $H_s^{\text{rel}} = F/F_\phi$.
- 278 • If the stress surface coincides with the Maxwell paraboloid,
279 then *constant loads characterize constant mean curvature
280 surfaces*, because we get $K_\phi = 1$ and $H_s = F/2$.
- 281 • If s_1, s_2 have the same stress potential ϕ , then $H_{s_1-s_2}^{\text{rel}} = H_{s_1}^{\text{rel}} - H_{s_2}^{\text{rel}} = 0$, so $s_1 - s_2$ is a (relative) minimal surface.

2.4 Meshes in Isotropic Geometry

284 A general theory of curvatures of polyhedral surfaces with respect
285 to a polyhedral unit sphere was proposed by [Pottmann et al. 2007;
286 Bobenko et al. 2010], and its dual complement in isotropic geo-
287 metry was elaborated on in [Pottmann and Liu 2007]. As illustrated by
288 Figure 4, the mean curvature of a self-supporting surface \mathcal{S} relative
289 to its discrete Airy stress potential is associated with the vertices of
290 \mathcal{S} . It is computed from areas and mixed areas of faces in the polar
291 polyhedra \mathcal{S}^* and Φ^* :

$$H^{\text{rel}}(\mathbf{v}_i) = \frac{A_i(\mathcal{S}, \Phi)}{A_i(\Phi, \Phi)}, \quad \text{where}$$

$$A_i(\mathcal{S}, \Phi) = \frac{1}{4} \sum_{k: f_k \in 1\text{-ring}(\mathbf{v}_i)} \det(\mathbf{v}'_k, \mathbf{w}'_{k+1}) + \det(\mathbf{w}'_k, \mathbf{v}'_{k+1}).$$

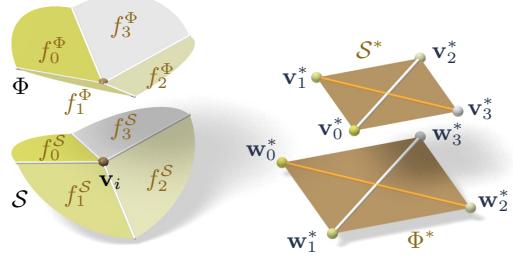
292 The prime denotes the projection into the xy plane, and summation
293 is over those dual vertices which are adjacent to \mathbf{v}_i . Replacing \mathbf{v}'_k
294 by \mathbf{w}'_k yields $A_i(\Phi, \Phi) = \frac{1}{2} \sum \det(\mathbf{w}'_k, \mathbf{w}'_{k+1})$.

295 **Proposition.** If Φ is the Airy surface of a thrust network \mathcal{S} , then
296 the mean curvature of \mathcal{S} relative to Φ is computable as

$$H^{\text{rel}}(\mathbf{v}_i) = \frac{\sum_{j \sim i} w_{ij}(s_j - s_i)}{\sum_{j \sim i} w_{ij}(\phi_j - \phi_i)} = \frac{\Delta_\phi s}{\Delta_\phi \phi} \Big|_{\mathbf{v}_i}. \quad (5)$$

297 **Proof.** It is sufficient to show $2A_i(\mathcal{S}, \Phi) = \sum_{j \sim i} w_{ij}(s_j - s_i)$.

298 For that, consider edges $\mathbf{e}'_1, \dots, \mathbf{e}'_n$ emanating from \mathbf{v}'_i . The dual
299 cycles in Φ^{**} and \mathcal{S}^{**} without loss of generality are given by ver-
300 tices $(\mathbf{v}'_1, \dots, \mathbf{v}'_n)$ and $(\mathbf{w}'_1, \dots, \mathbf{w}'_n)$, respectively. The latter
301 has edges $\mathbf{w}'_{j+1} - \mathbf{w}'_j = w_{ij} J \mathbf{e}'_j$ (indices modulo n).



271 **Figure 4:** Mean curvature of a vertex \mathbf{v}_i of \mathcal{S} : Corresponding
272 edges of the polar duals \mathcal{S}^* , Φ^* are parallel, and mean curvature
273 according to [Pottmann et al. 2007] is computed from the vertices
274 polar to faces adjacent to \mathbf{v}_i . For valence 4 vertices the case of
275 zero mean curvature shown here is characterized by parallelity of
276 non-corresponding diagonals of corresponding quads in \mathcal{S}^* , Φ^* .

277 Without loss of generality $\mathbf{v}_i = 0$, so the vertex \mathbf{v}'_{j+1}^* by construction
278 equals the gradient of the linear function $\mathbf{x} \mapsto \langle \mathbf{v}'_{j+1}^*, \mathbf{x} \rangle$ defined by
279 the properties $\mathbf{e}'_{j-1} \mapsto s_{j-1} - s_i$, $\mathbf{e}'_j \mapsto s_j - s_i$. Corresponding
280 edge vectors $\mathbf{v}'_{j+1} - \mathbf{v}'_j$ and $\mathbf{w}'_{j+1} - \mathbf{w}'_j$ are parallel, because
281 $\langle \mathbf{v}'_{j+1} - \mathbf{v}'_j, \mathbf{e}'_j \rangle = (s_j - s_i) - (s_j - s_i) = 0$. Expand $2A_i(\mathcal{S}, \Phi)$:

$$\begin{aligned} & \frac{1}{2} \sum \det(\mathbf{w}'_j, \mathbf{v}'_{j+1}) + \det(\mathbf{v}'_j, \mathbf{w}'_{j+1}) \\ &= \frac{1}{2} \sum \det(\mathbf{w}'_j - \mathbf{w}'_{j+1}, \mathbf{v}'_{j+1}) + \det(\mathbf{v}'_j, \mathbf{w}'_{j+1} - \mathbf{w}'_j) \\ &= \frac{1}{2} \sum \det(-w_{ij} J \mathbf{e}'_j, \mathbf{v}'_{j+1}) + \det(\mathbf{v}'_j, w_{ij} J \mathbf{e}'_j) \\ &= \sum \det(\mathbf{v}'_j, w_{ij} J \mathbf{e}'_j) = \sum w_{ij} \langle \mathbf{v}'_j, \mathbf{e}'_j \rangle = \sum w_{ij} (s_j - s_i). \end{aligned}$$

