

Crystal Bridges Expansion Moves Toward Finish Line

by [Jan Cottingham](#) - December 9, 2024, 12:00am



Crystal Bridges founder Alice Walton and architect Moshe Safdie tour the museum's expanded facilities under construction. (Provided)

The [114,056-SF expansion of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art](#) is more than two-thirds complete, with almost all of the exterior build-out finished, the [Bentonville](#) museum's leaders said.

"You can start to see and feel the spaces and how they're going to be when we're finished," [Rod Bigelow](#), executive director of the museum, said in an interview late last month. "You can also see the shaping of the land on the exterior spaces."

Plans for the expansion, a 50% enlargement of the original 200,000-SF museum, were announced on April 7, 2021, and museum officials expect the expanded spaces to be open to the public in 2026.

On the outside, builders are installing a new pond at the museum, which lies in a ravine through which a stream runs. "It's kind of a linchpin moment, where we're creating that space," Bigelow said. "We're trying to be very careful and thoughtful about that."

A museum spokesman said 130 workers are currently at the 120-acre museum site. They are finishing up metal roofing and glass installation on one building, after which all exterior building construction will be complete.

The focus now is largely the interior build-out and late site work, the spokesman, [Michelle Moore](#), said. "Exterior work has shifted to exterior improvements, including the pond liner and then stream bank stabilization," she said.

Moshe Safdie of Safdie Architects in Boston developed the museum master plan, which included the original buildings and the buildings in the expansion. Moore said Safdie and his team "are in close collaboration with the team at Crystal Bridges to ensure the architecture is in harmony with all interior and exterior plans around the buildings."

The museum works with the architecture firm "on major decisions impacting light, sight lines, finishes and more," she said.



The new Learning & Engagement Hub and exhibition gallery under construction is seen in this photo from April. (Provided)

[Flintco](#), which is headquartered in Tulsa but has an office in [Springdale](#), is the contractor for the project, and Amanda Owens, Crystal Bridges senior project manager, is acting as liaison with the construction and architectural teams.

The value of building permits taken out so far for the project totals \$23 million. The cost of the expansion will likely exceed that, though museum officials declined to provide total cost figures.

More than 40 subcontractors are working on the project, ranging from Ace Glass Construction Corp. of Little Rock, which is providing glass, to M.G. McGrath Inc. of Maplewood, Minnesota, providing metal roofing and skylights, to Russell Interiors Inc. of Edmond, Oklahoma, which is providing window treatments.

More Exhibition Space

The museum holds prized artworks, among them Georgia O’Keeffe’s “Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1,” which sold for \$44.4 million in 2015, and Asher B. Durand’s “Kindred Spirits,” which museum founder Alice Walton reportedly paid more than \$35 million for in 2005. The expansion, which includes two new galleries, will allow for 65% more of its works to be displayed, Bigelow said.

In addition to more exhibition space, the Crystal Bridges expansion will increase the space devoted to educational and outreach programs as well as community events. The project also includes a new bridge housing a cafe and an outdoor plaza that will feature what Bigelow calls a “splash pad,” accessible from the north side.

“It’s been exciting that this construction project has gone incredibly smoothly,” he said. “And I think that’s part of understanding and having the experience of creating the first museum buildings.” The museum opened on Nov. 11, 2011.



This new bridge connects two galleries, with a view to the cafe and natural surroundings of the museum campus. (Courtesy of Safdie Architects)

Memorial Day weekend storms did down some trees on the museum campus this year, Bigelow said, “but it was not a big deal.”

This latest expansion was preceded in 2021 by a renovation and enlargement of the museum’s main lobby entrance.

The pandemic meant some supply chain challenges two years ago, but those have been resolved, Bigelow and Moore said.

One challenge to contractors has been working around the visitors to the museum, which has remained open during the project, and to its campus, which has more than 5 miles of walking and biking trails, many of them dotted with works of art. The museum last year recorded its largest number of visitors since its opening, nearly 785,000.

For Bigelow, if there are surprises in the project, they are the good kind. “I think one of the surprises that will be a delightful experience for our guests is the new temporary exhibition space,” Bigelow said. “It is large, light-filled and truly welcoming and interesting. I think that is a big surprise for our whole team.

“But I also think the surprise will be more the meaning of the learning engagement, what we’re calling the learning engagement hub at this point, where there will be so many more spaces for the community to come in and try their hand at making art, see artists and engaging artists and definitely creating work.

“And then the wonderful community gathering spaces, where community groups can come together and have conversations or do meetings or whatever they may want to do.”

Bigelow went on to cite the increased “connectivity to nature” that the project is providing. The entire design of Crystal Bridges, inside and out, emphasizes the beauty of nature and the connection between art and nature.

“Opening back up what we call the north forest to access will be a rejuvenating sort of experience for people,” he said.

In addition, elevated walkways and bridges will extend from the new outside plaza into the forest to the north.

“There’s more natural light coming into the spaces than in the existing building, so people will see that physically in the space, and that always adds complexity to the project,” Bigelow said. “Moshe does a great job of sort of limiting the palette, so it’s concrete, wood, glass, and that’s what you’re going to get.”

Seeing Behind the Scenes

As the museum moves toward completing the expansion, primarily on the inside now, the major challenges next year will be continuing to stay open to display its art and reinstalling the collection of almost 4,000 artworks, as well as installing new work, inside and out.

“We made a very conscious decision not to close the museum while we were doing construction,” he said. “We could have easily closed for six or eight months, and we decided to consciously stay open.

“And what that means is that people, as they experience the existing building, as we’re changing everything around over 2025, they’ll have moments to see behind the scenes and to see us do things that you would normally not see,” Bigelow said. “That will be the most challenging time to juggle all of the activities.”



An aerial view of Crystal Bridges looking north. (Courtesy of Safdie Architects)

Adopting the mantra of “art everywhere,” the museum will display art in all of the transitional, non-gallery spaces, he said. “You will see it in unexpected places of the museum.”

One of the big payoffs, at least to Bigelow’s mind, comes once the project is complete. The expanded museum will be able to host 100,000 students annually compared with the 60,000 it will host this year. “And that’s because of the simple function of having more lunchroom space,” he said.

Another big advantage will be “being able to tell more stories through works of art,” Bigelow said. “We’re making a major investment in bringing more indigenous artists into the collection and to build out our collection of craft.”

In 2026, when the new museum space is set to open, “We’re sort of sharing the idea of one campus,” he said, referring to two other initiatives of Walton, the Alice L. Walton School of Medicine and the [Heartland Whole Health Institute](#).

“And with the addition of the medical school and the Heartland Whole Health Institute, we expect to create an experience that is campuswide,” Bigelow said. “You can visit all of these physical buildings and venture through trails and pathways that are inhabited by great works of art. And again, that concept of art everywhere will come alive in the other buildings as well.”