Drowning in Data: Post-Hurricane Damage Detection Using Machine Learning Algorithms

1st Shaanya Singh
Computer and Information Science and Engineering (of Herbert Wertheim College of Engineering)
University of Florida
Gainesville, USA
shaanyasingh@ufl.edu

2nd Mohit Parmanand Budhwani
Computer and Information Science and Engineering (of Herbert Wertheim College of Engineering)
University of Florida
Gainesville, USA
mbudhwani@ufl.edu

***Abstract*—This project develops a machine learning-based approach for post-hurricane damage detection using aerial imagery. Traditional methods are time-consuming and less effective for large-scale disaster assessments. Our approach utilizes Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), optimizing them for better generalization, efficiency, and accuracy. We integrate image augmentation, ensemble learning, and transfer learning techniques to enhance model robustness. Our model, tested with the University of Washington Disaster Data Science Lab's dataset, achieves a test accuracy of 0.9775, surpassing existing methods. This demonstrates the potential of our approach in providing a rapid, accurate, and scalable solution for post-disaster damage assessment, significantly aiding in efficient disaster response and recovery.**

***Index Terms*—Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), Remote Sensing Data Fusion, Disaster Damage Assessment, Spatial Context Analysis, insert**

I. Introduction

In the wake of devastating hurricanes and extreme weather events, the importance of timely and accurate damage assessment cannot be overstated. These natural disasters, becoming increasingly frequent and severe due to climate change, pose significant challenges to communities worldwide. In the United States alone, hurricanes have been responsible for some of the most costly natural disasters in recent history. The rapid assessment of damage following such events is crucial for initiating effective disaster response [15] and recovery processes. It aids in prioritizing emergency services, allocating resources efficiently, and planning long-term rehabilitation efforts.

Traditionally, damage assessment has relied heavily on manual surveys conducted by emergency personnel. However, this approach is fraught with challenges: it is time-consuming, labor-intensive, and often impractical, especially in regions with extensive devastation or difficult terrain. Moreover, the delay in obtaining accurate damage reports can significantly hinder relief and rescue operations, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.

With the advent of advanced aerial imaging technologies and the proliferation of machine learning techniques, there has been a paradigm shift in how post-disaster assessments are conducted. Aerial imagery, captured by satellites or drones [16], provides a comprehensive view of affected areas, allowing for quicker and more efficient damage evaluation. The integration of machine learning, especially deep learning methods such as Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), has further revolutionized this field. [1] These technologies have the potential to automate the damage detection process, offering rapid and accurate insights that are crucial in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. Existing methods for leveraging machine learning in post-disaster scenarios broadly fall into three categories:

a) Traditional Image Processing Techniques:: These methods involve algorithm-based analysis of aerial images. [17] Techniques include image segmentation, feature extraction, and the application of traditional machine learning algorithms like Support Vector Machines (SVM) and Random Forest. [2]While these methods are relatively straightforward and interpretable, they often struggle with the complexity and variability of real-world disaster imagery. Manual feature engineering is labor-intensive and lacks the adaptability needed for diverse disaster scenarios.

b) Deep Learning-based Approaches: These methods primarily utilize CNNs, which have shown exceptional capabilities in image recognition tasks. These models automatically extract and learn relevant features from images, making them highly effective in recognizing complex patterns such as damage structures. [1] They often incorporate advanced techniques like transfer learning, data augmentation, [3] and fine-tuning to enhance performance. However, they come with their own set of challenges, including the need for large labeled datasets, high computational resources, and difficulties in model interpretability.

c) Fusion of Remote Sensing Data: Some approaches combine various types of remote sensing data [13], such as optical imagery, Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) [18], and Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) data. This fusion results in a more comprehensive assessment, improving accuracy and reliability. However, these methods are often complex, resource-intensive, and require sophisticated processing techniques.

