

The Rise of the Small Box

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It's a cliché hardly worth noting. Big box stores swoop into new territory, push out smaller mom-and-pop stores, creating a homogenous, ubiquitous condition that erases local culture and disrupts economies. While sharing some of these same familiar dynamics, however, the "small box" poses a unique threat to the vibrancy of local communities.

Dollar General is a key example of the small box. Its 7,400 square foot stores are instantiations of an interconnected infrastructure of distribution centers and interstate highways. This system's efficiency allows each Dollar General store to capitalize on its context while thriving with an extreme amount of resiliency in conditions that other businesses and wholesalers find untenable. This allows Dollar General to wield considerable control over the towns and communities it infiltrates, making it a power center packaged in the small box, leveraging a nostalgia for the general store.

This paper synthesizes work from an undergraduate design studio with faculty research that investigates a specific Dollar General location in a dying retail center. The specificity of this context reveals DG's power in overcoming many common limitations of retail development. Utilizing James Corner's ideas on mapping and Fumihiko Maki's concepts of collective form, the work investigates the impacts the small box has on local communities, and imagines how architecture and its discourse on the city can develop productive responses. Architecture can make a unique contribution to understanding how and why this condition occurs and arm future practitioners and researchers with the tools they need to be projectively critical of the ever-changing urban context.

DOLLAR GENERAL AS "TODAY'S GENERAL STORE"

General stores are a distinctly American institution. Historically, the general store was an outpost, making a way for what we call "settlers" or "pioneers." These simple structures provided storefronts where individuals developing new, unoccupied lands could purchase essential materials. The general store was vital to survival and became a de facto center of pioneer life. The general store echoed the struggle faced by a young, expanding nation, expressing a need to work hard and overcome hardships in order to achieve success.

Of course, the reality of the general store's existence was far more complicated than this. A nostalgia for the general store serves the myth of Manifest Destiny as a signifier of the struggle and resiliency of a people seeking a better life, while concealing its true nature. The image below shows a general store from the mid to late 1800's. While it appears to be in the middle of nowhere, it is in reality located on sovereign territory promised to Native Americans. The store was a tool of colonization, since general stores inserted into this condition were not intended to serve those who were already there, but were built in anticipation of those yet to arrive. They packed all the resources needed to transform a territory into a town, all within an easily constructed small box. The general store became the center or starting point of towns and cities, an outpost meant to supplant existing conditions while paving the way for the development of a new network of cities.

Dollar General (DG) calls itself "today's general store." Its simple configuration, the small box, offers a wide variety of "essential" products that support everyday life. However, the disarming nature of the prevalent nostalgia for the general store tends to conceal this small box's unique threat to the vibrancy of local communities. Like the general store, it operates similarly in the contexts it inserts itself into, with a very telling difference: it is not the progenitor of new development, except that of its own. In many ways, this is no different from the cliché of big box retail: pushing out smaller mom-and-pop stores and creating a homogenous, ubiquitous condition that erases local culture and disrupts economies. Dollar General is able to accomplish the same feat as its big box counterparts through a smaller footprint and a brand image that imbues it with an unassuming character. This characteristic is crucial to Dollar General's success.

This paper will focus on exposing DG as an unassuming power center, which dramatically affects contemporary communities, and considers the role that architecture as a discipline can play in the face of its influence. The following discussion synthesizes work from a second-year undergraduate design studio at Oklahoma State University (OSU) with research of the three faculty members leading the studio.

DOLLAR GENERAL AS UNASSUMING POWER CENTER

From a disciplinary perspective, Dollar General is an easy target. Its aesthetics are easily dismissed, its blandness and lack