282 Here we have used $\det(\mathbf{a}, J\mathbf{b}) = \langle \mathbf{a}, \mathbf{b} \rangle$. □

283 In order to discretize (4), we also need a discrete Gaussian curva-
284 ture, usually defined as a quotient of areas which correspond under
285 the Gauss mapping. We define

$$K_\Phi(\mathbf{v}_i) = \frac{A_i(\Phi, \Phi)}{A_i},$$

286 where A_i is the Voronoi area of vertex \mathbf{v}'_i in the projected mesh \mathcal{S}'
287 used in (3).

288 **Remark:** If the faces of the thrust network \mathcal{S} are not planar, the sim-
289 ple trick of introducing additional edges with zero forces in them
290 makes them planar, and the theory is applicable. In the interest of
291 space, we refrain from elaborating further.

292 **Discrete Balance Equation.** The discrete version of the balance
293 equation (4) reads as follows:

294 **Theorem.** A simply-connected mesh \mathcal{S} with vertices $\mathbf{v}_i = (x_i, y_i, s_i)$ can be put into static equilibrium with vertical nodal
295 forces $A_i F_i$ if and only if there exists a combinatorially equivalent
296 mesh Φ with planar faces and vertices (x_i, y_i, ϕ_i) , such that cur-
297 vatures of \mathcal{S} relative to Φ obey

$$2K_\Phi(\mathbf{v}_i) H^{\text{rel}}(\mathbf{v}_i) = F_i \quad (6)$$

298 at every interior vertex and every free boundary vertex \mathbf{v}_i . \mathcal{S} can
299 be put into compressive static equilibrium if and only if there exists
300 a convex such Φ .

301 **Proof.** The relation between equilibrium forces $w_{ij} \mathbf{e}_{ij}$ in \mathcal{S} and
302 the polyhedral stress potential Φ has been discussed above, and
303 so has the equivalence “ $w_{ij} \geq 0 \iff \Phi$ convex” (see e.g.

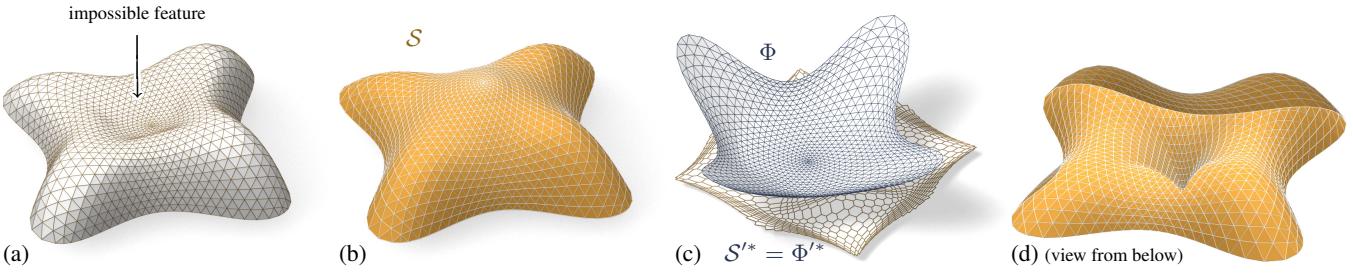


Figure 5: The top of the Lilium Tower (a) cannot stand as a masonry structure, because its central part is concave. Our algorithm finds a nearby self-supporting mesh (b) without this impossible feature. (c) shows the corresponding Airy mesh Φ and reciprocal force diagram $S'^* = \Phi'^*$. (d) The user can edit the original surface, such as by specifying that the center of the surface is supported by a vertical pillar, and the self-supporting network adjusts accordingly.

[Ash et al. 1988] for a survey of this and related results). It remains to show that Equations (2) and (6) are equivalent. This is the case because the proposition above implies $2K(\mathbf{v}_i)H^{\text{rel}}(\mathbf{v}_i) = 2\frac{A_i(\Phi, \Phi)}{A_i} \frac{A_i(\Phi, S)}{A_i(\Phi, \Phi)} = \frac{1}{A_i} (\sum_{j \sim i} w_{ij}(s_j - s_i)) = \frac{1}{A_i} A_i F_i$. \square

Existence of Discretizations. When considering discrete thrust networks as discretizations of continuous self-supporting surfaces, the following question is important: For a given smooth surface $s(x, y)$ with Airy stress function ϕ , does there exist a polyhedral surface S in equilibrium approximating $s(x, y)$, whose top view is a given planar mesh S' ? We restrict our attention to triangle meshes, where planarity of the faces of the discrete stress surface Φ is not an issue. This question has several equivalent reformulations:

- Does S' have a reciprocal diagram whose corresponding Airy polyhedron Φ approximates the continuous Airy potential ϕ ? (if the surfaces involved are not simply connected, these objects are defined locally).
- Does S' possess a “perfect” discrete Laplace-Beltrami operator Δ_ϕ in the sense of Wardetzky et al. [2007] whose weights are the edge length scalars of such a reciprocal diagram?

