
PREFACE

This book is about decompositions, or partitions, of manifolds, usually into cell-like sets. (These are the compact sets, similar to the contractable ones, that behave homotopically much like points.) Equivalently, it is about cell-like mappings defined on manifolds. Originating with work of R. L. Moore in the 1920s, this topic was renewed by results of R. H. Bing in the 1950s. As an unmistakable sign of its importance, the subject has proved indispensable to the recent characterization of higher-dimensional manifolds in terms of elementary topological properties, based upon the work of R. D. Edwards and F. Quinn.

Decomposition theory is one component of geometric topology, a heading that encompasses many topics, such as PL or differential topology, manifold structure theory, embedding theory, knot theory, shape theory, even parts of dimension theory. While most of the others have been studied systematically, decomposition theory has not. Filling that gap is the overriding goal. The need is startlingly acute because a detailed proof of its fundamental result, the cell-like approximation theorem, has not been published heretofore.

Placing the subject in proper context within geometric topology is a secondary goal. Its interrelationships with the other portions of the discipline nourish its vitality. Demonstrating those interrelationships is a significant factor among the intentions. On one hand, material from other topics occasionally will be developed for use here when it enhances the central purpose; on the other hand, applications of decomposition theory to the others will be developed as frequently as possible. Nevertheless, this book does not attempt to organize all of geometric topology, just the decomposition-theoretic aspects, in coherent, linear fashion.

Uppermost in my thinking, from the earliest stages of the book's conception, has been the belief it should be put together as a text, with as few prerequisites as possible, and so it has evolved. Not intended for experts, it aims to help students interested in geometric topology bridge the gap between entry-level graduate courses and research at the frontier. Along the way it touches on many issues embraced by decomposition theory but makes no attempt to be encyclopedic. It depicts foundational material in fine detail, and as more of the canvas is unveiled, it employs a coarser brush. In particular, after the proof of the climactic result, the cell-like approximation theorem, it tends to present merely the cruder features of later topics, to expose items deserving further individual pursuit. All in all, it should equip mature readers with a broad, substantial background for successfully doing research in this area.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people to whom I am indebted for help with this manuscript. Phil Bowers, David Wright and, especially, Jim Henderson read large pieces of it, noticing misprints, correcting errors, and offering a multitude of valuable suggestions. So also did Charles Bass, Dennis Garity, and Sukhjit Singh.

Students in classes taught during the academic years 1978-1979 and 1981-1982 made substantial contributions, partly by reacting to material presented, but often by voicing their own insights; included among them are Jean Campbell, Jerome Eastham, Terry Lay, Steve Pax, Kriss Preston, Phil Bowers, Jung-In Choi, Rick Dickson, and Nem-Yie Hwang. Preston, Lay, Pax, and Bowers, who all wrote dissertations in geometric topology, deserve specific recognition. In addition, Mladen Bestvina and Zoran Ne\vajdić are two others who more recently contributed pertinent comments.

Cindi Blair typed much of the manuscript. Craig Guilbault and David Snyder scrutinized page proofs and spotted countless mistakes.

Friends and colleagues provided a great deal of encouragement. Particularly significant was the prodding by two reigning department heads at the University of Tennessee, Lida Barrett and Spud Bradley.

The National Science Foundation bestowed research support throughout the time this project was underway.

To all of the above, and to those whom I have neglected, many thanks. Finally and most importantly, a note of appreciation to my wife, Lana, who aids in untold ways.