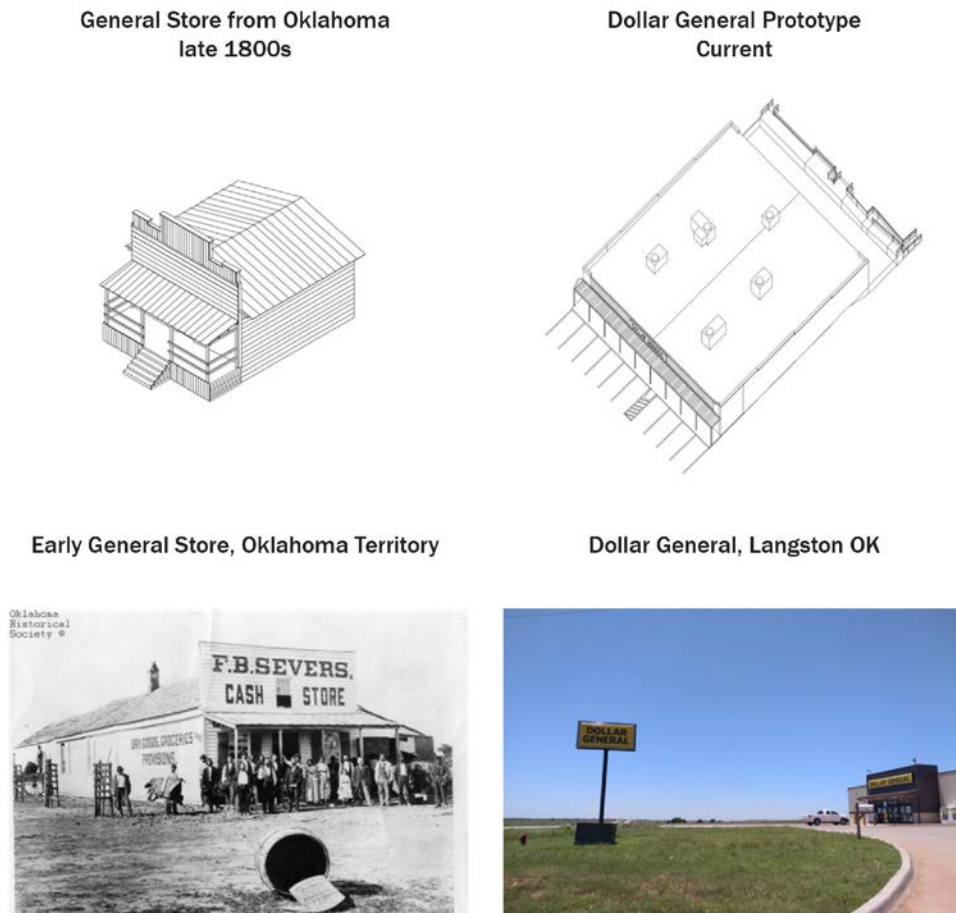


Figure 1. Dollar General calls itself “today’s general store.” Images provided by authors.

of character clearly not within many definitions of architecture worth paying attention to. Yet its surface effects and modest nature conceal its true agenda. Currently numbering over 17,000 stores,¹ Dollar General is extremely disruptive to local economies, both rural and urban. Local grocers, unable to buy from wholesalers, simply cannot compete with DG’s prices and their sales typically drop 30% after DG opens.² DG’s small stores allow it to be nimble in a way that big boxes cannot. At an average size of 7,400SF, the small box can slip through zoning and regulatory approvals easily.³ Many jurisdictions, desperate for any investment, welcome DG into their community.⁴

Despite conveying an image of making valuable resources available to a community, DG’s model is fundamentally extractive and extremely effective. Although it purportedly offers significant benefits for consumers, there is growing evidence that these stores actually contribute to economic distress, often disproportionately affecting low-income Black communities.⁵ Its sales are driven by tricking consumers into thinking they are saving money through offering lower overall prices at a higher unit cost.⁶ It locates itself in areas where people cannot easily leave the neighborhood to buy what they need, either through distance in rural areas or due to lack of transportation

options in urban ones.⁷ Forcing out its competition, DG creates and perpetuates food deserts by limiting its offerings to frozen and packaged foods.⁸ Fresh vegetables, fruit, or meat are almost non-existent, even in rural communities actually producing this food.⁹ To operate its stores, DG uses a lean labor model that exploits salaried managers, limiting its labor force to 8-9 staff versus 14 for a small, independent grocery store.¹⁰ Especially in urban areas, the short-staffed store then creates an environment where violent crime can proliferate. The stores notoriously have poorly-placed cameras, limited staffing, and high staff turnover.¹¹ Dollar General is able to capitalize on its context in these extreme ways while thriving with an extreme amount of resiliency in urban conditions that other businesses and wholesalers find untenable. This allows Dollar General to wield considerable control over the towns and communities it infiltrates, making it a power center packaged in the small box as an unassuming general store.

