

The Urban Think Tank in Caracas, Venezuela, artist Jeanne van Heeswijk in the Netherlands, the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) in New York, Rahul Mehrotra and the Urban Design Research Institute in Mumbai, City Mine(d) in Belgium, Public Architecture in San Francisco, Atelier Bow-Wow in Japan, the Everyday Urbanism group in the United States, and Stalker in Italy are some of the groups that invent and realize their own projects from outside official institutions and client-architect-budget relations, analyzing existing social and spatial situations and retrofitting them with programs that bring their particular ideal version of reality a little closer. These practices do not wait for a client or a commission—they forge ahead on their own and find other ways to finance the project.

Their projects often rely on maniacal commitment to one city or neighborhood; they dive in and dig up everything possibly useful for their intended projects and hold on until there is at least one “fact on the ground,” one realization of their intentions that proves their ideas viable and prepares the way for more. These offices, groups, and artists have abandoned the idea of the conventional architects’ office or urban planning department and have blurred the boundaries between urban planning, urban design, art, and social work. They do not care how they are classified as long as their projects succeed to some extent. To us they are urbanists much more than the Italianate-square-designing or pseudo-avant-garde-vision-conceiving architects who have hijacked City Hall and Academia. Having headed for the ditch, they do not allow themselves to get distracted by the unquenchable hunger of clients and magazines for glossy images and good-looking design. They engage with some condition neglected by the officials or professionals, and they explore and analyze its real social and cultural lineaments. They use design to visualize issues and solve problems. These offices all believe that the community-forming powers of their interventions are often inversely proportional to their physical impact and size and their financial investment. They make strategic gestures that prove a point, that show a deep political understanding of their urban contexts and are designed to change these dynamics from within. Their interventions can be physical objects but even then are more importantly tactical manipulations of political landscapes. By succeeding in building something, these offices change the political status quo in such a way that more things become thinkable and doable. Let’s examine three examples of Ditch Urbanism.