

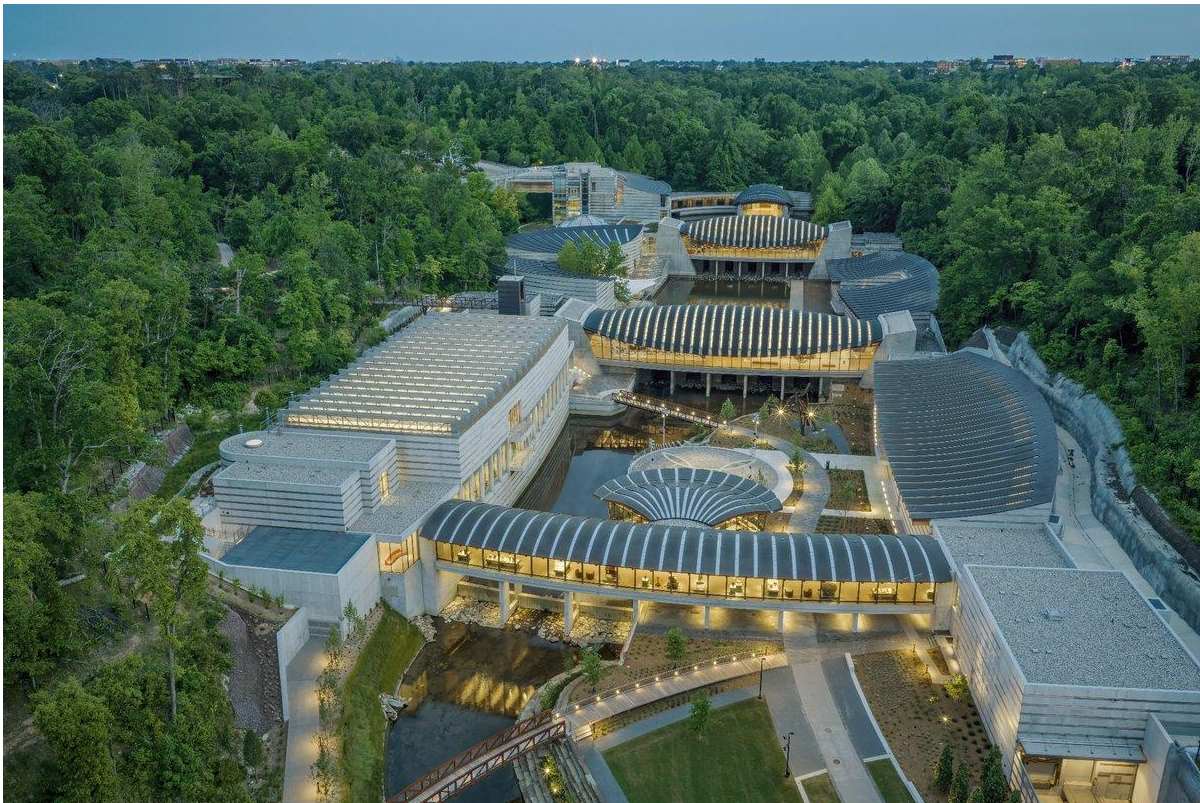


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Inside the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art's major expansion

The Arkansas museum now has 50% more space for its ever-expanding collection and art-and-wellness programming

Scarlet Cheng



Aerial view of the newly expanded Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas© Tim Hursley, courtesy Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

The [Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art](#) is the centrepiece of a 134-acre campus in the small town of Bentonville, Arkansas—the birthplace of Walmart. One of the company's heirs, Alice Walton, opened the museum in 2011 with the goal of marrying art and architecture with nature and wellness. Designed by the Boston-headquartered firm Safdie Architects, the museum consists of a series of concrete and glass structures linked by “bridges” over a natural ravine shaped into ponds and

surrounded by woods and trails.

On 6 June, a new segment of the museum will open downstream, adding 114,000 sq. ft to allow more space for its growing collection and art-and-wellness programming. The expansion, also designed by Safdie Architects and estimated to cost over \$100m, will add 50% more space—29,000 sq. ft of it dedicated to galleries displaying pieces by artists including [Mary Cassatt](#), [Theaster Gates](#), Jun Kaneko and [Kiki Smith](#). A total of 200 works from the museum’s permanent collection not shown before will now be on view, including a number of newly acquired pieces.

Also new will be ceramics and digital-art studios and a “home-like lounge for gathering with family, friends and community members”, according to Crystal Bridges. And outdoors, there will be the new Ozark Discovery Canopy providing a playscape for kids, designed by the Philadelphia-based landscape architect Bryan Hanes.



