Introduction to Aerial Robotics
Lecture 1

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Dept. of ECE, HKUST


4 February 2025

Logistics

About this Course…

- This course is about:
  - Autonomy for aerial robots
  - Modeling and control of multi-rotor aerial robots
  - Path and trajectory planning for multi-rotor aerial robots
  - Algorithms for vision-based state estimation
  - Algorithms for multi-sensor fusion
  - Real-time software implementations for autonomous aerial robots
  - Lots of fun with robots ☺
- This course is NOT about:
  - Aerodynamics ☹
  - Aircraft design ☹
  - Electromechanical systems of aerial robots ☹

Course structure

- Weekly lectures + lots of projects + a midterm exam

- Grading Scheme:
  - Midterm exam: 20%
  - Project 1: 30%
  - Project 2: 20%
  - Project 3: 30%

- More details can be found on the Canvas homepage.

Teaching Team

- **Instructor:**
  - Shaojie Shen (eeshaojie@ust.hk)
    Office Hour: by appointment

- **Teaching Assistants:**
  - Xiuyuan Lu (xluaj@connect.ust.hk)
    Office Hour: by appointment
  - Yan Ning (yningaa@connect.ust.hk)
    Office Hour: by appointment

Administrative Stuff

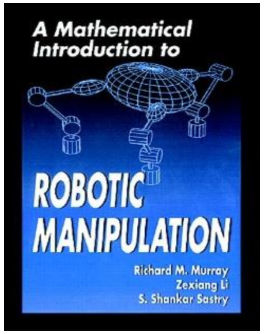
- **Lecture:**
  - Tuesday 1:30 pm - 4:20 pm
    - Rm 5506, Lift 25-26 (30)
    - Students who are not registered are welcome to sit in the lectures, but their assignments will not be graded

- **Labs:**
  - We 06:00PM - 08:50PM
    - Robotics Institute Flight Area
    - We will not have lab sessions every week, refer to Canvas site for details

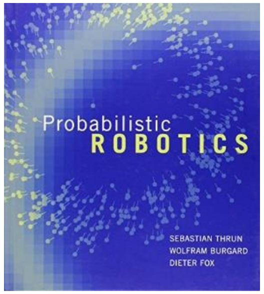
- **Course Website:**
  - https://canvas.ust.hk/courses/61540

(Non-Compulsory) Reference Books

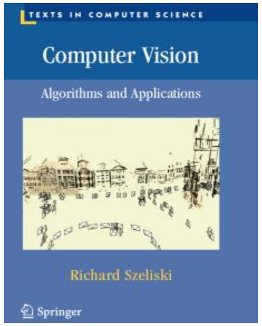
- A Mathematical Introduction to Robotic Manipulation
  - Richard M. Murray, Zexiang Li, S. Shankar Sastry;



- Probabilistic Robotics;
  - Sebastian Thrun, Wolfram Burgard, Dieter Fox;



- Computer Vision: Algorithms and Applications
  - Richard Szeliski
  - http://szeliski.org/Book/



Workload & Expectation

- **Expected Student Background:**
  - Linear algebra
  - Probability
  - MATLAB programming skills
  - C++ programming skills (VERY IMPORTANT)
  - Linux
  - Love robots ☺

- **Workload:**
  - Attend lectures
  - Lots of project work
  - Have fun with robots ☺

Programming!

- MATLAB
- C++
- Robot Operating System (ROS) [http://www.ros.org/]
- Requires coding on both desktop PC and embedded platforms

Overview of Aerial Robotics

Aerial Robots = Military Drones?

- Mostly Big
- 10+ Hours of Flight Time
- Remote Control
  - Waypoint planning
  - Some joystick
  - Flight crew 4-10

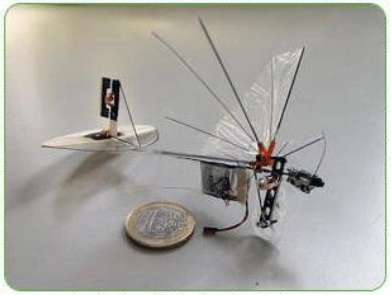
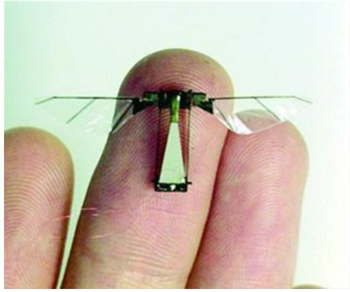
"Drones mischaracterize what these things are. They're not dumb. Nor are they unmanned, actually. They're remotely piloted aircraft."

-- Gen. Norton Schwarz, August 10, 2012

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles

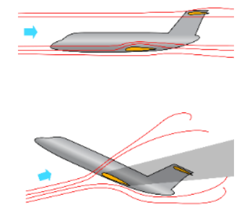


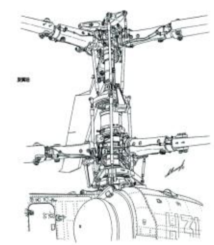


Unmanned Aerial Vehicles

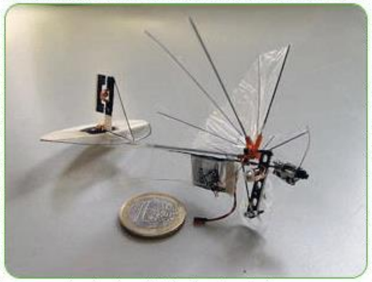
- Types of UAVs
  - Fixed wing
    - Long flight time, large payload, self-stabilized system ☺
    - Requires runway, may stall, needs aerodynamic design ☹
  - Helicopter
    - Vertical takeoff and landing ☺
    - OK flight time and payload
    - Complex mechanical system, unstable systems ☹
  - Multi-rotor
    - VTOL, simple mechanical design ☺
    - Hard to scale up
    - Short flight time, small payload, unstable system ☹

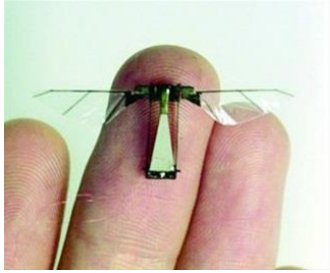





Unmanned Aerial Vehicles

- Anything even better?
  - Vertical Take-Off and Landing (VTOL) UAV
    - VTOL + long flight time + long range ☺
    - Technology not well developed ☹
  - Flapping Wing / Bio-Inspired UAVs
    - Suitable for small platforms ☺
    - Technology not well developed ☹





Contents [hide]

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles

- Civilian market of $100 billion USD
- Regulations are getting mature

Multi-Rotor Micro Aerial Vehicles

- Small size (<1m)
- Adequate payload (1-5kg)
- Low cost (< 10k USD)
- Safe
- Superior mobility


Inspection


Search and Rescue


Transportation

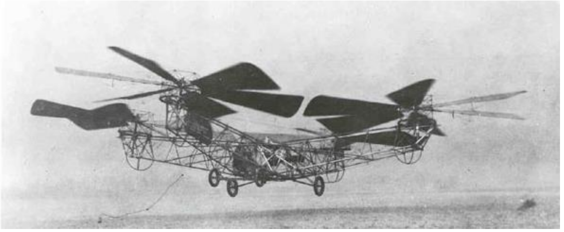

Aerial Photography

Law enforcement


Agriculture

Development of Multi-Rotors

- de Bothezat helicopter (1922)
  - Flight altitude 5m during demonstration
  - Fully manual controlled unstable system ☹



- Nothing happened in the next few decades
  - Almost impossible for manual control ☹
  - Multi-rotors cannot be scaled up ☹
  - No suitable sensors (tradition IMUs are big and expensive) ☹

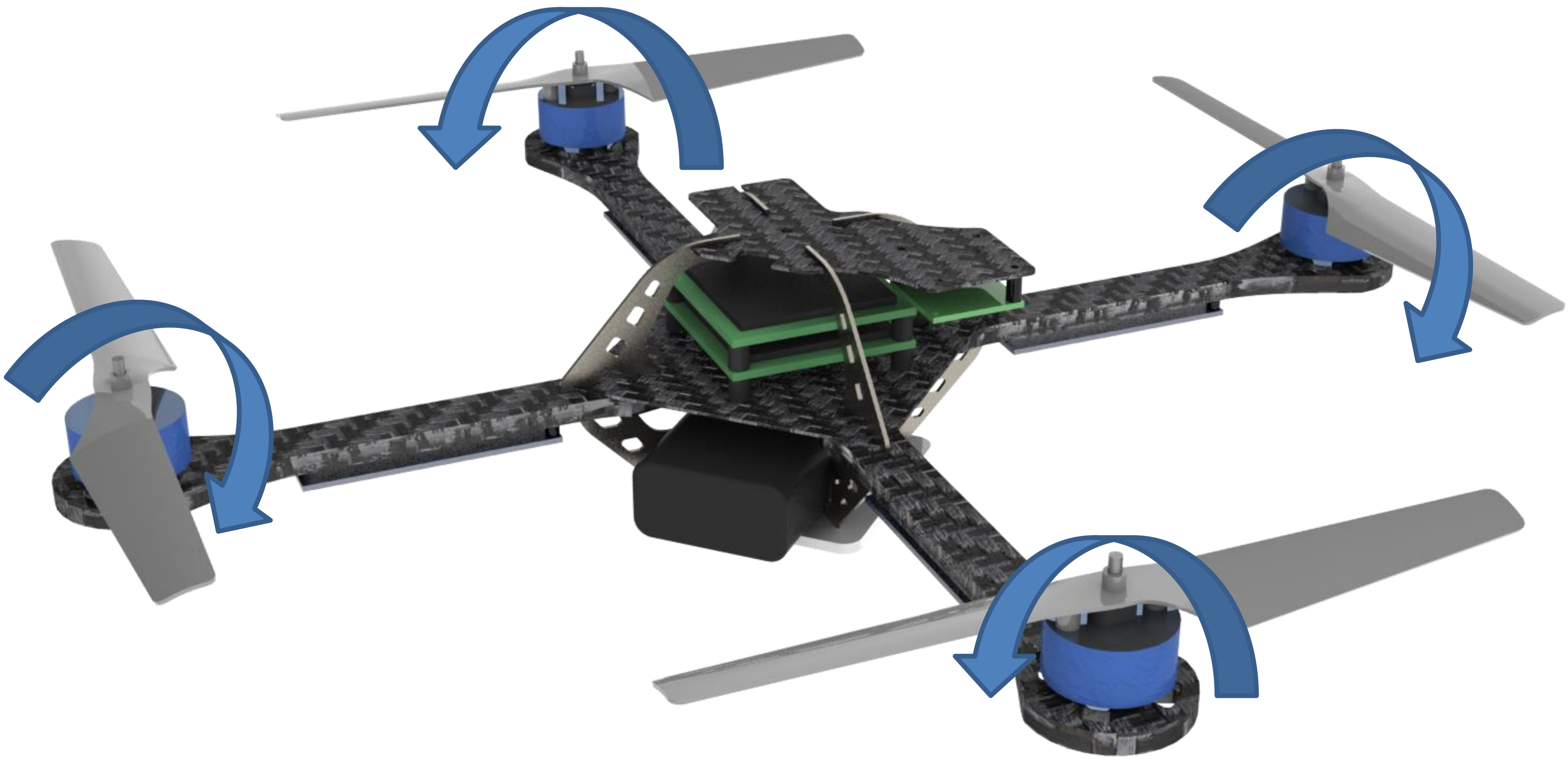
- STARMAC @ Stanford University (2004)
  - Thanks to the development of smart mobile devices
  - MEMS sensors + embedded computers

Development of Multi-Rotors

- The Role of Academia
  - University of Pennsylvania
    - Vijay Kumar (Planning, control, swarm)
  - Massachusetts Institute of Technology
    - Jonathan How (modelling, control)
    - Nicolas Roy (perception)
  - University of California, Berkeley
    - Claire Tomlin (control, policies)
  - ETH Zurich
    - Roland Siegwart (perception, control)
    - Raffaello D'Andrea (control, swarm)
    - Marc Pollefeys (perception, Pixhawk)
  - Univ. of Zurich
    - Davide Scaramuzza (perception, control)
  - Hong Kong University of Science Technology
    - Zexiang Li (founded DJI with Frank Wang)
    - I actually want to put myself here…
  - Also involves other areas such as communication, material science, mechanical engineering, electronics, aerospace engineering, system engineering…

Commercialization of Aerial Robots

Quadrotors

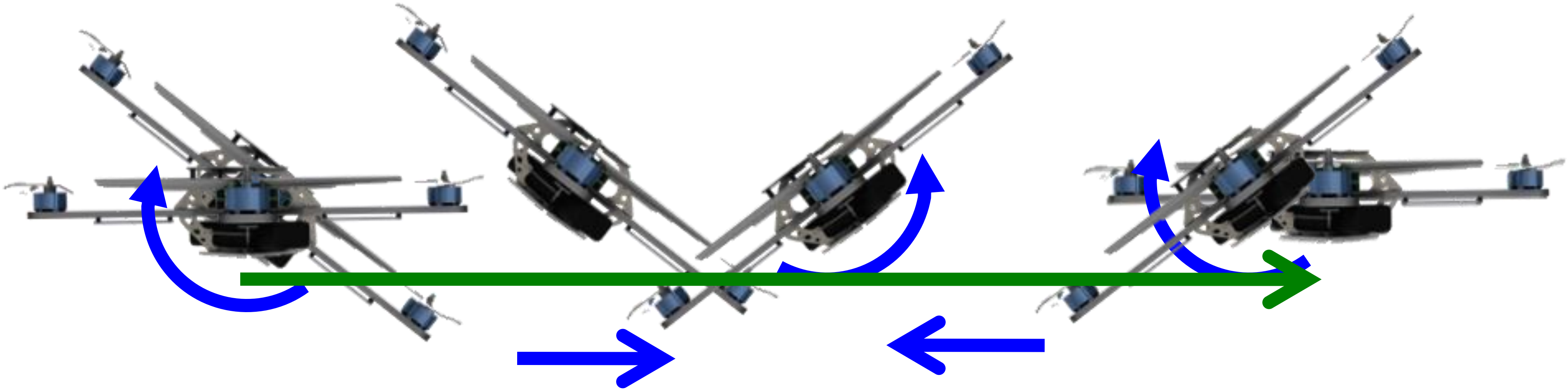


CAD Models from V. Kumar

Quadrotors - Rotation

CAD Models from V. Kumar

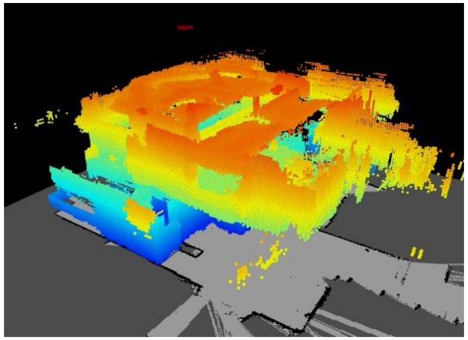
Quadrotors - Translation



CAD Models from V. Kumar

Towards Autonomous Flight…

- Sensing and perception — Part 2
- State estimation — Part 3
- Path planning
- Trajectory generation — Part 1
- Control
- System integration — Projects!

