

# UAV Trajectory Optimization With Machine Learning

Independent Study – Fall 2025

*Emerson Hall*



College of Engineering  
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

# Project Overview

- Semester long study of UAV planning and control
- Compared a classical A\* system to a machine-learning enhanced controller
- Tested across 3 terrains and 4 wind profiles
- Final goal: measure reliability, safety and performance



# Motivation

- UAVs must navigate cluttered, windy environments
- Classical planners are predictable but conservative
- Machine learning can improve efficiency but may reduce reliability
- This project studied how the two approaches behave under identical scenarios



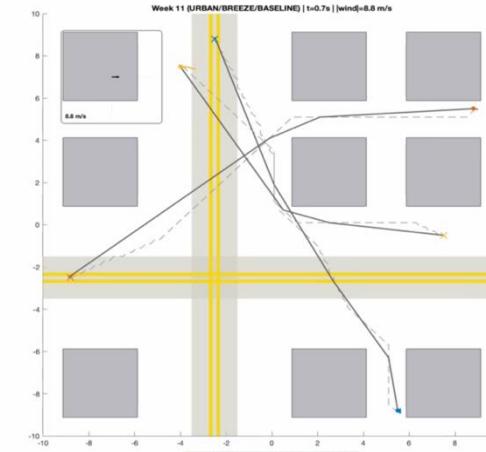
# Background

- A\* grid-based path planning on an inflated occupancy map
- Frenet-frame controller with repulsion and braking logic
- Behavior cloning model trained on expert trajectories
- Multi-UAV coordination using dilation and reserved corridor logic

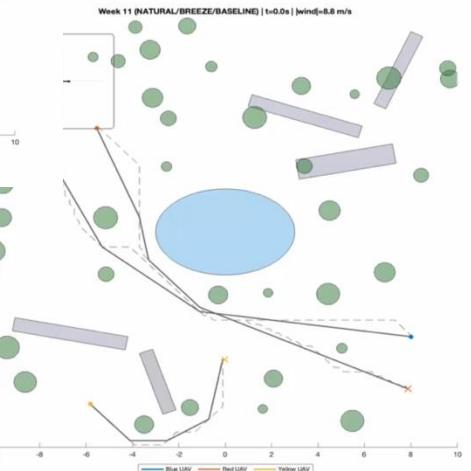


# Simulation Environment

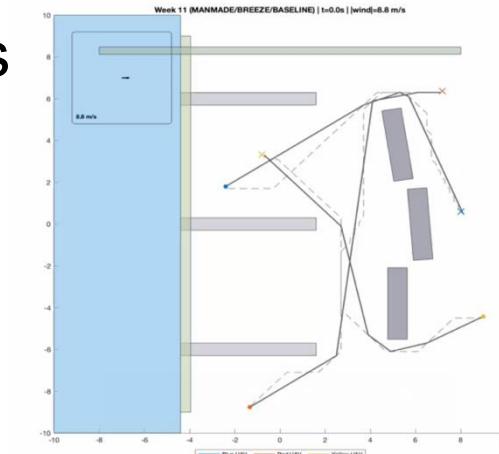
- 2D 20x20 m world
- Urban, Natural and Manmade terrain layouts
- Thick/Thin occupancy masks for safe planning
- Wind modeled with Ornstein-Uhlenbeck gusts
- 4 wind profiles: calm, breeze, gusty, storm



urban



natural



manmade



# Baseline Controller

- A\* planner and smoothed path (string-pull and shortcuts)
- Frenet-frame tracking with lateral correction
- Repulsion forces using distance gradients
- Braking when rays detect nearby obstacles
- Very stable in wind and narrow corridors



# Machine Learning Controller

- Dataset from baseline expert trajectories
- Features: goal direction, velocity, obstacle distance, wind terms
- Model: Ridge Regression (multi-output)
- Near-zero training and validation error
- Replaces the baseline's local tracking step



# Multi-UAV and Wind Handling

- Up to 3 UAVs at once
- Each treats others as moving obstacles
- Reserved corridor dilation to reduce path overlap
- Wind feedforward and airspeed capping
- Minimum ground progress rule prevents stalling



# Validation Framework

- Deterministic scenarios for fairness
- 3 terrains x 4 winds x 2 modes
- Metrics:
  - Time to goal, Path length, Minimum clearance, Replans, Success flag
  - Generated bar charts, CDFs and scenario videos