Our project aims to address these challenges by introducing a novel approach that optimizes CNN architectures for improved generalization across different post-hurricane scenarios, enhances computational efficiency, and increases accuracy in damage detection. We employ techniques such as image augmentation [3] to counteract overfitting, ensemble learning [4] to combine the strengths of different models, and transfer learning using the Resnet50 architecture [5] to leverage pre-trained models for enhanced performance. Our approach stands out by providing a scalable and efficient solution capable of rapid deployment in post-disaster scenarios, thereby offering significant improvements over existing methods in both accuracy and practicality.

The technical contributions of our project are significant. We demonstrate that our optimized model not only achieves a high level of accuracy in detecting damage from aerial imagery but also shows robustness and adaptability to different disaster environments. Our experimental results, utilizing a diverse dataset from the University of Washington Disaster Data Science Lab, indicate a test accuracy of 0.9775, setting a new benchmark in the field. The project's findings have profound implications for disaster management, offering a viable tool for rapid and effective post-disaster assessment, thus playing a critical role in saving lives and guiding recovery efforts.

II. Problem Definition

Our project addresses a critical and increasingly urgent issue: the efficient and precise assessment of structural damage following hurricanes, leveraging advanced remote sensing technologies [13]. This challenge is of paramount importance in the context of escalating hurricane frequency and intensity, largely attributed to climate change. Hurricanes have historically been the most destructive natural disasters in the United States, exemplified by events like Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Superstorm Sandy in 2012, and Hurricane Harvey in 2017. These events not only cause widespread destruction but also present formidable challenges for emergency response and recovery efforts.

The Core Challenge in Detail: The immediate aftermath of a hurricane presents a unique set of challenges. The primary goal is to conduct rapid and accurate assessments of structural damage. These assessments serve multiple critical functions: they guide the efficient allocation of emergency response resources, inform the identification of the most severely affected areas, and are essential in calculating the economic impacts necessary for securing recovery funding. Traditional methods, which typically involve on-ground surveys and inspections, are considerably hampered by logistical challenges. Access to affected areas is often limited due to damaged infrastructure and transportation networks. Furthermore, the scale of the disaster, often encompassing vast geographical areas with hundreds of thousands of structures, requires a level of resource allocation that is not always feasible, particularly when resources are already constrained by immediate rescue operations.

In formal terms, Our input is high-resolution remote sensing imagery [13], primarily aerial photographs taken after the hurricane. These images cover a wide range of affected areas, showcasing various landscapes, urban settings, and degrees of structural damage.

Fig. 1: Sample Dataset

Set	Number of Images
Training	8000
Validation	2000
Test	2000

TABLE I: Dataset Composition

To illustrate, let's revisit the case of Hurricane Harvey's impact on Houston in 2017. Imagine an aerial photograph of a residential area in Houston immediately following the hurricane. Traditional manual assessment would involve emergency personnel conducting door-to-door inspections – a process that could take days, if not weeks, given the extent of the affected area. In contrast, our machine learning model would analyze the same aerial photograph in a fraction of the time. It would identify individual structures, classify them into categories like 'severely damaged,' 'partially damaged,' or 'intact,' and create a damage map. This rapid assessment allows for a more immediate response, directing rescue and recovery efforts to the most affected areas first, and providing crucial data for planning long-term rehabilitation and securing necessary funding.

A. Related Work

In the realm of disaster response [15] and damage detection using aerial imagery, significant advancements have been made, each with its unique approaches, limitations, and challenges. Understanding the landscape of existing methodologies is crucial to contextualizing our machine learning [19] model for post-hurricane damage assessment.

Traditional Image Processing Techniques [17] have long been the cornerstone in this field. These methods typically involve stages like image pre-processing, feature extraction, followed by classification using algorithms such as Support Vector Machines (SVM) or Random Forest. The primary advantage of these techniques is their interpretability and established nature. However, they fall short in their ability to handle complex patterns due to their reliance on hand-crafted features. This limitation hinders their generalizability and accuracy in varied disaster scenarios. Manual feature engineering, a staple of this approach, is both time-consuming and may not encapsulate all the relevant information, leading to suboptimal damage assessments.