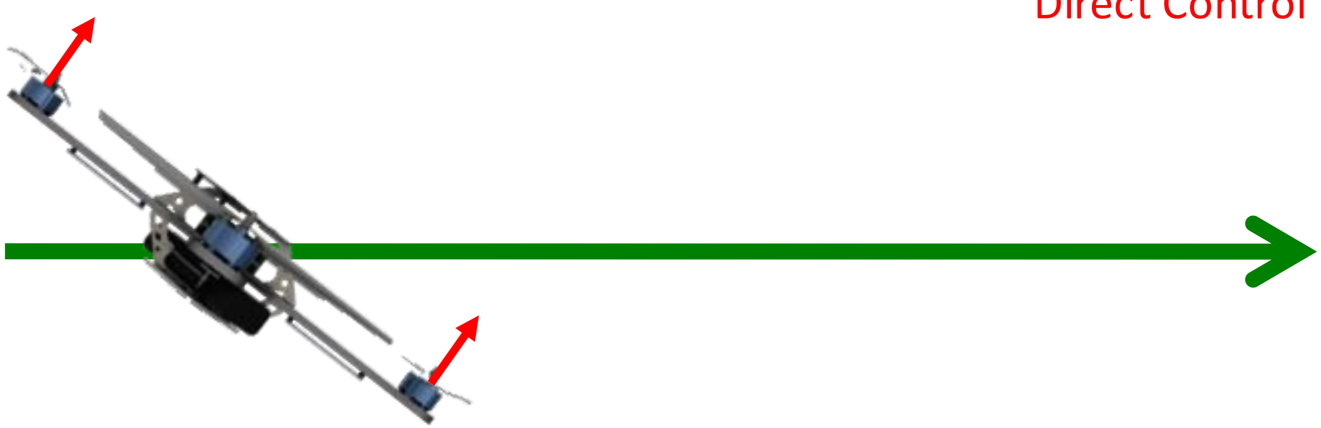


How to fly? – Dynamics & Control

Derivative	Translation	Rotation	Thrust
0	Position		
1	Velocity		
2	Acceleration	Rotation	
3	Jerk	Angular Velocity	
4	Snap	Angular Acceleration	Differential Thrust
5	Crackle	Angular Jerk	Change in Thrust

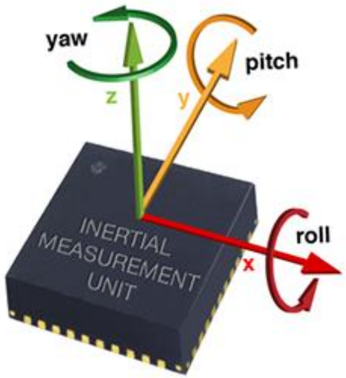
Position → Control Target

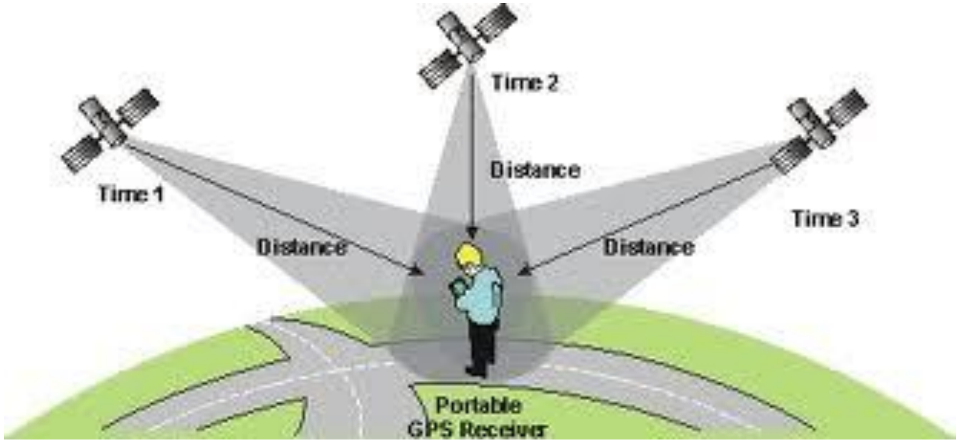
Change in Thrust → Direct Control Input



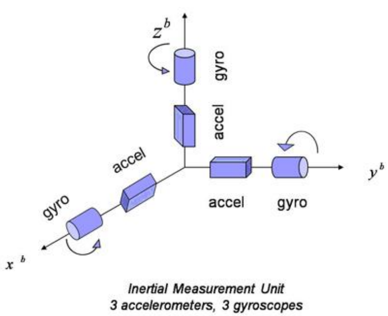
How to Fly? – Sensing & Estimation

- Answer the key question: Where am I?
- Proprioceptive sensors
  - Low cost Inertial Measurement Unit
- Exteroceptive sensors
  - GPS
  - Magnetometer
  - Barometer
  - Cameras
  - Laser range finders
  - etc.
- Processors
- Algorithms

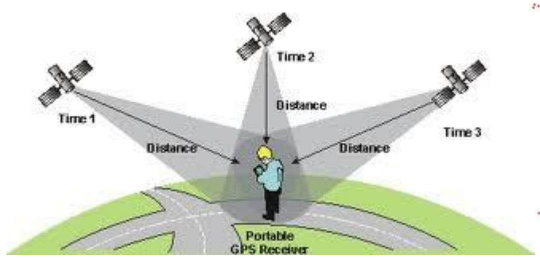




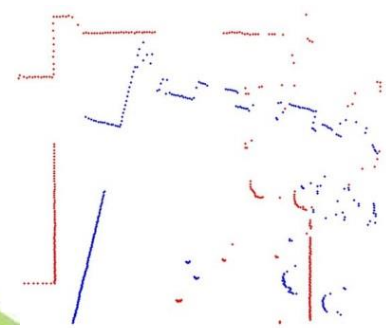
How to Fly? – Sensing & Estimation



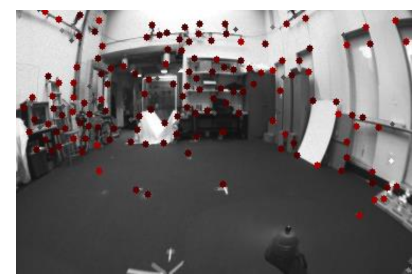
Inertial Measurement Unit



GPS



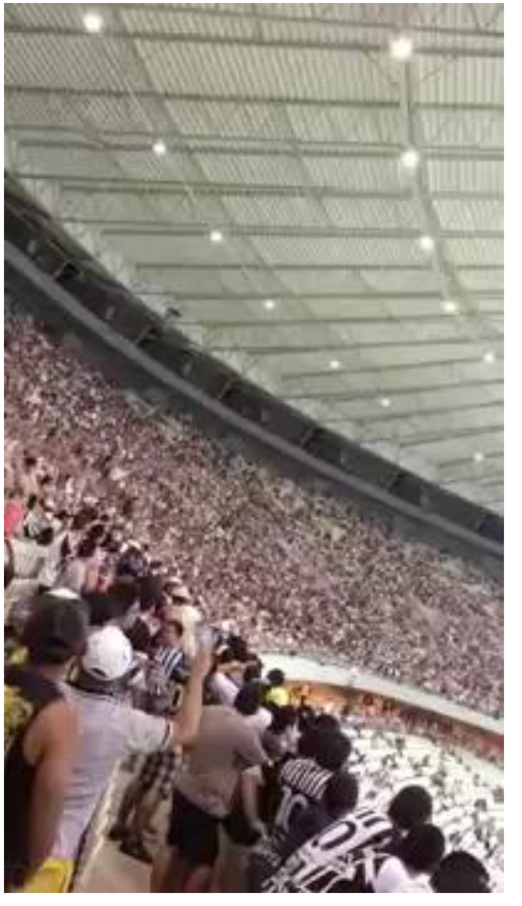
Laser Range Finder



Camera

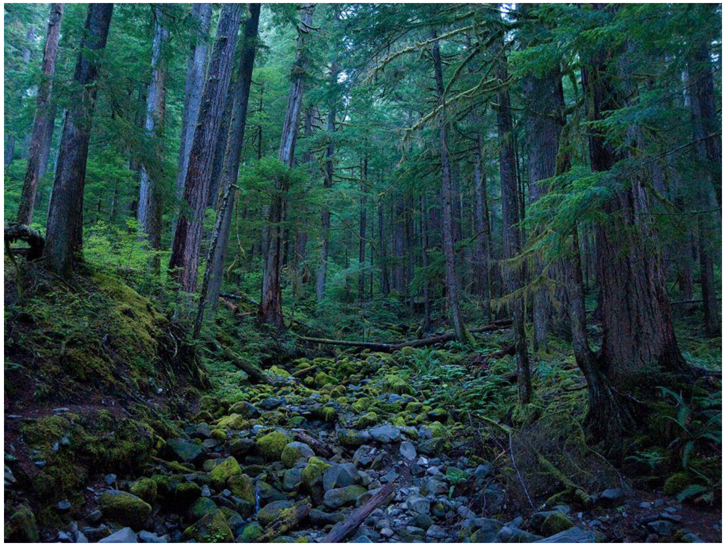
How to Fly? – Navigation

- Remote control
  - Requires line of sight
  - Requires communication link
  - Requires skilled pilots
- Inertial navigation
  - Requires aviation grade IMU
  - Heavy and expensive
- GPS-based navigation
  - Waypoint following
  - No obstacle avoidance
  - GPS can be unreliable

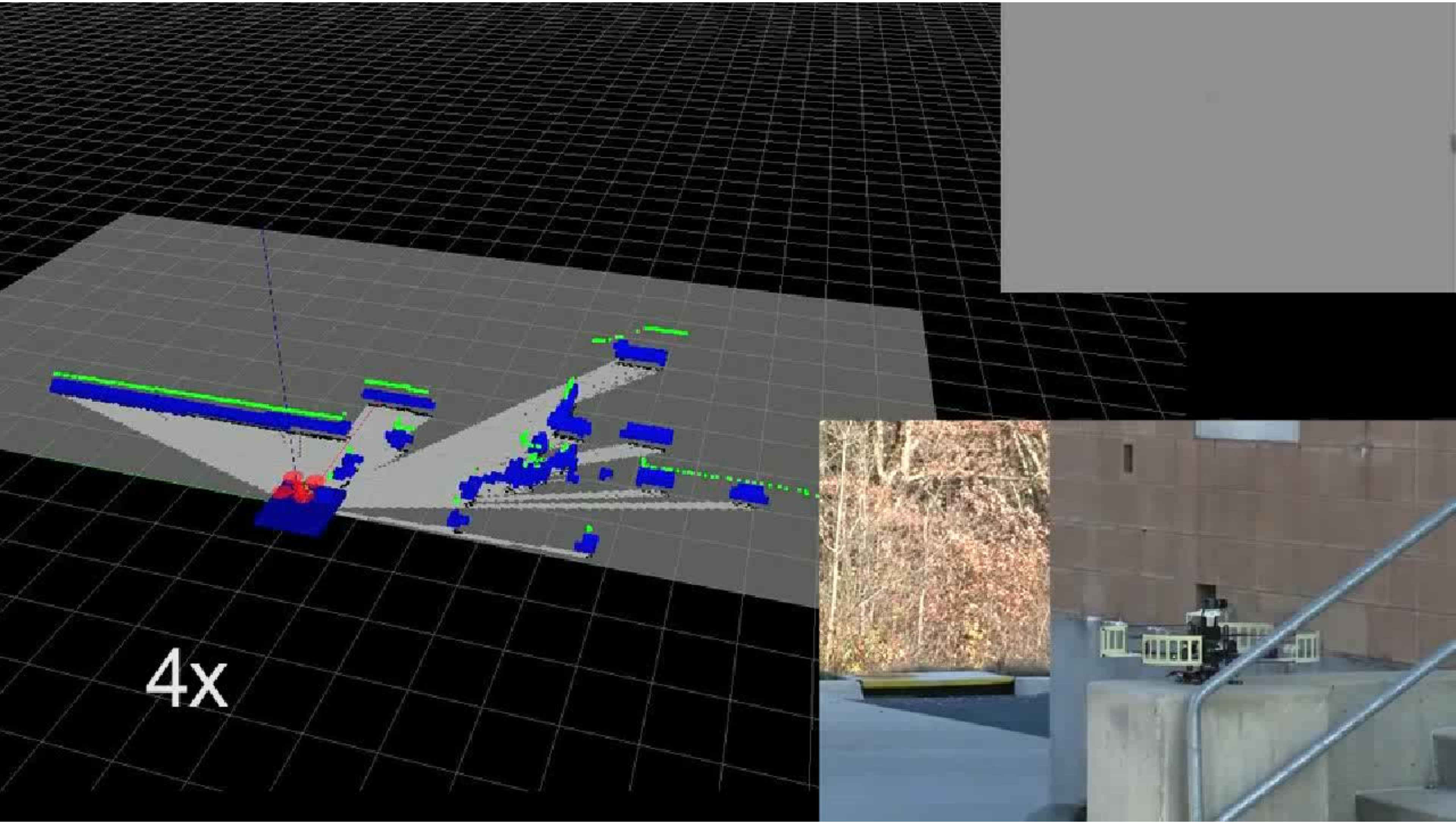


How to Fly? – GPS-based Navigation

How to Fly? – GPS-denied Navigation



How to Fly? – Laser-based Navigation



How to Fly? – Laser-based Navigation

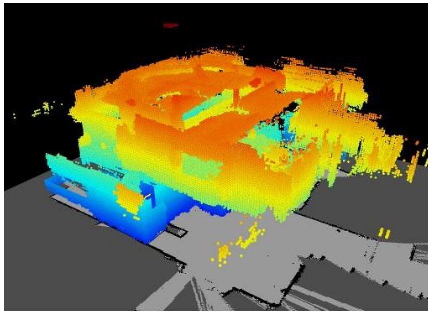
Zhou B., Gao F., Wang L., Liu C., and Shen S. RAL, 2019