From [Wardetzky et al. 2007] we know that perfect Laplacians exist only on regular triangulations which are projections of convex polyhedra. On the other hand, previous sections show how to appropriately re-triangulate: Let Φ be a triangle mesh convex hull of the vertices $(x_i, y_i, \phi(x_i, y_i))$, where (x_i, y_i) are vertices of S' . Then its polar dual Φ^* projects onto a reciprocal diagram with positive edge weights, so Δ_ϕ has positive weights, and the vertices (x_i, y_i, s_i) of S can be found by solving the discrete Poisson problem $(\Delta_\phi s)_i = A_i F_i$.

Assuming the discrete Δ_ϕ approximates its continuous counterpart, this yields a mesh approximating $s(x, y)$, and we conclude: A smooth self-supporting surface can be approximated by a discrete self-supporting triangular mesh for any sampling of the surface.

3 Thrust Networks from Reference Meshes

Consider now the problem of taking a given reference mesh, say \mathcal{R} , and finding a combinatorially equivalent mesh S in static equilibrium approximating \mathcal{R} . The loads on S include user-prescribed loads as well as the dead load caused by the mesh’s own weight. Conceptually, finding S amounts to minimizing some formulation of distance between \mathcal{R} and S , subject to constraints (2), (3), and $w_{ij} \geq 0$. For any choice of distance this minimization will be a nonlinear, non-convex, inequality-constrained variational problem. Our experience with black-box solvers is that they perform very well for surfaces without complex geometry or for polishing reference meshes close to self-supporting, but fail to converge in re-

sonable time for more complicated shapes such as the swiss cheese example (Fig. 1). We therefore propose the following specialized, staggered linearization for solving the optimization problem:

0. Start with an initial guess $S = \mathcal{R}$.
1. Estimate the self-load on the vertices of S , using their current positions.
2. Fixing S , locally fit an associated stress surface Φ .
3. Alter positions \mathbf{v}_i to improve the fit.
4. Repeat from Step 1 until convergence.

Remark: This staggered approach shares the several advantages of solving the full nonlinear problem: a nearby self-supporting surface is found given only a suggested reference shape, without needing to single one of the many possible top view reciprocal diagrams or needing to specify boundary tractions – these are found automatically during optimization. Although providing an initial top view graph with good combinatorics remains important, by not fixing the top view our approach allows the thrust network to slide both vertically and tangentially to the ground, essential to finding faithful thrust networks for surfaces with free boundary conditions.

Step 1: Estimating Self-Load. The dead load due to the surface’s own weight depends not only on the top view of S , but also on the surface area of its faces. To avoid adding nonlinearity to the algorithm, we estimate the load coefficients F_i at the beginning of each iteration, and assume they remain constant until the next iteration. We estimate the load $A_i F_i$ associated with each vertex by calculating its Voronoi surface area on each of its incident faces (note that this surface area is distinct from A_i , the vertex’s Voronoi area on the top view), and then multiplying by a user-specified surface density ρ .

Step 2: Fit a Stress Surface. In this step, we fix S and try to fit a stress surface Φ subordinate to the top view S' of the primal mesh. We do so by searching for dihedral angles between the faces of Φ which minimize, in the least-squares sense, the error in force equilibrium (6) and local integrability of Φ . Doing so is equivalent to minimizing the squared residuals of Equations (3) and (2), with the positions held fixed. We define the *equilibrium energy*

$$E = \sum_i \left\| \begin{pmatrix} 0 \\ A_i F_i \end{pmatrix} - \sum_{j \sim i} w_{ij} (\mathbf{v}_j - \mathbf{v}_i) \right\|^2, \quad (7)$$

where i runs through interior and free boundary vertices, and we solve

$$\min_{w_{ij}} E, \quad \text{s.t. } 0 \leq w_{ij} \leq w_{\max}. \quad (8)$$

Here w_{\max} is an optional maximum weight we are willing to assign (to limit the amount of stress in the surface). This convex, sparse,

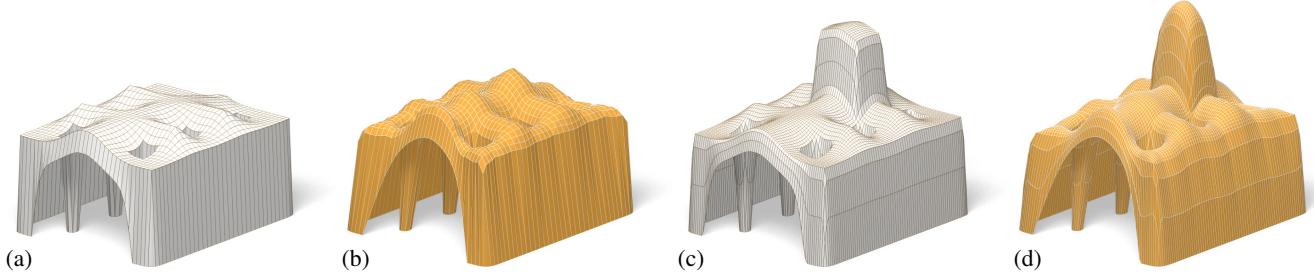


Figure 6: The user-designed reference mesh (a) is not self-supporting, but our algorithm finds a nearby perturbation of the reference surface (b) that is in equilibrium. As the user makes edits to the reference surface (c), the thrust network automatically adjusts (d).