Deep Learning-based Approaches, particularly those employing Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), represent a significant shift in this domain. These models excel at automatically learning hierarchical data representations and often incorporate advanced techniques like transfer learning, data augmentation, [3] and dropout strategies to enhance performance. [1]While these models are powerful in processing complex patterns and leveraging large datasets, they come with their own set of limitations. They require extensive data to perform optimally and are computationally intensive. Moreover, a significant challenge with these models is their lack of interpretability, which poses difficulties in understanding the underlying decision-making processes.

The Fusion of Remote Sensing Data methodology [13] is another notable approach, integrating different data sources such as optical imagery, Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) [18], and Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR). This integration offers a more comprehensive understanding by combining multiple perspectives, thereby providing a more detailed assessment of disaster-affected areas. However, this approach is hindered by the complexity of data fusion, the cost and resource requirements for acquiring diverse data types, and the necessity for advanced processing techniques.

Our approach aims to address these limitations, focusing on enhancing generalizability, computational efficiency, and interpretability. By building upon the foundations laid by existing methodologies and integrating advancements in deep learning and spatial context analysis, we propose a solution that innovates to meet the unique challenges of post-disaster damage assessment.

Current challenges in this field are diverse. Many existing models lack robustness across different scenarios and geographical regions. There is a notable gap in interpretability and explainability, especially in deep learning models, making it difficult for stakeholders to trust and understand model predictions. Another significant challenge is the availability and diversity of high-quality labeled data, which is crucial for models to generalize effectively across new disaster types or scenarios. Additionally, the adaptation of these models for real-time applications and their scalability across extensive geographic areas remain crucial for practical deployment. [2] It is also imperative to consider the ethical and social implications of deploying such technology in disaster response scenarios [15], ensuring fairness, transparency, and privacy.

III. Proposed Solution

The proposed solution for automating post-hurricane structure damage assessments involves the development of an optimized Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) architecture. The objective is to create a model capable of accurately classifying structures into damaged and undamaged categories based on post-hurricane imagery. The core elements of the proposed solution are as follows:

A. Architecture Refinement

Variations in Architecture Components: The architecture is fine-tuned by experimenting with different configurations of convolution filters (which capture various features from the input images), dense layer nodes (which interpret the features extracted by the convolution layers), dropout rates (to prevent overfitting by randomly deactivating certain neurons during training), and learning rates (which determine the step size at each iteration while moving towards a minimum of a loss function). Max Pooling Layers: These are added before activation functions. Max Pooling reduces the spatial dimensions (width, height) of the input volume for the next convolution layer. It is done to decrease the computational power required to process the data through dimensionality reduction. Additionally, it extracts dominant features which are rotational and positional invariant, thus aiding in reducing overfitting.

B. Data Augmentation

Purpose and Techniques: To ensure the model can generalize across a variety of hurricane scenarios, the dataset is augmented with a range of conditions. This includes altering lighting conditions, simulating different weather effects, and introducing variations in structural features. For instance, the same image might be adjusted to simulate different times of the day or weather conditions, such as clear, cloudy, or rainy. This helps the model learn to recognize damage under a variety of visual inputs. [3] Impact on Model Generalization: This broadens the range of features the model is exposed to during training, making it more adaptable and robust to new, unseen images post-deployment.

C. Ensemble Learning

Combining Multiple Models: This technique involves training multiple models and then combining their predictions.

Each model may capture different aspects or features of the data. [4] When their predictions are combined, it often results in improved accuracy and robustness compared to any single model. Application: For instance, several CNN models might be trained on the same dataset but with different architectures or hyperparameters. [2] Their collective output would then be aggregated, often leading to more reliable and accurate assessments of hurricane damage.

D. Spatial Context Integration

Understanding Spatial Relationships: This element focuses on incorporating the spatial context or the relationship between structures and their surroundings into the model. This could mean understanding how the damage to one structure might correlate with or affect nearby structures. Implementation: Techniques might include analyzing the proximity of structures to one another, the patterns of damage across a neighborhood, or the correlation between the extent of damage and distance from the hurricane's epicenter.

