

tragic divide between the self-conscious heirs to Modernist and experimental urban design and the apostates of Modernism who have the ear of policy makers, business people, and the general populace. The first group rightly accuses the second of being conservative and opportunistic; the second rightly accuses the first of being irrelevant, elitist, and naive. In the grown-up world of urban planning, on the playing field of sprawl and suburbanization, the second group is much more successful; in the high-profile world of cultural projects, competitions, institutes, and magazines, only the first group has credibility. By the very nature of its professional ethics, the second group is incapable of being anything but a tool in the hands of dominant interests and of realizing anything but those ideas about which the broadest consensus exists. They are unlikely to create alternatives, aid disenfranchised communities, or show us unforeseen possibilities. The first group, however, is doomed just to pay lip service to the Modernist project of taking on the toughest social issues and of using urban planning to address these and show us fragments of a new world. Their exciting images will remain just images when confronted with realities that fall outside the cosseted world of ambitious curators and highbrow cultural commissions.

Of his biggest hit, “Heart of Gold,” Canadian singer Neil Young wrote, “This song put me in the middle of the road. Traveling there soon became a bore, so I headed for the ditch. A rougher ride but I saw more interesting people there.”² Both the politically and economically viable New Urbanists and the international avant-garde auteurs are squarely steering the middle of their respective roads. To address difficult urban realities like those of New Orleans, we need the people who have chosen the rough ride in the ditch. Where and what is this ditch, and whom can we expect to meet there?

Worldwide, in vastly different urban conditions far removed from the professional spotlights, where hundreds of millions of people carry on their lives, the Ditch School of Urban Design is developing. This disparate school shares one strand of DNA: the emancipatory, collectivist, anticonformist, breakthrough élan of the Modern Movement in its “heroic age.” These practices have shed the stylistic consensus of Modernism but share an attitude about their different urban contexts: they are driven by ideologies and civic goals that seem positively old-school. Most of them, like members of a secret international brotherhood, know each other.