



COURSE DESCRIPTION

MONO-POLY-DOLLAR

ACSA 2022 Course
Development Prize Proposal

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Nearly 1 in 3 new stores opening in the US is a Dollar General (DG),¹ and, according to a report by Coresight Research, dollar stores are on track to account for 1/3 of all retail openings in America in 2021. As of September 2021, of the 4,799 announced retail openings, 1,626 are new dollar stores, 1,050 of which are owned and operated by Dollar General Corporation, the country's largest "small-box" retailer.² The pandemic-fueled downturn in the economy, along with the company's century-old legacy of innovating its retail model to meet contemporary needs with aggressive expansion, has resulted in an unprecedented proliferation of the dollar store economy.

During the fall semester of 2022, an interdisciplinary vertical research and design studio, operating at both the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) and the University of Colorado Denver (CUD), will use Dollar General Corp, the largest and most influential of the dollar store triumvirate - Family Dollar, Dollar Tree, and Dollar General - to examine the country's environmental, economic, and racial fault lines, and highlight this understudied vernacular typology as a weapon of discourse and agent of climate activism. The course asks students to reimagine the architectural canon, challenge existing value systems, and use the local and familiar as catalysts for change. Through this process of examination, research, and debate, students will form positions, establish critiques, and build new dialogues to test the efficacy of their claims on how small-box architecture has the potential to create new climate regimes.

As they trisect the country, the two comparable design programs working in tandem allow students to observe the nation as a whole and develop systems for reconnoitering a cross-section of Dollar General enterprises that move from the provincial to the cosmopolitan. The course requires students to address the subject matter neutrally and arrive at socio-spatial positions and projections by conducting extensive primary research in the form of travel, interviews, documentation, product testing, and studying permitting applications and legal documents pertaining to the organization. In doing so, they will uncover the industrial ecologies, global networks, nefarious land-use strategies, and precarious environmental practices that Dollar General's business culture set in motion decades ago. As students unpack the complexities of Dollar General as a case study in American 21st-century capitalism, they will acquire projective and bold design skills, imagining experimental architectural futures that take root in the urgent issues of today.

¹ Nathaniel Meyersohn, CNN Business, "Nearly 1 in 3 new stores opening in the US is a Dollar General," May 6 2021. Source: [LINK](#).

² Marianne Wilson, Chain Store Age: The Business of Retail, "Dollar store chains opening the most stores so far this year," Sep 7 2021. Source: [LINK](#).

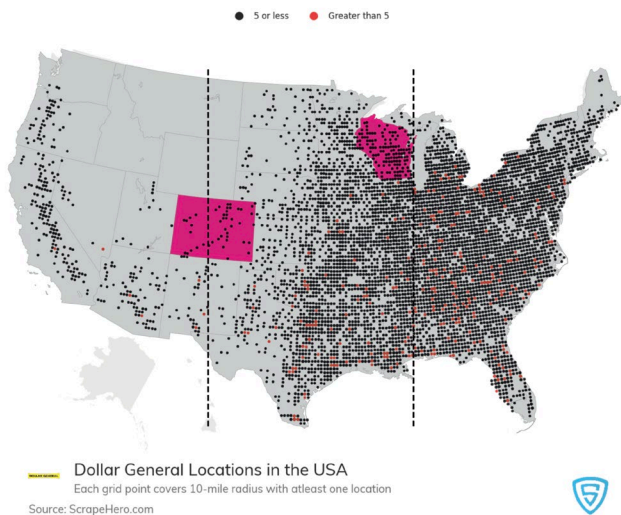


Fig. A
Map of Dollar General Locations in the USA.
Source: ScrapeHero Data Store, "Dollar General store locations in the USA," updated Oct 10 2021. Accessed via: [LINK](#).

Small-box dollar stores are critical to the function of our daily lives but are underexplored in architectural thought and discourse. The studio finds new possibilities for architecture in the climate crisis that moves the focus away from niche materials and LEED-certified buildings for the 1% to the highly franchised, extra-ordinary, and ubiquitous dollar store; in doing so, it provides students with a pathway for inculcating sustainable strategies on a granular level that effect change on a national and global scale.