DOLLAR GENERAL’S EXPLOITATION OF CIMARRON PLAZA

This strategic model is effective for Dollar General, but harmful for the communities in which it flourishes. Since DG’s threat to a community’s resiliency may not be immediately apparent, it is

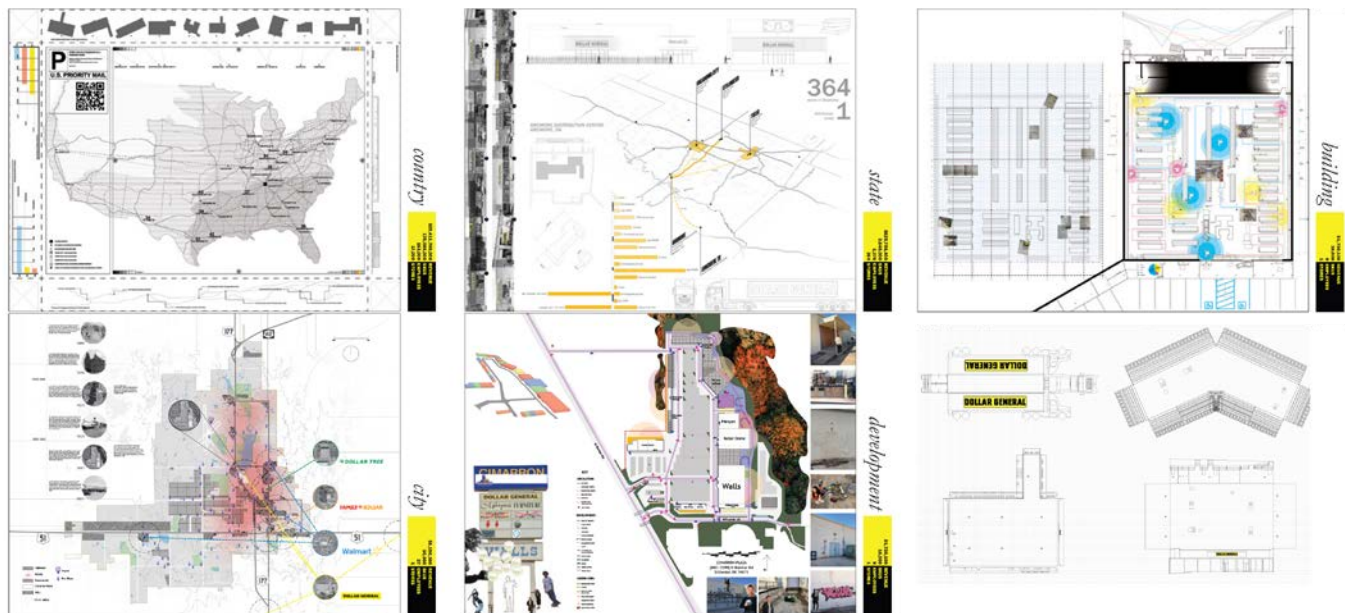


Figure 2. Student mappings of Dollar General at different scales. Drawings by Hank Traxel, Jesus Gutierrez, Will Hentges, Maiten Rodriguez, Kristie Ward, Olivia Morgan, Christian Rosas-Hamilton, Lojen Alsaman, Ally Burchett, Juan Flores, Brock Orf, Kimora Sengkhavilay, Chesney Barfield, Cas Cluck, Hannah Knam, and Liam Vennerholm.

helpful to understand how DG works. In the design studio led by professors Keith Peiffer, Seung Ra, and Jared Macken, conducted during the spring 2021 semester, students explored one instantiation of Dollar General in Cimarron Plaza in Stillwater, OK. The specificity of this context reveals DG's power in overcoming many common limitations of retail development.

While dollar stores are ubiquitous and commonplace in the United States, their familiarity masks the complexity and sophistication of the networks that make them possible. Headquartered in Goodlettsville, Tennessee, Dollar General is composed of thousands of sites strategically located throughout the United States. To understand Dollar General in Cimarron Plaza, we need to look beyond the single store to consider how it fits within this much larger system.

One section of the studio mapped and visualized DG's infrastructure at different scales:

- Country (USA)
- State (Oklahoma)
- City (Stillwater)
- Development (Cimarron Plaza)
- Building (1608 Cimarron Plaza)

At the national scale, DG has orchestrated a sophisticated infrastructure of distribution centers, interstate highways, and local stores strategically placed across the country and optimized for efficiency. This massive scale allows DG to have significant buying power, resulting in lower prices and product offerings that local chains simply cannot compete with.¹² DG has significant

influence by leveraging available public infrastructure with its own strategic insertions, but ultimately, its activity is inherently focused on its own growth and well-being. Capital is invested in distribution centers and local stores that serve the small box and its continued proliferation, not the local community and its sense of collective prosperity.

