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# RECONSTRUCTING SURFACE TRIANGULATIONS BY THEIR INTERSECTION MATRICES ${ }^{1}$ 

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#### Abstract

The intersection matrix of a simplicial complex has entries equal to the rank of the intersecction of its facets. We prove that this matrix is enough to define up to isomorphism a triangulation of a surface.


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## 1. Introduction

There are several classes of simplicial complexes that are defined by the adjacency relation between maximal simplices. This is true for triangulations of the sphere due to the classical theorem of Whitney about the embeddings of 3-connected planar graphs. It is also true for simplicial convex polytopes of arbitrary dimension [1,2,4].

[^0]A triangulated surface is a simplicial complex whose underlying topological space is a connected 2-manifold (without boundary). It turns out that triangulated surfaces are not defined up to isomorphism by their dual graphs. There exist different triangulated surfaces having the same dual graph (see Goldberg snarks in [3], pages 890-892). However, it is not easy to build the appropriate examples. This strongly suggests that with little more information we should be able to define triangulated surfaces up to isomorphism.

If $S$ is a triangulated surface, then we will denote by $V, E$ and $T$ the sets of its vertices, edges and triangles. We say that two triangulated surfaces $S$ and $S^{\prime}$ have the same intersection matrix if there is a bijective map $f: T \longrightarrow T^{\prime}$ such that for any two triangles $t_{1}$, $t_{2}$ the equality of cardinalities $\left|t_{1} \cap t_{2}\right|=\left|f\left(t_{1}\right) \cap f\left(t_{2}\right)\right|$ holds. In this case we will say that $f$ is an intersection preserving map. We shall prove the following.
Theorem 1. If two triangulated surfaces have the same intersection matrix, then they are isomorphic.

Now we shall state a more detailed result from which Theorem 1 follows. We say that a map $f: T \longrightarrow T^{\prime}$ extends to an isomorphism if there is an isomorphism $g: V \longrightarrow V^{\prime}$ which induces $f$. This means that for any triangle $t=\left\{v_{1}, v_{2}, v_{3}\right\}$ the equality $f(t)=\left\{g\left(v_{1}\right), g\left(v_{2}\right), g\left(v_{3}\right)\right\}$ holds.

It is not true that any intersection preserving map extends to an isomorphism. To see this, consider the two triangulations of the projective plane in Figure 1.


Figure 1. Two triangulations of the projective plane which have intersection preserving maps not extendable to automorphisms.

The triangulation on the left is the half-icosahedron and we will denote it by $\mathcal{I} / 2$. The one on the right can be obtained by triangulating the 3 squares of the half-cube with 3 additional vertices. We will denote it by $\mathcal{T C} / 2$.

It can be easily checked that in the half-icosahedron case, the permutation of the triangles whose descomposition in cycles is $\left(1,1^{\prime}\right)\left(2,2^{\prime}, 5,5^{\prime}\right)\left(3,3^{\prime}, 4,4^{\prime}\right)$ is intersection preserving. In the $\mathcal{T C} / 2$ case, the involution $i \leftrightarrow i^{\prime}$ is intersection preserving. However, these two maps do not extend to automorphisms because disks are mapped to Möbius bands.

Theorem 1 is true because essentially there are no more such examples. More precisely, our main result is the following.

Theorem 2. Let $S$ and $S^{\prime}$ be two triangulated surfaces and $f: T \longrightarrow T^{\prime}$ be an intersection preserving map that does not extend to an isomorphism. Then, $S \simeq S^{\prime} \simeq \mathcal{I} / 2$ or $S \simeq S^{\prime} \simeq \mathcal{T C} / 2$.

The next section is dedicated to introduce and classify cyclic shells: a tool that we use to prove Theorem 2. The proof of Theorem 2 is given in Section 3. In the last section we outline some directions of further research.