E. Modeling

Development Process: Utilizing TensorFlow and Keras, various CNN architectures are developed and iterated upon. A baseline model provides a starting point, which is then incrementally improved by integrating techniques like max pooling and dropout layers [11]. The different models that we have used in our implementation are as follows:

1) **Base CNN**: We initiated our hurricane damage detection study by implementing a foundational Convolutional Neural Network (CNN). This base model served as a starting point to understand the inherent complexities of hurricane damage patterns in urban areas. The architecture was carefully designed to capture essential features from input images and establish a performance baseline for subsequent comparisons.
2) **Base CNN with Image Augmentation**: Recognizing the importance of robust model generalization, we introduced data augmentation techniques. The training set images underwent transformations, such as rotation, shifting, and flipping, through the ImageDataGenerator. [3] This augmentation aimed to expose the model to diverse scenarios, improving its adaptability to varying environmental conditions and enhancing overall predictive accuracy.
3) **CNN with Max Pooling and Dropout Layers**: To mitigate overfitting issues, we enhanced the base CNN architecture by incorporating max pooling layers and dropout regularization. Max pooling downsampled convolutional outputs, reducing computational load and focusing on critical features. Dropout layers introduced stochasticity during training, preventing the model from over-relying on specific patterns and contributing to better generalization.
4) **Transfer Learning Model with ResNet50**: Recognizing the potential of pre-trained models, we employed transfer learning with ResNet50. This aspect involves utilizing a pre-trained model (Resnet50) [5], which has already learned a vast array of features from a comprehensive dataset. Leveraging the knowledge gained from extensive image datasets, ResNet50 provided a strong foundation for hurricane damage feature extraction. By using transfer learning, the model can leverage these pre-learned features, thereby reducing training time and improving efficiency without sacrificing accuracy. This transfer learning approach aimed to capture intricate patterns and nuances present in urban damage scenarios, significantly boosting model performance.
5) **Transfer Learning Model with ResNet50 and Reduced Learning Rate**: In an effort to fine-tune the transfer learning model, we explored the impact of reducing the learning rate and adjusting convolution kernel sizes. This variation aimed to achieve better convergence, allowing the model to discern finer details in the hurricane damage images. By optimizing the learning process, we sought to strike a balance between capturing nuanced features and preventing overfitting.

Each model underwent rigorous training and validation processes on our curated dataset, with careful consideration of hyperparameter tuning. The subsequent evaluation and comparison of these models were conducted to gain insights into their individual strengths and weaknesses in hurricane damage detection in urban networks. Each of these elements contributes to creating a sophisticated, robust, and efficient CNN model for assessing structural damage post-hurricanes. The combination of architectural refinements, data augmentation, [3]ensemble learning [4], spatial context integration, and advanced modeling techniques ensures that the proposed solution is not only accurate but also adaptable and efficient in various post-disaster scenarios.

IV. EVALUATION

Our experimental evaluation was designed to systematically assess the performance of different neural network architectures in classifying structural damage from aerial imagery following hurricanes. This evaluation concentrated on several critical aspects of model performance, including classification accuracy, generalizability, convergence during training, potential overfitting, and the robust identification of meaningful damage patterns across various data samples. Specifically, our evaluation aimed to answer pivotal questions about the efficacy of basic versus complex CNN architectures, the impact of transfer learning, the benefits of augmenting training data, and the effectiveness of techniques aimed at reducing overfitting.

Dataset: The dataset used for this evaluation was sourced from the University of Washington Disaster Data Science Lab. It comprises color images in RGB format, each of size 128x128 pixels, depicting structures cropped from aerial imagery collected post-Hurricane Harvey. The images are categorized to indicate whether the structure is damaged or undamaged. We divided this dataset into balanced training, validation, and test sets.