How to Fly? – Vision-based Navigation

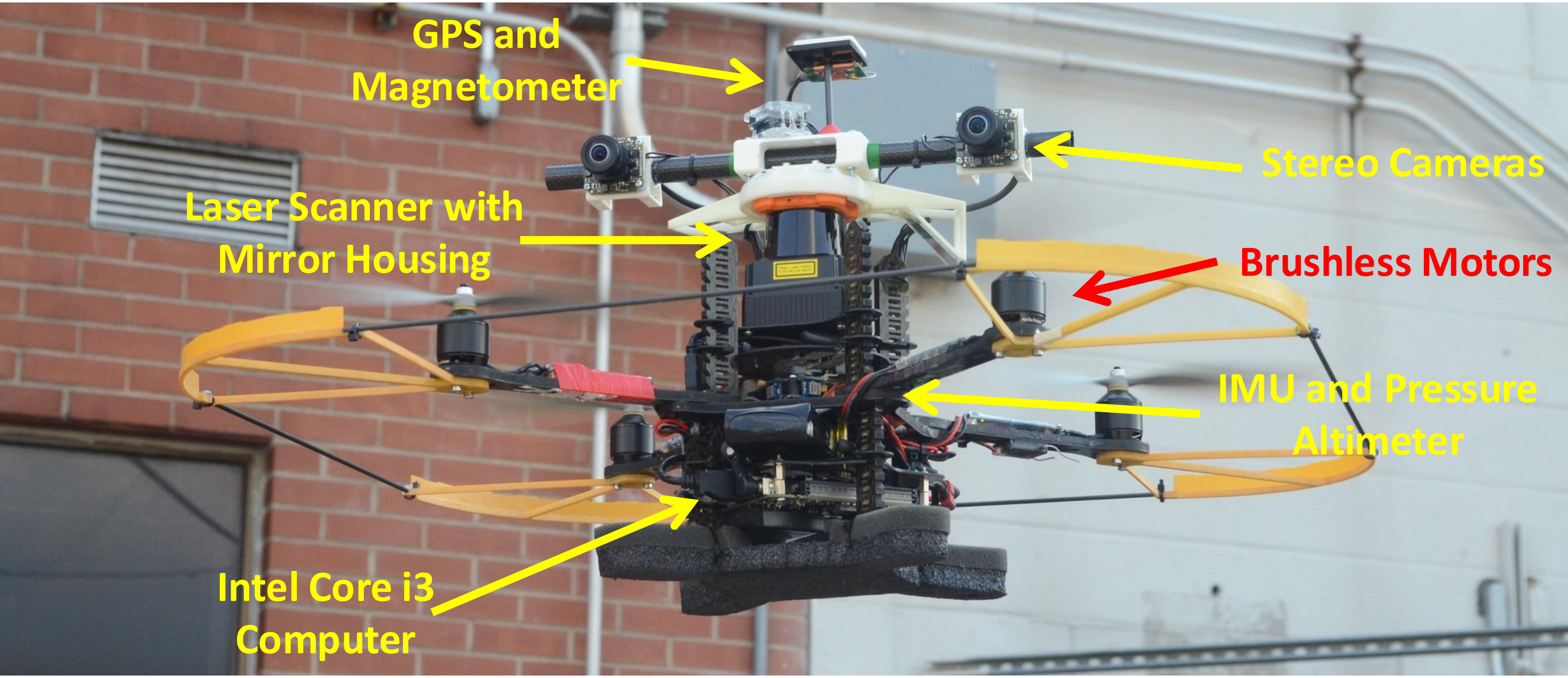
Zhou B., Pan J., Gao F., and Shen S. TRO, 2021

Challenges

- Sensing & Perception
  - 3D sensing & mapping
- State Estimation & Localization
  - Low latency & high accuracy
- Obstacle avoidance
  - Complex & unknown environments
- Trajectory Control
  - Aggressive maneuvers
  - Smooth trajectory tracking
- System integration
  - Limited sensing & computation
  - Autonomous operations



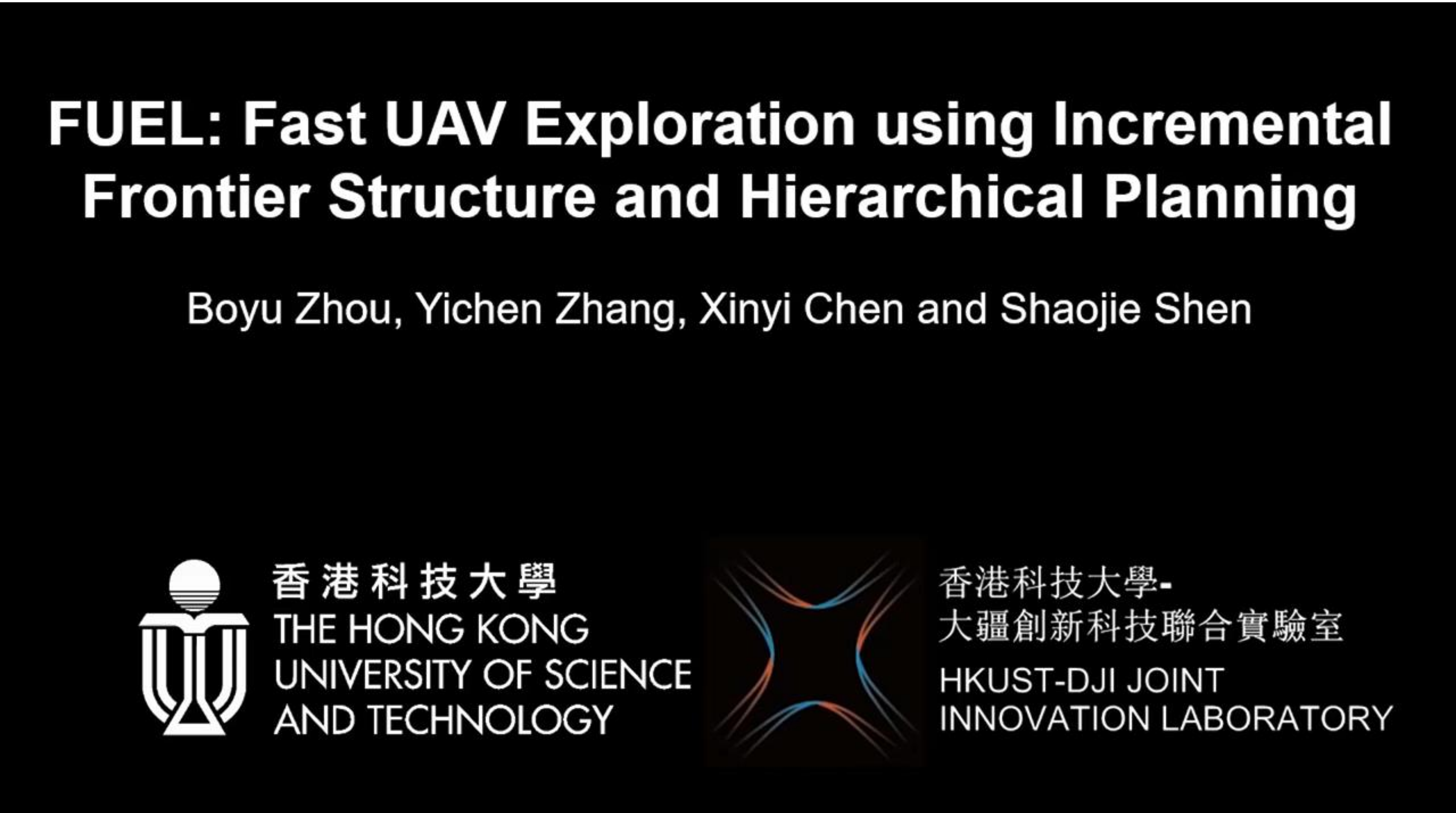
A Flying Robot



Goal

"Prometheus"

Autonomous Exploration



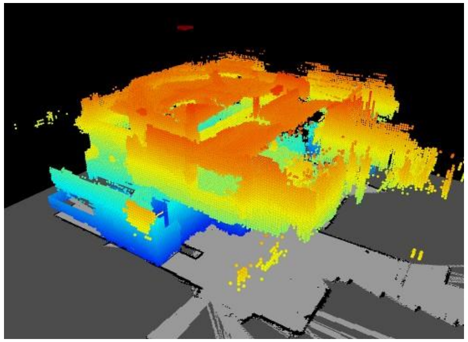
Zhou B., Zhang Y., Chen X., and Shen S. RAL, 2021

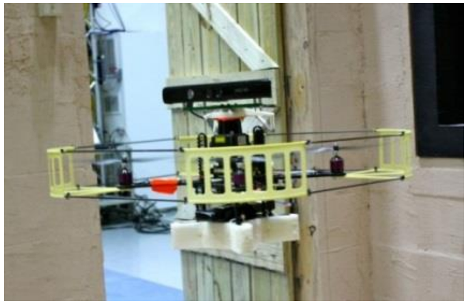
Autonomous Exploration

Zhang Y., Zhou B., Wang L., and Shen S. ICRA, 2022

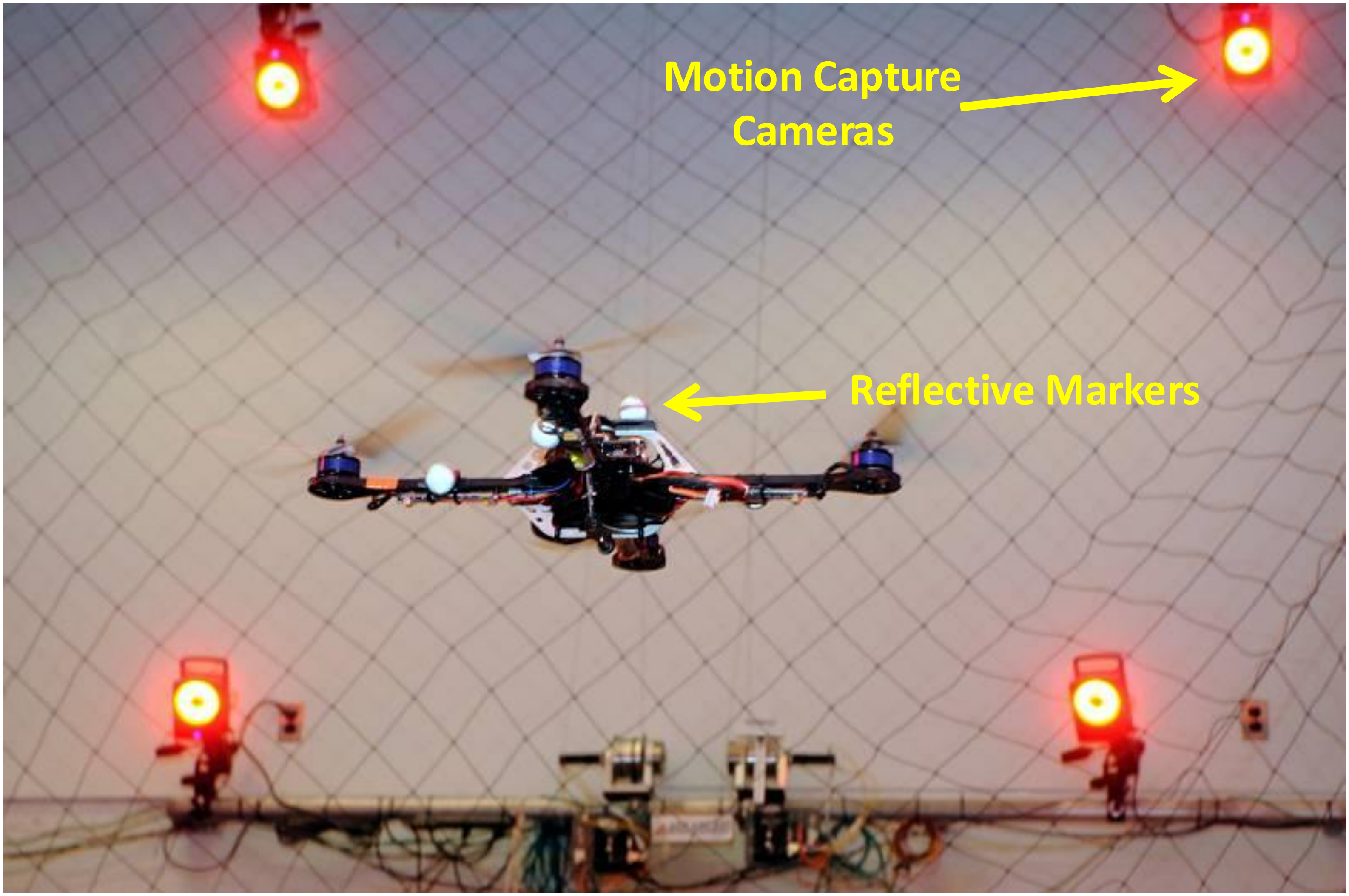
Towards Autonomous Flight…

- Sensing and perception
- State estimation
- Path planning
- Trajectory generation
- Control
- System integration