## 2. Cyclic Shells

A cyclic shell is a simplicial complex of dimension two spanned by a set of $n \geq 3$ triangles $\left\{t_{0}, t_{1}, \ldots, t_{n-1}\right\}$ such that for all $0 \leq i<j \leq n-1$

$$
\left|t_{i} \cap t_{j}\right|= \begin{cases}2 & \text { if } i=0 \text { and } j=n-1 \\ 2 & \text { if } j=i+1 \\ 1 & \text { otherwise }\end{cases}
$$

Of course, triangulations of disks known as "wheels" in graph theory (see Figure 2) are cyclic shells. The neighborhoods of all vertices in triangulated surfaces are wheels. The wheels will be denoted by $C W_{n}$. Cyclic shells are exactly those simplicial complexes whose intersection matrix is equal to the intersection matrix of a wheel.


Figure 2. Cyclic shells.
More interesting cyclic shells are the two triangulations of the Möbius band showed in Figure 2. They will be denoted by $C E_{5}$ and $C E_{6}$ according to their number of triangles. We shall prove in this section that there are no more cyclic shells. This is a necessary step because any intersection preserving map transforms cyclic shells onto cyclic shells.

A linear shell is a simplicial complex of dimension two spanned by a set of $n \geq 2$ triangles $\left\{t_{0}, t_{1}, \ldots, t_{n-1}\right\}$ such that for all $0 \leq i<j \leq n-1$

$$
\left|t_{i} \cap t_{j}\right|= \begin{cases}2 & \text { if } j=i+1, \\ 1 & \text { otherwise } .\end{cases}
$$

An $n$-shell is a (linear or cyclic) shell with $n$ triangles. It is clear that if $\left\{t_{0}, \ldots, t_{n-1}\right\}$ spans a cyclic or linear shell, then for every $0 \leq j<k<n$ the set $\left\{t_{j}, t_{j+1}, \ldots, t_{k}\right\}$ spans a linear shell. This allows us to classify linear shells starting with small ones and "gluing" new triangles one by one. The reader should be prepared to deal with a relative large number of cases but the arguments used in each case are very simple.


Figure 3. Small shells.
Easy arguments show that the only linear shells with less than 5 triangles are those in Figure 3. The first three are part of an infinite family obtained by deleting one triangle from wheels. They will be denoted by $L W_{n}$. The one on the right will be denoted by $L E_{4}$ and can be obtained from $L W_{3}$ by adding a triangle and identifying the two vertices labeled the letter " v ".

Observe that the map $v \leftrightarrow v, a \leftrightarrow a^{\prime}, b \leftrightarrow b^{\prime}$ is an automorphism of $L E_{4}$ and therefore there are only two ways to glue a triangle to $L E_{4}$ in order to obtain a linear 5 -shell. They are shown in Figure 4.


Figure 4. Adding a triangle to $L E_{4}$.
The one on the left is a linear 5 -shell and will be denoted by $L E_{5}$. In the one on the right, the triangles $\left\{a, b^{\prime}, b\right\}$ and $\left\{v, a^{\prime}, c\right\}$ do not intersect and therefore we should identify the new vertex $c$ with one in $\left\{a, b^{\prime}, b\right\}$.

| Case | It is not a linear 5 -shell because: |
| :--- | :--- |
| $c=a$ | $\left\|\left\{v, a^{\prime}, c\right\} \cap\{a, b, v\}\right\|=2$ |
| $c=b$ | $\left\|\left\{v, a^{\prime}, c\right\} \cap\left\{a^{\prime}, b, b^{\prime}\right\}\right\|=2$ |
| $c=b^{\prime}$ | $\left\{v, a^{\prime}, c\right\}=\left\{v, a^{\prime}, b^{\prime}\right\}$. |

In the three cases we do not obtain a linear 5 -shell and we must discard this possibility. Also observe that $L E_{5}$ contains $L W_{4}$ and therefore we proved that the only linear 5 -shells are $L E_{5}$ and $L W_{5}$.

