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# UP IN THE AIR

THIS NEW INNOVATION LABORATORY FOR AIR-TRAFFIC  
MANAGEMENT TAKES OFF FROM THE MOMENT OF ARRIVAL

Picture a group of foreign government officials arriving in the foyer of Thales' Melbourne office. They're here to review air-traffic management systems and new technologies being developed by CASIA, the Centre for Advanced Studies in Air Traffic Management. They walk through the office: it's pleasant (in a conservative, corporate way) but doesn't do much to evoke the kinds of brand characteristics that presumably help win air-traffic management contracts: 'innovation', 'precision', 'high tech'. No matter – technical details and dollar figures are top of mind.

And then they arrive at The Door, a silver cavity slider with a neat radius at the corners that recalls classic retro-futuristic science fiction films. For something so simple, it arouses an incredible sense of anticipation. It's obviously a threshold to a special space (and it's only mildly disappointing that it opens with a swipe card, not voice activation!).

Instantly, the visitors have an emotional investment in this place. And, when the door skids open, they're not disappointed. CH Architects' fit-out of the Thales CASIA Innovation Laboratory is immediately intriguing. The entry area is narrow, with a low ceiling, but the walls fan out as the visitors move forward, and the ceiling flows upward in a seemingly exponential curve modelled on the take-off trajectory of a plane. The sense of compression and expansion is palpable – like something Frank Lloyd Wright might've designed if he had a wind tunnel.

Every detail delivers maximum emotional impact and optimum functionality: a custom Corian console in the centre of the space has curves and colours reminiscent of moulded aircraft furniture, but also conceals a duct system that draws cool air in over hidden CPUs and then out through the floor; at the stroke of a master control pad, a drop-down projection wall hides extra workstations, and windows to the adjacent Innovation Workspace turn from clear to opaque; LED light fittings in the ceilings recall aeroplane floor lighting, and fittings in the floor are mini runway lights; the pattern in the carpet is

Melbourne Airport's flight path map; even the chairs were specified for their aesthetic link to aircraft seats.

The central console leads the eye to what many of CASIA's visitors would consider the mother-lode: the server room. Even here, the architects have had fun, with mirrored walls and ceilings, and wire cables that reflect infinitely and geometrically into darkness.

It must be a dream to give a presentation in this space – no need for a warm-up act – but it must also be an inspiring place to work. And this is a vital point. Like so many commercial fit-outs, there are external (brand) objectives and internal (workplace) objectives, and the design of the Innovation Laboratory nails both aspects. The only pity is that it's such an exclusive space and most people will never see it (oh, and the voice activation thing, of course).

*Mark Scruby is a freelance writer based in Melbourne.*

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PHOTOGRAPHY SHANNON  
MCGRATH**

**ARCHITECT CH ARCHITECTS  
LOCATION MELBOURNE | AUS  
PROJECT THALES CASIA  
INNOVATION LABORATORY**

**LEFT** A linear pattern in the carpet is actually Melbourne Airport's flight path  
**BELOW** Almost every aspect of the fit-out recalls some element of aviation



## THALES CASIA INNOVATION LABORATORY

**ARCHITECT** CH Architects  
**PROJECT TEAM** David Carabott (Project Director), Adele Bates (Senior Interior Designer), Adam Emerson (Project Architect), Davide Vigano, Philippa Johnson, Chantelle Merlo, Amelia Attrill (Interior Designers), Chivonne Hollis (Contract Administrator)  
**BUILDER** Fynnan Construction  
**CORIAN FABRICATOR** Deadwood  
**BUDGET** \$1,226,000  
**TIME TO COMPLETE** 7 months  
**TOTAL FLOOR AREA** approx. 403m<sup>2</sup>

**CH ARCHITECTS**  
(61 3) 9417 1944 charchitects.com.au  
**FURNITURE** In Innovation Lab and Innovation Workspace, 'Sitz' mesh task chairs from Insitu Furniture. In Innovation Lab, custom star-base coffee tables from Insitu Furniture. In Training Rooms, 'Summit' training task chairs also from Insitu Furniture, and 'Incognito' folding tables from Chairbiz. In Innovation Lab, 'Catifa 70' meeting chairs from Stylecraft. In Innovation Workspace, 'Delta' workstation legs from Centra Interiors.

Generally throughout fit-out, CPU holders from Centra Interiors

**LIGHTING** In Innovation Lab, wall lights from JSB Lighting, custom-made suspended light from LPA. Generally throughout, lighting from UGE Lighting

**FINISHES** In Innovation Lab, Innovation Workshop and Server Room, fixed smart glass panels from iGlass. In Innovation Lab, joinery from Corian, and 2 Pac finish from Halifax Vogel Group. In Server Room, mirror panel from Mitchell Plastics. In Training Room,

EchoPanel from Woven Image. Generally throughout, paint from Dulux. Projector paint from Livingstone Audio. Carpet tiles from Rugs Carpet & Design. Laminates from Laminex. Upholstery on display walls and speakers from Warwick Fabrics

**FIXED & FITTED** In Innovation Lab, visual merchandising hardware from mei+picchi, and metal ceiling system from Hunter Douglas. In Innovation Workshop and Server Room, operable wall from Hufcor. Generally throughout, door hardware and duct joinery from Designer Doorware

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