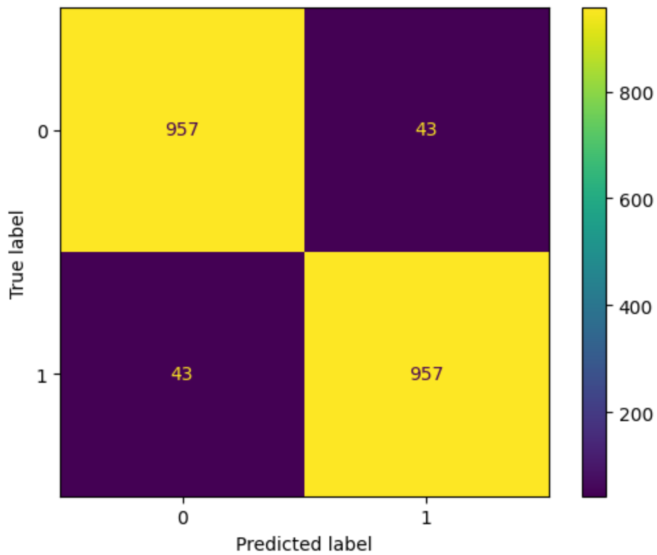

Fig. 2: Confusion Matrix for Best Performing Model

For our models, we experimented with various parameters, including convolution filters, dense layer nodes, dropout rates, learning rates, and techniques like max pooling and image augmentation. [3]Transfer learning was also explored using the ResNet50 model. [5]

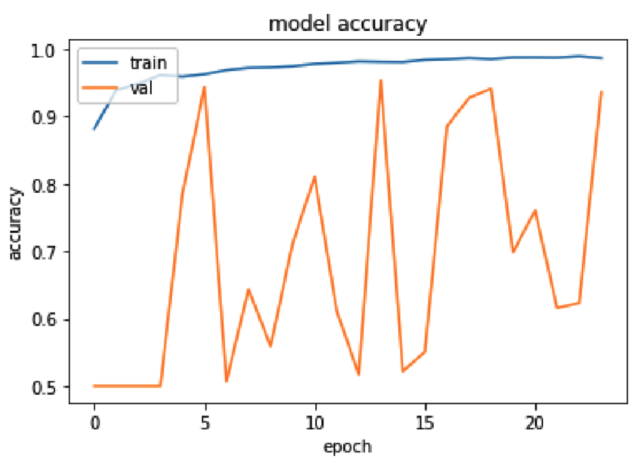

Fig. 3: Model accuracy for Baseline CNN model.

Evaluation Metrics: The primary metric used for evaluating model performance was classification accuracy, which is particularly pertinent given the balanced nature of our dataset. [7] We also considered additional metrics such as sensitivity/true positive rate, specificity/true negative rate, precision/positive predictive value, false positive rate, and false negative rate.

Preliminary Results: Our preliminary results indicated varying levels of performance and stability across different model iterations. The initial CNN model, a basic architecture, achieved a notable validation accuracy, especially when image augmentation [3] was utilized. However, to improve convergence and reduce overfitting, additional complexities were

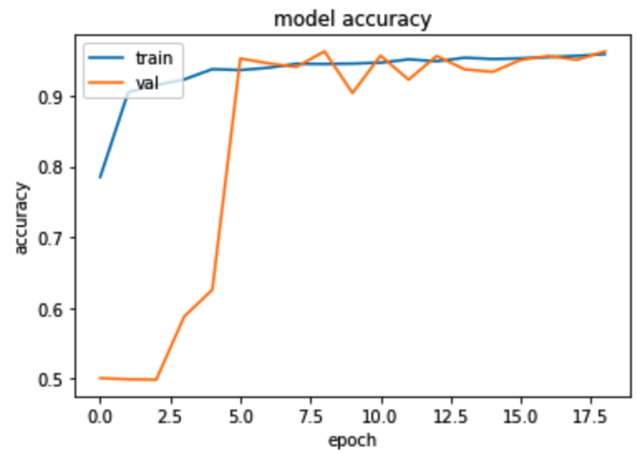

Fig. 4: Model accuracy for Updated CNN model.

introduced in the model architecture. This included adjusting kernel sizes, the number of filters, and learning rates, as well as incorporating max pooling and dropout layers.