Lemma 3. If a linear $n$-shell contains $L W_{5}$, then it is $L W_{n}$.
Proof. If we add a new triangle to $L W_{5}$, then we obtain either $L W_{6}$ or the triangulation in Figure 5.


Figure 5. Adding a triangle to $L W_{5}$.
The new triangle $\{e, f, y\}$ does not intersect the triangles $\{a, b, x\},\{b, c, x\}$ and $\{c, d, x\}$ and therefore we should identify the new vertex $y$ with a non existing common vertex to these three triangles. So, we must discard this possibility. The same happens when we add a new triangle to $L W_{n}$ for $n \geq 5$.

If we add a new triangle to $L E_{5}$, then we obtain one of the triangulations in Figure 6. The new triangle is always the one that contains the vertex $d$.


Figure 6. Adding a triangle to $L E_{5}$.
The first triangulation from the left is a linear 6 -shell and will be denoted by $L E_{6}$. In the second one the new triangle does not intersect $\left\{a^{\prime}, b, b^{\prime}\right\}$. If we identify $d$ with one of these vertices, then a linear 6 -shell is not obtained:

| Case | It is not a linear 6 -shell because: |
| :--- | :--- |
| $d=a^{\prime}$ | $\left\|\{v, a, d\} \cap\left\{v, a^{\prime}, b^{\prime}\right\}\right\|=2$ |
| $d=b^{\prime}$ | $\left\|\{v, a, d\} \cap\left\{v, a^{\prime}, b^{\prime}\right\}\right\|=2$ |
| $d=b$ | $\{v, a, d\}=\{v, a, b\}$. |

In the third one from the left, the new triangle does not intersect $\left\{a^{\prime}, b, b^{\prime}\right\}$. If we identify $d$ with one of these vertices, then a linear 6 -shell is not obtained:

| Case | It is not a linear 6 -shell because: |
| :--- | :--- |
| $d=a^{\prime}$ | $\left\|\{v, c, d\} \cap\left\{v, b^{\prime}, a^{\prime}\right\}\right\|=2$ |
| $d=b$ | $\|\{v, c, d\} \cap\{v, a, b\}\|=2$ |
| $d=b^{\prime}$ | $\{v, c, d\}=\left\{v, c, b^{\prime}\right\}$. |

The last one contains $L W_{5}$ and by Lemma 3 we must discard it. So, we proved that the only linear 6 -shells are $L E_{6}$ and $L W_{6}$.

The map $v \leftrightarrow v, a \leftrightarrow a^{\prime}, b \leftrightarrow b^{\prime}, c \leftrightarrow d$ is an automorphism of $L E_{6}$ and therefore there are only two ways to glue a triangle to $L E_{6}$ in order to obtain a linear 7-shell. They are showed in Figure 7.


Figure 7. Adding a triangle to $L E_{6}$.
The one on the left contains $L W_{5}$ and by Lemma 3 we must discard it. In the one on the right, the new triangle does not intersect the triangles $\left\{a, b, b^{\prime}\right\}$ and $\left\{a^{\prime}, b, b^{\prime}\right\}$. If we identify $e$ with $b$, then the new triangle has two vertices in common with $\{d, b, v\}$. If we identify $e$ with $b^{\prime}$, then the triangulation has only 6 triangles. This shows that $L W_{7}$ is the only linear 7 -shell. Therefore, we proved the following.

Proposition 4. The linear shells are $L W_{n}$ for $n \geq 2$ and $L E_{m}$ for $m \in\{4,5,6\}$.
Proposition 5. The cyclic shells are $C W_{n}$ for $n \geq 3$ and $C E_{m}$ for $m \in\{5,6\}$.
Proof. We will add a triangle to a linear shell to obtain a cyclic shell. It is easy to see that the only cyclic shell than can be obtained from $L W_{n}$ is $C W_{n}$.