Within Oklahoma, DG is aggressively expanding in small towns throughout the state, bolstered by the expansion of its existing distribution center in Ardmore.¹³ Its weak attempts at community investment¹⁴ are far outweighed by its negative effects on local communities. In fact, community activists in Tulsa have fought new dollar stores from adding to the over 50 existing dollar stores in the city.¹⁵

Surprisingly, in the small college town of Stillwater (25,000 residents + approximately 20,000 students), there are *seven* dollar stores: five Dollar Generals (in fact, one was completed since the studio's work in spring 2021), as well as competitors Dollar Tree and Family Dollar.

The fact that DG can thrive in Cimarron Plaza in Stillwater is perhaps most striking. Built in 1978, Cimarron Plaza was a strategic development intended to keep shoppers from leaving Stillwater for larger metro centers like Tulsa and Oklahoma City.¹⁶ Its spaces were originally leased to both local and corporately owned stores alike, but its success waned as new developments that favored only larger big box stores and chain restaurants were developed along major thoroughfares, a condition as ubiquitous in small towns as Dollar General. The 32-acre development has

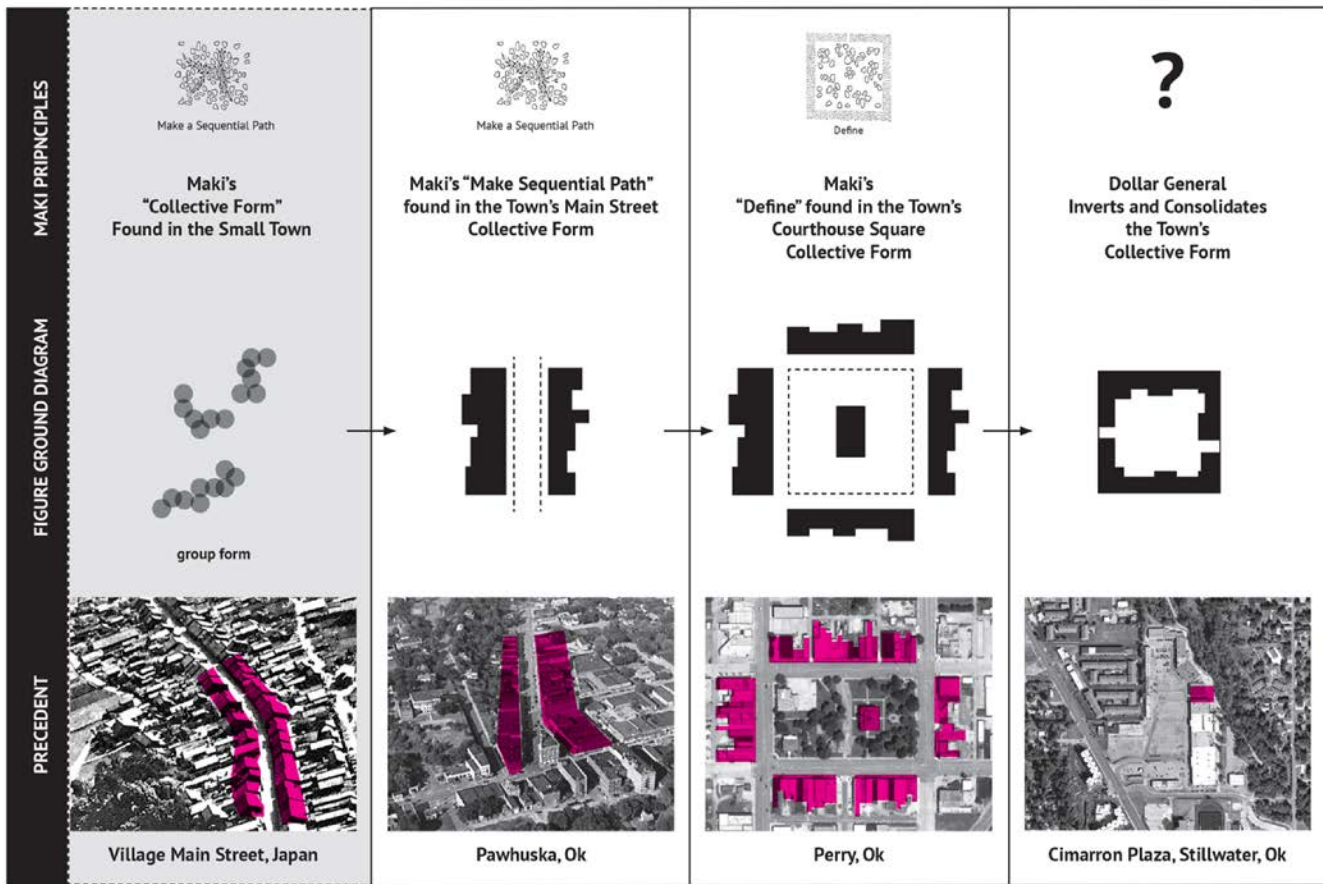


Figure 3. Dollar General's inversion of Fumihiko Maki's idea of the town's collective form. Image by Jared Macken.