Model Type	Validation Accuracy
Baseline (no image augmentation)	0.9475
Baseline with Image Augmentation	0.9485
Max Pooling & Dropout	0.9285
Transfer Learning (ResNet50, various kernels)	0.9595, 0.9350

TABLE II: Validation Accuracies for Model Iterations

We generated plots to visualize the training and validation accuracy per epoch for our models. These plots were instrumental in determining the models' stability and convergence. Additionally, confusion matrices and true positive classification visuals were created to further understand the models' classification effectiveness.

Analysis of Results:

- **CNN Architectural Complexity**: The more complex standard CNN models outperformed the basic CNN architecture, indicating a need for advanced architectures for this specific task.
- **Transfer Learning:** While the transfer learning model using ResNet50 [5] showed slightly higher accuracy, its larger size and computational inefficiency made the standard CNN model preferable.
- **Data Augmentation:** The improvement in validation accuracy with the addition of image augmentation highlighted its role in enhancing model generalization.
- **Overfitting Reduction Techniques**: The inclusion of max pooling and dropout layers resulted in increased model convergence and reduced overfitting, as evidenced by the models' improved test accuracy compared to their validation accuracy.

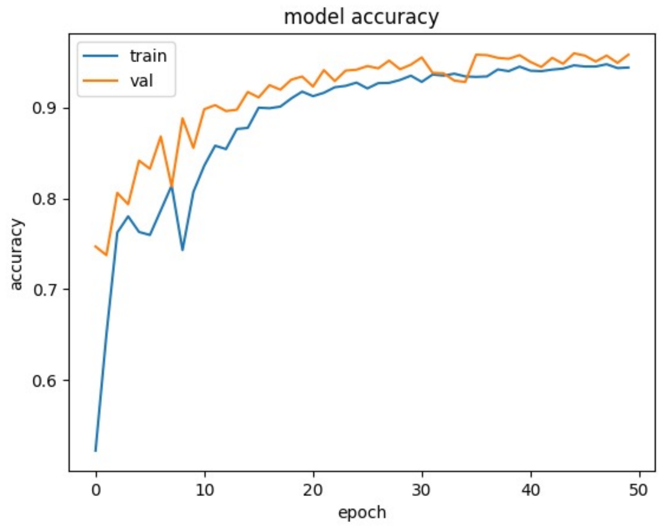

Fig. 5: Model accuracy after Transfer Learning

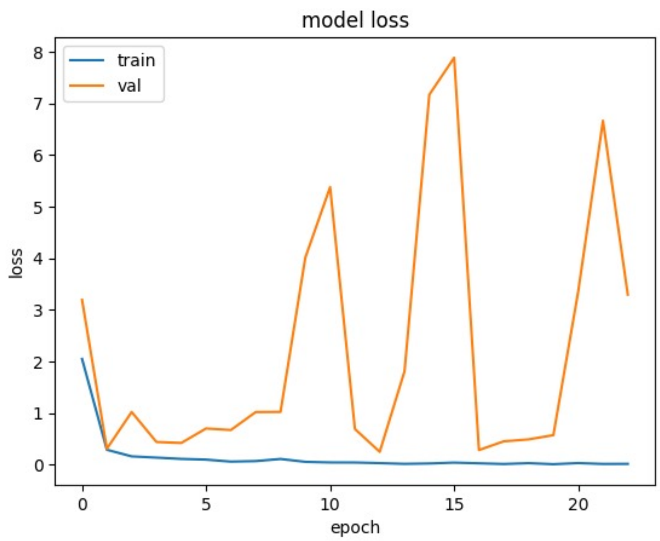

Fig. 6: Model Loss for Baseline CNN Model

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, the evaluation demonstrates that a standard CNN model, augmented with max pooling, dropout, and data augmentation techniques [3], achieves an optimal balance between accuracy, efficiency, and interpretability. With an accuracy rate of approximately 0.98, our model proves to be an effective and deployable solution for classifying post-hurricane structural damage, showcasing the potential of CNNs in disaster assessment scenarios.