Recall that $L E_{4}$ is on the right of Figure $3, L E_{5}$ is on the left of Figure 4 and $L E_{6}$ is on the left of Figure 6. We will use the names of vertices given in those figures. We have that $C E_{5}=L E_{4}+\left\{v, a, a^{\prime}\right\}$ and $C E_{6}=L E_{5}+\{v, c, b\}$.

To prove that there are no more cyclic shells, observe that the new triangle has to contain an edge from the first triangle and another edge from the last triangle. Hence, it contains the common vertex of these two triangles and no new vertices. So, we only need to check the following four cases:

$$
\begin{array}{l|l}
\text { Triangulation } & \text { It is not a cyclic shell because: } \\
\hline L E_{4}+\left\{v, b^{\prime}, a\right\} & \left|\left\{v, b^{\prime}, a\right\} \cap\left\{a, b, b^{\prime}\right\}\right|=2 \\
L E_{4}+\left\{v, b^{\prime}, b\right\} & \left|\left\{v, b^{\prime}, b\right\} \cap\left\{a, b, b^{\prime}\right\}\right|=2 \\
L E_{5}+\{v, c, a\} & \left|\{v, c, a\} \cap\left\{a^{\prime}, b, b^{\prime}\right\}\right|=0 \\
L E_{6}+\{v, c, d\} & \left|\{v, c, d\} \cap\left\{a^{\prime}, b, b^{\prime}\right\}\right|=0 .
\end{array}
$$

## 3. The Proof of Theorem 2

Proof. Now we are ready to prove Theorem 2. Let $f: T \longrightarrow T^{\prime}$ be an intersection preserving map between the sets of triangles of two triangulated surfaces $S$ and $S^{\prime}$. Since cyclic shells are defined in terms of the cardinalities of the intersections, then $f$ must map cyclic shells onto cyclic shells.

Let $v$ be a vertex of $S$. Its neighborhood is some wheel $C W_{n}$. If the image by $f$ is also a wheel, then there is a vertex $w$ in $S^{\prime}$ which is the center of this wheel. If this happens for every vertex in $S$, then we can define in this way the function $g: V \ni v \mapsto w \in V^{\prime}$. It is not hard to prove that the action of $g$ on triangles is $f$. Moreover, $g$ is an isomorphism which extends $f$.

So, the only interesting cases arise when some wheel is mapped by $f$ to a cyclic shell which is not a wheel. By the classification of cyclic shells, the image must be $C E_{5}$ or $C E_{6}$.


Figure 8. Mapping $C W_{5}$ to $C E_{5}$.
Case $C E_{5}$. Let $\left\{t_{0}, t_{1}, \ldots, t_{4}\right\}$ be a set of triangles on $S$ which spans a wheel. Denote $t_{i}^{\prime}=f\left(t_{i}\right)$. In this case we suppose that $\left\{t_{0}^{\prime}, t_{1}^{\prime}, \ldots, t_{4}^{\prime}\right\}$ spans a $C E_{5}$. Since $S$ is a surface without boundary, there must exist five triangles $r_{0}, r_{1}, \ldots, r_{4}$ such that $\left|t_{i} \cap r_{i}\right|=2$. Denote $r_{i}^{\prime}=f\left(r_{i}\right)$. By the properties of $f$ we have $\left|t_{i}^{\prime} \cap r_{i}^{\prime}\right|=2$. This situation is showed in Figure 8. We will use the names of the vertices in this figure. The drawing on the right is our goal: we must prove that $S \simeq \mathcal{I} / 2 \simeq S^{\prime}$.

Observe that $r_{2}^{\prime}$ has non empty intersection with $t_{0}^{\prime}$ and $t_{4}^{\prime}$. By the properties of $f$, the triangle $r_{2}$ has non empty intersection with $t_{0}$ and $t_{4}$. Since $S$ is a surface, the vertices $a_{2}$ and $b_{2}$ are the same. By dihedral symmetry we also have $a_{i}=b_{i}$ and therefore $S \simeq \mathcal{I} / 2$.

