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Crystal Bridges: the unlikely museum grows

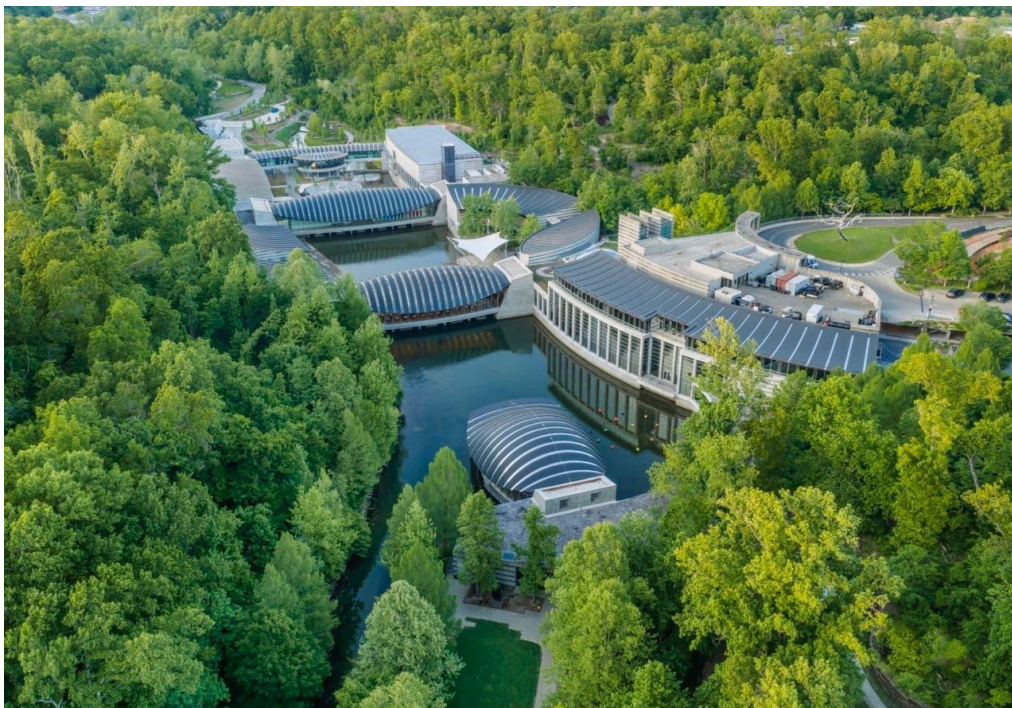
Safdie Architects doubles Crystal Bridges in Bentonville, turning its creekside pavilions into a larger landscape for art, learning and public life

Anthony Paletta

When **Crystal Bridges Museum of Art** opened in 2011 **Bentonville**, Arkansas was perhaps the most implausible location for a major art museum in the United States. That is emphatically no longer the case. While many technology hotbeds have failed to produce cultural facilities of much note, Bentonville — the home of resolutely unglamorous retailer Wal-Mart — has. Crystal Bridges' size has now been doubled by **Safdie Architects**, which opened on June 6th.

A return came as a surprise to multiple parties, including its architect. Safdie commented, "When I was first building in Arkansas everybody said nobody's going to come here. So I certainly wasn't thinking that within a few years we'd be expanding this."

The museum has attracted **14 million visitors since its opening**, amidst a boom of quality architecture in the town of a little over 50,000 residents, with new buildings by Marlon Blackwell, Deborah Berke, and soon BIG. Crystal Bridges opened a contemporary arts offshoot, the Momentary, designed by Wheeler Kearns Architects in 2021.





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Crystal Bridges' original iteration was **slung directly over a creek** on the Walton estate just north of town. Safdie was inspired by a number of things: the Louisiana Museum, Fallingwater, old mill towns, and Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton's Fay Jones house, which also bridges water. Safdie took a tumble into the creek when first visiting the site; thanks to his efforts you won't.

Safdie has built a number of projects around or over water, including Exploration Place in Wichita and the Khalsa Heritage Center near Chandigarh but this was a different sort of embrace of a densely wooded ravine. Safdie described that location in *If Walls Could Speak: My Life in Architecture* as "an element you had to decipher" which required sorting out hydrological features among much else. Building over this creek spared foliage on the larger site while providing a pastoral setting.

The original complex featured **two bridges over the creek**, and the use of bridge-like elements for other purposes, with catenary cables supporting multiple pavilions. Facades otherwise feature poured concrete slotted with cedar beams.