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415 box-constrained least-squares problem [Friedlander 2007] always
416 has a solution. If the objective is 0 at this solution, the faces of Φ
417 locally integrate to a stress surface satisfying (6), and this Φ certifies
418 that \mathcal{S} is self-supporting – we are done. Otherwise, \mathcal{S} is not self-
419 supporting and its vertices must be moved.

420 **Step 3: Alter Positions.** In the previous step we fit as best as
421 possible a stress surface Φ to \mathcal{S} . There are two possible kinds of
422 error with this fit: the faces around a vertex (equivalently, the recip-
423 ical diagram) might not close up; and the resulting stress forces
424 might not be exactly in equilibrium with the loads. These errors
425 can be decreased by modifying the top view and heights of \mathcal{S} , re-
426 spectively. It is possible to simply solve for new vertex positions
427 that put \mathcal{S} in static equilibrium, since Equations (2) and (3) with
428 w_{ij} fixed form a square linear system that is typically nonsingular.

429 While this approach would yield a self-supporting \mathcal{S} , this mesh is
430 often far from the reference mesh \mathcal{R} , since any local errors in the
431 stress surface from Step 2 amplify into global errors in \mathcal{S} . We pro-
432 pose instead to look for new positions that decrease the imbalance
433 in the stresses and loads, while also penalizing drift away from the
434 reference mesh:

$$\min_{\mathbf{v}} E + \alpha \sum_i \langle \mathbf{n}_i, \mathbf{v}_i - \mathbf{v}_i^0 \rangle^2 + \beta \|\mathbf{v} - \mathbf{v}_P^0\|^2,$$

435 where \mathbf{v}_i^0 is the position of the i -th vertex at the start of this step
436 of the optimization, \mathbf{n}_i is the starting vertex normal (computed as
437 the average of the incident face normals), \mathbf{v}_P^0 is the projection of
438 \mathbf{v}^0 onto the reference mesh, and $\alpha > \beta$ are penalty coefficients
439 that are decreased every iteration of Steps 1–3. The second term
440 allows \mathcal{S} to slide over itself (if doing so improves equilibrium) but
441 penalizes drift in the normal direction. The third term, weaker than
442 the second, regularizes the optimization by preventing large drift
443 away from the reference surface or excessive tangential sliding.

444 **Implementation Details.** Solving the weighted least-squares
445 problem of Step 3 amounts to solving a sparse, symmetric linear
446 system. While the MINRES algorithm [Paige and Saunders 1975]
447 is likely the most robust algorithm for solving this system, in prac-
448 tice we have observed that the method of conjugate gradients works
449 well despite the potential ill-conditioning of the objective matrix.

450 **Limitations.** This algorithm is not guaranteed to always con-
451 verge; this fact is not surprising from the physics of the problem
452 (if the boundary of the reference mesh encloses too large of a re-
453 gion, w_{\max} is set too low, and the density of the surface too high,
454 a thrust network in equilibrium simply does not exist – the vault is
455 too ambitious and cannot be built to stand; pillars are needed.)

456 We can, however, make a few remarks. Step 2 always decreases the
457 equilibrium energy E of Equation (7) and Step 3 does as well as



Figure 7: A freeform surface (left) needs adjustments around the entrance arch and between the two pillars in order to be self-supporting; our algorithm finds the nearby surface in equilibrium (right) that incorporates these changes.

Fig.	Vertices	Edges	Time (s)	Iterations	Max. Rel. Error
5b	1201	3504	21.6	9	4.2×10^{-5}
5d	1200	3500	26.5	10	8.5×10^{-5}
7	1535	2976	17.0	21	2.7×10^{-5}
8	752	2165	8.0	9	5.8×10^{-5}
11	2358	4302	19.5	9	3.0×10^{-4}
16	527	998	5.7	25	2.4×10^{-5}

Table 1: Numerical details about our examples. We show the clock time needed by an Intel Xeon 2.3GHz desktop PC with 4 GB of RAM to find a self-supporting thrust network and associated stress surface from the example’s reference mesh; we also give the number of outer iterations of the four steps in (§3). The maximum relative error is the dimensionless quantity $\max_i \|A_i F_i - \sum_{j \sim i} w_{ij}(\mathbf{v}_j - \mathbf{v}_i)\| / \|A_i F_i\|$ (the maximum is taken over interior vertices \mathbf{v}_i).

458 $\beta \rightarrow 0$. Moreover, as $\alpha \rightarrow 0$ and $\beta \rightarrow 0$, Step 3 approaches a lin-
459 ear system with as many equations as unknowns; if this system has
460 full rank, its solution sets $E = 0$. These facts suggest that the algo-
461 rithm should generally converge to a thrust network in equilibrium,
462 provided that Step 1 does not increase the loads by too much at ev-
463 ery iteration, and this is indeed what we observe in practice. One
464 case where this assumption is guaranteed to hold is if the thickness
465 of the surface is allowed to freely vary, so that it can be chosen so
466 that the surface has uniform density over the top view.

