

99 cents

& Up

& Up



City 99 Cents, Bedford-Stuyvesant

Source: Google Map

Introduction

Exploring 99 cents stores came from a place of curiosity. As a newly-ish formed design collaborative, we wanted to explore the possibility of inquiry-based art that let us step outside of our traditional urbanist professions and tap into storytelling. The idea of exploring 99 cents stores came after many conversations and walks. While we both had spent time in 99 cents stores (Daphne having grown up in central Brooklyn with a high concentration of discount stores and Gloria in and out of dollar stores in suburban California), what we knew about them was limited to what we were taught in graduate school and what we had seen in the news: they're concentrated in low-income Black and brown neighborhoods, they're not "desirable" uses, and they're popping up everywhere around the country. In taking on this project, it was an opportunity to complicate the story of a kind of place we never fully understood.

In New York City there are approximately 1,359 dollar stores. That's more locations than Duane Reade (250), Dunkin' Donuts (619), Starbucks (310), and McDonald's (191) combined¹. For a business that's so omnipresent, the landscape of 99 cents stores isn't really understood. In putting together "99 cents & Up & Up", we wanted to demystify these places - how they function and what they mean. In this booklet, you'll find some of our research, methodology, and ponderings about 99 cents stores, aka, our attempt to make sense of 99 cents. We hope this booklet encourages you to look at 99 cents stores and other ubiquitous places in a new light. This zine is the first part of a deeper dive into these spaces and future inquiry-based artwork.

How did we get so many 99 cents stores?

There are a couple of things that make 99 cents stores, 99 cents stores. They carry a variety of products, they tend to have a smaller footprint than big box stores which make it possible to open them basically anywhere (zoning permitting), and they carry seemingly affordable goods. In reviewing these criteria, one can go way back to the 1800s/1900s to see the ancestor of dollar stores: the variety and general store². With the colonial expansion of the United States, there were now new communities in areas with limited access to retail stores. The general store became a one-stop-shop where someone in a rural town could buy food goods and key appliances at the same place. Over time as these small towns grew, general stores made way for department stores and other types of retail.

The Great Depression created the kind of financial precarity that was ripe for a new retail model. Dollar General™, one of the largest and most profitable discount chains in the US (\$33B in sales in FY 2020, over 17K stores in 46 states)³, and credited as the original creator of the dollar store concept, originated in 1939. Struggling retailers and manufacturers were looking for opportunities to off-load merchandise at steep discounts. J.L. Turner and Son, a wholesale and retail business in Scottsville, Kentucky, purchased steeply discounted inventory that was then sold to customers at low prices. Eventually, this became the dollar store model with inventory sold at or below a dollar⁴. Many of the nation's dollar store chains originated in the south because of the business model created by J.L. Turner and Son. Family Dollar started in North Carolina, Dollar Tree in Virginia, and Fred's in Mississippi. What started as regional retail stores has expanded into the fastest-growing retailer in the country⁴. Seventy-five percent of Americans now live within 5 miles of a Dollar General⁵. Much like the economic precarity of the Great Depression, the Great Recession, the subprime mortgage crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic, all events of which disproportionately impacted and continue to impact Black and brown communities because of racist policies, laid the groundwork for the massive expansion in discount stores we see today.