Bypass the Sensing Problem



Robust Control

Science Robotics   Caltech

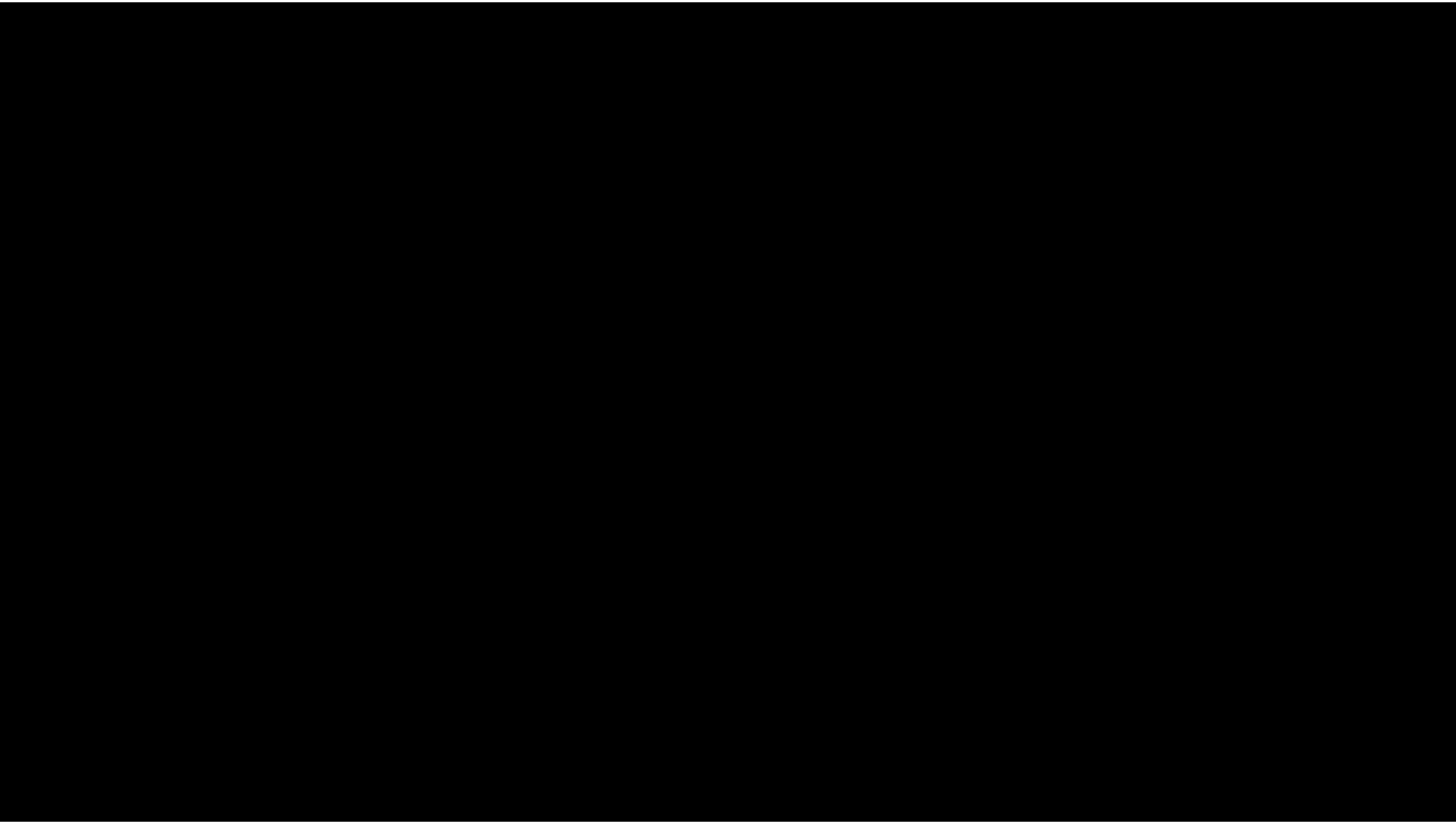
Neural-Fly Enables Rapid Learning for Agile Flight in Strong Winds

Michael O'Connell*, Guanya Shi*, Xichen Shi,
Kamyar Azizzadenesheli, Anima Anandkumar,
Yisong Yue, Soon-Jo Chung†

*Equal contribution and alphabetical order
†Corresponding email: sjchung@caltech.edu

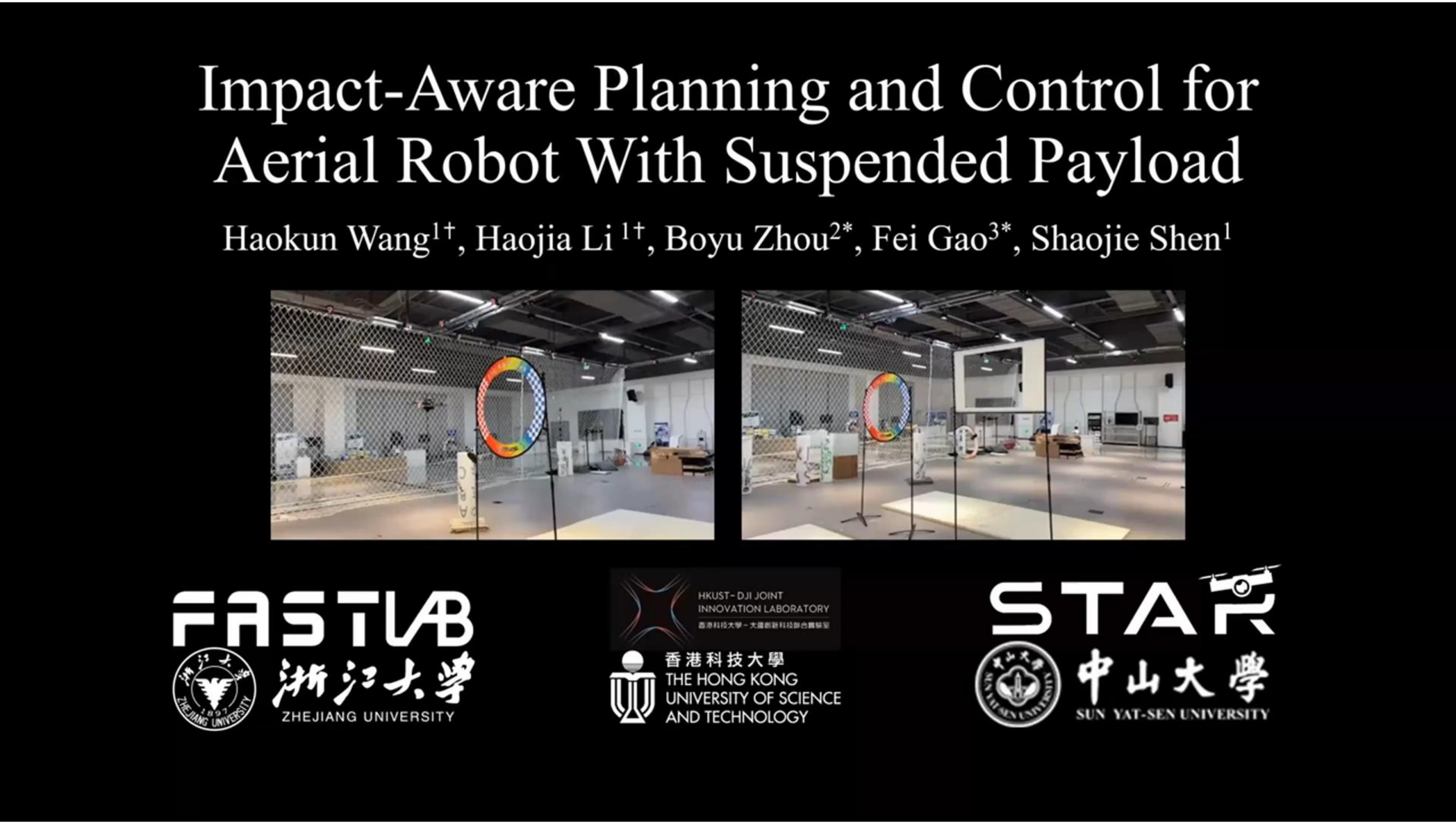
M. O'Connell, et al. SR, 2022

Robust Control for Drone Racing



Song Y., et al. SR, 2023

Impact-aware Control

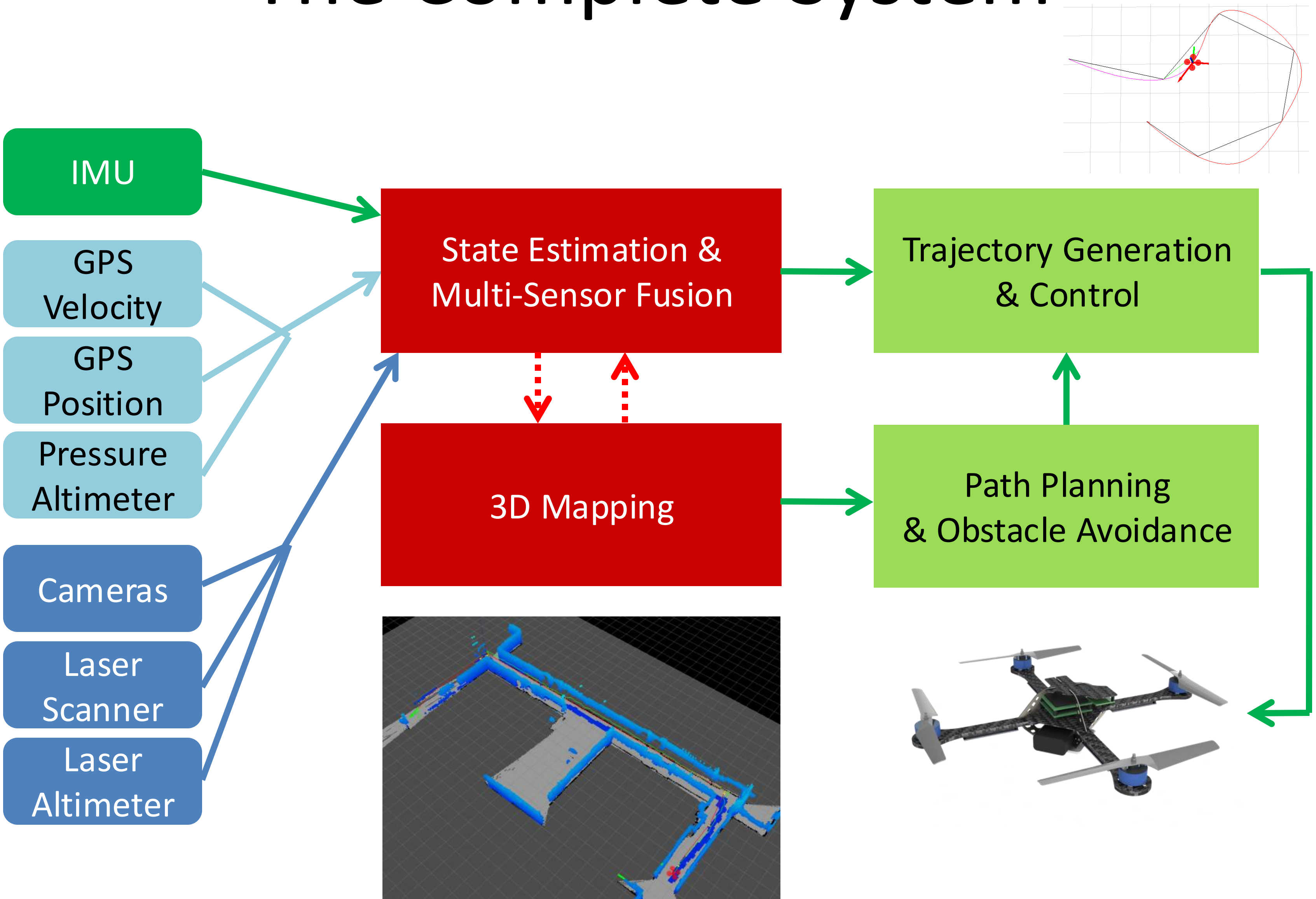


Wang H., Li H., Zhou B., Gao F., and Shen S. TRO (In Submission), 2023

Ball Catching

Yu H. et al. TMECH, 2023

The Complete System



Search and Rescue

DJI Application

香港科技大學 THE HONG KONG UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY | 電子及計算機工程學系 DEPARTMENT OF ELECTRONIC & COMPUTER ENGINEERING