Working collaboratively across both universities and with the support of a Dollar General Literacy Foundation grant, students will interrogate the DG machine - from its copy-and-paste building design and tactical anti-permitting strategies that enable it to proliferate and undercut its competitors, to the ways it affects large-scale agricultural practices and small-scale domestic realities. They will use their findings to test the social, spatial, and environmental consequences of making a series of small, measured disruptions in the DG system, then compile their speculative proposals into a book and paired exhibition that will be comprehensible to people outside of architecture and the academy. The book will retail in the 17,000+ DG general stores and, therefore, must be legible to a broad audience. The exhibition - *Dollar General Futures* - will involve designing and producing a panoply of climate-responsive objects for sale in a future DG store.

COURSE STRUCTURE + RESEARCH AGENDA

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Denver, Colorado, are geographically poised to document the distribution of Dollar General's presence in the U.S. as they trisect the drastic gradient from the densely populated DG-landscape of the American East, Midwest and South, to the sparsely populated DG-landscape of the American West (Fig. A). Between and around these two research nodes, UWM and CUD students will investigate, visit, and document a comprehensive cross-section of 12 Dollar General institutions and focus on the following topics: farm to package supply chains; energy demands of DG's refrigerated landscapes; DG Literacy Foundation's efforts to promote the production and diffusion of knowledge across America; subversive land-use policies; and DG's influence, from furnishing the spaces where civic and domestic life transpire to sponsoring truck and car racing events in rural areas.

MONO-POLY-DOLLAR will run concurrently at UWM and CUD in four chronologically defined sections that facilitate student-led research, group travel, and mixed-format design strategies, ranging from policy proposals to architectural interventions. The two institutions will work collaboratively and meet virtually to discuss findings, offer feedback, debate research methodologies, and share generative design tools. All work will exist in shared drives and digital boards that facilitate simultaneous editing.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Module 1: RESEARCH / 4 weeks

September 1 - October 1

Working in groups, students will find and consume large quantities of written information about Dollar General Corp and construct conspiratorial diagrams that illustrate the organization's evolution into a powerful actor that continues to shape the character and tenor of contemporary American life. In addition, they will attend and ask questions at public planning meetings in local municipalities with DG stores to develop their proficiency at formulating questions and asserting a diversity of values, needs, and opinions - all skills they will need for the subsequent modules.

COURSE READING LIST:

Alex Ohlin, *Andreas Gursky and the Contemporary Sublime* (2014)

Amanda Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism: Contemporary Art and the Drive to Waste* (2019)

Beatriz Colomina, *Domesticity at War* (1992)

Cal Turner Jr., *My Father's Business* (2018)

CLUJ, *Refrigerated Nation: The Landscape of Perishable Food in America* (2014)

Deborah Fausch, *Can Architecture be Ordinary?* (2014)

Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi, Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972)

Donald W. Meinig, *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays* (1979)

Eames Demetrios, *Travel Guide volume Four: Kcymaerxthaere. Discover Ledd & Parts of Now Estrellia* (2014)

Elizabeth Currid-Halkett, *The Sum of Small Things, a Theory of the Aspirational Class* (2017)

Fahim Amir, *Being and Swine: The End of Nature (As We Knew It)* (2020)

Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (1968)

Liam Young, *Machine Landscapes: Architectures of the Post Anthropocene* (2019)

Lucy Lippard, *Undermining: a Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West* (2014)

Reinier de Graaf, *Four Walls and a Roof: The Complex Nature of a Simple Profession* (2017)

Steven Harris and Deborah Berke, *Architecture of the Everyday* (1997)

Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013)

Tobias Armbrorst, *The Arsenal of Exclusion & Inclusion* (2014)

Witold Rybcynski, *Mysteries of the Mall* (2015)

Module 2: TRAVEL / 2 weeks

October 2 - October 16

During the two concurrent two-week trips - one starting and ending at UWM and the other starting and ending at CUD - students will experience firsthand how DG is both affecting and being affected by complex phenomena such as race, social class, and climate change. By collectively traversing 20 of the 50 states and crossing a wide array of counties, cities, and towns, they will glean insights into the ways segregation, food deserts, franchised architecture, and monocultures affect the lives of everyday Americans and how an infrastructure as vast and accessible as the DG store can play a reconciliatory role across these critical divides. Through physical engagement and close observation, students will expand their understanding of their chosen research topic. Deliverables for this module include interview transcripts, extensive documentation of the environmental impact of DG's homogeneous aesthetic and complete disregard for site-specificity and climate realities, and a taxonomy of shelf-stable goods and survivalist paraphernalia available in-store for people to prepare for a climate disaster. See the two travel itineraries below for a complete list of store types, locations, and planned routes.