New York City's 99 cents landscape

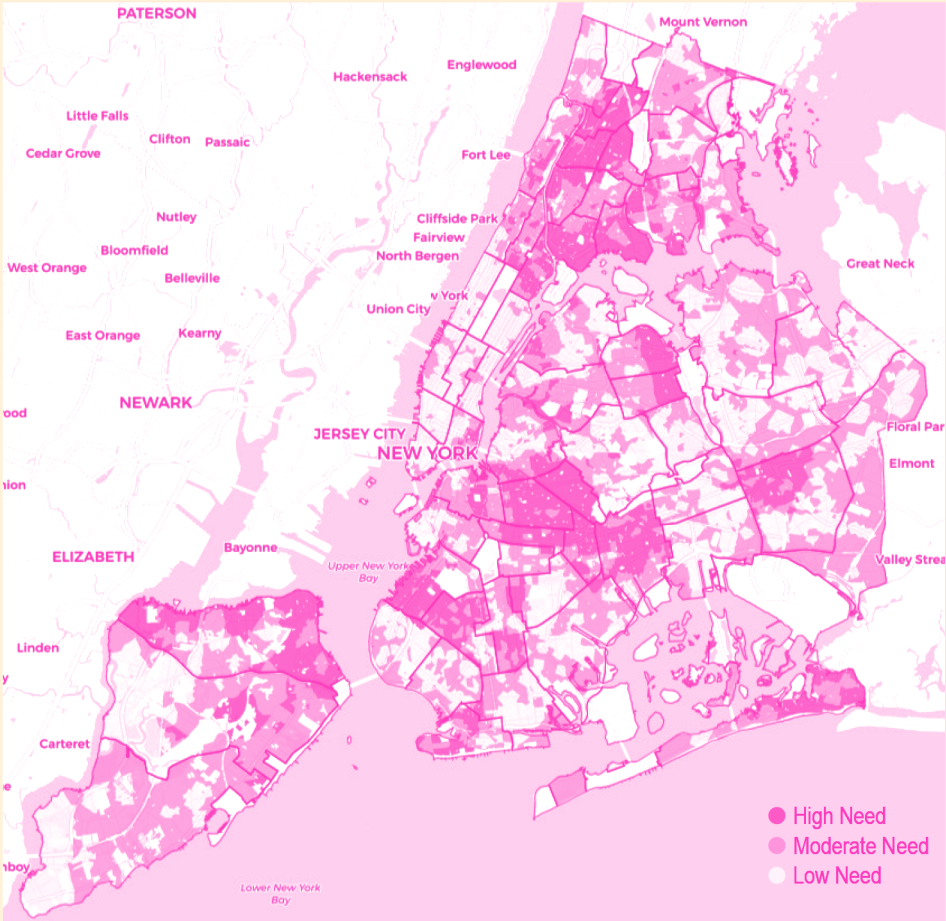
Finding and mapping 99 cents stores is a tricky endeavor. Outside of the major chains, 99 cents stores have a variety of naming conventions that make it hard to put together a definitive list through a simple google search. After doing an analysis of North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) industry codes for dollar stores and using a business search platform, the universe of 99 cents in New York City was whittled down to roughly 1,359 businesses. While the national landscape of dollar stores is overwhelmingly made up of chain stores, the landscape in NYC is largely made up of small businesses. 87% of dollar stores are privately owned, mostly mom-and-pop stores with the remaining 13% falling under one of the major dollar store chains: Family Dollar, Dollar General, Dollar Tree, or Five Below. There are 17 Neighborhood Tabulation Areas (NTAs) in the city that have 20 or more 99 cents stores: Bay Ridge, Flatbush, Melrose, Bushwick (West), Jamaica, Borough Park, Brownsville, Ridgewood, Crown Heights (North), Mott Haven-Port Morris, South Ozone Park, Bensonhurst, Mount Hope, East Flatbush-Erasmus, Flushing-Willets Point, Longwood, and Jackson Heights. Of the 17 NTAs, 15 are majority Black, Latinx, or Asian. Many of these

same neighborhoods are also rated as having high or moderate supermarket needs. Nationwide dollar stores are now beginning to carry food items that speak to the fact they're disproportionately located in food deserts/swamps. In 2021, the retail food industry magazine, Progressive Grocer, named Dollar General the retailer of the year. That year 77 percent of Dollar General's business was in food goods⁶.



99 Cents Store Locations
Source: Reference Solutions USA

While chain dollar stores have set layouts and merchandise, mom-and-pop stores tend to have more variety. Given the racial/ethnic diversity of 99 cents business owners and the neighborhoods that their stores are located in, owners can curate the items they stock. Not only to meet the needs of the communities they come from, but the communities they've opened in⁷. A dollar store in Sunset Park might carry Asian-style slippers and cookware, while a dollar store in central Brooklyn might carry eco hair-styling gel and coconut milk. While all these choices boil down to wholesale purchases, they also speak to decision-making around community needs and desires.



