

Using CAD Drawings for Robot Navigation¹

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Abstract

Exploration and navigation of an environment by a robot usually involves the steps of mapping, localization and path planning. Here we look at the problem of navigation in an environment about which the robot has some *a priori* information available, namely in the form of an architectural CAD drawing. The CAD drawing is utilized to obtain: (i) a topological map of the environment which is used for large scale path planning between regions in the environment and (ii) a skeleton of each region in the environment for path planning within regions. We then propose that a hierarchy of representations consisting of the topological map, skeleton and a reactive hazard-avoidance control system can be used effectively for navigation and exploration by a robot.

Keywords

CAD drawings, architectural drawings, mapping, path planning, navigation, mobile robot, topological map, Voronoi diagram, medial axis transform, layered control.

1. Introduction

Autonomous exploration and navigation of an environment by a mobile robot is a difficult task involving the steps of mapping, localization and path planning. Most research in these areas deals with unknown environments. However, in many situations such as institutional offices and campus environments, an architectural CAD description is readily available. Hence, our decision to focus on the problem of robot navigation in such environments.

The CAD drawing serves as an *a priori* global map of the environment. This map may not be an accurate representation of the environment but nevertheless it makes the process of exploration, particularly of large-scale space, simpler for the robot.

The problem dealt with in this paper, therefore, is of how to use the information in such CAD maps effectively for exploration and navigation. This will involve the following main steps:

- Obtaining the necessary information from the CAD map.

- Representing this information in forms suitable for planning.
- And finally planning based on the representations.

The architectural CAD drawings we use are 2-dimensional and use line segments and other geometrical entities to represent the environment.

1.1. Related Work

In this section we look at related work done on navigation in known environments and mainly consider approaches that use line segment based representations of the world.

Most methods use 2-D line segment based maps of the environment ([3], [12]). In [12], the map contains the locations of obstacles and landmarks that are used by the robot for localization. To perform path planning the map is converted into an occupancy grid map. Crowley [3] divides the free space in the map into a network of convex regions to perform global path planning. This representation is more compact than the occupancy grid used in [12].

Kosaka and Kak [7] employ a 3-D geometric model of the world. This model is used to build a *skeleton* of the 2-D floor plan of the environment which is used for path planning. Fennema *et. al* [4] use solid modeling techniques to construct a detailed 3-D model of the world. Path planning is then done using this model at several levels of abstraction.

Thrun *et al.* [13] assume that the environment is initially unknown and construct an occupancy grid map of the environment by exploration. A topological graph of disjoint regions is obtained from the grid and multiple path planners then determine a set of motion commands for the robot to follow.

Most of the approaches described above use a layered control architecture with each layer performing different tasks for navigation. Such control architectures used in mobile robots today usually have three layers for (i) deliberative computation, (ii) plan execution and (iii) reactive feedback control ([5]).

There are many more approaches to the problems of mapping and path planning and details on them can be found in [6], [9].

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1.2. Our Approach

The architectural CAD drawings we use here represent the environment as collections of line segments, arcs and other geometric entities. However, in order to simplify and focus the problem we assume that the CAD map is made up of straight line segments and ignore other geometric entities.² Furthermore, we restrict the present research to indoor environments.

As stated earlier our attempt here is to use the metrical CAD map effectively for navigation by coming up with a better representation of the map and using appropriate techniques for path planning. Therefore our approach is as follows:

1. We first process the CAD drawing to extract geometrical descriptions of the rooms and doors present in it. This effectively divides up the CAD drawing into discrete regions (i.e. rooms) each of which can be dealt with independently. Section 2 describes this in detail.
2. The collection of rooms and doors is used obtain a topological map of the environment, with the rooms as its nodes and doors as its edges. The topological map thus provides for a compact representation of the environment and is used for large-scale path planning. Section 3 discusses this in greater detail.
3. The skeleton (also known as the medial axis transform) of each room in the CAD drawing is then constructed. The medial axis transform is very similar to the Voronoi diagram and is used for path planning within each room or region. This is discussed in section 4.

Once the topological map and skeleton of the environment have been constructed, the following hierarchy of representations is proposed for robot navigation and exploration:

- The topological map at the top level of the hierarchy for large-scale path planning.
- The room-specific skeleton at the next level to propose trajectories suitable to reach a destination within an empty room.
- A reactive hazard-avoidance control system (like that proposed by Brooks [2]) at the third level for motion within a room to enable the robot to reach its destination even if the room is far from empty.

This hierarchy thus provides for a layered control architecture very similar to the generic model mentioned in section 1.1. The sections that follow discuss in detail our approach to the problem.