Our project has successfully developed a model that demonstrates high performance in classifying damaged and undamaged structures from post-hurricane aerial imagery. This model achieved commendable accuracy in both validation and test datasets. However, there are notable caveats and areas for potential improvement that should be acknowledged:

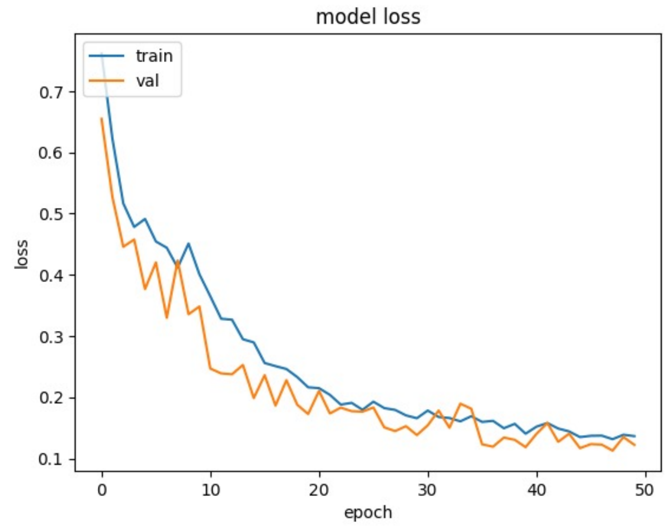

Fig. 7: Model Loss after Transfer Learning

1) **Learning Beyond Visible Flood Water:** A significant portion of the damaged structures in our training dataset featured visible flood water. While the model has effectively learned to identify flood water as an indicator of damage, its ability to recognize structural damage in the absence of flood water remains uncertain. To enhance the model's utility, it's crucial to train it to identify more subtle damage indicators. This could be achieved by incorporating labeled training images taken several weeks post-hurricane, allowing the model to learn from scenarios where flood water has receded.
2) **Geographic Diversity in Training Data:** The current dataset predominantly comprises images from different neighborhoods within the Houston area. This leads to a potential bias where the model might be learning neighborhood-specific characteristics unrelated to hurricane damage, such as architectural styles or tree canopy levels. To address this, we suggest refining the training dataset to include images from neighborhoods with both damaged and undamaged structures. This approach requires additional training data and basic geospatial processing but will help the model focus on learning features directly related to hurricane damage.
3) **Model Generalizability to Various Urban Forms:** Since the training data is exclusively from Houston, the model's ability to generalize to other cities with different urban forms and natural environments is uncertain. For instance, its effectiveness in a dense urban setting like New York City might differ significantly. To overcome this limitation, the model should be trained with post-hurricane images from multiple cities, encompassing a variety of urban landscapes and architectural styles.

The resultant model, with its capability to accurately distinguish between damaged and undamaged structures, is optimally suited for integration into a larger pipeline. Such a