NYC Supermarket Needs Index 2018
 Source: NYC Department of City Planning



 Privately Owned

 Dollar Tree

 Five Bellow

 Dollar General

 Family Dollar

99 Cents Store by Owners

Source: Our World in Data

Where do 99 cents store products come from?

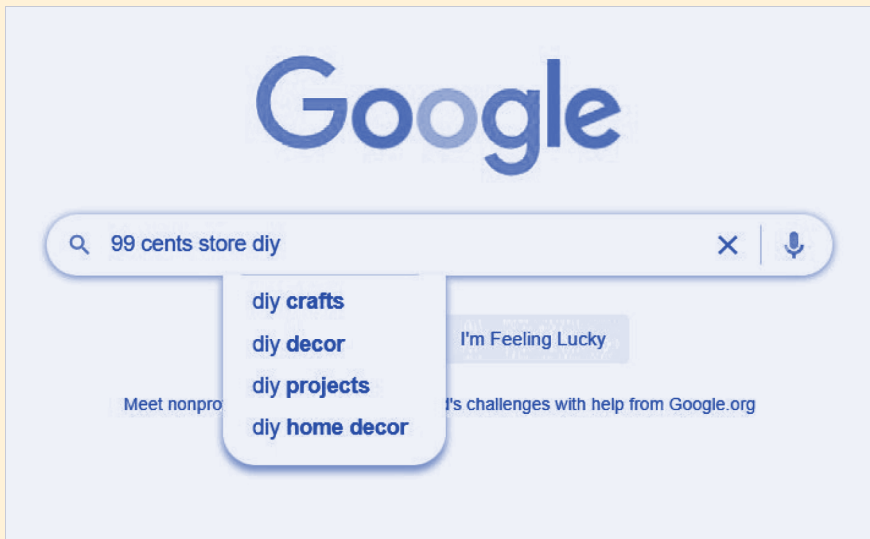
Behind the vast array of 99 cents stores is a network of wholesale companies that serve as their suppliers. 99 cents store owners usually buy inventory in bulk and sell them at a high margin. There isn't a central database of wholesalers catering to 99 cents stores. Data regarding wholesale companies within the five boroughs isn't easily available and is also difficult to categorize by product types. But from listicles found in Yellowpages and Google searches, one can start to piece together the supply chain behind these stores. With names such as "88 Import Inc." and "Price Master Corporation", they provide the bulk sale of merchandise from homegoods, games, electronics, hardware, and vitamins. They are located in neighborhoods with higher concentrations of wholesale companies such as Sunset Park, Long Island City, and Maspeth. A number of wholesalers across the country have websites and one can easily navigate through a myriad of products from brand name items to generic ones, originating domestically and internationally.



99 cents homemaking

While the existence and density of 99 cents stores across the country is emblematic of economic systems that fail low-income communities, these stores have also become sites of creativity. If you Google “99 cents diy” videos, you’ll find almost 7 million videos of people transforming regular 99 cents products into new things. Words like “decor”, “glam”, “aesthetic” and “makeover” are sprinkled throughout the results. In many ways, the price point of 99 cents stores make fields like interior design, landscaping, and home improvement more broadly accessible to more people.

These stores also function as a weird amalgamation of many retail types that have experienced rapid decline or that never existed in certain communities to begin with: the hardware store, the hobby/craft store, and the grocery store. While the pandemic caused a surge in hardware store sales, much of that growth has since stalled⁸. Craft stores, including major chains like Michaels and Joann’s, face stiff competition with companies like Amazon that make it easier to buy craft supplies online⁹. In this retail dynamic, dollar stores have filled in the gap, carrying everything from hammers and electrical tape to sewing thread and popsicle sticks.



How are communities/cities responding to the increase in dollar stores?