² The algorithms we describe can be applied to other geometrical shapes by first approximating them with straight line segments.

2. Obtaining Geometrical Information from CAD Drawings

Indoor environments, such as university buildings or corporate offices, can be represented as a collection of rooms or corridors connected by doors. This information can be extracted from CAD drawings of such environments and is the first step of the method described in section 1.2. However since the drawing is not error free, it is first modified to remove errors and then processed to extract the doors and rooms. We begin with a description of the CAD drawings.

2.1 Architectural CAD drawings

The Architectural CAD drawings used were available as AutoCAD drawing interchange format (*dxf*) files. Figure 1 shows such a CAD drawing of the 4th floor of Taylor Hall, a building at the University of Texas at Austin.

AutoCAD *dxf* files represent objects (walls, doors, stairs etc) in the environment as a collection of geometric entities such as line segments, arcs, text etc. For example, walls are represented by line segments and doors by line segments and arcs (see figure 1). Note that in the CAD file rooms are not a separate object i.e. line segments representing a room are not associated with each other in any way.

All the geometric entities are further grouped into different layers usually depending on the object they represent. For example, all line segments and arcs representing doors belong to a single layer called *A-door* in the CAD file. Table 1 shows some layers and the associated objects and entities they contain.

To start processing, the CAD database is first parsed and all relevant information regarding geometric entities stored in data structures. Doors in the CAD drawing are also identified using the layer information described above.

Layer	Geometric Entities or Objects
<i>A-door</i>	Line segments and arcs representing doors.
<i>A-wall-env</i>	Line segments representing outer walls of the building.
<i>S-colm</i>	Line segments representing vertical columns.

Table 1: Separation of objects/entities into layers.

2.2. Removing Errors from the CAD Drawing

Before the required information from the CAD drawing can be extracted, the drawing is first pre-processed to remove errors present in it. There are two types of errors present in the CAD drawings – numerical errors and drawing errors. Numerical errors have to be dealt with throughout – they can never be removed. Errors that arise due to

there are at least two points on the object's boundary that are equidistant from q and are closest to q . The medial axis of a polygon is very closely related to the Voronoi diagram and is, in fact, totally contained in the set of Voronoi edges of the polygon as shown in figure 5.

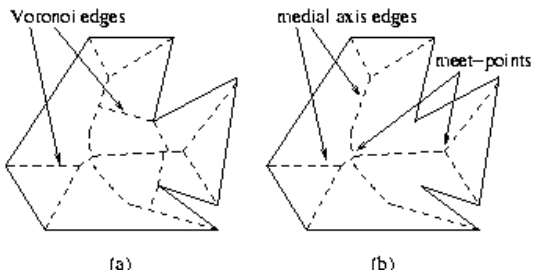


Figure 5: (a) Voronoi diagram and (b) skeleton.

There exist a number of methods for constructing the medial axis of a polygon of which many are based on optimal algorithms for constructing Voronoi diagrams (refer [1] for an extensive survey). However, the method we implement here is not optimal but is based somewhat on the techniques that would be used by a real robot to construct the skeleton or Voronoi diagram of a real environment.

3.1 Constructing the Skeleton

The medial axis of the CAD drawing is constructed by a simulated Voronoi robot as it explores the environment. The robot is circular, with center at

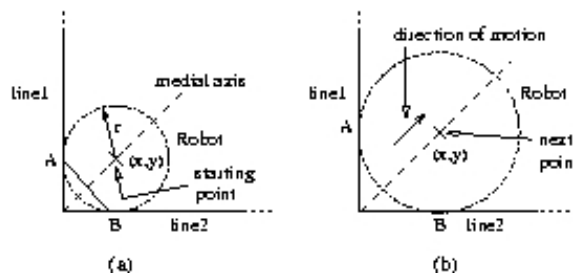


Figure 6: The Voronoi robot.

(x,y) and radius r and moves by changing x , y and r to stay in contact with walls or obstacles (see figure 6a). The robot moves in steps and in a given direction at a time. The step size is chosen before exploration starts and determines how close the constructed skeleton will be to a perfect skeleton. The Voronoi robot treats each room like a polygon and constructs the skeleton of each room separately. The following are the steps followed by the algorithm:

1. The robot starts the exploration from a point on the medial axis of the room. This point is equidistant from exactly two line segments in the room and is determined beforehand. Figure 6a shows the Voronoi robot starting at a point on the medial axis equidistant from the two line segments (*line1* and *line2*).

2. With the two points of contact on the lines (marked *A* and *B* in figure 6a) the robot moves *approximately*³ along the direction of the perpendicular bisector of the chord formed by them (dashed line which is also the medial axis), shrinking or growing r to maintain contact, as shown in figure 6. Figures 6 and 7 show that as long as there are 2 points of contact the robot remains on the same edge of the medial axis (marked 1, 2 and 3 in figure 7).