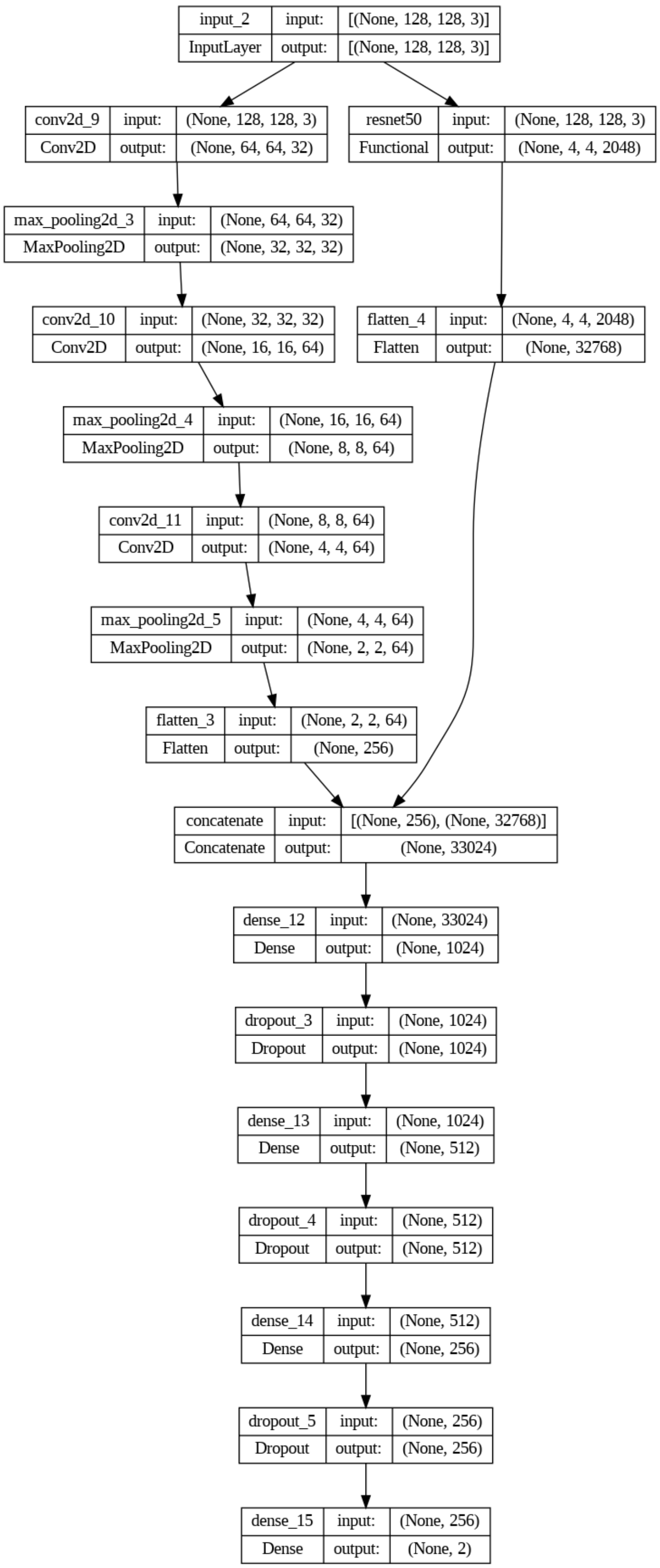

Fig. 8: Transfer Learning Model Summary

Metric	Formula	Value
Test Accuracy	(TP + TN) / Total	0.9595
Sensitivity/True Positive Rate	TP / (TP + FN)	0.957
Specificity/True Negative Rate	TN / (TN + FP)	0.957
Precision/Positive Predictive Value	TP / (TP + FP)	0.957
False Positive Rate	FP / (FP + TN)	0.043
False Negative Rate	FN / (FN + TP)	0.043

TABLE III: Evaluation Metrics

pipeline could ingest extensive aerial images, crop them to individual structures using building footprints, and classify each structure. Modern building detection algorithms, coupled with publicly available datasets like Microsoft's US building footprints, could streamline this process. By applying this pipeline, we can transform extensive aerial imagery into detailed city-wide damage assessment maps with minimal human intervention. This system holds immense potential for aiding federal to local first responders, streamlining the process of damage assessment and resource allocation in the wake of natural disasters. Additionally, the incorporation of satellite imagery in this pipeline could further enhance its efficiency and scope.

While acknowledging the areas for improvement, the developed model stands as a significant advancement in using machine learning for rapid and accurate damage classification. Its potential for real-world application, particularly in aiding disaster response efforts, underscores the value of this research in the broader context of natural disaster management and recovery.

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