467 If the linear system in Step 3 is singular and infeasible, the algo-
468 rithm can stall at $E > 0$. This failure occurs, for instance, when
469 an interior vertex has height z_i lower than all of its neighbors, and
470 Step 2 assigns all incident edges to that vertex a weight of zero:
471 clearly no amount of moving the vertex or its neighbors can bring
472 the vertex into equilibrium. We avoid such degenerate configura-
473 tions by bounding weights slightly away from zero in (8), trading
474 increased robustness for slight smoothing of the resulting surface.
475 Attempting to optimize meshes that have self-intersecting top views
476 (i.e., aren’t height fields), have too many impossible features, or are
477 insufficiently supported by fixed boundary points can also result in
478 errors and instability.

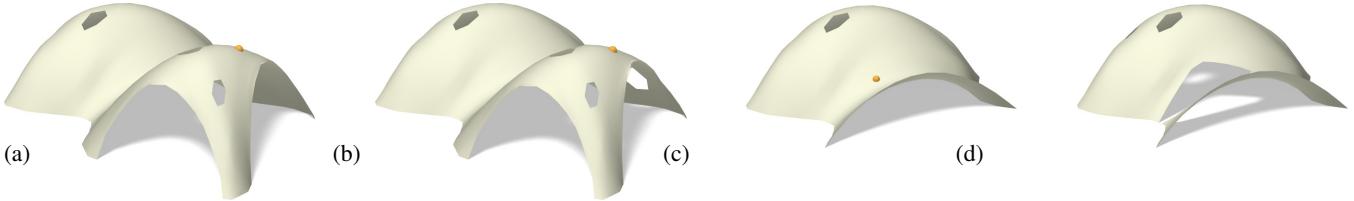


Figure 8: Destruction sequence. We simulate removing small parts of masonry (their location is shown by a yellow ball) and the falling off of further pieces which are no longer supported after removal. For this example, removing a certain small number of single bricks does not affect stability (a,b). Removal of material at a certain point (yellow ball in (b)) will cause a greater part of the structure to collapse, as seen in (c). (d) shows the result after one more removal (all images show the respective thrust networks, not the reference surface).

Figure 9: Stability Test. Left: Coloring and cross-section of edges visualize the magnitude of forces in a thrust network which is in equilibrium with this dome's dead load. Right: When an additional load is applied, there exists a corresponding compressive thrust network which is still contained in the masonry hull of the original dome. This implies stability of the dome under that load.

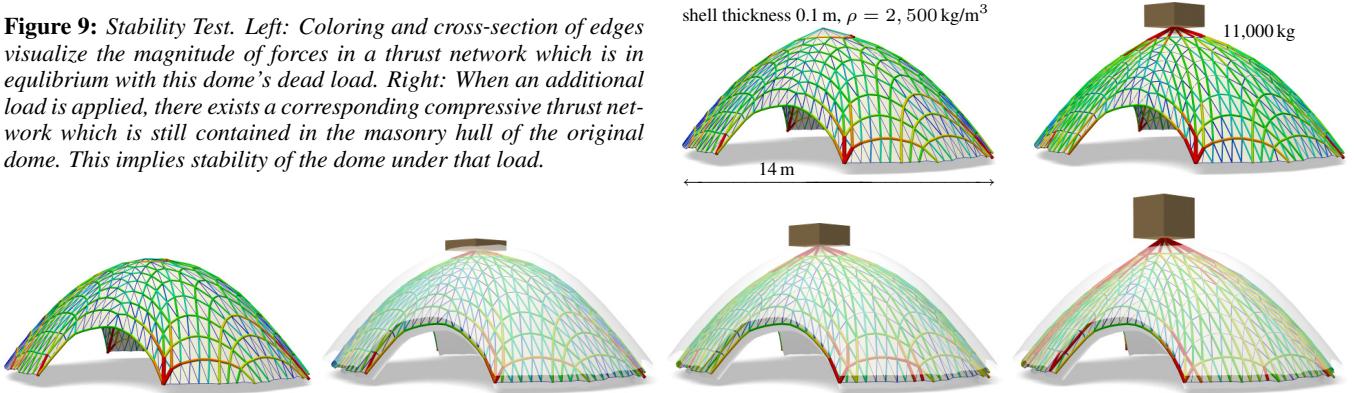


Figure 10: Stability test similar to Figure 9, but with a shell thickness of 1 m, in order to better visualize the way the thrust network starts to leave the masonry hull as the load increases. Additional loads are 0 kg, 5,000 kg, 10,000 kg, and 20,000 kg, resp., from left to right.

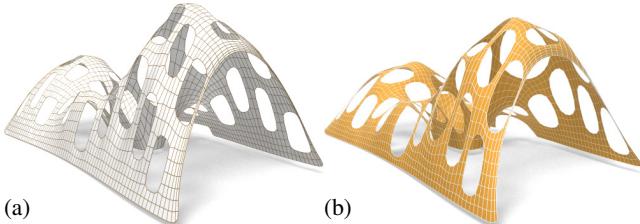


Figure 11: A mesh with holes (a) requires large deformations to both the top view and heights to render it self-supporting (b)

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are specified by “pinning” vertices of the surface, specifying that the thrust network must coincide with the reference mesh at this point, and relaxing the condition that forces must be in equilibrium there.

- Interactive adjustment of surface density ρ , external loads, and maximum permissible stress per edge w_{\max} , with visual feedback of how these parameters affect the fitted thrust network.
- Upsampling of the thrust network through Catmull-Clark subdivision and polishing of the resulting refined thrust network using optimization (§3).
- Visualization of the stress surface dual to the thrust network and corresponding reciprocal diagram.