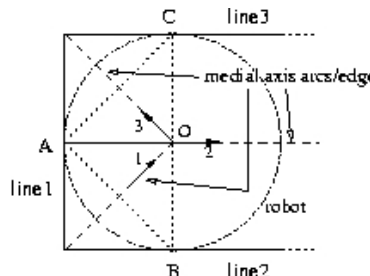


Figure 7: Reaching a meet-point

3. If more than two points of contact occur (e.g. *A*, *B* and *C* in figure 7) the robot defines a meet-point at its center (point *O* in figure 7) and explores further by moving in the direction of the perpendicular bisectors of the two or more new chords defined by the points of contact (as shown by the arrows in figure 7). Since all the contact points touch the circle they are also equidistant from its center. The robot continues to explore the environment keeping track of all meet-points to make sure it explores the whole environment.

The trace of the robot's center (x, y) is then the medial axis. Figure 8 shows the skeleton obtained for the entire CAD drawing with all doors open. The skeleton thus obtained can be used for suggesting routes to the robot within a room. One thing to note is that due to a finite step size the robot sometimes re-detects the meet-point it detected a step earlier and so while searching for new meet-points the robot should restrict its field of view. [11] provides more information on this and other implementation details.

A problem that arises is that the medial axis of a real environment with obstacles in it can be quite different from the one constructed using the CAD drawing. This can be overcome by ignoring unknown obstacles in the real world. One way of doing this is by using the ceiling of a room to construct the medial axis in the real world. Another way is using vision sensors as done by Kosaka and Kak [7]. Further work will focus on a better solution to the problem.

³ Due to numerical errors, moving along the perpendicular bisector causes the robot to deviate from the axis. One solution is moving towards the *center* of the chord joining the equidistant points (e.g. chord *AB* in figure 7) or its reflection about the robot's center - depending on the robot's direction of motion.

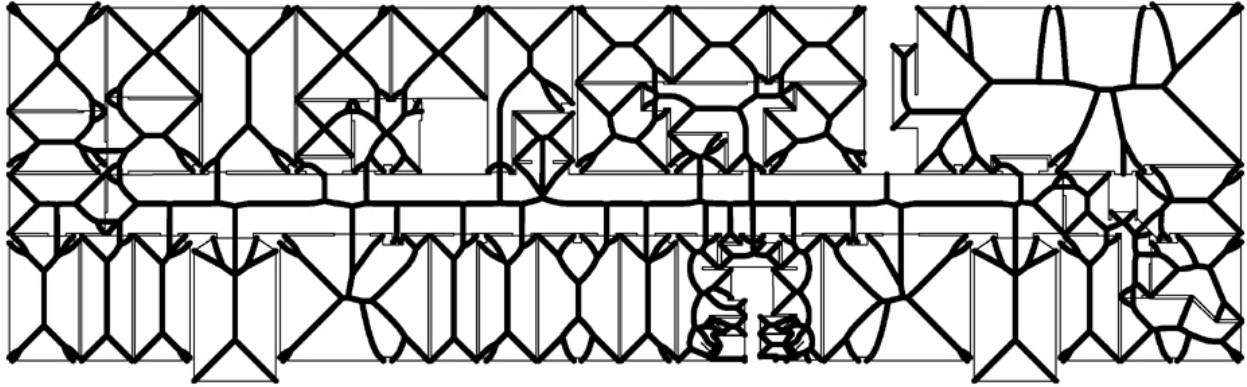


Figure 8: Skeleton of the CAD drawing with doors open.

5. Conclusion

The topological map along with the skeleton allows the robot to plan a complete path to its destination. This combined with a reactive control system, as proposed in section 1.2, can help the robot find a path to its destination even in the presence of unknown obstacles in the environment. The topological map and skeleton also provide for a compact representation of the environment as compared to occupancy grids or 3-D models as discussed in section 1.1. Also the use of multiple planners simplifies the path planning problem.

The use of readily available CAD drawings enables the robot to easily explore large-scale space. In this respect, another aspect being considered is using this work to complement the Spatial Semantic Hierarchy (SSH) [8] which is designed to model the process by which a robot learns a cognitive map from its experience during travel. The use of a graphical map, like a CAD drawing, with the SSH makes it possible to do things that are very difficult to do with local observations gathered during travel.

Future work will also consist of implementing the hierarchy proposed here on a physical robot and evaluating its effectiveness. Since CAD drawings of outdoor areas are available as well we will look at extending the present work to such environments.

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