Start:	University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, SARUP
Stop A:	Janesville, WI (DG General Goods Dist. Center)
Stop B:	Mahanomen, MN (DG Store on White Earth Reservation)
Stop C:	Des Moines, IA (DGX Store)
Stop D:	Springfield, KY (the 1st DG Store)
Stop E:	Bowling Green, KY (DGFresh Refrigerated Dist. Center)
Stop F:	Barkhamsted, CT (1st DG store staff trying to unionize) ³
Finish:	University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, SARUP



Start:	University of Colorado-Denver, CAP
Stop A:	Anywhere, MT (only state in mainland US without a DG)
Stop B:	Athol, ID (newest DG Store) ⁴
Stop C:	Bloomfield, NM (DG Store adjacent to Navajo Nation)
Stop D:	San Antonio, TX (DGFresh Refrigerated Dist. Center)
Stop E:	Tulsa, OK (DGX Store)
Stop F:	Duncan, OK 1 (DG General Goods Dist. Center)
Finish:	University of Colorado-Denver, CAP

Module 3: PRODUCE / 2 weeks

October 17 - November 3

Working collaboratively across the two universities, students will engage in several fast-paced design charrettes that ask them to synthesize and dissect their findings from the trip, collectively identify patterns, and agree on a method for categorizing and curating the information. They will begin outlining strategies to compile their research into a Dollar General Literacy Foundation-sponsored book that will be made available to consumers in the 17,000+ DG stores nationwide and produce Dollar General Futures - a pair of staged exhibitions by each institution that imagines new climate-responsive futures for the DG Corporation.

Module 4: DISPLAY & DISSEMINATE / 5 weeks

November 4 - December 15

In the final module, students will refine their research document, test its legibility to those outside of academia and the discipline of architecture, and ready it for publication and distribution through the Dollar General Literacy Foundation and the company's stores, as well as finalize their objects and displays for the Dollar General Futures exhibition. The semester will conclude with a cross-country reading and exhibition opening that invites people from all sides of the DG conversation to consider ways that the organization's scope and exponential growth pattern can initiate and propel new climate futures that transcend current financially and geographically defined strategies.

³ Hamilton Nolan, In These Times, "Dollar General Workers Stare Down Historic Union Vote, Vowing 'We're Gonna Fight,'" Oct 12 2021. Source: [LINK](#).

⁴ Dollar General News Center, "Dollar General Announces Planned Expansion to 47th State," Sep 27 2021. Source: [LINK](#).



Fig. B
Lindsey Krug, "DGX Cleveland," Oct 9 2021. Photograph.

5 Dollar General News Center, "Dollar General Unveils Exciting, New and Differentiated Retail Store: Meet pOpshelf!," Oct 8 2020. Source: [LINK](#).

6 Dollar General News Center, "Dollar General Announces New Traditional Distribution Center and DG Fresh Cold Storage Facilities," Aug 5 2020. Source: [LINK](#).

7 Julie Beck, The Atlantic, "More Than Half of What Americans Eat Is Ultra-Processed," March 10, 2016. Source: [LINK](#).

8 USDA Economic Research Service, "Food Access Research Atlas", updated Apr 27 2021. Source: [LINK](#).

9 Marie Donahue, Institute for Local Self-Reliance, "The Impact of Dollar Stores and How Communities Can Fight Back," Dec 6, 2018. Source: [LINK](#).

10 Jessica Goodheart, Newsweek, "David Perdue's Dollar General Was Sued 2,500 Times for Sex, Race, Wage Practices," Dec 30 2020. Accessed via: [LINK](#).

11 Daniel Jackson, Courthouse News Service, "Before Stock Trades, Georgia Senator Faced Scrutiny Over Dollar General Sale," Nov 30 2020. Accessed via: [LINK](#).