been in limbo and awaiting further investment since Stillwater Public Schools purchased the site in 2012. Despite supporting the local community for a couple decades, many of Cimarron Plaza's retail spaces are now empty. The development no longer meets the criteria for even Class C commercial properties as it is over 20 years old, lacks a desirable location, and requires significant maintenance. Current tenants are few and far between, and upgrades to the development are kept to the bare minimum given the site's interim use. Despite rock-bottom leasing rates, few retailers can survive in this dismal context. Turnover is common and traffic through the site is limited.

Yet, DG thrives in this location due to its distributed infrastructure as one of 17,000 other stores. Using a prototype nimble enough to adjust to the unique context of each location, the tenant fit-out itself was kept to the bare minimum, with the racks, shelves, and signage establishing brand identity and consistency. This ethos is rendered physically in the finishes; the space has fields of VCT, painted drywall, and acoustical panel ceilings that bear no overarching organizational logic other than being remnants of past tenants and uses.

DOLLAR GENERAL'S INVERSION OF THE MAIN STREET

Part of the reason DG is able to survive is its ability to interiorize all the elements of a typical main street, without needing to maintain a relationship with other businesses or entities. Typically, a town or city is composed of multiple structures that connect and link together to form larger wholes. Architecture then plays a role in shaping and connecting these structures together, creating various spaces that support human interaction and collectivity and form the cultural vibrancy of the city. Architect and theorist Fumihiko Maki, in his book *Investigations Into Collective Form*, implored architects to understand and consider how their projects relate to the collective nature of the city. Maki states that "the theory of architecture has evolved through one issue as to how one can create perfect single buildings whatever they are," but argues that architects need to "investigate the nature of 'Collective Form,'" which he describes as the formal language of the city.¹⁷ He goes on to say:

Collective form represents groups of buildings and quasi-buildings—the segment of our cities. Collective form is, however, not a collection of unrelated, separate buildings, but of buildings that have reasons to be together.¹⁸