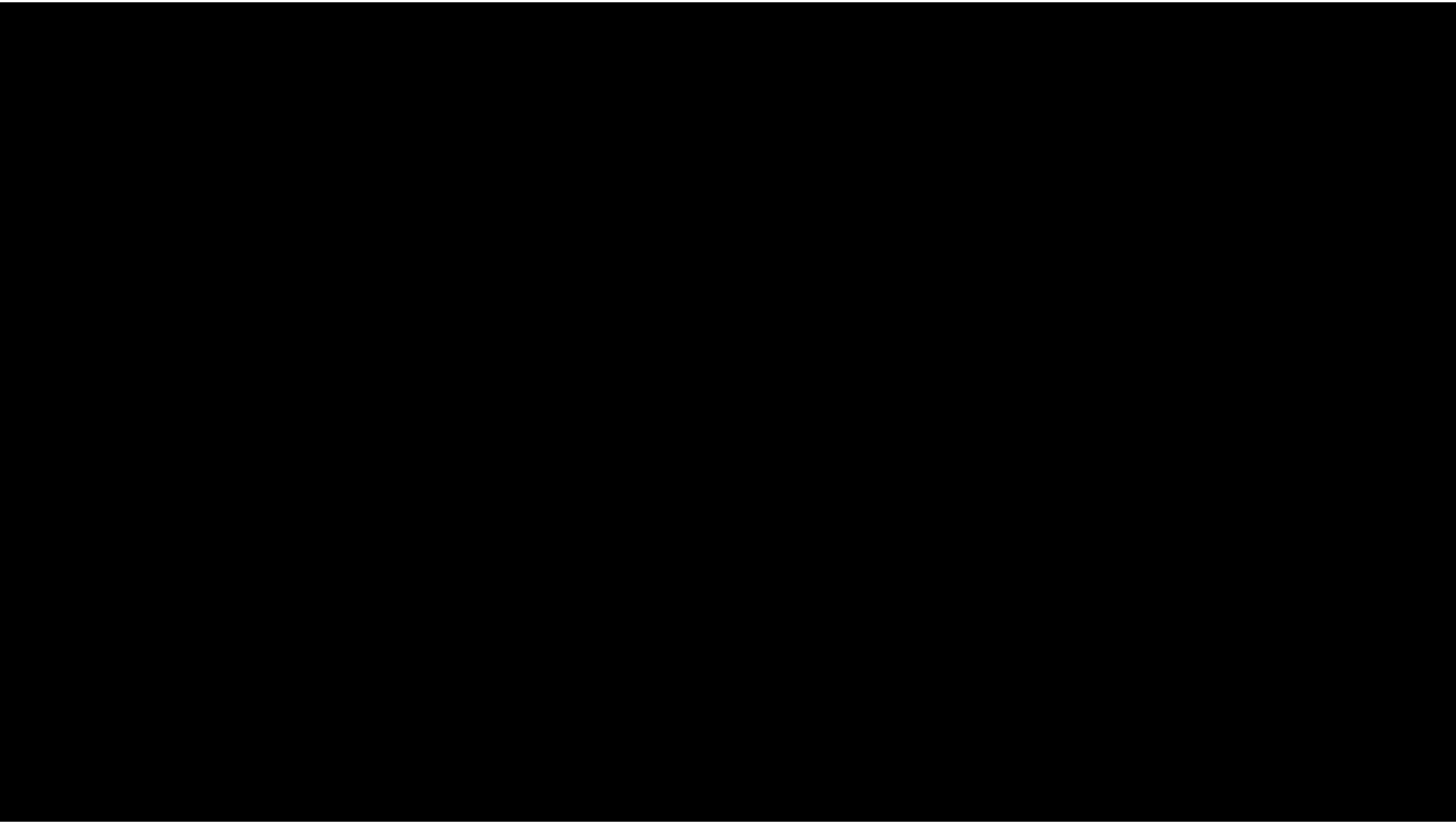
Autonomous Reconstruction

Feng C., Li H., Gao F., Zhou B. and Shen S. ICRA, 2023

Autonomous Inspection

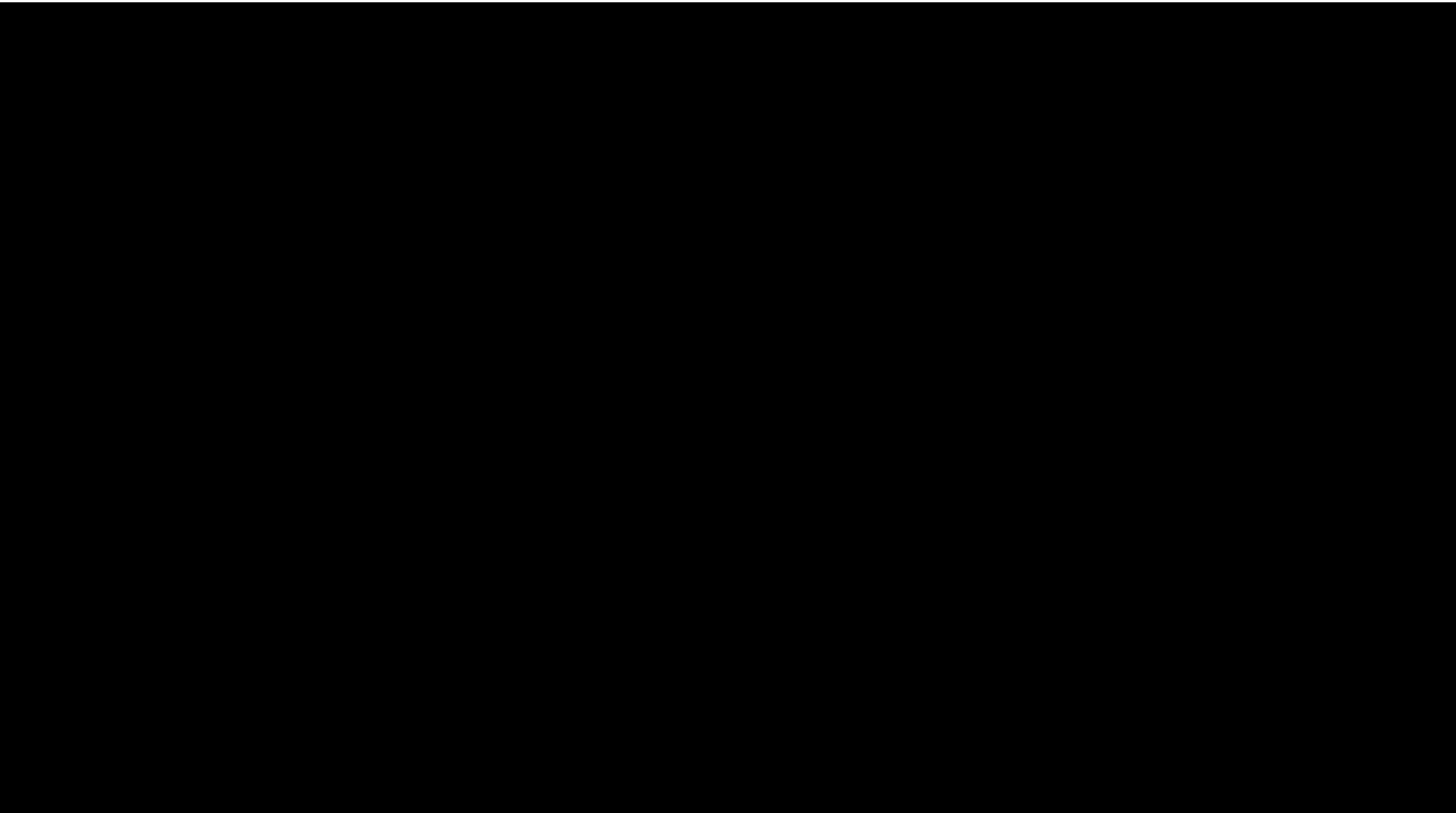
Feng C., Li H., Chen X., Zhou B. and Shen S. ICRA, 2024