Since $r_{0} \cap r_{2}=\left\{a_{2}, a_{0}\right\}$, we have $\left|r_{0}^{\prime} \cap r_{2}^{\prime}\right|=2$ and therefore $x_{0}^{\prime}=x_{2}^{\prime}$, By dihedral symmetry we also have $x_{2}^{\prime}=x_{4}^{\prime}=x_{1}^{\prime}=x_{3}^{\prime}$. Therefore $S^{\prime}$ can be obtained by gluing $C W_{5}$ and $C E_{5}$ by their boundaries. This implies that $S^{\prime} \simeq \mathcal{I} / 2$.

Case $C E_{6}$. Let $\left\{t_{0}, t_{1}, \ldots, t_{5}\right\}$ be a set of triangles on $S$ which spans a wheel. Denote $t_{i}^{\prime}=f\left(t_{i}\right)$. We suppose that $\left\{t_{0}^{\prime}, t_{1}^{\prime}, \ldots, t_{5}^{\prime}\right\}$ spans a $C E_{6}$. Since $S$ is a surface without boundary, there must exist six triangles $r_{0}, r_{1}, \ldots, r_{6}$ such that
$\left|t_{i} \cap r_{i}\right|=2$. Denote $r_{i}^{\prime}=f\left(r_{i}\right)$. By the properties of $f$ we have $\left|t_{i}^{\prime} \cap r_{i}^{\prime}\right|=2$. This situation is showed in Figure 9. We will use the names of vertices in this figure. The drawing on the right is our goal: we must prove that $S \simeq \mathcal{T C} / 2 \simeq S^{\prime}$. This drawing is different from the one on Figure 1 but the triangulation is the same, the line at the infinity has changed.


Figure 9. Mapping $C W_{6}$ to $C E_{6}$.
Since the triangle $r_{0}^{\prime}$ intersects $t_{3}^{\prime}$ and $t_{4}^{\prime}$, we see that $r_{0}$ must intersects $t_{3}$ and $t_{4}$. Since $S$ is a surface, $b_{0}=u$. Since $r_{1}^{\prime}$ intersects $t_{3}^{\prime}$ and $t_{4}^{\prime}$, we have $b_{1}=u$. By triangular symmetry we also have that $b_{5}=b_{4}=w$ and $b_{2}=b_{3}=v$. We proved that $S$ is isomorphic to $\mathcal{T C} / 2$.

Since $\left|r_{0} \cap r_{1}\right|=\left|r_{1} \cap r_{4}\right|=\left|r_{4} \cap r_{5}\right|=\left|r_{5} \cap r_{2}\right|=\left|r_{2} \cap r_{3}\right|=2$ in $S$, we have $x_{0}^{\prime}=x_{1}^{\prime}=x_{4}^{\prime}=x_{5}^{\prime}=x_{2}^{\prime}=x_{3}^{\prime}$ in $S^{\prime}$. From this we conclude that $S^{\prime}$ can be obtained by gluing $C W_{6}$ and $C E_{6}$ by their boundaries. This implies that $S^{\prime} \simeq \mathcal{T C} / 2$.

## 4. Conclusion

The reader might wonder if the intersection matrix characterizes triangulations of connected surfaces with boundaries. The answer to this question is negative and some examples of this are provided by the objects in Section 2.

However, some of the surfaces in Section 2 are non orientable, thus one may further ask if the intersection matrix of a triangulation of a connected orientable surface with boundary defines it. Here, we conjecture that the answer to this question is positive.

Further, one might wonder on the generalizations of Theorem 1 to simplicial complexes of higher dimension. We have strong evidence to suggest that the statement of Theorem 1 can indeed be extended to some classes of simplicial complexes of higher dimension. For example, triangulations of 3-dimensional balls.

Another interesting question is the algorithmic one. How fast can we build the lists of vertices and triangles of a triangulated closed surface from its intersection matrix?

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