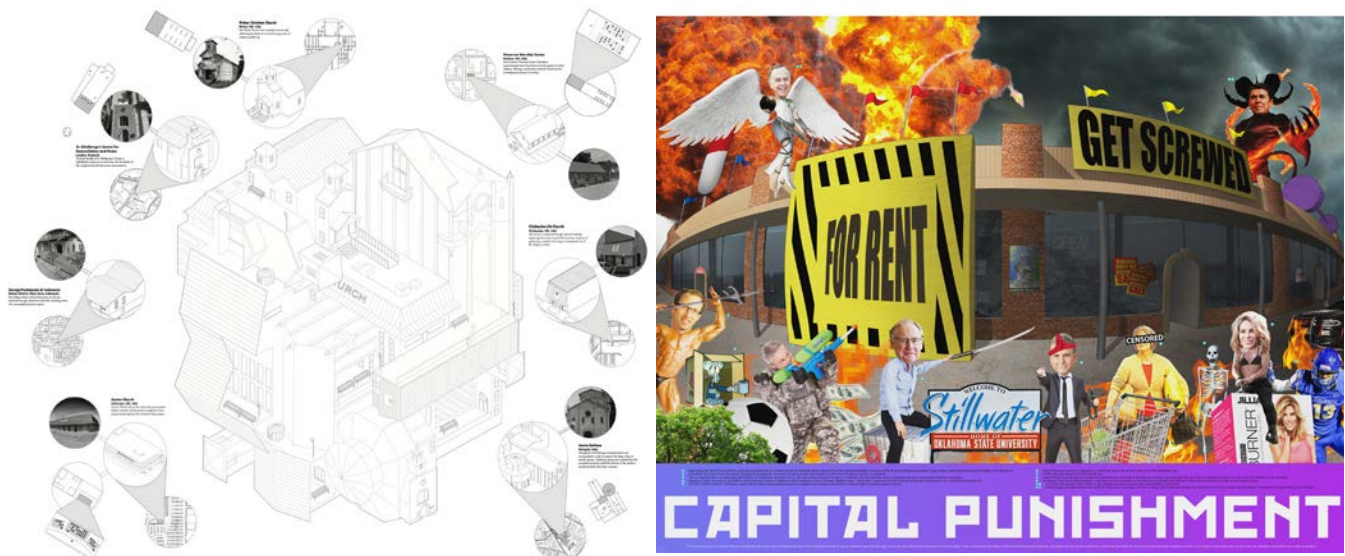


Figure 4. “Mapping” exercises investigating the architectural characters and power structures of Cimarron Plaza. Drawings by Jordon McVicker, Logan Stites, Carson Voelker (left) and Beau Henneha, Jordan Hill, Aaron Wagnitz (right).

Maki is not only thinking about how individual instances of architecture can contribute to the city, but how the discipline can adapt a new typology from the city’s interconnected form. The city seen through the lens of collective form is a vast interconnected structure of individual buildings cohering into a new whole.

Cimarron Plaza, despite being identified as a strip mall typology, still exhibits Maki’s principles of collective form through essentially concentrating the entities of a traditional main street into a single development. While collective form allows each structure to be important, it does so by unifying them with connections like sidewalks, plazas, and aligned flat storefronts, as seen in Cimarron Plaza. DG in contrast consolidates the multiple elements from the collective form of the city into one small box store, supported from its vast infrastructure of components dispersed across the United States. The small box then is an individual structure with an interior that allows shoppers to conflate what would normally be a trip to different stores connected by public infrastructural spaces—sidewalks, plazas, etc.—into a single location. In a sense, Dollar General inverts the whole street into its small box. It does not need the other elements of the city’s collective form and therefore does not need a successfully leased and vibrant Cimarron Plaza to exist; it thrives because its insular approach toward collective form frees it from a reliance on its context. The unfortunate corollary is that DG’s individualistic interiorization does little to contribute to Cimarron Plaza’s prosperity.

This inversion even occurs in DG’s interior finishes. What DG does programmatically and culturally (which is reductive in the context of the cities and towns it inserts itself into), it mirrors with its material logic. In its current prototype, the dark

brown corrugated metal panels used as exterior wall cladding are brought into the store interior, as the city is inverted into the small box. Dollar General’s model for collective form only extends as far as the different shopping sections within its own store. All of the different wall-mounted displays are unified by the metal cladding, creating small-scale vestiges of storefronts: one bay sells food items, the next pots and pans, the one adjacent tools and antifreeze for fixing your car, and hanging nearby is a display of t-shirts. What was once a grocery store, kitchen appliance and supply store, auto shop, and clothing store is encapsulated in the small box.

DOLLAR GENERAL ALTERNATIVES

By subverting traditional notions of collective form, DG restructures communities through the small box, which it controls towards its own ends. The resulting threat to local communities is clear and the business model seems almost unstoppable. So how can architecture engage the immense scale of the problem, seeking to instead serve a community’s collective interests, to actually have impact?

As a profession, architects could critique DG’s “ugly” aesthetics, decry its bad urbanism, or simply ignore it. Yet its stores are no less intentional or designed than other buildings. Or professionals could advocate for locally-based design guidelines that require DG to modify its stores’ exterior enclosure design and materials to be more contextual. Grassroots efforts to design a better store, more contextual and community-based, while interesting on a local level, are completely insufficient to address the vastness of the issues at hand. Such a store is highly unlikely to offer any real competition to Dollar General’s business model, as it generally appeals to a different market of shoppers with a different set of values.

Maybe more promising is to join Cimarron Plaza's neighbors in Tulsa (a nearby city) in protesting future construction of DGs in a community. As architects, we can provide important perspective on the information and context needed to educate local communities about the negative impact of the small box. A specific tactic would be to utilize Urban Network Analysis (UNA), a platform to consider the dynamic relationship of urban form and its organization. UNA looks at the spatial applications of computation and data analysis to expand the spectrum of architectural research and visualize the overlapping aspects of daily life and their interaction within towns and cities. This emerging technology enhances feasible planning strategies and activates social connectivity, empowering local jurisdictions to make data-driven decisions about future development.

While these may be promising options for the discipline to intervene within this phenomenon, as educators, we were most concerned with specifically how a second-year undergraduate design studio can engage this context productively. Within OSU's curriculum, this second-year studio features a series of individual projects focused on the following general categories: SITE, SPACE, SKIN/STRUCTURE, and SYNTHESIS. Using the curricular structure as a framework, we created a series of projects that collectively explored the potential for architecture to produce a critical project through multiple formats.

