

Crystalline-symmetry-protected Majorana modes in coupled quantum dots

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(Received 7 August 2024; accepted 20 December 2024; published 27 January 2025)

We propose a minimalist architecture for achieving various crystalline-symmetry-protected Majorana modes in an array of coupled quantum dots. Our framework is motivated by the recent experimental demonstrations of two-site and three-site artificial Kitaev chains in a similar setup. We find that introducing a π -phase domain wall in the Kitaev chain leads to a pair of mirror-protected Majorana zero modes located at or near the junction. Joining two π junctions into a closed loop, we can simulate two distinct classes of two-dimensional higher-order topological superconducting phases, both carrying symmetry-protected Majorana modes around the sample corners. As an extension of the π junction, we further consider a general vertex structure where n Kitaev chains meet, i.e., a Kitaev n vertex. We prove that such an n vertex, if respecting a dihedral symmetry group D_n , necessarily carries n vertex-bound Majorana modes protected by the D_n symmetry. Resilience of the junction and vertex Majorana bound states against disorder and correlation effects is also discussed. Our architecture paves the way for designing, constructing, and exploring a wide variety of artificial topological crystalline phases in quantum-dot experiments.

DOI: [10.1103/PhysRevResearch.7.L012022](https://doi.org/10.1103/PhysRevResearch.7.L012022)

Introduction. Over the past decade, significant research efforts have focused on topological phenomena protected by the ubiquitous lattice symmetries in quantum crystals [1–6]. Starting from SnTe [2], various topological crystalline insulators and semimetals have been theoretically predicted and experimentally revealed in a plethora of compounds, such as Na₃Bi [7], Cd₃As₂ [8], KHgSb [9], MnBi_{1-2n}Te_{3n+1} [10], etc. This ongoing triumph of material discovery has been greatly boosted by conceptual advances such as topological quantum chemistry [11] and symmetry indicators [12–14]. Meanwhile, crystalline topological superconductors (TSCs) have similarly gathered substantial research interest [15–18]. However, few promising real-world candidates for crystalline TSCs have been proposed and experimental confirmation remains elusive. Notably, most recipes for crystalline TSCs necessitate unconventional pairing symmetries, such as triplet superconductivity, which are rare in nature, significantly limiting the pool of potential candidates.

Motivated by the above challenge, we propose the recently developed coupled quantum-dot system [19–23] as a viable avenue to explore various crystalline topological phases of

superconductors. Recently, the same platform has been exploited to realize an artificial Kitaev chain with two quantum dots (QDs) in experiments [24]. Very recently, the successful experimental realization of a π junction in the Kitaev model was achieved using just three quantum dots embedded in a two-dimensional electron gas [25]. We find that a π -phase junction structure of a similar QD-based Kitaev chain will trap a pair of Majorana zero modes (MZMs) protected by mirror symmetry [Figs. 1(a) and 1(b)], which manifests as a building block to achieve more sophisticated crystalline topological structures. In particular, by joining a pair of π junctions into a square, we show that we can realize two different higher-order TSC phases in two dimensions (2D) with corner-localized Majorana modes, which are protected by dihedral group symmetries D_2 and D_4 , respectively [Figs. 1(c) and 1(d)].

In terms of graph theory, a π junction can be viewed as a vertex with degree two, where each edge is a separate Kitaev chain. This further inspires us to explore the topological consequence of general vertices with n Kitaev-chain edges ($n > 2$), a structure dubbed “Kitaev n vertex” [Figs. 1(e) and 1(f)]. Remarkably, we find that an n vertex, if respecting a dihedral group D_n , must host n symmetry-indexed Majorana modes at the vertex. In particular, the vertex-bound states can be classified into singly degenerate MZMs and symmetry-enforced Majorana doublets, which exactly correspond to the 1D and 2D irreducible representations of the underlying D_n group, respectively. As a proof of concept, we provide a model study of the minimal 4-vertex with nine QDs, confirming the expected vertex Majorana physics. The robustness of the above Majorana modes against correlation and disorder effects is also discussed.

