Architects in contemporary practice are increasingly called upon to design buildings in places that are quite different from their own homelands in terms of geography, climate, and culture. Yet, at the same time that international agreements are making it easier to engage in multi-national practice, there is also an emerging emphasis on the importance of the local as part of the expanding discourse surrounding the concept of sustainability. This requires that designers be able to relatively quickly gain an understanding of physical environments and human communities with which they have little - and sometimes no - personal experience. It is therefore one of the goals of this studio to help you examine the relationship between design process and culturally and environmentally sensitive design solutions by emphasizing the role of research in that process.

Sai Gon (also known Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City, or Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh), provides the setting for this studio. Vietnam’s commercial capital, Saigon is located along the Saigon river near its confluence with the Nha Be, 37 miles inland from the South China Sea and 11 degrees north of the equator. Saigon is expanding rapidly in the midst of social and economic changes that are affecting the country as a whole. For example, work is underway on the construction of an entirely new district, the Thu Thiem New Urban Area, across the river from the existing city center. It is planned for completion in only 15 years.

The project for the studio will be a center for the architectural study, including an archive and exhibition space to house materials related to the architectural and urban history of Saigon and of Vietnam. It will be located in Saigon’s downtown. We are still in the process of nailing down the exact site, but we are looking at one on a tree lined street adjacent to a French Colonial building in need of preservation. Whatever the exact site, the project will challenge you to examine and make decisions about a variety of diverse architectural precedents ranging from traditional Vietnamese architecture, to French colonial architecture, to modern international design. You will also investigate design strategies appropriate for a tropical climate with hot wet summers and warm dry winters.

Because of it’s long, rich, and sometimes conflicted history, it’s changing economic and political status, and it’s diverse, often politically charged architectural influences, Sai Gon provides fertile ground for examining appropriate design responses in the contemporary context of globalized architectural practice. For class participants who do not know Vietnam well - including myself - it may require us to challenge our perceptions of Vietnam as a place. It may also challenge our understandings of the use and perception of space. For participants who do know Vietnam well, especially for those who may call it home, this studio will, I hope, allow for an enriched understanding of home-place.