The College of Environmental Design (CED) has a long tradition of engaging in various ways with the world at large. Indeed, it can boast some of the world’s top experts on Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia amongst its faculty members. The expertise of our faculty members also represents the diverse panorama of environmental design and is evidenced by CED’s proficiency in many fields ranging from housing to urbanization and from urban design to infrastructure planning. Courses in the College’s three departments clearly illustrate this international and interdisciplinary outlook and while design studios conducted abroad and structured around the problems of other countries are not new, they have taken on a new dimension as well as a new urgency at this moment as this issue of Frameworks illustrates.

Globalization and the rise of the information society have redefined the landscape of both professional knowledge and practice. But while such trends may have resulted in homogenization to some degree, they have also offered the possibilities of recognizing the international and cross-cultural potential of local and regional traditions particularly as they relate to the developing countries of the so-called “Third World.” One may argue that we are embarking on a new stage in the relationships between the First and the Third Worlds, one that may depart from the long and brutal legacies of colonialism. Many Third World countries in the global South, like China, India, and Mexico, are now witnessing unprecedented rates of urban development and economic growth. Often these changes have been coupled with transnational alliances and aggressive policies that
help countries position themselves globally and in ways that have allowed some of them to rapidly join the advanced or industrialized nations of the First World. From our vantage point today, it appears that the latest wrinkle in the old international division of labor, previously characterized by the flow of information from South to North and its return in the form of manufactured products in the 20th century, has been replaced with the flow of information from North to South and its return in the form of outsourced knowledge and specialized immigrant labor. And while it is too soon to cheer the demise of colonial structures of surplus extraction or labor exploitation, we may also recognize that these have been fundamentally recalibrated, allowing the global South to shape the prospects of the North just as the latter continues to study and practice within the former.

I believe that a truly global approach to teaching architecture and planning in this transnational world must be based on two separate yet linked educational beliefs. The first is the belief that the study of other people, cultures, and environments is an obligation that should be pursued with the conviction that such knowledge is necessary for our own well-being as well as that of others.

An exchange between various cultures and/or countries when pursued on this premise often brings mutually beneficial by-products. For example, many traditional environments in the Third World offer innovative solutions and practical insights regarding the complexity of the social environment—knowledge that is crucial to contemporary practice. Learning from such places and practices allows us to situate ourselves in the wider human context—which one may argue is the very essence of our profession and discipline.

The second belief underlying this approach stems from the conviction that we in the First World have an ethical responsibility to play a role in the development of the Third World, possibly reversing the decades of intellectual hegemony that accompanied centuries of colonization. Training practitioners in areas like managing urbanization and providing infrastructure in which the First World has been generally successful is no longer a luxury but in fact a necessity. For we must accept that as one of the premier public institutions in the First World, we are also part of a Berkeley “tradition” that reminds us that the circumstances of the Third World are neither irrelevant nor marginal to the well-being and continued strength of the First World.

In the pages that follow, you the reader, will learn about the various ways in which the CED has carried forward its own epistemological traditions as well as those of the Berkeley campus at large. As the guest editor of this issue of Frameworks, I hope that this magazine will stand for more than just a catalog of CED’s accomplishments in the past year. That the various global studios conducted by the College will be understood as more than simply a means to gain professional skill or license. Mostly, I hope that our efforts at transnational teaching will help us recognize that we need to learn more about the world and our place within it, while also recognizing our professional limitations and our complicity in the current state of global affairs.

Nezar AlSayyad is Professor of Architecture, City Planning, Urban Design, and Urban History and Associate Dean for International Programs in the College of Environmental Design.