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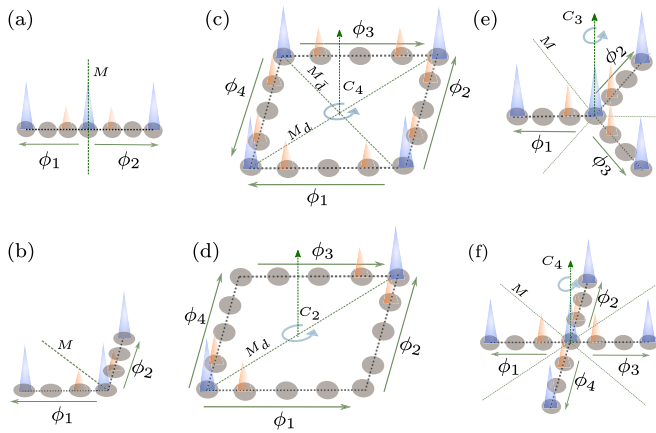


FIG. 1. Quantum-dot arrays with crystalline-symmetry-protected Majorana modes. (a) and (b) display two equivalent geometries of a π -phase junction with $\phi_1 = \pi$ and $\phi_2 = 0$. The blue and orange peaks around the junction site denote two π -phase MZMs with distinct mirror parities. (c) and (d) represent two extrinsic higher-order TSC phases protected by D_4 and D_2 , respectively. Here the phase configurations are $\Phi_B = (\phi_1, \phi_2, \phi_3, \phi_4) = (\pi, 0, \pi, 0)$ in (c) and $\Phi_A = (\phi_1, \phi_2, \phi_3, \phi_4) = (0, 0, \pi, \pi)$ in (d). (e) shows a D_3 -symmetric Kitaev 3-vertex with $\phi_1 = \pi$ and $\phi_2 = \phi_3 = 0$, where one MZM and one MZD are found around the vertex. (f) shows a D_4 -symmetric Kitaev 4-vertex with $\phi_1 = \phi_2 = \pi$ and $\phi_3 = \phi_4 = 0$, which hosts two vertex MZMs and one vertex MZD.

Mirror-indexed Majorana zero modes. Our setup of interest is a 1D chain of spin-polarized quantum dots (QDs) coupled through superconductor-semiconductor hybrids [24,26–28], which is known to reproduce the famous Kitaev-chain Hamiltonian [29]

$$H_K = \sum_{j=1}^{N-1} (-tc_j^\dagger c_{j+1} + \Delta_j c_j c_{j+1}) + \text{H.c.}, \quad (1)$$

where t denotes the single-electron hopping amplitude between neighboring QDs, and $\Delta_j = \Delta e^{i\phi_j}$ is the nearest-neighbor triplet pairing between the j th and $j+1$ th QDs. In practice, one can fine tune the system to the “sweet spot” with $t = \Delta$, where the topological Majorana physics stand out. In particular, with $c_j = \frac{1}{\sqrt{2}} e^{-i\phi_j/2} (\gamma_{A,j} + i\gamma_{B,j})$, the sweet-spot Hamiltonian becomes $H_K = -2i\Delta \sum_{j=1}^{N-1} \gamma_{A,j+1} \gamma_{B,j}$. Here, the Majorana operators are anticommutating $\{\gamma_{\alpha,j}, \gamma_{\alpha',j'}\} = 2\delta_{\alpha,\alpha'} \delta_{j,j'}$ and further fulfill a self-adjoint condition $\gamma_{\alpha,j}^\dagger = \gamma_{\alpha,j}$. By inspection, the end Majorana operators $\gamma_{A,1}$ and $\gamma_{B,N}$ are the only two unpaired ones that, thus, manifest as non-Abelian Majorana zero modes (MZMs) [29], whose existence is ϕ_j independent.