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Examples. *Vault with Pillars:* As an example of the design and optimization workflow, consider a rectangular vault with six pillars, free boundary conditions along one edge, fixed boundary conditions along the others, and a tower extruded from the top of the surface (see Figure 6). This surface is neither convex nor simply connected, and exhibits a mix of boundary conditions, none of which cause our algorithm any difficulty; it finds a self-supporting thrust network near the designed reference mesh. The user is now free to make edits to the reference mesh, and the thrust network adapts to these edits, providing the user feedback on whether these designs are physically realizable.

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Example: Top of the Lilium Tower. Consider the top portion of the steel-glass exterior surface of the Lilium Tower, which is currently being built in Warsaw (see Figure 5). This surface contains a concave part with local minimum in its interior and so cannot possibly be self-supporting. Given this surface as a reference mesh, our algorithm constructs a nearby thrust network in equilibrium without the impossible feature. The user can then explore how editing the reference mesh – adding a pillar, for example – affects the thrust

4 Results

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Interactive Design of Self-Supporting Surfaces. The optimization algorithm described in the previous section forms the basis of an interactive design tool for self-supporting surfaces. Users manipulate a mesh representing a reference surface, and the computer searches for a nearby thrust network in equilibrium (see e.g. Figure 6). Features of the design tool include:

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• Handle-based 3D editing of the reference mesh using Laplacian coordinates [Lipman et al. 2004; Sorkine et al. 2003] to extrude vaults, insert pillars, and apply other deformations to the reference mesh. Handle-based adjustments of the heights, keeping the top view fixed, and deformation of the top view, keeping the heights fixed, are also supported. The thrust network adjusts interactively to fit the deformed positions, giving the usual visual feedback about the effects of edits on whether or not the surface can stand.
- Specification of boundary conditions. Points of contact between the reference surface and the ground or environment

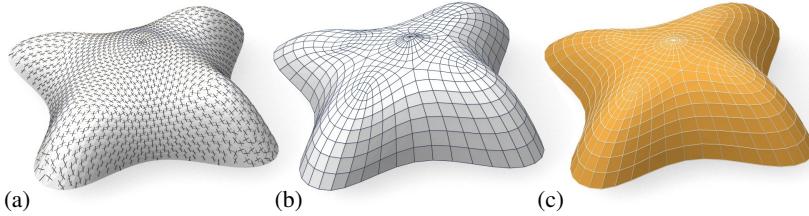


Figure 12: Planar quad remeshing of the “Lilium tower” surface of Figure 5. (a) Relative principal directions which are found as eigenvectors of $(\nabla^2\phi)^{-1}\nabla^2s$. (b) Quad mesh guided by principal directions is almost planar and almost self-supporting. (c) Small changes achieve both properties.

network and its deviation from the reference surface.

Example: Freeform Structure with Two Pillars. Suppose an architect’s experience and intuition has permitted the design of a nearly self-supporting freeform surface (Figure 7). Our algorithm reveals those edits needed to make the structure sound – principally around the entrance arch, and the area between the two pillars.

Example: Destruction Sequence. In Figure 8 we simulate removing parts of masonry and the falling off of further pieces which are no longer supported after removal. This is done by deleting the 1-neighborhood of a vertex and solving for a new thrust network in compressive equilibrium close to the original reference surface. We delete those parts of the network which deviate too much and are no longer contained in the masonry hull, and iterate.

Example: Swiss Cheese. Cutting holes in a self-supporting surface interrupts force flow lines and causes dramatic global changes to the surface stresses, often to the point that the surface is no longer in equilibrium. Whether a given surface with many such holes can stand is far from obvious. Figure 11a shows such an implausible and unstable surface; our optimization finds a nearby, equally implausible but stable surface without difficulty (see Figures 1 and 11b).

Example: Stability Test: See Figures 9 and 10 for a series of images which visualize the effect of additional loads on a thrust network.

Example: Structural Glass. See Figure 16 for details on a self-supporting surface which is realized not as masonry, but as a steel/glass construction with glass as a structural element.

5 Special Self-Supporting Surfaces

PQ Meshes. Meshes with *planar* faces are of particular interest in architecture, so in this section we discuss how to remesh a given thrust network in equilibrium such that it becomes a quad mesh with planar faces (again in equilibrium). If this mesh is realized as a steel-glass construction, it is self-supporting in its beams alone, with no forces exerted on the glass (this is the usual manner of using glass). The beams constitute a self-supporting structure which is in perfect force equilibrium (without moments in the nodes) if only the deadload is applied.

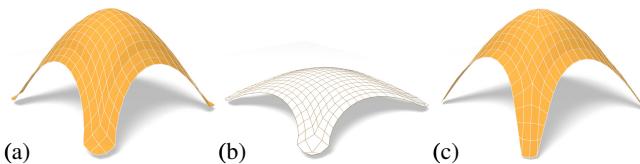


Figure 13: Directly enforcing planarity of the faces of even a very simple self-supporting quad-mesh vault (a) results in a surface far removed from the original design (b). Starting instead from a remeshing of the surface with edges following relative principal curvature directions yields a self-supporting, PQ mesh far more faithful to the original (c).

Taking an arbitrary non-planar quad mesh and attempting naive, simultaneous enforcement of planarity and static equilibrium – either by staggering a planarity optimization step every outer iteration, or adding a planarity penalty term to the position update – does not yield good results, as shown in Figure 13. Indeed, as we will see later in this section, such a planar perturbation of a thrust network is not expected to generally exist.