The first project interrogated the SITE through mapping. Drawing from James Corner's seminal work on mapping, this project sought to move beyond what is a seemingly known condition to uncover the site's lesser known characteristics and visualize it in new ways. While one section used mapping exercises to identify the infrastructure of DG as previously discussed, another section considered Cimarron Plaza as a collection of architectural "characters," connecting the prototypical American plaza strip mall to the larger historical context of the city. This section investigated the typological forms, programmatic uses, and connections created by and between the architectural characters that inhabit Cimarron Plaza, considering how individual structures aggregate into larger collectives in the city. By viewing the fragmented nature of Cimarron Plaza through these distinct characters and how they have historically connected to other parts of the city, this section explored the very nature of collective form that provides resistance to DG's attempt to usurp them.

A third section considered the power structures at the local and global level and illustrated how cities are shaped by forms of collectivity, politics, culture, economic, and social impact. Powerful institutional systems result in uneven development, social inequality, and other disparities that implement and perpetuate discriminatory and extractive practices. Through its very decline, Cimarron Plaza is indexical of these forces, with the mappings making the materialization of power structures even more explicit.

As James Corner suggests in "The Agency of Mapping," the act of mapping requires the making of judgments in choosing what is shown and the level and nature of abstraction used. "Both maps and territories are 'thoroughly mediated products' and the nature of their exchange is far from neutral or uncomplicated."¹⁹ In this regard, the mapping exercises enacted each professor's research and teaching models and sought to strategically expose "hidden forces"²⁰ acting within the site and suggest potential alternative projective outcomes. The subsequent projects within the studio emerged from the collective mapping of the three sections.

The second project, focused on SPACE, emerged out of the collective mapping procedure of project one and sought to reorient Dollar General's infrastructure and the broader power structures manifested in Cimarron Plaza. The design prompt subverted the model of DG by placing value on cultural production—or art space—instead of economic value. A prime portion of the storefront of the store was selected for an intervention focused on a single item currently sold within the store. A productive dissonance was palpable as students recognized very early on that this "inefficiency" and excess did not align with DG's business model. The project especially shifted the internalistic valuation of DG through focusing on a single object; these projects were not concerned with selling the product as much as understanding the product's role in the larger context of the city and culture. In this current context of late-stage capitalism, this project offered refreshing images of possibilities that could emerge outside of precisely calibrated development driven by profits.

SKIN AND STRUCTURE, the third project, explored this idea of cultural space further, by creating a proposal for one of two characters identified during the mapping exercise that have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic: the Church and the Café. Seizing on emptiness as opportunity, the vast, underutilized parking lot of Cimarron Plaza provided ample space for the addition of new program areas to support these characters' needs. The project site included the facade of the existing building and the parking area in front of the building. The result was a timely response to current events directly informed by the students' emerging understanding of Cimarron Plaza as a site. The schemes critiqued the existing DG condition by purposefully thinking about how these two structures could literally reach out toward each other, creating links across the deserted parking lot. The strategic insertion of an open-air enclosure capitalized on the potential for collective form to reconfigure the isolated nature of the current mostly-vacant development, and explore how power could be redistributed through moments of collectivity.

Through the mapping exercises, it was clear that Cimarron Plaza offered an exciting opportunity for a temporary installation. The students' representations and speculative design work were then exhibited in Cimarron Plaza using the empty storefronts. The exhibition was itself an intervention within this condition; a temporal occupation of the site, it marked a new but equally