Let us now consider two QD chains of equal length and attempt to “glue” them into a long QD chain. At the sweet-spot limit, such a gluing process is reduced to a simple two-level problem that describes the coupling of two end MZMs γ_B^I and γ_A^{II} , where the superscript is the chain index. When two QD chains share the same pairing phase, one can always fuse and gap out the two MZMs with $H_c = -2i\Delta \gamma_A^{II} \gamma_B^I$. Using the Majorana basis $|\Psi\rangle = (|\gamma_{B,1}\rangle, |\gamma_{A,2}\rangle)^T$, $H_K = -\Delta \sigma_y$ respects both the particle-hole symmetry (PHS) $\Xi = \sigma_0 \mathcal{K}$ (where \mathcal{K}

is the complex conjugation operator) and a mirror symmetry $M_x = \sigma_y$ that spatially switches the dots. Note that both the spinless and odd-parity nature of the Kitaev chain requires $M_x^2 = 1$ and $\{M_x, \Xi\} = 0$.

Remarkably, the interchain gluing process is impossible when the pairings of the two QD chains differ by a π phase. To see this, we first note that π -phase geometry implies the two QD chains have exactly the opposite pairing orders, i.e., $\Delta(x) = \Delta \text{sgn}(x)$. Here, it is helpful to use the orientation of the p -wave pairing to define the direction of a Kitaev chain. In this convention, the QD chains forming a π junction are of opposite directions, as denoted by the arrows in Fig. 1(a). The spatial dependence of $\Delta(x)$ not only violates the original M_x , but also makes the p -wave pairing effectively even parity. In this case, we can always define a new mirror symmetry \tilde{M}_x that is compatible with even-parity pairings, at the cost of enforcing $[\tilde{M}_x, \Xi] = 0$. We then find that $\tilde{M}_x = \sigma_x$ under the Majorana basis $|\Psi\rangle$. As a consequence, any term H_c that couples γ_A^{II} and γ_B^I must satisfy $\{\Xi, H_c\} = [\tilde{M}_x, H_c] = 0$, which immediately leads to $H_c = 0$. Therefore, we conclude that the π -phase domain of a 1D Kitaev TSC must host a pair of MZMs.

The robustness of π -phase MZMs suggests that they should be symmetry protected. Indeed, we can combine γ_B^I and γ_A^{II} to form $|\gamma_\pm\rangle = \frac{1}{\sqrt{2}} (|\gamma_B^I\rangle \pm |\gamma_A^{II}\rangle)$. Owing to $[\tilde{M}_x, \Xi] = 0$, we find that

$$\tilde{M}_x |\gamma_\pm\rangle = \pm |\gamma_\pm\rangle, \quad \Xi |\gamma_\pm\rangle = |\gamma_\pm\rangle. \quad (2)$$

Therefore, γ_\pm are MZMs that carry distinct \tilde{M}_x indices and are hence protected by \tilde{M}_x . This guarantees the inability to construct a coupling H_c for the π -phase MZMs, as demonstrated earlier with the algebra of Pauli matrices.

Let us make a few remarks. First, the existence of π -phase zero modes in Kitaev systems has been reported in the literature [29–31], but the crucial role of mirror symmetry has rarely been highlighted. By breaking \tilde{M}_x , accidental zero modes can also appear at the junction, but not necessarily when there is an exact π phase difference. To summarize, the above discussion of π -phase MZMs has assumed: (i) the total number of QDs $N \in \text{even}$; (ii) the mirror plane lies in between QDs. We note that an analogous proof for $N \in \text{odd}$ is straightforward when choosing the mirror plane to coincide with the location of the central QD. As a concrete example, we analytically study a QD chain with $N = 5$ and further enforce a π -phase junction at $j = 3$, as shown in Fig. 2(a). Diagonalizing the QD Hamiltonian yields four zero-energy modes in the energy spectrum [Fig. 2(b)], where two zero modes are localized around the π junction and the other two are end MZMs [Fig. 2(c)]. A further symmetry analysis reveals that the π -phase zero modes carry a mirror index of ± 1 , respectively, just as we expect. A detailed discussion on this $N = 5$ system can be found in the Supplemental Material [32]. Finally, while disorder effects could be inevitable in a real-world setup, we have numerically proved the resilience of the π -phase junction MZMs against moderate quench disorders that respect mirror symmetry on average [32]. Note that similar topological robustness has also been reported in other topological crystalline systems [33].