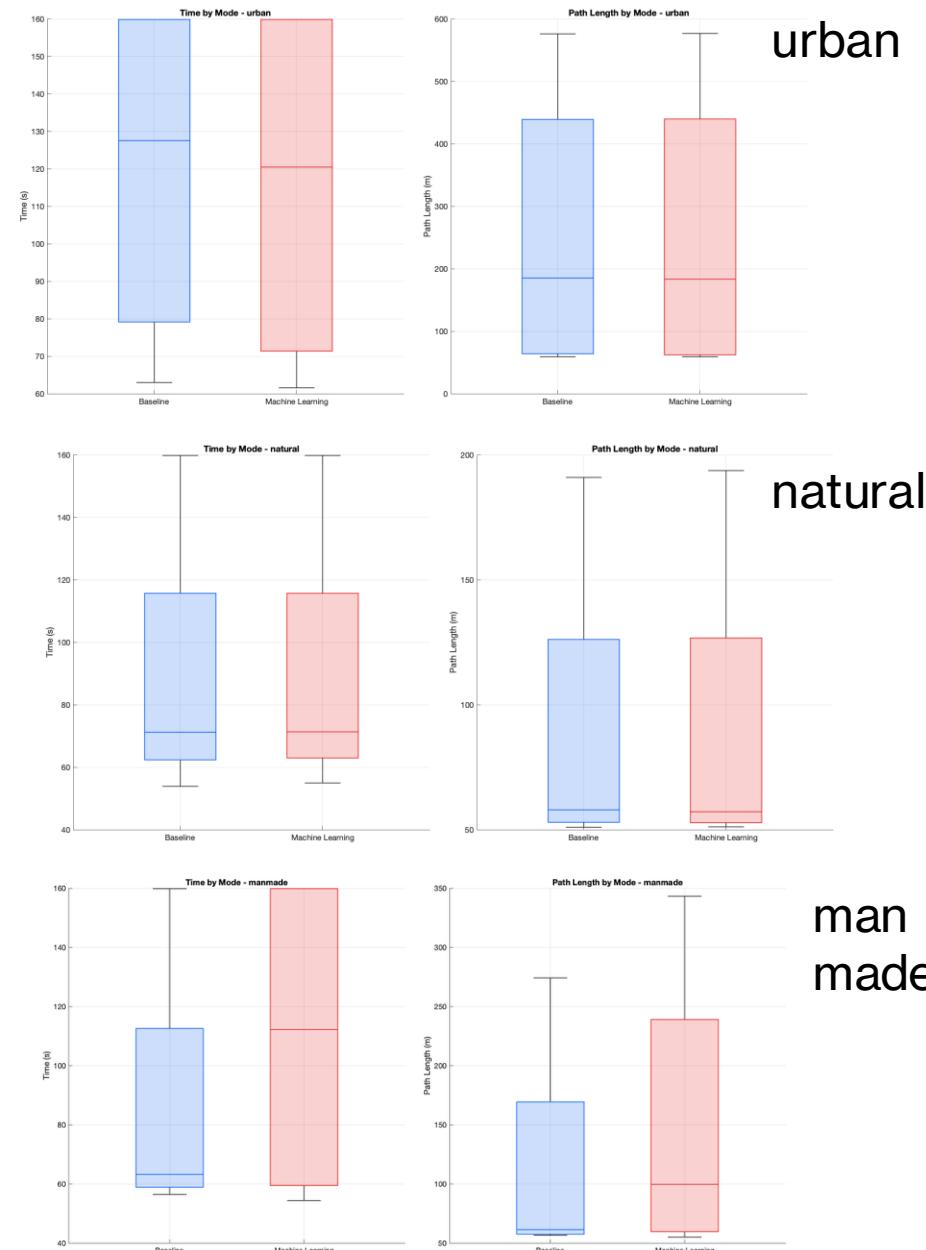
# Results: Key Finds

- Calm Wind:
  - $ML \approx \text{Baseline}$  in all terrains
- Breeze Wind:
  - $ML$  often faster (urban and manmade)
- Gusty Wind:
  - Baseline more reliable
  - $ML$  failed in manmade terrain
- Storm Wind:
  - Both modes fail as wind was too strong



# Performance Summary

- Urban: ML faster in breeze, both fail in high wind
- Natural: Both strong in all but storm
- Manmade: ML best in breeze; ML fails early in gusty
- Minimum clearance nearly identical across all cases



# Discussion

- ML controller imitates baseline very well in mild conditions
- ML is less reliable when it leaves the distribution of its training data
- Baseline more robust to crosswind drift and narrow corridors
- Safety margins mainly depend on planning and occupancy inflation



# Future Work

- Larger and more diverse training dataset
- Add perturbations and failure recovery behavior
- Reinforcement learning to optimize long-term performance
- Hybrid controller that switches between ML and Baseline based on wind
- Extend to 3D UAV dynamics



# Conclusion

- ML can outperform classical control in mild wind
- Baseline remains more reliable under difficult geometry and high wind
- Planning and inflated safety masks dominate the safety behavior
- Project shows both the potential and the limitations of ML in UAV trajectory control

