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Visual limits of maximal flats in symmetric spaces and Euclidean buildings

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(Submitted on 6 Jun 2012)

Let X be a symmetric space of non-compact type or a locally finite, strongly transitive Euclidean building, and let B denote the geodesic boundary of X. We reduce the study of visual limits of maximal flats in X to the study of limits of apartments in the spherical building B: this defines a natural, geometric compactification of the space of maximal flats of X. We then completely determine the possible degenerations of apartments when X is of rank 1, associated to a classical group of rank 2 or to PGL(4). In particular, we exhibit remarkable behaviours of visual limits of maximal flats in various symmetric spaces of small rank and surprising algebraic restrictions that occur.

Submission history

From: Thomas Haettel [view email]
[v1] Wed, 6 Jun 2012 13:51:04 GMT (139kb,D)

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