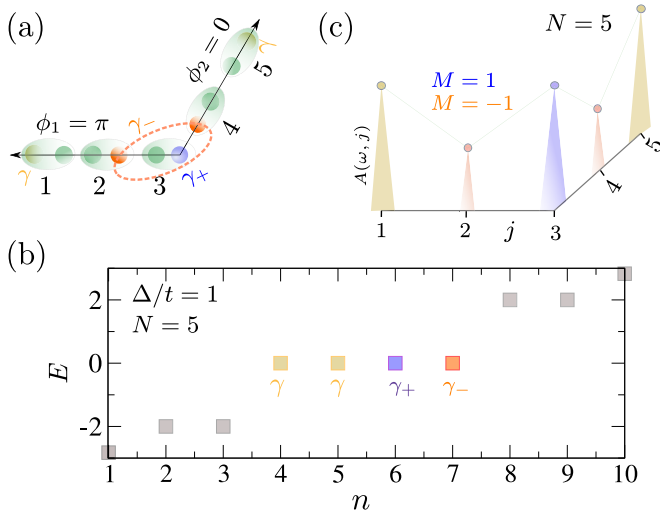


FIG. 2. (a) Schematic plot of a five-QD π junction with a pair of mirror-indexed MZMs. (b) BdG energy spectrum of the π junction in (a) with the sweet-spot condition $\Delta/t = 1$, where two edge MZMs are shown in olive. The junction MZMs γ_+ and γ_- are shown in blue and orange, respectively. The horizontal axis n labels states from the lower energy to the higher. (c) Site-dependent local density of states $\mathcal{A}(\omega = 0, j)$ of the four MZMs in (b).

The poor man’s higher-order topology. The geometry of the topological QD array can be quite flexible. For example, we show in Fig. 1(b) that a pair of MZMs will also emerge as corner excitations in an L-shaped junction with the two legs differing by a π phase, as long as a leg-switching mirror symmetry is well defined. When we assemble two identical L-shaped π junctions into a square-shaped closed loop, as shown in Figs. 1(c) and 1(d), we find two inequivalent scenarios of QD loops with two pairs of corner-localized MZMs (dubbed phase A) and four corner-MZM pairs (dubbed phase B), respectively.

This intriguing phenomenon is reminiscent of a 2D second-order TSC, denoted as TSC_2 , whose boundary characteristics are 0D corner-localized Majorana modes [34–45]. In general, corners MZMs can be protected by either a bulk gap or an edge gap. The latter case defines an extrinsic TSC_2 with a nontrivial edge-state topology, whose bulk state can be topologically free [46]. In contrast, an intrinsic TSC_2 must have a topological ground state in the bulk. Since a closed QD loop always has a vacuum state in its interior, it is thus expected to reproduce the key physics of an extrinsic TSC_2 with a minimal number of degrees of freedom. We dub this strategy the “poor man’s approach” [20] for TSC_2 .

For phase A, the edge SC phase is given by $\Phi_A = (\phi_1, \phi_2, \phi_3, \phi_4) = (0, 0, \pi, \pi)$, as shown in Fig. 1(d). We note that the system respects a dihedral symmetry group D_2 , generated by mirror symmetries M_d with $M_d(x, y) = (y, x)$ and $M_{\bar{d}}$ with $M_{\bar{d}}(x, y) = (-y, -x)$. Crucially, the phase structure Φ_A dictates $[M_d, \Xi] = [M_{\bar{d}}, \Xi] = 0$. The commutation relations support one MZM pair at each M_d -invariant corner, but not at the $M_{\bar{d}}$ -respecting corners. Notably, the only D_2 -invariant way to eliminate the corner MZMs is to simultaneously change the topology of every Kitaev chain by closing the “edge” gap, a manifestation of the extrinsic higher-order topology. We note