Consider a planar quad mesh \mathcal{S} with vertices $\mathbf{v}_{ij} = (x_{ij}, y_{ij}, s_{ij})$ which approximates a given continuous surface $s(x, y)$. It is known that \mathcal{S} must approximately follow a network of conjugate curves in the surface (see e.g. [Liu et al. 2006]). We can derive this condition in an elementary way as follows: Using a Taylor expansion, we compute the volume of the convex hull of the quadrilateral \mathbf{v}_{ij} , $\mathbf{v}_{i+1,j}$, $\mathbf{v}_{i+1,j+1}$, $\mathbf{v}_{i,j+1}$, assuming the vertices lie exactly on the surface $s(x, y)$. This results in

$$\text{vol} = \frac{1}{6} \det(\mathbf{a}_1, \mathbf{a}_2) \cdot ((\mathbf{a}_1)^T \nabla^2 s \mathbf{a}_2) + \dots,$$

$$\text{where } \mathbf{a}_1 = \begin{pmatrix} x_{i+1,j} - x_{ij} \\ y_{i+1,j} - y_{ij} \end{pmatrix}, \quad \mathbf{a}_2 = \begin{pmatrix} x_{i,j+1} - x_{ij} \\ y_{i,j+1} - y_{ij} \end{pmatrix},$$

and the dots indicate higher order terms. We see that planarity requires $(\mathbf{a}_1)^T \nabla^2 s \mathbf{a}_2 = 0$. In addition to the mesh \mathcal{S} approximating the surface $s(x, y)$, the corresponding polyhedral Airy surface Φ must approximate $\phi(x, y)$; thus we get the conditions

$$(\mathbf{a}_1)^T \nabla^2 s \mathbf{a}_2 = (\mathbf{a}_1)^T \nabla^2 \phi \mathbf{a}_2 = 0.$$

$\mathbf{a}_1, \mathbf{a}_2$ are therefore eigenvectors of $(\nabla^2\phi)^{-1}\nabla^2s$. In view of §2.3, $\mathbf{a}_1, \mathbf{a}_2$ indicate the principal directions of the surface $s(x, y)$ relative to $\phi(x, y)$.

In the discrete case, where s, ϕ are not given as continuous surfaces, but are represented by a mesh in equilibrium and its Airy mesh, we use the techniques of Schiftner [2007] and Cohen-Steiner and Morvan [2003] to approximate the Hessians $\nabla^2s, \nabla^2\phi$, compute principal directions as eigenvectors of $(\nabla^2\phi)^{-1}\nabla^2s$, and subsequently find meshes \mathcal{S}, Φ approximating s, ϕ which follow those directions. Global optimization can now polish \mathcal{S}, Φ to a valid thrust network with discrete stress potential, where before it failed: we do so by taking the planarity energy $\sum_f (2\pi - \theta_f)^2$, where the sum runs over faces and θ_f is the sum of the interior angles of face f , linearizing it at every iteration, and adding it to the objective function of the position update (Step 3). Convexity of Φ ensures that \mathcal{S} is self-supporting.

Note that for each Φ , the relative principal curvature directions give the *unique* curve network along which a planar quad discretization of a self-supporting surface is possible. Other networks lead to results like the one shown by Figure 13. Figures 12 and 14 further illustrate the result of applying this procedure to self-supporting surfaces.

Remark: When remeshing a given shape by planar quad meshes, we know that the circular and conical properties require that the mesh follows the ordinary, Euclidean principal curvature directions [Liu et al. 2006]. It is remarkable that the self-supporting property in a similar manner requires us to follow certain *relative* principal directions. Practitioners’ observations regarding the beneficial statics properties of principal directions can be explained by this analogy,

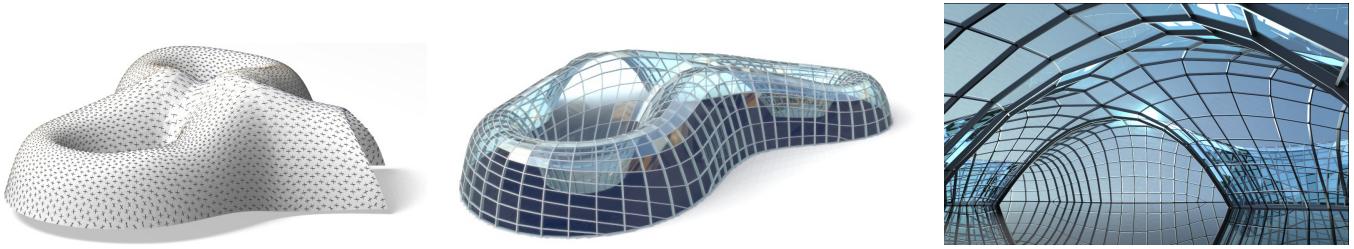


Figure 14: Planar quad remeshing of the surface of Figure 7. Left: Relative principal directions. Center: The result of optimization is a self-supporting PQ mesh, which guides a moment-free steel/glass construction. Right: Interior view.

because the relative principal directions are close to the Euclidean ones, if the stress distribution is uniform and $\|\nabla s\|$ is small.

Koenigs Meshes. Given a self-supporting thrust network \mathcal{S} with stress surface Φ , we ask the question: Which vertical perturbation $\mathcal{S} + \mathcal{R}$ is self-supporting, with the same loads as \mathcal{S} ? As to notation, all involved meshes $\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{R}, \Phi$ have the same top view, and arithmetic operations refer to the respective z coordinates s_i, r_i, ϕ_i of vertices.

