We describe analytical methods for the design of the discrete elements of ultralight lattice structures. This modular, building block strategy allows for relatively simple element manufacturing, as well as relatively simple robotic assembly of low mass density structures on orbit, with potential for disassembly and reassembly into highly varying and large structures. This method also results in a structure that is easily navigable by relatively small mobile robots. The geometry of the cell can allow for high packing efficiency to minimize wasted payload volume while maximizing structural performance and constructability. We describe the effect of geometry choices on the final system mechanical properties, manufacturability of the components, and automated robotic constructability of a final system. Geometry choices considered include building block complexity, symmetry of the unit cell, and effects of vertex, edge, and face connectivity of the unit cell. Mechanical properties considered include strength scaling, modulus scaling, and structural performance of the joint, including proof load, shear load, mass, and loading area, as well as validation and verification opportunities. Manufacturability metrics include cost and time, manufacturing method (COTS versus custom), and tolerances required. Automated constructability metrics include local effects of loads imparted to the structure by the robot and assembly complexity, encompassing the ability of the robot to clamp and number of placement motions needed for assembly.

Research, design, and test different connection types for ease in robotic assembly
Evaluate unit cells to determine optimal geometry
Design and implement a robotic end effector for mechanical fastening of the lattice

We evaluated a variety of unit cell geometries to determine which would best suit our requirements of structural performance and mechanical ability to be assembled. Additionally, for each lattice geometry, we evaluated the effects of the selected adjacencies – here, defined as a neighboring voxel; adjacency type can be face, edge, or vertex – and attachments, which occur between the base voxel and the adjacency.

Examples of the unit cells examined, from left to right: cube, truncated cube, cuboctahedron, truncated octahedron, rhombic dodecahedron, elongated rhombic dodecahedron, and hexagonal prismatic.

Select final geometry for unit cell using determined metrics
Determine optimal adjacency and attachment combination for maximized robotic assembly efficiency and ease
Integrate joining method into chosen unit cell geometry

I would like to thank my amazing mentors, Olivia Formoso, Greenfield Trinh, and Ben Jenett, along with everyone in the Coded Structures Laboratory, for helping me throughout the summer, with a special shoutout to Kenny Cheung. Thanks also go out to NASA Ames Research Center for this wonderful opportunity.