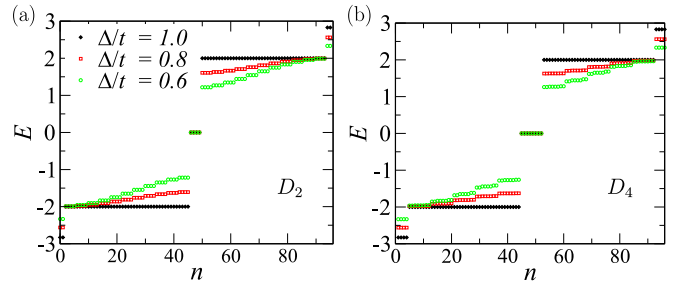


FIG. 3. (a) Energy spectrum of a D_2 -symmetric higher-order TSC (Phase A), where four corner MZMs are found. (b) Energy spectrum of a D_4 -symmetric higher-order TSC (Phase B) with eight corner MZMs. $N = 48$ QDs are used in both real-space calculations.

that an extrinsic TSC_2 does not often require any symmetry protection. Nonetheless, breaking the mirror symmetries for phase A will hybridize the MZM pair at the corresponding corners, thus spoiling the second-order topology. Therefore, phase A realizes a special class of D_2 -protected extrinsic TSC_2 .

Meanwhile, the phase structure for phase B is $\Phi_B = (\pi, 0, \pi, 0)$ [Fig. 1(c)]. This geometry respects a D_4 symmetry group generated by a fourfold rotation C_4 and M_d . Notably, both M_d and $M_{\bar{d}}$ now commute with the PHS, so that both M_d and $M_{\bar{d}}$ -invariant corners can support MZM pairs. Such a corner-mode configuration in Fig. 1(c) is also compatible with C_4 . Phase B thus offers a poor man’s version of a D_4 -protected extrinsic TSC_2 .

Figures 3(a) and 3(b) provide numerical simulations for both phases A and B with a total number of QDs $N = 48$, which confirms the above expectations. We have also chosen different sets of model parameters, and still find the corner MZMs to be extremely localized and robust. In particular, we find that the MZM wavefunction with a positive mirror index always peaks at the corner sites, while those with a negative mirror index will peak off the corner sites.

Both extrinsic TSC_2 phases described above share a \mathbb{Z}_2 classification. Namely, every mirror-respecting corner can support either zero or one pair of MZMs, if the mirror commutes with the PHS. For completeness, let us mention that an intrinsic TSC_2 with the same D_2 or D_4 symmetry is also \mathbb{Z}_2 classified, where a single MZM, rather than a MZM pair, will show up at each mirror-respecting corner [47]. The intrinsic and extrinsic TSC_2 phases together constitute a $\mathbb{Z}_2 \times \mathbb{Z}_2$ class. This agrees with the fact that each mirror-invariant corner can host zero or one MZM in either mirror subspace.

Kitaev vertices. We study a 2D geometry of QD arrays where n Kitaev chains meet at a single vertex; here is dubbed a “Kitaev n vertex.” Following the language of graph theory, $n \in \mathbb{Z}_+$ is the vertex degree. Such vertex structure manifests as an elementary building block for constructing complex QD lattices, on which scalable Majorana braiding and fusion operations can be implemented [48–52]. Earlier studies have revealed the existence of zero-energy modes in certain Kitaev vertices, while the topological origin of these zero modes remains unclear [53]. As clarified below, in this paper we show that the key to comprehending the vertex-bound zero

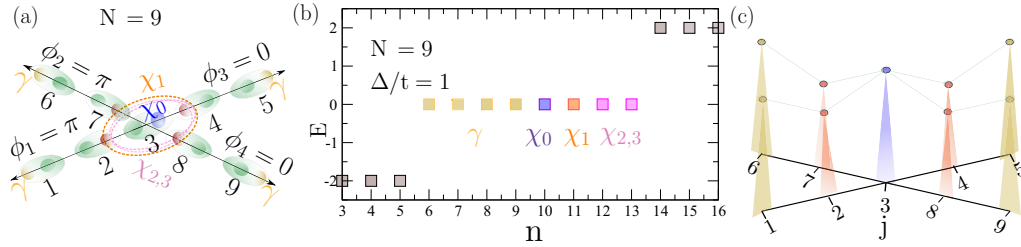


FIG. 4. (a) A minimal D_4 -invariant 4-vertex with nine QDs. (b) The BdG energy spectrum shows eight zero modes, including four edge MZMs (in olive), two vertex MZMs (in blue and orange), and two zero modes that constitute a MZD (in magenta). The horizontal axis n labels states from the lower energy to the higher. (c) Real-space LDOS plots of the eight zero modes.

modes is the underlying crystalline symmetry of the vertex geometry.