The condition of equal loads then is expressed as $\Delta_\phi(s + r) = \Delta_\phi s$ in terms of Laplacians or as $H_{\mathcal{S}}^{\text{rel}} = H_{\mathcal{S} + \mathcal{R}}^{\text{rel}}$ in terms of mean curvature, and is equivalent to

$$\Delta_\phi r = 0, \quad \text{i.e.,} \quad H_{\mathcal{R}}^{\text{rel}} = 0.$$

So \mathcal{R} is a *minimal surface* relative to Φ . While in the triangle mesh case there are enough degrees of freedom for nontrivial solutions, the case of planar quad meshes is more intricate: Polar polyhedra \mathcal{R}^*, Φ^* have to be Christoffel duals of each other [Pottmann and Liu 2007], as illustrated by Figure 4. Unfortunately not all quad meshes have such a dual; the condition is that the mesh is *Koenigs*, i.e., the derived mesh formed by the intersection points of diagonals of faces again has planar faces [Bobenko and Suris 2008].



Figure 15: A “Koebe” mesh Φ is self-supporting for unit dead load. An entire family of self-supporting meshes with the same top view is defined by $\mathcal{S}_\alpha = \Phi + \alpha\mathcal{R}$, where \mathcal{R} is chosen as Φ ’s Christoffel-dual.

Koebe meshes. An interesting special case occurs if Φ is a *Koebe* mesh of isotropic geometry, i.e., a PQ mesh whose edges touch the Maxwell paraboloid. Since Φ approximates the Maxwell paraboloid, we get $2K(\mathbf{v}_i)H^{\text{rel}}(\mathbf{v}_i) \approx 1$ and Φ consequently is self-supporting for unit load. Applying the Christoffel dual construction described above yields a minimal mesh \mathcal{R} and a family of meshes $\Phi + \alpha\mathcal{R}$ which are self-supporting for unit load (see Figure 15).

6 Conclusion and Future Work

Conclusion. This paper builds on relations between statics and geometry, some of which have been known for a long time, and connects them with newer methods of discrete differential geometry, such as discrete Laplace operators and curvatures of polyhedral

surfaces. We were able to find efficient ways of modeling self-supporting freeform shapes, and provide architects and engineers with an interactive tool for evaluating the statics of freeform geometries. The self-supporting property of a shape is directly relevant for freeform masonry. The actual thrust networks we use for computation are relevant e.g. for steel constructions, where equilibrium of deadload forces implies absence of moments. This theory and accompanying algorithms thus constitute a new contribution to architectural geometry, connecting statics and geometric design.

Future Work. There are several directions of future research. One is to incorporate non-manifold meshes, which occur naturally when e.g. supporting walls are introduced. It is also obvious that non-vertical loads, e.g. wind load, play a role. There are also some directions to pursue in improving the algorithms, for instance adaptive remeshing in problem areas. Probably the interesting connections between statics properties and geometry are not yet exhausted, and we would like to propose the *geometrization* of problems as a strategy for their solution.

Acknowledgements. This work was very much inspired by Philippe Block’s plenary lecture at the 2011 Symposium on Geometry Processing in Lausanne. Several illustrations (the maximum load example of Figure 9 and the destruction sequence of Figure 8) have real-world analogues on his web page [Block 2011].

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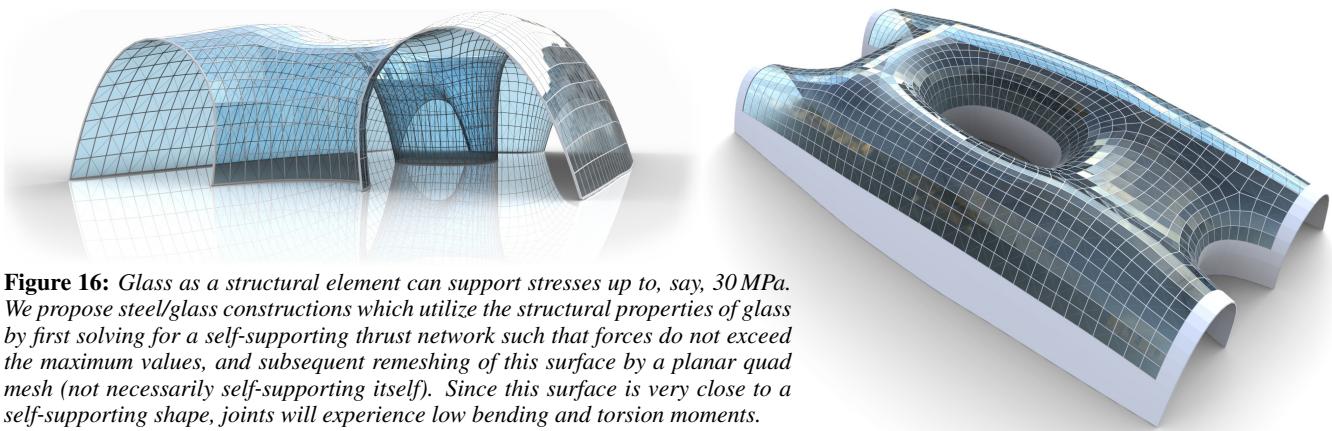


Figure 16: Glass as a structural element can support stresses up to, say, 30 MPa. We propose steel/glass constructions which utilize the structural properties of glass by first solving for a self-supporting thrust network such that forces do not exceed the maximum values, and subsequent remeshing of this surface by a planar quad mesh (not necessarily self-supporting itself). Since this surface is very close to a self-supporting shape, joints will experience low bending and torsion moments.

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