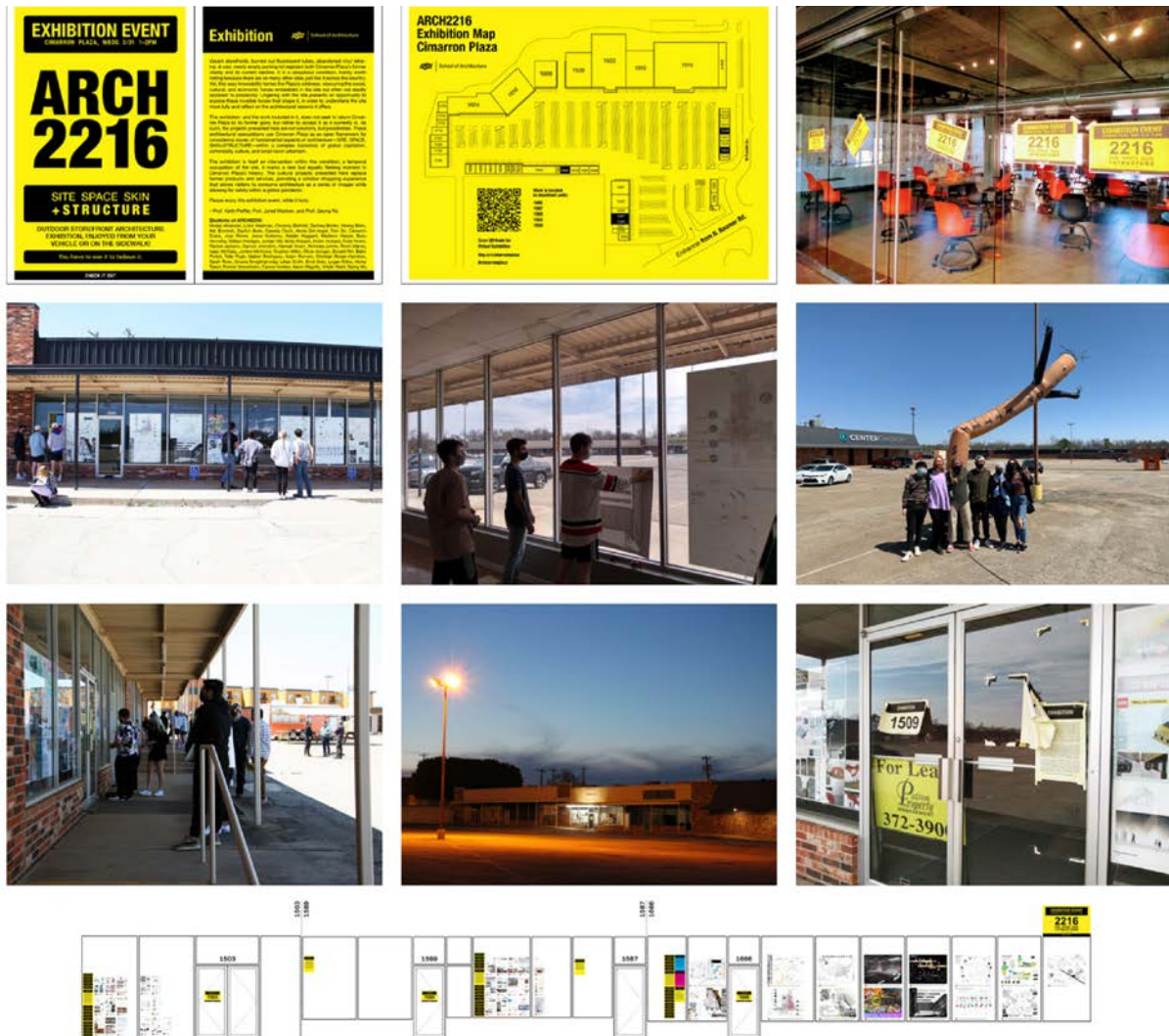


Figure 5. Activism, architectural representation, and speculation subvert the shopping plaza. Images provided by the authors.

fleeting moment in Cimarron Plaza’s history. It harkened back to the site’s collectivity by making connections across different storefront windows, utilizing the sidewalks that once provided access from one locally owned business to the next. The cultural projects presented there replaced former products and services, providing a window shopping experience that allowed visitors to consume architecture as a series of images while allowing for safety within a global pandemic.

The exhibition activated the site through an event that mimicked the unassuming qualities so impactfully utilized by DG, but again subverted it by allowing the critical projects of the studio to be the emphasis. The exhibition took the medium of activism, the modes of architectural representation, and empty storefronts surrounding DG, to create a dialogue initiated by the studio. The exhibition was unassuming, yet provided critique of the reductive inversion of the city found in DG by actually creating only cultural interactions within the vacant storefronts surrounding DG.

CONCLUSION

While the threat of the small box is significant, we can remain optimistic about the unique contribution the discipline can make in supporting activism, creating representations of complex realities, and speculating about alternatives. The truth remains that in many cases the Dollar General is the only retail store that some small towns or city neighborhoods have, and architecture can make a unique contribution to understanding how and why this condition occurs. Architecturally and urbanistically, Dollar General holds significant power, exerting its influence in a number of crucial ways, all of which dramatically impacts the cultural landscape. An analysis of this condition allows the discipline to address the notion of architecture’s role in the city, but also how future practitioners and researchers in the field can be armed with the tools they need to be projectively critical of the ever-changing urban context.

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