Let us start by labeling the edges of an n vertex by an edge index $\alpha = 1, 2, \dots, n$, and an example for $n = 4$ is shown in Fig. 1(f). Here we have assumed $n > 2$ as a 2-vertex is essentially a linear junction structure discussed in the previous section. Because each edge is a Kitaev chain, it will contribute to an end MZM to the central node. As a result, the low-energy physics of an n vertex will involve n edge MZMs, dubbed γ_α . Without imposing any symmetry constraint, the MZMs at a general vertex structure with an even n can always be paired up and gapped out, while one vertex MZM will persist for $n = 3$. Notably, the Kitaev chains or edges are directional. When all edges are pointing outward or inward, the n vertex respects a dihedral symmetry group D_n , and every energy eigenstate must be labeled by an irreducible representation (irrep) of D_n .

Let us first consider the rotation C_n , which permutes the edge MZMs as

$$C_n \gamma_\alpha C_n^{-1} = \gamma_{\alpha+1}, \quad \text{with } \gamma_{n+1} \equiv \gamma_1. \quad (3)$$

Hence, $\{\gamma_\alpha\}$ form a regular representation of C_n . As a consequence, the n energy eigenstates from $\{\gamma_\alpha\}$ must cover all possible $|J_z\rangle$, where the z -component angular momentum $J_z \in \{0, 1, \dots, n-1\}$ and $C_n |J_z\rangle = \exp(i\frac{2\pi}{n}J_z) |J_z\rangle$. In the Majorana representation, the PHS $\Xi = \mathcal{K}$ is the complex conjugation and the rotation matrix is simply a permutation matrix of different MZMs, which leads to $[C_n, \Xi] = 0$. Because the PHS will flip the value of J_z , a $|J_z\rangle$ must be a MZM state if $J_z \equiv -J_z \pmod{n}$ [54]. It is then easy to show that when n is even, an n vertex will have two vertex MZMs with $J_z = 0$ and $\frac{n}{2}$. Otherwise, there will be one vertex MZM with $J_z = 0$. Note that a similar mathematical structure of bound states has been found in the superconducting vortex of C_n -protected higher-order TSCs in 2D [55].

Meanwhile, the mirror symmetry M of D_n group can merge two 1D irreps into one 2D irrep. This forces $|J_z\rangle$ and $| -J_z\rangle$ to be energetically degenerate, i.e., $E_{J_z} = E_{-J_z}$. This scenario happens when $J_z \not\equiv -J_z \pmod{n}$, i.e., only when $|J_z\rangle$ is not PHS invariant. On the other hand, $|\pm J_z\rangle$ are PHS related, leading to $E_{J_z} = -E_{-J_z}$. We then find that $E_{J_z} = E_{-J_z} = 0$. Therefore, $|\pm J_z\rangle$ represents a class of D_n -protected degenerate zero modes unveiled here that respect the PHS as a whole [56]. We dub these modes a ‘‘Majorana zero doublet’’ (MZD), to distinguish them from the conventional nondegenerate MZMs. We have now arrived at the following remarkable conclusions: (i) A D_n -symmetric n vertex always

has n zero modes, including both MZMs and MDPs; (ii) Vertex MZMs and MDPs are classified by the 1D and 2D irreps of D_n , respectively.