“Essentially what the dollar stores are betting on in a large way is that we are going to have a permanent underclass in America”
-Garrick Brown, Cushman & Wakefield quoted in Bloomberg Businessweek in 2017 article *Dollar General Hits a Gold Mine in Rural America*

Even with all of the creativity and businesses ownership opportunities that 99 cents stores provide, the rapid expansion of major dollar store chains and the predation on low-income communities is undeniable. So much so that municipalities have begun to organize against them. North Tulsa Oklahoma, once home to “Black Wall Street” a thriving Black community that was destroyed by white mobs in the 1921 Tulsa Race massacre, had no full-service supermarkets until 2021. Instead, it had more than 50 Dollar Generals, Family Dollars, and Dollar Trees¹⁰. In response to the growing concentration of dollar stores, in 2018 the City Council passed one of the first ordinances in the county that limit new dollar stores from opening in north Tulsa. The ordinance also included provisions to encourage the development of new grocery stores¹⁰.



Dollar General, North Tulsa, Oklahoma

Source: Google Map

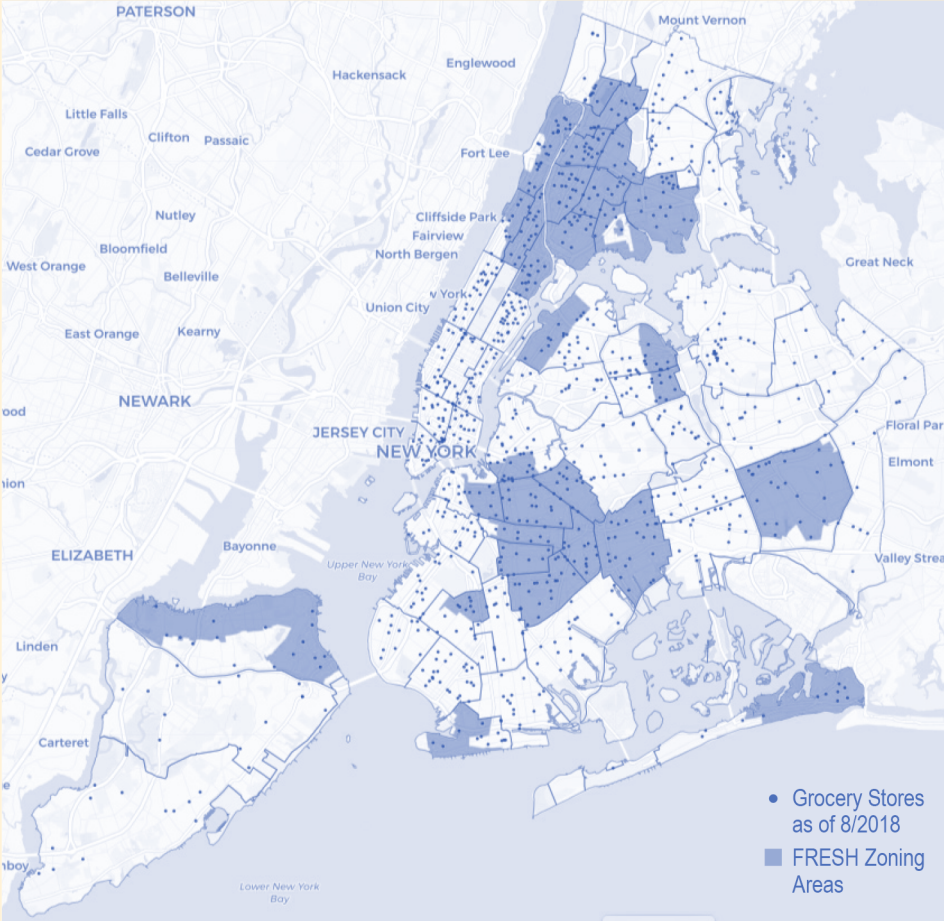
(Published in the Tulsa World

April 21, 2018.)