Industrial Application



DJI Application

Precision Farming

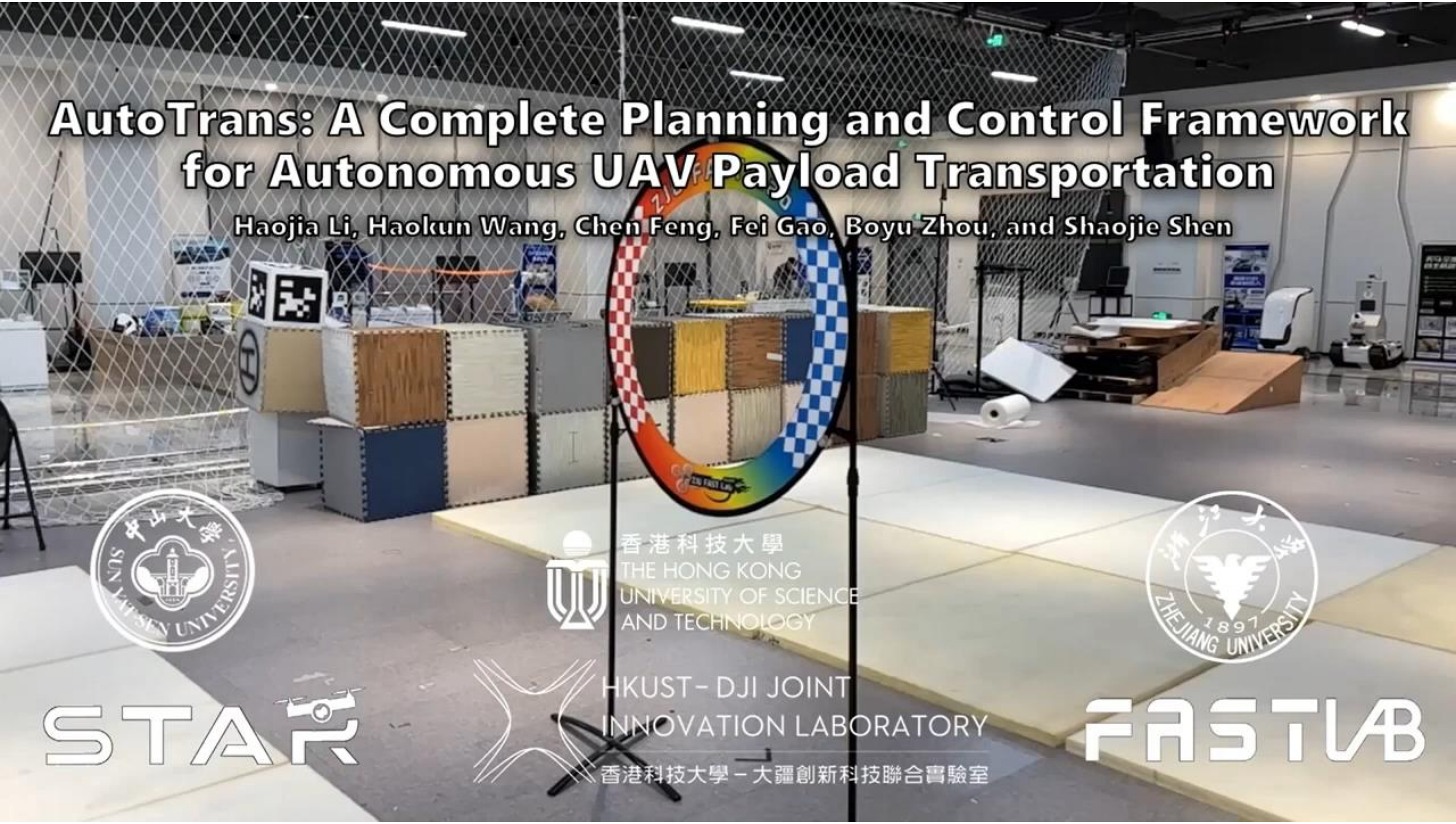


DJI Application

Delivery

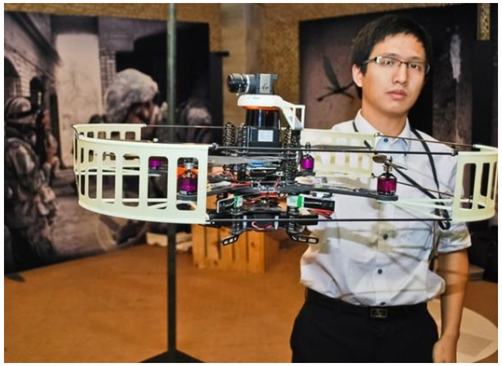
Meituan UAS Application

Payload System for Delivery



Li H., Wang H., Feng C., Gao F., Zhou B. and Shen S. RAL, 2023

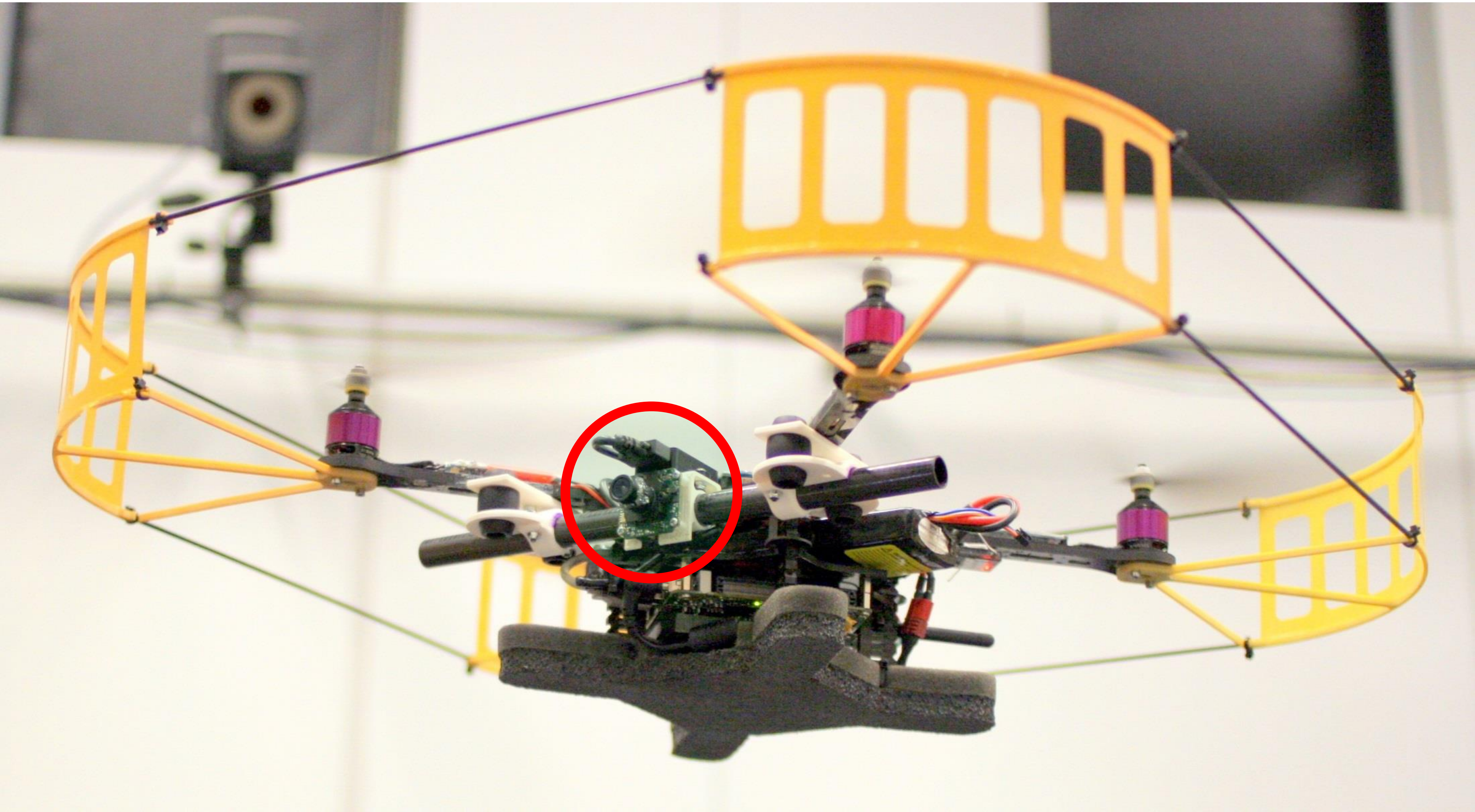
Small and Autonomous



Processing: Not quite there yet, but remember the **Moore's Law!**

Sensing: **YES!**

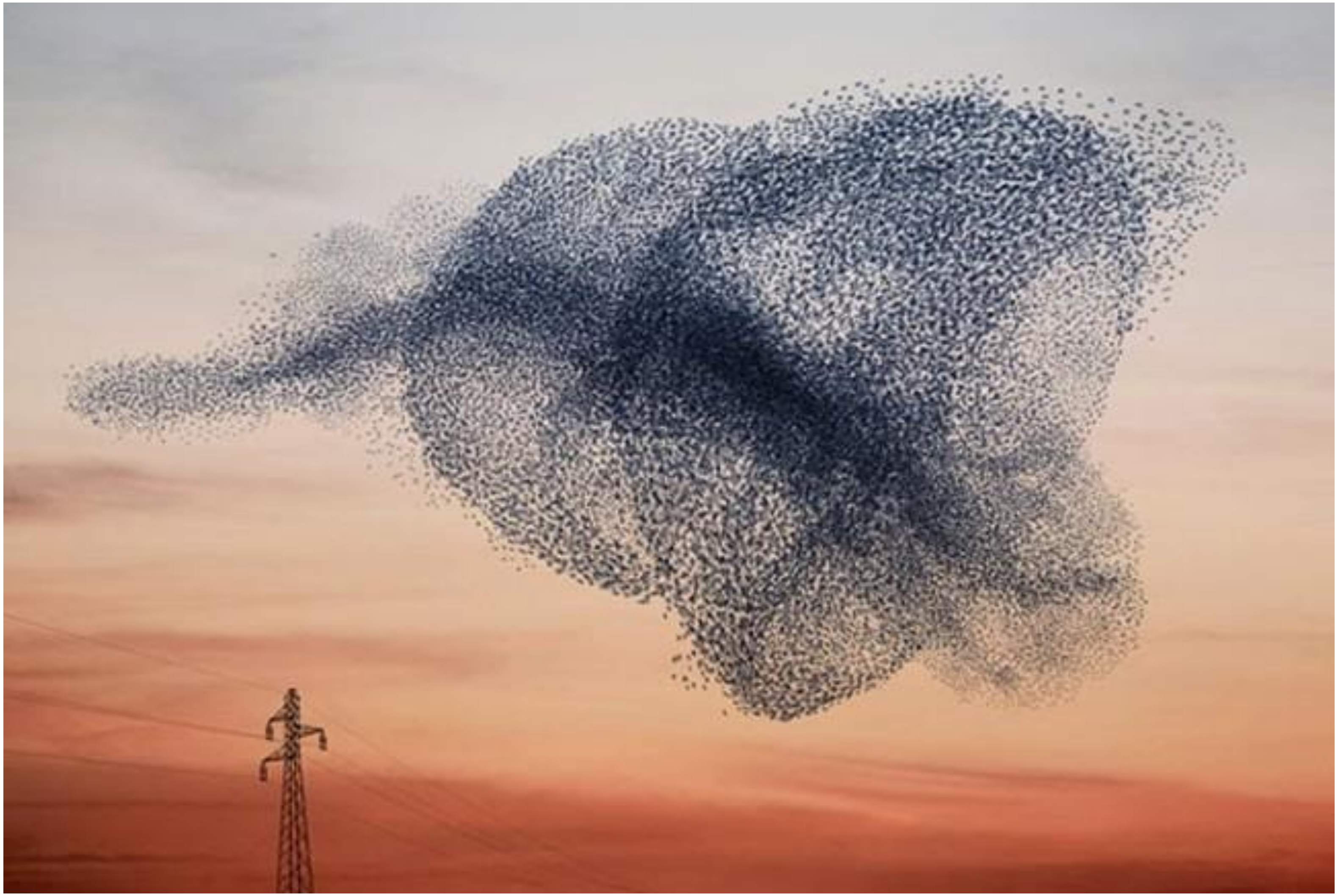
Minimum Sensing: 1 Camera + 1 IMU



Minimum Sensing: 1 Camera + 1 IMU

Lin, et al, 2017

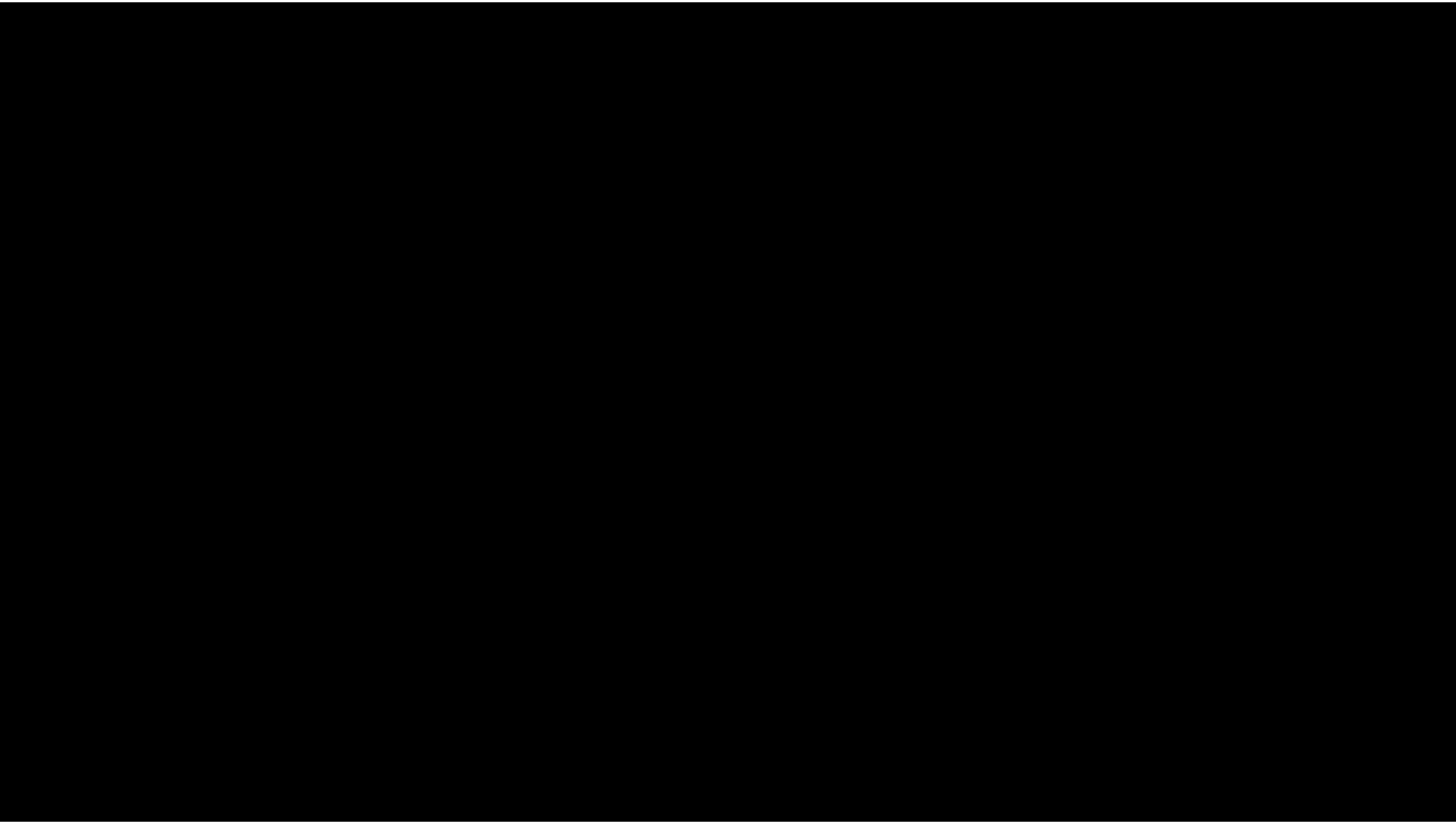
Swarm



Swarm Localization

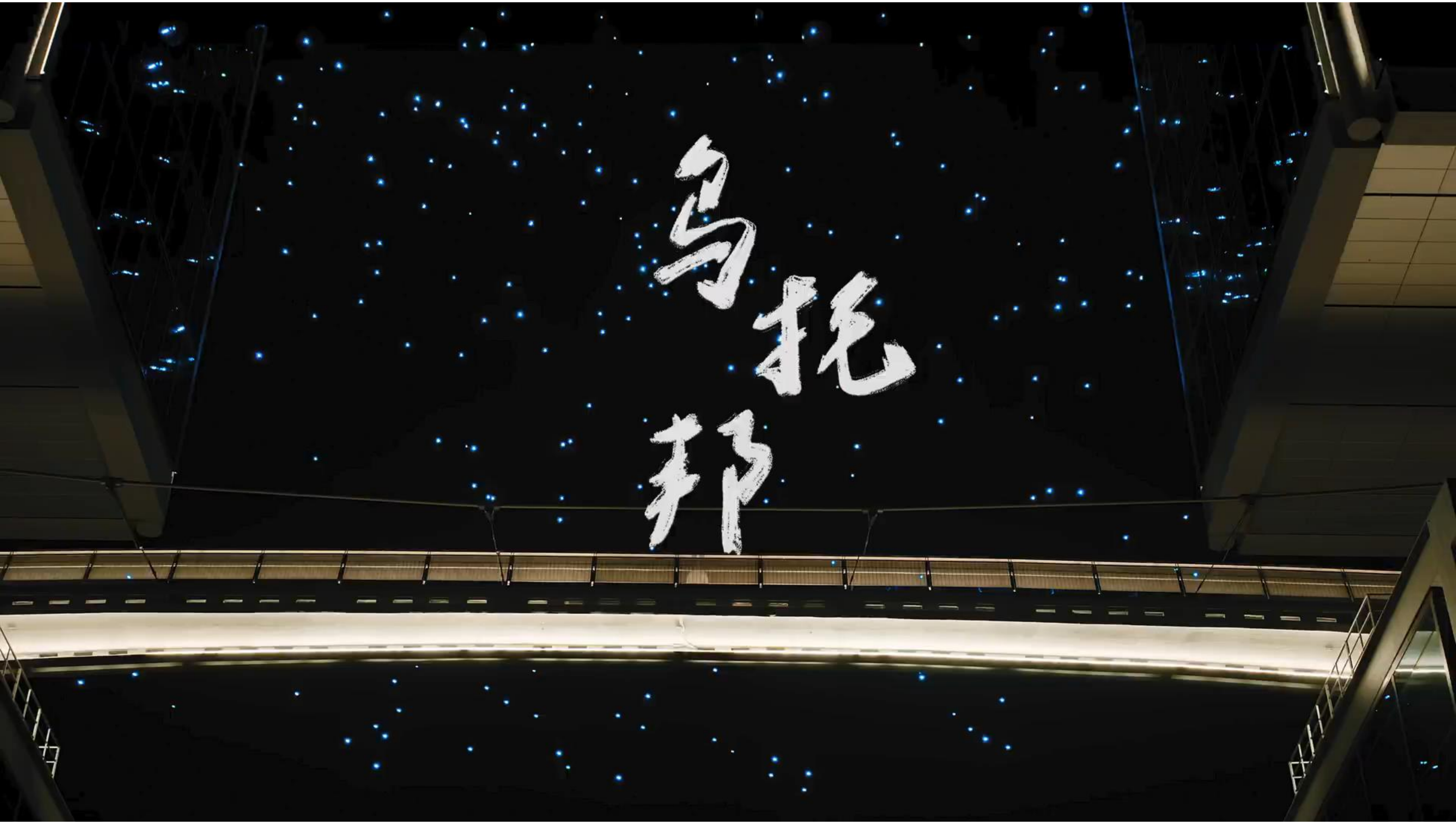
Xu H., Zhang Y., Zhou B., Wang L., Yao X., Meng G., and Shen S. TRO, 2022