The newly reinstated Foundations of American Art Gallery© Tim Hursley, courtesy Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

“Crystal Bridges decided to expand, because our impact and the demand for what we offer outgrew our original footprint,” Austen Barron Bailly, the museum’s deputy director of curatorial affairs, tells *The Art Newspaper*. “Record-breaking visitation from local and national audiences, along with significant growth in the collection (especially in craft and Indigenous art), made clear that the museum needed more space to thoughtfully support our mission of providing access to art to all.” Last year, according to *The Art Newspaper*'s annual survey of museum visitor figures, attendance at the museum [exceeded 800,000 people](#).

"The inauguration of this second phase marks the culmination of a two-decade collaboration—an evolving dialogue between architect, patron and institution—that has shaped not only a building, but a shared vision for what a museum can be," the architect Moshe Safdie said in a statement. "Beyond broadening its programme, the expansion extends and deepens the museum's connection to nature—embedding new spaces for community, learning and the display of art within an architectural language shaped by the region's terrain."

Inside the museum, all the galleries have been refreshed with new lighting, colours and large-scale graphics. Some of the works on display are iconic Americana—like [Norman Rockwell's](#) *Rosie the Riveter* (1943) and Georgia O'Keeffe's *Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1* (1932)—while others are more experimental. For example, the new exhibition [Keith Haring in 3D](#) (6 June-25 January 2027), focuses on the New York artist's sculptural work, clothing and masks, skateboards and boomboxes, and a delightfully painted 1963 Buick Special.



A new gallery with installation view of *Keith Haring in 3D* © Tim Hursley, courtesy Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. Keith Haring artwork: © Keith Haring Foundation

“[Keith Haring](#) believed art should be accessible, engaging and part of everyday life—values that align

perfectly with the mission of Crystal Bridges,” says Victor Gomez, an assistant curator of contemporary art at the museum. “His bold, familiar imagery draws people in right away, making the show feel welcoming to all kinds of guests.” The works fit in aesthetically and physically as well, he adds: “The scale and colour of Haring's works are ideally suited to the expansive and luminous new gallery with its natural light and 17ft-high ceilings.”

Museum lab

While Crystal Bridges continues its mission at its newly expanded space in Bentonville, its sister organisation, the [Art Bridges Foundation](#), has been reaching out to museums across the US to help develop and fund their own projects related to art and wellness. About a dozen museums are currently participating in a special two-year programme through which they can borrow works from Art Bridges’ art-sharing initiative, the Partner Loan Network, which encourages museums to take works out of storage and lend them to other institutions.

“Museums get a selection of artworks to incorporate some of their art and wellness initiatives around,” says [Anne Kraybill](#), the chief executive of Art Bridges. “They also get \$50,000 to implement these art and wellness ideas within their institutions.”



A sculpture by Marisol in one of the new gallery spaces, with a view of a campus nature trail © Tim Hursley, courtesy Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

To help shape their programmes, the selected museums were invited to attend workshops at Art

Bridges headquarters in Bentonville. Institutions in the first cohort that met in October include the [Baltimore Museum of Art](#), [Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico](#) in San Juan, [Allentown Art Museum](#) in Pennsylvania, El Paso Museum of Art in Texas, Frye Art Museum in Seattle and North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh.

“We have been advancing several wellness programmes on our own,” says Museo de Arte director María Cristina Gaztambide, “but having received the invitation to submit a proposal for this allowed our team to really think about what we could do in a more integrated manner.” She adds that her museum was able to address “not only the topic of wellness but also access and inclusion”. The target demographic for new programming includes the elderly and at-risk youth—specifically, boys in correctional facilities.



Exterior view of the new bridge gallery© Tim Hursley, courtesy Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

Annie Y. Saldaña, the director of the San Juan museum’s Creative Community Development Center, says that Art Bridges’ “wellness toolkit” has been especially helpful. “It talked about the four different areas that we can impact through art and wellness—emotional, social, cognitive and physical well-being—and helped us to design our activities, to make sure that we’re aligning our programming to measure that data.” She adds it has also been valuable “to network and be with other museum professionals and see what they were doing”.

Meanwhile in Pennsylvania, the Allentown Art Museum's accessibility team has been promoting social connections and emotional well-being with programmes for dementia patients and their caregivers, and field trips for homeschoolers and their families. The latter "is a programme that involves artmaking as well as a tour of some of the works in our collection", says Margie Makowski, the manager of museum accessibility in Allentown.

Some of these programmes are test trials, and Art Bridges plans to collect progress reports from the museums. "We want to look at the impact of some of these things that we could then scale," Kraybill says. "This is all new for us, too."