This studio will be the seventeenth year of the Yale School of Architecture’s China Studio, and the sixth year of the collaboration between Yale and Tsinghua University School of Architecture in Beijing. With this studio, we continue an investigation of urban development and redevelopment in the historic and contemporary Chinese city, with a particular emphasis on models of sustainable mixed-use and neighborhood development. Over the first three years, the China Studio studied the impact of preservation, infill and new development on three sites along the historic north-south axis of Beijing, moving from the center outward to the urban periphery. In recent years, the focus has turned to the impact of new infrastructure, particularly high-speed rail, on the shape and character of urban development.

This year’s studio will consider one of the Gordian knots of Beijing urbanism, the result of the uneven and apparently uncoordinated development of rapid urban growth and the intersection of new and old infrastructure. These episodes, characterized by the conjunction of new scales and typologies of contemporary development, state of the art infrastructure, and both persistent and emergent patterns of urban life, occur all over Beijing and indeed all over China, but one that is obvious, unavoidable and dramatic is the area around the main subway station serving the Tsinghua campus: Wudaokou. Although this busy subway station serves a growing cluster of institutions of higher education with a combined enrollment of more than 75,000, including our partner institution, Tsinghua, with over 12,000 students and over 3,000 academic staff, related high-tech and research industries, and of course the inevitable associated development of restaurants, hotels and retail, it is poorly planned and poorly connected to the existing street system and the larger area it serves. In addition, Tsinghua, while once a traditional gated danwei (work unit), with its own housing and facilities, functions increasingly like any other large institution or industry in an open contemporary metropolitan region. However, while there is a persistent concentration of pedestrian and bicycle riders, as on any university campus, there is also a swarm of taxis and personal and commercial electric vehicles, along with the explosive growth of car ownership and use characteristic of modernizing Chinese cities. The infrastructure is incapable of keeping up with, much less managing, these often competing modes of circulation and storage, and the station is
the epicenter of these conflicts – often with long lines backed up from ticket windows, security and gates, spilling on to sidewalks already congested with parked and moving bicycles, pedestrians attempting to circulate, and of course more diverse vehicles than planners seemed to anticipate.

This area also has the oldest railroad line in China, running north-south and crossing the busy street in front of the Wudaokou station on grade. There are, however, plans to relocate this historic rail line, which was already moved once, 60 years ago, from the middle of the Tsinghua campus to its current location, to below grade. This move would be part of the construction of a new high-speed rail line, beginning at Xizhimen, another spatially complex and frustrating tangle of multiple subway lines and the Beijing North railway station, and connecting Beijing to the site of snow events for the 2022 Winter Olympics at Zhangjiakou in Hebei Province, 190 km northwest of the city. These plans are the immediate provocation for a comprehensive reconsideration of urban development, architecture and transportation in the Wudaokou area.

The challenge to this year’s studio will not only be to research, analyze and deploy relevant models of conventional transit-oriented development, but to update these models, especially in the third and fourth-dimensions. Transit-oriented development in the contemporary metropolis can no longer be structured by traditional land-use plans overlaid by two-dimensional radii of walking or bicycle access, but needs to become fully three-dimensional, engaging with new building and infrastructure typologies and morphologies and the patterns of use that they generate. Therefore, students in this studio will be encouraged, as in past studios, not only to generate innovative design solutions, but also innovative modes and media of representing life in contemporary cities, and presenting those in an engaging and compelling way.

As in past studios, Yale students will travel to China, tour the site and other relevant sites and projects in and around Beijing, meet with local planning officials, and, most importantly, collaborate with their counterparts, graduate students at Tsinghua University, to develop preliminary site analysis and design concepts. This interaction will continue throughout the term via video conferencing, and Tsinghua students, faculty, along with Beijing planning officials, have been invited to participate in final reviews at Yale. All students considering participating in the studio should make sure that they have a current passport in their possession, with sufficient space for a Chinese visa.