Swarm Navigation



Zhou X. et al. SR, 2022

Utopia: Firefly



Course Outline

Course Outline

- Dynamics, Planning & Control
- Vision
- Estimation

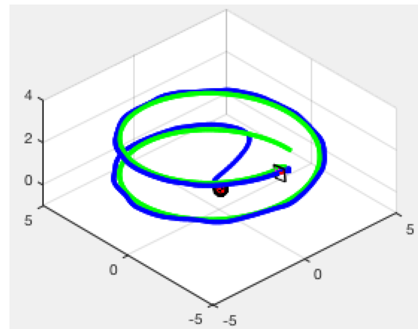
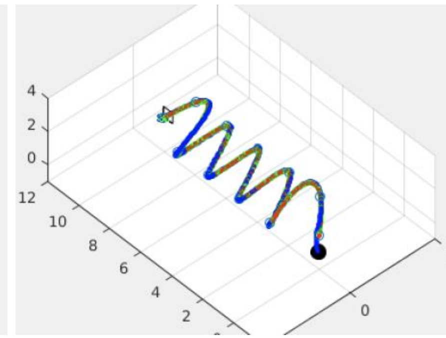
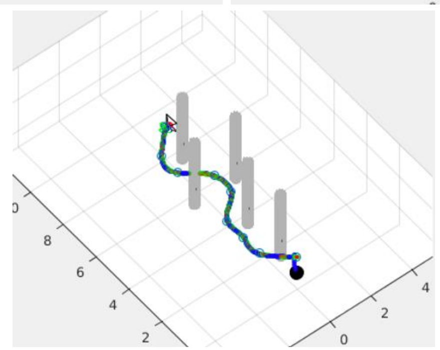
Week	Lecture Date Tue 13:30-16:20	Topic	Assignment (due **23:59** on **Friday** of the corresponding week)	Lab Wed 18:00-20:50
1	2/4	Introduction		No Lab
2	2/11	Rigid Body Transformation Quaternion Quadrotor Modeling		No Lab
3	2/18	Control Basics Quadrotor Control Trajectory Generation	Project 1 Phase 1 Out	No Lab
4	2/25	Trajectory Generation Path Planning	Project 1 Phase 1 Due Project 1 Phase 2 Out	No Lab
5	3/4	Camera Modeling & Calibration Feature Detection & Matching	Project 1 Phase 2 Due Project 1 Phase 3 Out	No Lab
6	3/11	Midterm	Project 1 Phase 3 Due Project 1 Phase 4 Out	Lab Tutorial 1: Robot Assembly
7	3/18	Multi-View Geometry Pose Estimation	Project 1 Phase 3 Due Project 2 Phase 1 Out	Lab Tutorial 2: Prepare P1P4
8	3/25	Optical Flow Dense Stereo	Project 2 Phase 1 Due Project 2 Phase 2 Out	Free Lab Time
9	4/1	Midterm Break (No class)		No Lab
10	4/8	Probability Basics Bayesian Inferencing Kalman Filter	Project 2 Phase 2 Due Project 3 Phase 1 Out	Free Lab Time
11	4/15	Extended Kalman Filter Augmented State EKF Particle Filter	Project 1 Phase 4 Due Project 3 Phase 2 Out	Free Lab Time
12	4/22	SLAM	Project 3 Phase 3 Out Project 3 Phase 1 Due	Lab Tutorial 3: Prepare P3P3
13	4/29	x	Project 3 Phase 2 Due	Free Lab Time
14	5/6	x	Project 3 Phase 3 Due	Free Lab Time

Course Outline

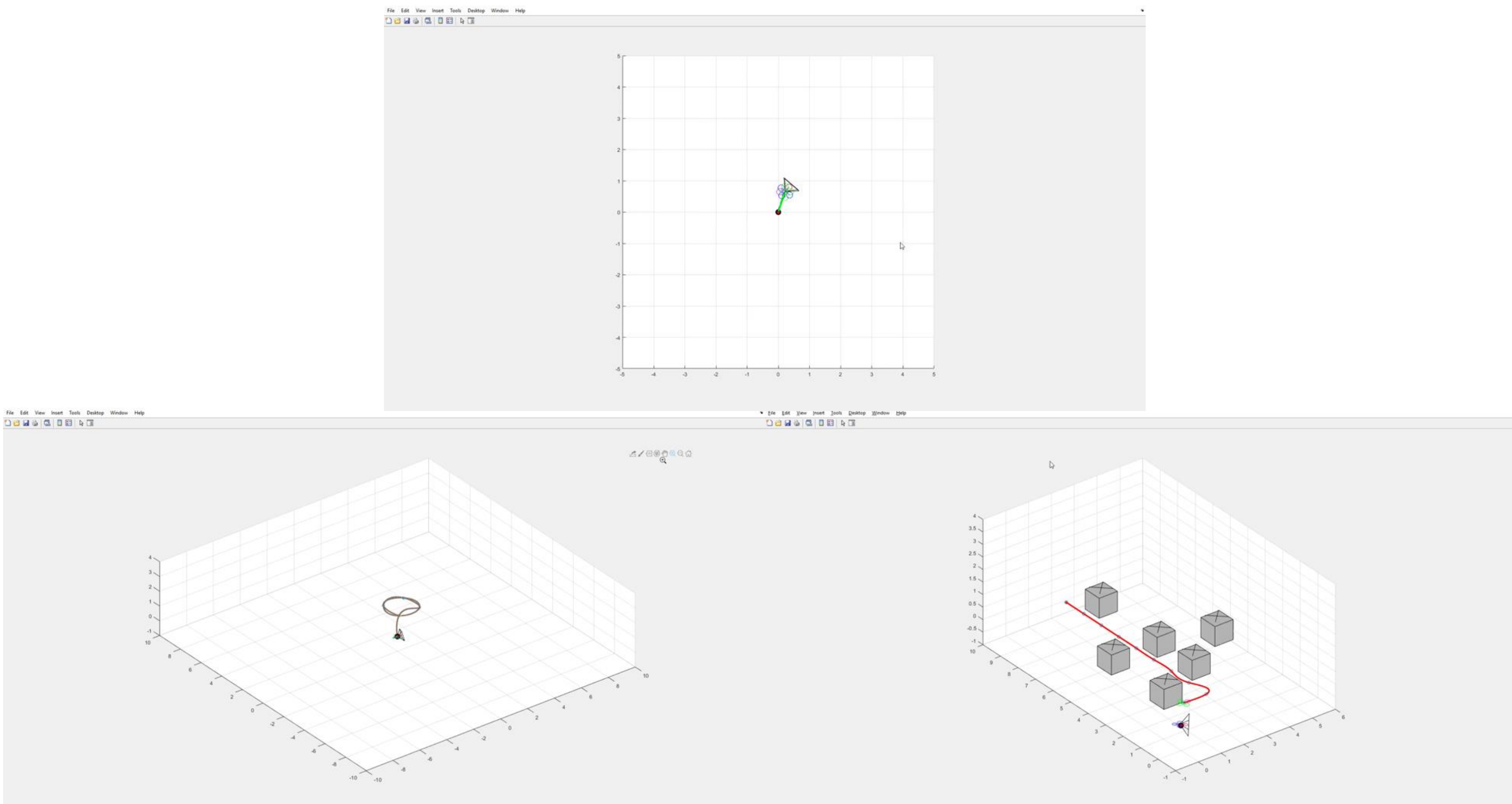
- Dynamics, Control, and Planning
  - Understand 3D rigid body transformation
  - Derive the model of quadrotor aerial robots
  - Able to hover the quadrotor given perfect localization
  - Able to generate and track smooth trajectories given user-defined waypoints
  - Able to generate smooth and safe paths and trajectories given obstacle locations
  - Project 1
- Vision
  - Understand how cameras capture the world
  - Understand feature-based and optical flow-based image processing pipeline
  - Able to use only images to compute camera position, orientation, and velocity
  - Project 2
- Estimation
  - Understand how to incorporate probability principles into robotics
  - Able to integrate heterogeneous noisy measurements to get robust estimates of the platform motion
  - A light touch of simultaneous localization and mapping (SLAM)
  - Project 3

Project 1

- Phase 1: Hovering and trajectory tracking of a simulated quadrotor
  - MATLAB, offline
- Phase 2: Trajectory generation and tracking of a simulated quadrotor
  - MATLAB, offline
- Phase 3: Obstacle avoidance using A* path planning and smooth trajectory generation
  - MATLAB, offline
- Phase 4: Fly the robot!

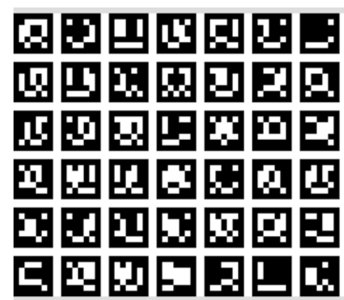




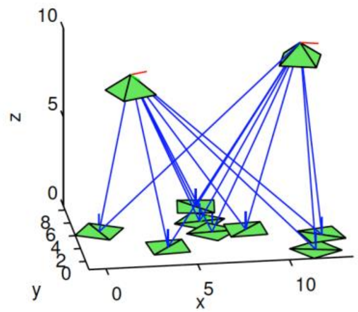

Project 1 in Past Years



Project 2

- Phase 1: PnP-based localization on marker map
  - ROS & C++, Desktop PC, offline

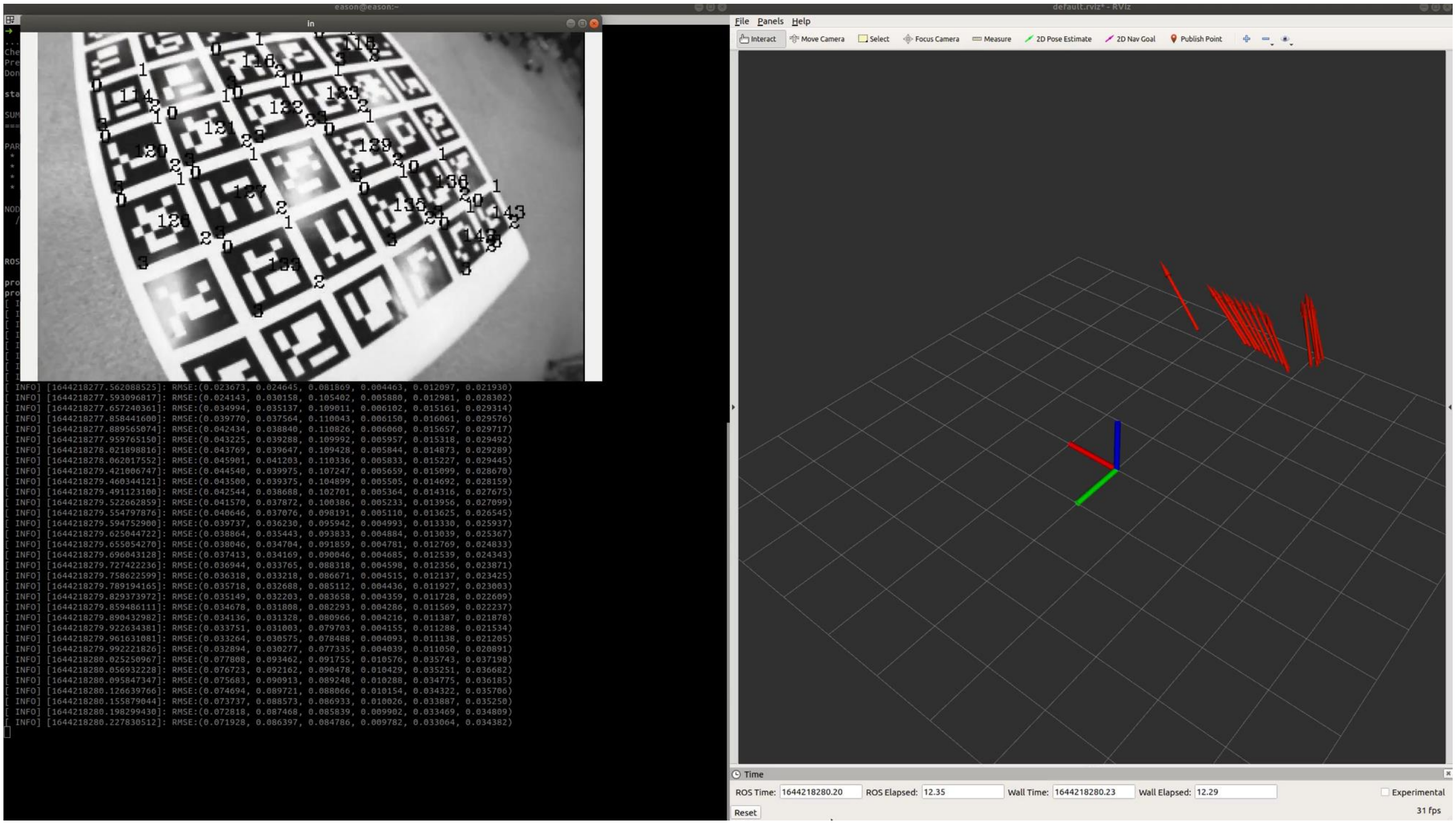




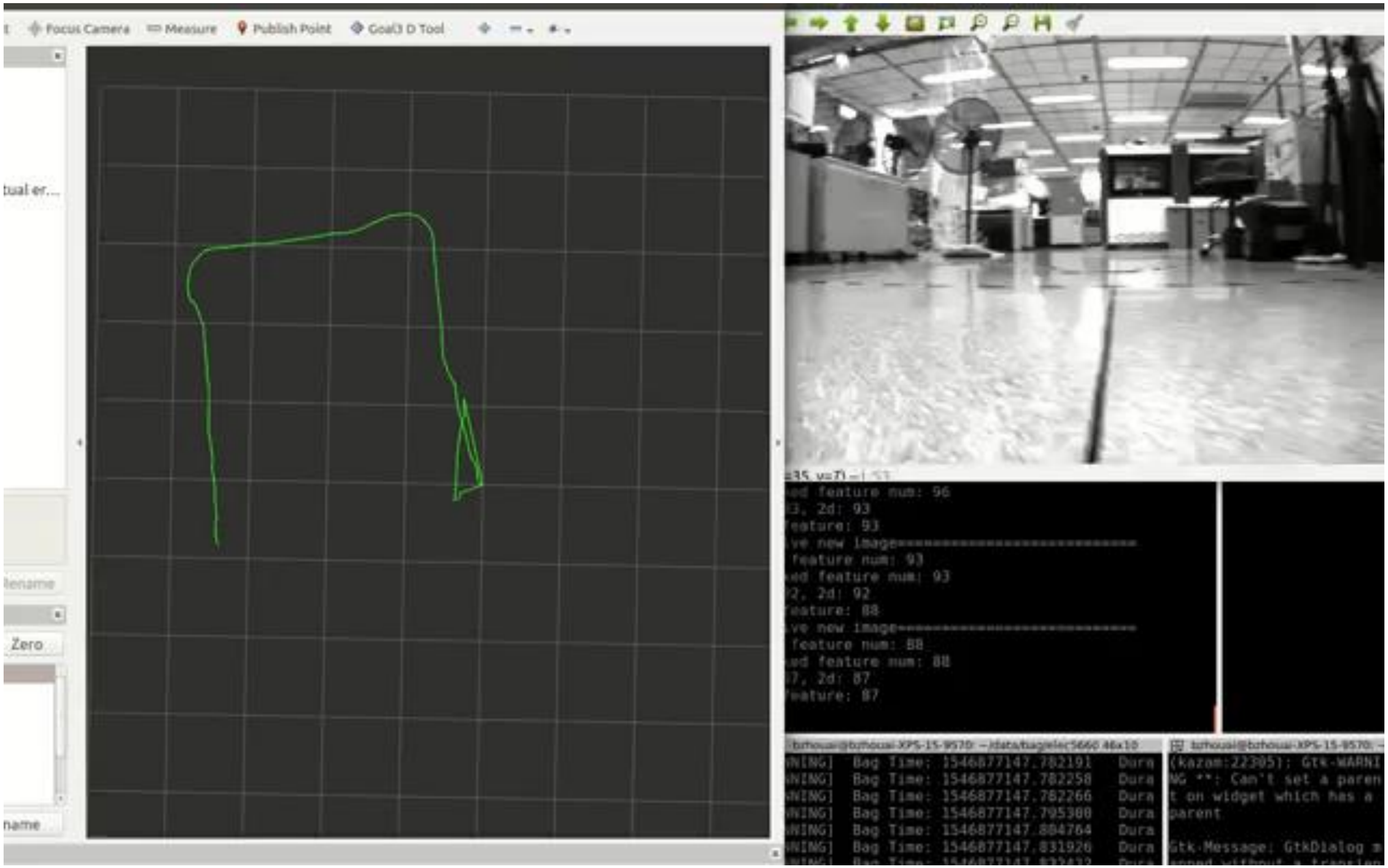
- Phase 2: Visual odometry in markerless environment
  - ROS & C++, Desktop PC, offline