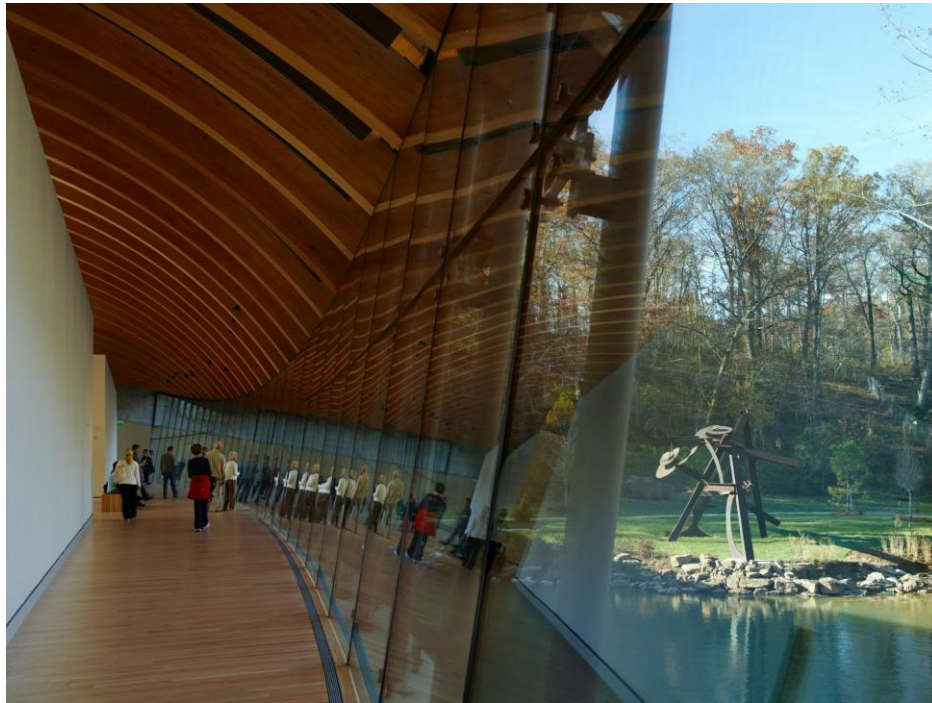


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When it came time to expand, the choice of architect was clear. **Alice Walton**, the museum's founder commented, "I've always said one thing, I'll never let anybody touch this building but Moshe."

Safdie obliged with an extension that's about doubled the size of the museum, shifting its form from a rough circle with a cedilla to a new form roughly resembling an eight. "We decided to go downstream" he explained, building out a **new loop centered around a new pool** terraced 12 feet below its neighbor. There was little to displace; a fire lane and a Buckminster Fuller dome. The latter was relocated nearby. These additions required greater excavation depths into nearby hillsides than the original, with 35 percent of the new structure below grade.





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The expansion includes a 1,300 m² **Learning and Educational Hub** and 2,700 m² of gallery space. Safdie explained, “I thought it would be appropriate to diversify the experience. If it was a building it’s now become more than a building — a village.” Pavilion clusters are a familiar habit in his work from Skirball to Vad Yashem and here he injected formal variety into the museum experience.

The addition includes one tall palazzo-like building containing a rectangular temporary exhibition gallery topped with a sawtooth-skylit steel truss with education spaces beneath, a new volume on the campus. Across from this is a contemporary exhibition gallery that resembles prior canted copper-roofed galleries. Matt Longo, Principal at Safdie explained their goal of the buildings “forming a kind of axial alignment following the direction of the ponds and creek.”

The expansion **engages more closely with the creek itself than prior buildings**. There’s now a promenade open to the water on three sides running through the prior bridge gallery, the education spaces, and the new glass gallery. Safdie explained, “The glass gallery started as a link. Alice said, *Why not a gallery?* And we decided to make it wide enough for a gallery for works that are not sensitive to light.



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An offshoot in the center of that bridge houses the Quartz and Honey cafe, a floral pod featuring a dramatic view of the creek. Its is copper-roofed, supported by southern yellow pine beams, and features a jaunty upturn at its edges. Safdie aimed to intensify the experience of nature in this expansion, so the visitor might “**really feel the sight of the water flowing.**” The waterside space is more directly activated than the prior pond; it’s centered on a new piazza and splash pad; there’s also a new outdoor pedestrian bridge running diagonally across the creek.

Safdie had hoped for more light in the original galleries but this didn't happen, resulting in a sequence of black boxes alternating with overlooks. He's achieved his aim this time around.





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The **Temporary Exhibitions Gallery**, which is the sole gallery above the main circulation sequence, linked by a three-and-a-half foot ramp, is a new sort of space. It's 1,300 m² and spanned by a 24 m truss containing mechanicals, skylights and other lights, covered in CFRG and acoustical plastic. The **Contemporary Gallery** across the creek features a sloping ceiling and clerestories on two sides.

The expansion of gallery space has enabled a broader display of the museum's permanent collection, with 577 works on view from artists ranging from **Stuart Davis** to **Jacob Lawrence** to **Yayoi Kusama** to **George Bellows**. This is about 14% of their collection. Numerous recent acquisitions and commissions are also shown, along with an exhibit Keith Haring in 3D. The museum's director Rod Bigelow explained, "nearly every work or art in the museum was moved." It's provided room for fresh categories of art, including a new infusion of indigenous and craft works.

The complex also engages more closely with its surroundings otherwise; a third entrance was added in 2015 which was expanded. New trails by **Coen + Partners** also knit the expansion into the parkland around. The museum is free, and thus free of the need to channel visitors through a single entrance. Sculpture outside needn't be the beginning or end of your experience; it's rarely been so simple to go in and out as many times as you like.