CONTEXT: DG AND THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE

What was once a single wholesale store in Springfield, Kentucky, the Dollar General Corporation now operates over 17,000 stores across the country that include its most common retail stores: Dollar General; its midwestern-urban-millennial-oriented stores: DGX; its playful, seasonal, and on-trend stores: pOpshelf!;⁵ its self-checkout stores: FastTrack; and its latest and most potent innovation - stores and distribution centers offering fresh and refrigerated food options: DGFresh.⁶

The well-told story of American food culture - where at least 70% of the food Americans eat is substantially processed and manufactured, rather than simply washed, peeled, cut, and cooked at home - plays a role in this retail shift.⁷ Manufactured foods, including those that move along the cold-chain like luncheon meats, frozen dinners, and countless other refrigerated and frozen foods, are made by mechanically and chemically deconstructing and merging components derived from basic foods and edible non-foods, such as dairy, meats, fats, oils, grains, legumes, minerals, and petrochemicals. Once treated to a vast variety of industrial processes to form food-like material, this food is packaged, sold, and consumed. Most of the food we eat is broken down, in order to be built back up in a more appealing and economical form.

While part of DG's expansion model has long been to move into communities and areas where Walmart and other big-box grocers wouldn't, giving at least one food/retail option to residents of those communities, there is significant debate over whether the rapid proliferation of dollar stores is actually having a net positive impact in regions considered to be food deserts (low-income, low-access areas as defined by the USDA).⁸ DG executives tout the positive impacts their presence can have on a community: one-stop-shop access to a variety of affordable goods, job creation, and investment in literacy programs, but dollar stores have shown to squeeze out other grocers and local retailers which limits resident access to fresh and healthy food, (Fig. B) have a troubling track record of labor force treatment, and actively participate in the dire expansion of monoculture agriculture in America. By strategically maintaining their stores, and as a result, available food options, in the "small-box" category under 10,000 SF, DG is able to avoid more stringent zoning and permitting rules in many municipalities.⁹

Before controversial businessman and politician David Perdue took over as CEO in 2003, DG was debilitated from prior shareholder lawsuits resulting from overstated profits and the \$162 million it owed in settlements. Perdue is credited with overhauling DG's logistics, marketing, and inventory networks during his tenure, doubling its stock value. However, during his four years as CEO, the annual number of employment legal cases rose from an average of 19 under the previous CEO to an average of 625 under Perdue's leadership.¹⁰ After selling Dollar General to a private equity firm in 2007, Perdue faced shareholder lawsuits of his own for underselling shareholders while earning tens of millions himself following the company's change of ownership.¹¹

Under the leadership of DG's two subsequent CEOs, Richard Dreiling and Todd Vasos, the company fought the Mississippi Choctaw tribe all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court (Dollar General v. Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians) over the case of a Dollar General employee sexually assaulting a young Choctaw member during a job-training event.¹² When the child's family sued for damages in Tribal Court, Dollar General insisted that a tribal court cannot assert tort jurisdiction over a non-Indian business on a reservation, arguing against the bodily agency of tribe members in their stores. (Fig. C)



Fig. C (above, left)
Native women rallied on the steps of the U.S. Supreme Court. Source: [Indians.com](#). "Long wait hints at Supreme Court tie in closely-watched tribal jurisdiction case," May 23 2016. Source: [LINK](#).

Fig. D (above, right)
Andreas Gursky, 99 cent, 1999. Chromogenic print.

12 National Congress of American Indians, "U.S. Supreme Court Affirms Tribal Court Jurisdiction in Dollar General v. Mississippi Choctaw," June 23 2016. Accessed via: [LINK](#).



The hold that the dollar-store economy and industry-leader Dollar General has on the American landscape, society, and culture is profound and growing exponentially. Its impacts span far and wide into issues of land use management, food culture, economic health, property assessment, agricultural practices, distribution and supply infrastructures, and the increasing divide among Americans along the lines of race, class, religion, politics, and geography. As the dollar-store empire continues its expansion in both rural and urban communities, it creates an opportunity to establish new forms of climate awareness and action. Paradoxically, DG amplifies the nation's problems and creates spaces for shared discourse around ways to heal the country and unite through its scale and influence. (Fig. D) There's also irony and humor embedded in the role that DG can play to decelerate the climate crisis - while it accelerates environmental decline through monocultures and over-packaged products, it also stocks a panoply of affordable, shelf-stable foods and bug out bag essentials to survive a climate catastrophe.