(b)

Project 2 Phase 1 in Past Years

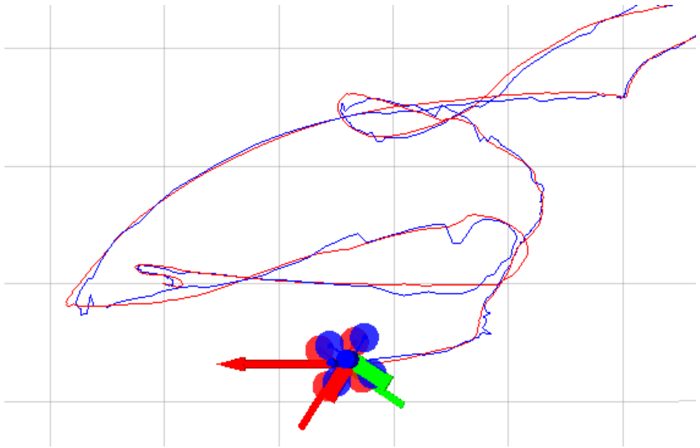


Project 2 Phase 2 in Past Years



Project 3

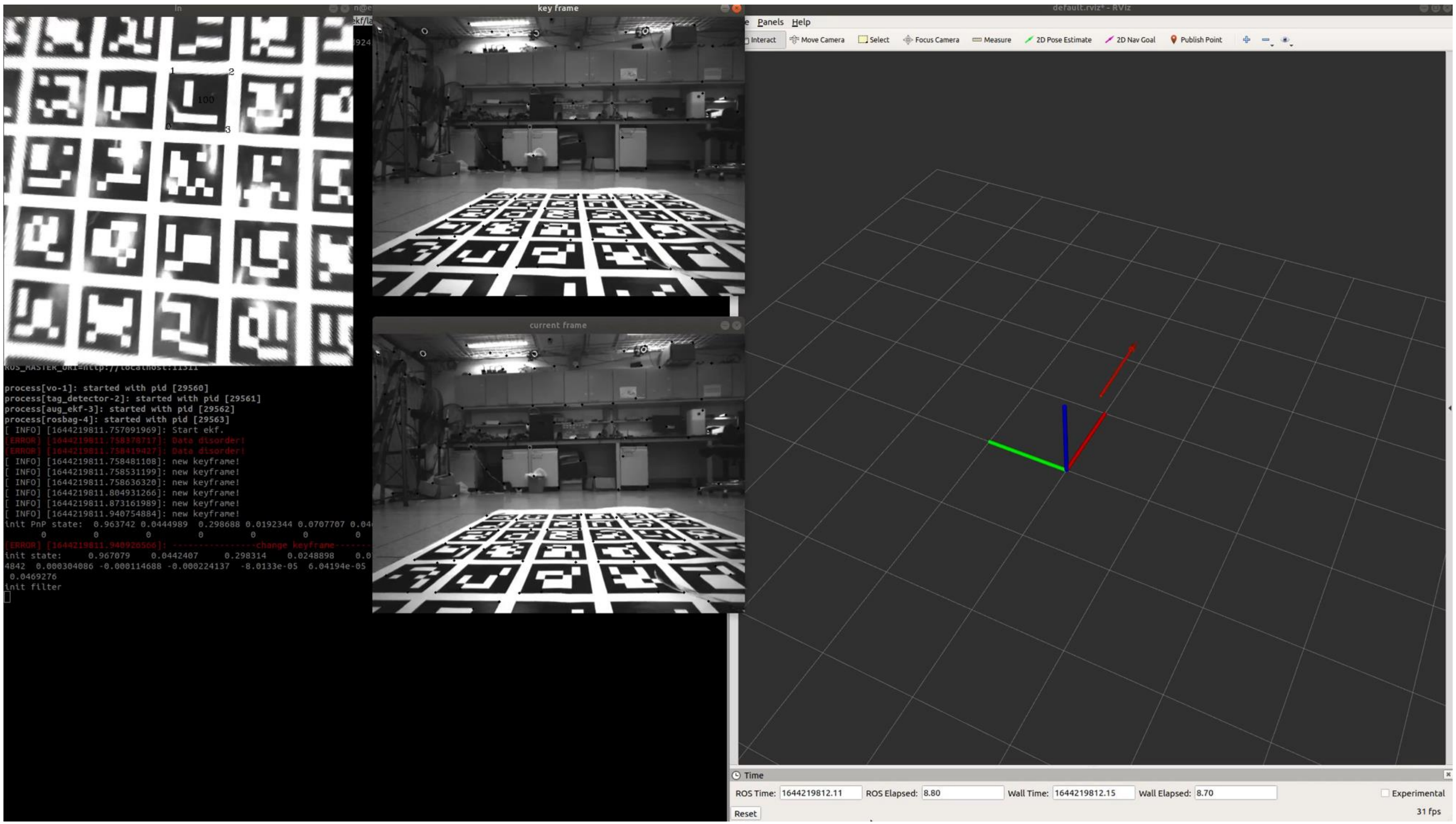
- Phase 1: EKF-based sensor fusion of IMU and tag-based position estimation
  - ROS & C++, Desktop PC, offline



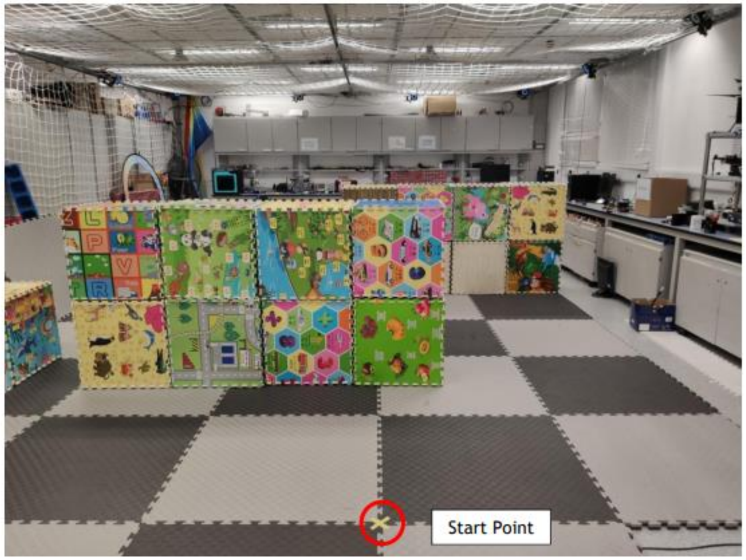
- Phase 2: Augmented state EKF for fusion of IMU and keyframe-based visual odometry together with the PnP localization on markers
  - ROS & C++, Desktop PC, offline

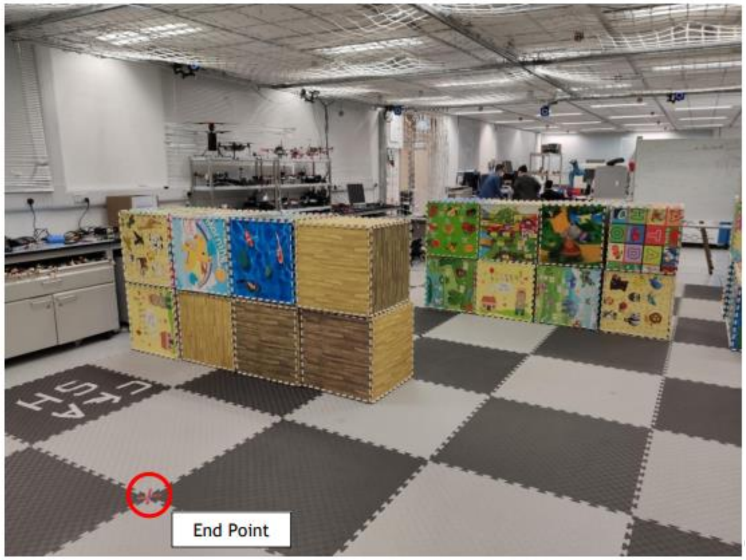
- Phase 3: Fly the robot!

Project 3 in Past Years

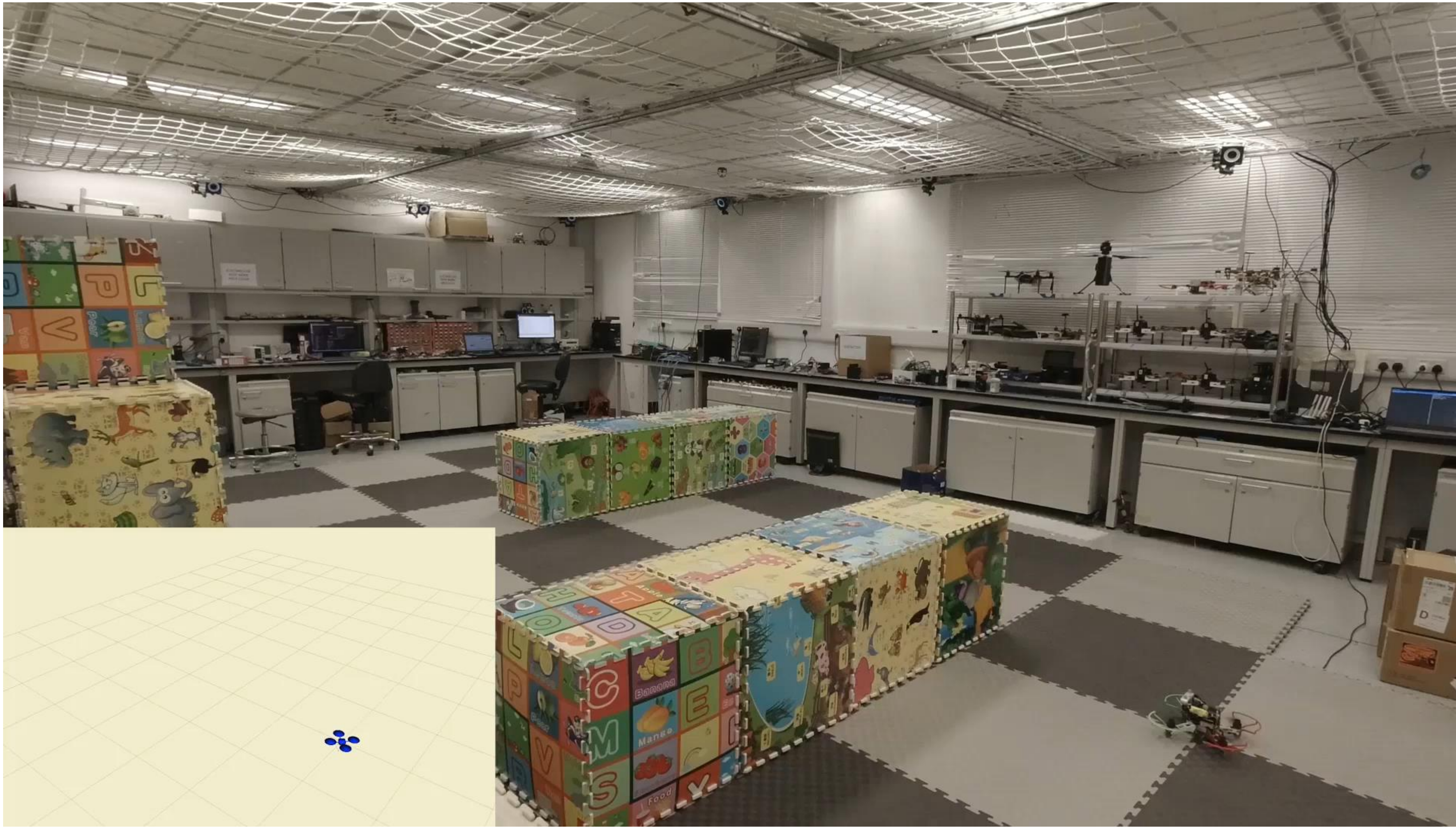


Project 3 in Past Years





Project 3 in Past Years



Next Lecture…

- Rigid Body Transformations
- Rotational Motions
- Rotation Representations
- Rigid Body Motions
- Rigid Body Velocities
- Quadrotor Dynamics