

Facts on the Ground: Urbanism from Midroad to Ditch

Michelle Provoost and Wouter Vanstiphout

“Dutch Design Saves New Orleans!” This was the message at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C., where the exhibition “Newer Orleans—A Shared Space,” curated by the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI), opened in April 2006.¹ At least that is how it seemed to viewers of Dutch television news programs. The NAI had invited Dutch architects to create plans for the future of the devastated city. Adriaan Geuze of West 8 created a beautiful artificial delta able to withstand Gulf hurricanes and incrementally accommodate returning citizens. MVRDV based its proposal on a New Orleans child’s drawing of a hill with schools and playgrounds perched on top, above flood lines. Ben van Berkel and UN Studio designed a glamorous, green zigzag building including all possible collective programs. The contributions by offices from the United States were conveniently ignored on Dutch TV.

On television, the director of the NAI, Aaron Betsky, guided Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu through the exhibition. The senator was right on message: the Dutch plans “give hope” to New Orleans citizens. Then came an interview with the Dutch Christian Democrat state secretary for finance, Joop Wijn, who had traveled to the United States for the opening. Why was a cabinet minister present at the opening of a bunch of rushed speculative designs for New Orleans? Wijn said that