ORDINANCE NO. 23904

AN ORDINANCE AMENDING THE TULSA ZONING CODE, TITLE 42 TULSA REVISED ORDINANCES (HEREINAFTER "TITLE 42"), BY AMENDING **CHAPTER 20, OVERLAY DISTRICTS**, TO ADD SECTION 20.060 ESTABLISHING A NEW OVERLAY ZONING DISTRICT TITLED "HEALTHY NEIGHBORHOODS OVERLAY", DESIGNATED BY THE ABBREVIATION "HNO", ESTABLISHING PROVISIONS RELATED TO PURPOSE AND INTENT AND APPLICABILITY OF THE OVERLAY DISTRICT, ESTABLISHING REGULATIONS PERTAINING TO SMALL BOX DISCOUNT STORES AND COMMUNITY GARDENS WITHIN THE OVERLAY DISTRICT, ESTABLISHING REQUIRED OFF-STREET PARKING FOR GROCERY STORES LOCATED WITHIN THE OVERLAY DISTRICT, AND PROVIDING FOR EXEMPTIONS AND NONCONFORMITIES; AMENDING **CHAPTER 35, BUILDING TYPES AND USE CATEGORIES**, TO AMEND SECTION 35.050-L1, CONVENIENCE GOODS, AND SECTION 35.050-L2, CONSUMER SHOPPING GOODS, ADDING SECTION 35.050-L4, TITLED "SMALL BOX DISCOUNT STORE", AND ADDING SECTION 35.050-L5, TITLED "GROCERY STORE"; AMENDING **CHAPTER 10, MIXED-USE DISTRICTS**, TO AMEND SECTION 10.020, TABLE 10-2, MX DISTRICT USE REGULATIONS AND TO AMEND SECTION 10.020-G TO ADD TABLE NOTE [2]; AMENDING **CHAPTER 15, OFFICE, COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL DISTRICTS**, TO AMEND SECTION 15.020, TABLE 15-2, O, C AND I DISTRICT USE REGULATIONS, AND TO AMEND SECTION 15.020-G TO ADD TABLE NOTE [6]; AMENDING **CHAPTER 25, SPECIAL DISTRICTS**, TO AMEND SECTION 25.060-B, TABLE 25-7, IMX DISTRICT USE REGULATIONS, AND TO AMEND SECTION 25.060-B3 TO ADD TABLE NOTE [5]; AMENDING **CHAPTER 55, PARKING**, TO AMEND TABLE 55-1, MINIMUM MOTOR VEHICLE PARKING RATIOS, TO ESTABLISH OFF-STREET PARKING REQUIREMENTS FOR SMALL BOX DISCOUNT STORES AND GROCERY STORES; REPEALING ALL ORDINANCES OR PARTS OF ORDINANCES IN CONFLICT HERewith; AND DECLARING AN EMERGENCY.

Nationwide there are now at least 26 municipalities that have passed restrictions or full-bans of dollar stores. Locally in NYC, the Department of City Planning recently updated and expanded the Food Retail Expansion to Support Health Program (FRESH) program which was created in 2009 to incentivize new grocery stores in communities that have limited access to fresh foods.



NYC FRESH Zoning Areas
Source: NYC Department of City Planning



Municipalities with Dollar Store Restrictions

Source: Institute for Local Self-Reliance

Conclusions

What's clear after going down a dollar store rabbit hole is that the dollar store exists in a very complicated plane. Their existence is the perfect representation of forces that prey on economic instability and racial inequality. Their existence also creates portals for home-making, creativity, and in some cases, business ownership for the very same communities that are being preyed upon. We leave this phase of our project with some answers, but we are also left with new questions about what these places mean and what that meaning might become over time.

Citations List

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Dollar Tower, Inwood

Source: Google Map

Laudi CoLab is an arts-based design practice founded by Gloria Lau and Daphne Ludi. Central to Laudi CoLab's mission is amplifying community stories in the built environment that have been erased or undervalued and pushing the boundaries of what mediums are possible for storytelling. Gloria is a landscape architect, urban planner, and visual artist, who merges art and archival research to explore the interplay of urban and natural landscape and the interlinks between spatial systems, culture, and identity. Daphne is an urban planner, policymaker, and self-taught garment maker interested in clothing construction and textile manipulation. She is fascinated by the science-fiction of city-making and the use of games and art to make urban planning accessible to young people. If you'd like to learn more about Laudi CoLab or reach out about potential collaborations, visit www.laudicolab.com to learn more.