For example, a 4-vertex should host two MZMs ($|J_z = 0\rangle$ and $|J_z = 2\rangle$) and one MZD contributed by $|J_z = 1, 3\rangle$. In total, there are four zero modes at the center of a 4-vertex (Fig. 4). For a 3-vertex, there exists one MZM $|J_z = 0\rangle$ and one MZD ($|J_z = 1, 2\rangle$) that are symmetry protected (see the SM [32] for more details). We can similarly identify the numbers of MZMs and MZDs for other n , and a summary of results can be found in Table I. As a proof of concept, we have also numerically calculated the BdG spectrum of the minimal 4-vertex with nine QDs and found eight zero modes, as shown in Figs. 4(a) and 4(b). By plotting their spatial profile in Fig. 4(c), four zero modes (highlighted in yellow) are localized at one site at the end of each edge, while $J_z = 0$, MZM χ_0 (colored in purple) sits at the vertex site. Notably, while the $J_z = 2$, MZM $\chi_1 = \frac{1}{2}(\gamma_{B,2} - \gamma_{B,7} + \gamma_{A,4} - \gamma_{A,8})$ (colored in orange) and the MZD $[\chi_2 = \frac{1}{2}(i\gamma_{B,2} + \gamma_{B,7} - i\gamma_{A,4} - \gamma_{A,8})$ and $\chi_3 = \chi_2^\dagger]$ (colored in pink) with $J_z = 1, 3$, share exactly the same spatial location (see also the SM [32] for the detailed calculations), they are completely decoupled from one another thanks to the protection of D_4 symmetry.

Conclusion. We have shown that junctions and vertices of QD-based artificial Kitaev chains are natural generators of multifold degenerate Majorana modes that carry crystalline quantum numbers. As an elementary function component of our architecture, the π junction, along with the associated mirror-indexed MZMs, can be experimentally achieved by applying a magnetic flux through a superconducting loop

TABLE I. Classification of vertex Majorana modes with and without a D_n symmetry. \mathcal{N}_{MZM} and \mathcal{N}_{MZD} count the number of vertex-bound MZM and MZD, respectively. \mathcal{N}_{tot} denotes the total number of vertex zero modes, including both MZMs and MZDs.

Symmetry	Degree n	$(\mathcal{N}_{\text{MZM}}, \mathcal{N}_{\text{MZD}})$	\mathcal{N}_{tot}
None	3	(1,0)	1
	4	(0,0)	0
	5	(1,0)	1
	6	(0,0)	0
D_n	3	(1,1)	3
	4	(2,1)	4
	5	(1,2)	5
	6	(2,2)	6

that connects the two hybrid segments of quantum-dots systems [57]. Structures of complex geometric patterns, such as the poor man's higher-order TSC phases and Kitaev vertices, can be assembled by stacking multiple π junctions. Fine-tuning the system to the sweet spot, a minimal geometry of the proposed junction or vertex only requires a handful of QDs, which are accessible with state-of-the-art device fabrication techniques. Meanwhile, signatures of junction and vertex Majorana modes can be revealed in the local and nonlocal tunneling conductance measurements [24,26]. Away from the sweet spot, hybridizations among edge and junction/vertex Majorana modes are expected to trigger intriguing signals that are detectable with multiterminal nonlocal transport measurements [58,59].

It is also straightforward to extend the construction schemes of both TSC₂ and highfold vertex bound states to 1D topological chains in other symmetry classes. For example, a vertex structure consisting of multiple Su-Schrieffer-Heeger (SSH) chains in the class BDI would feature vertex zero modes with both crystalline index and chiral-symmetry

indices. Artificial lattice systems such as cold-atom [60] or photonic [61] platforms would be a feasible and tunable avenue to explore these phenomena in experiments.

The dihedral-symmetric Kitaev vertices further manifest as a basic element for constructing general 2D networks of connected Kitaev chains, i.e., a vertex lattice [62]. Since each vertex is rich in Majorana degrees of freedom, turning on intervertex interactions in a vertex lattice opens up a new door for achieving various 2D symmetry-protected topological (SPT) states [63], topological orders [64,65], fracton phases [66], etc. We leave this intriguing directions for future discussions.

Acknowledgments. We thank S. Okamoto for helpful discussion. B.P. and E.D. were supported by the U.S. Department of Energy, Office of Science, Basic Energy Sciences, Materials Sciences and Engineering Division. G.A. was supported by the U.S. Department of Energy, Office of Science, National Quantum Information Science Research Centers, Quantum Science Center. R.X.Z. is supported by a startup fund of the University of Tennessee.

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