

The New York Times

How a Walmart Heir Is Transforming Rural Arkansas Into a Design Powerhouse

Alice Walton is helping the Ozark region shed its “flyover” status by creating civic projects with top architects. The Waltons say they are “giving back.” What is the region giving up?

Sam Lubell



The 114,000-square-foot addition to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Ark., designed by Moshe Safdie, includes a glass-bridge gallery, right; a cafe, center and a contemporary art gallery, far left.
Credit...Michael Davello for The New York Times

When Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art opened in 2011 in Bentonville, Ark., some wondered what impact the giant institution funded by the Walmart heir Alice Walton would have on the sleepy Ozark town known primarily as the home of the Walton family’s mega-business.

Now it’s becoming clearer.

Bentonville's population was about 37,000 when the museum opened; its average single-family home sold for about \$175,000, and most traffic came through two-lane rural roads.

"It was mostly empty land," Moshe Safdie, the architect of Crystal Bridges, recalled in an interview in Bentonville in May. "There were no restaurants in the square."

To say things have changed since then is a whopping understatement. Bentonville's population has nearly doubled. The town is bursting with new activity: award-winning restaurants, shopping, boutique hotels, condominiums, offices and arguably the most sophisticated bike trail network in the country. But prices are bursting too: A single-family home now hovers around \$490,000. The average rent has nearly tripled, to \$2,000 a month from about \$800.



Moshe Safdie, the architect of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, with Alice Walton, whose investments in Northwest Arkansas have spurred innovative design projects. The question is how to manage the inevitable challenges, like congestion, housing pressure and sprawl, Credit...George Etheredge for The New York Times

Northwest Arkansas is among the 10 fastest-expanding metro areas in the United States, according to the [census](#). A burgeoning design powerhouse, the area has recently drawn architects from New Orleans, New York and Chicago, and from countries including Denmark and Switzerland. In Fayetteville, just 25 miles away, [Grafton Architects](#) of Dublin, the 2020 Pritzker Prize winners, built a soaring center for the [Fay Jones School of Architecture and Design](#) at the University of Arkansas, underwritten by a [major timber supplier](#). With funding from [a former Walmart employee](#), an art center is underway by [Tod Williams + Billie Tsien Architects](#), designers of the new Obama Presidential Center.

“I feel like I get a lot of the amenities that you would find in a big city here now,” said Morgan Johnson, an employee at Two Friends Books, inside Bentonville’s 8th Street Market, a former Tyson chicken plant transformed into a food hub. Johnson rolled off the recent restaurants and concerts she’d been to, and the people from around the world she’d met.

But she also noted that buying a home in Bentonville is out of her reach, adding that if she didn’t have a “really generous” landlord, she’d have a very difficult time paying rent.



Top, view of the campus of Crystal Bridges Museum, with a series of pavilions linked by glass bridges and formed around ponds. Below, the new contemporary art gallery features curving wooden beams and skylights. Credit...Michael Davello for The New York Times

Resurgence of a ‘Forgotten’ State

Many here, including Alice Walton herself, whose net worth is more than \$100 billion, credit Crystal Bridges with helping spur the area’s resurgence. The museum, which opened an expansion by Safdie last summer that nearly doubled its size, draws about 800,000 visitors a year, serving as a magnet for tourism, investment and residents.

“It’s been a great big spark to ignite other investment,” Walton said.

It was a calculated effort by the Waltons, whose reach touches many aspects of life in this region, including new health and wellness centers and universities. The Waltons operate several nonprofits and a vast network of for-profits, including, of course, Walmart, the largest private employer in the United States. And then there are the hospitality groups, banks and real estate firms that have followed.

The Walton Family Foundation, begun by the Walmart founders Sam and Helen Walton, awarded nearly half a billion dollars in grants to what it calls the “home region” — which includes Northwest Arkansas and the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta — between 2017 and 2024, the most recent year for which figures are available.

“This is the place that gave us our opportunity as a family,” said Alice Walton, who is 77. “And that means that we have to give something back.”



Top, the Alice L. Walton School of Medicine on the Crystal Bridges' campus in Bentonville, with a glass exterior that appears to fold, by Polk Stanley Wilcox. Below, students can ascend a thickly planted roof shaped by sandstone blocks and mounds. Credit...Michael Davello for The New York Times

The advances have also served the Waltons' bottom line, drawing high-level employees and helping expand their many local investments. But the work is clearly personal to Walton, who still feels disrespect directed at her region.

"This is a spectacular part of the world that gets forgotten by a lot of other parts of the world. We're a flyover state," she said. "We've been so fortunate as a family to have the opportunity to maybe make a difference."

The question for the Waltons and other local leaders is no longer how to achieve success but how to manage its inevitable challenges, like congestion, housing pressure and sprawl, while safeguarding local identity. By giving back, what are they giving up?

"My view is if you're creating the reason for growth, then you need to participate in the responsibility," Walton said. But not everybody agrees with her family's solutions.

Art Plus Nature

Crystal Bridges, which is free to the public, helped Walton set a template for her future plans. The design was largely driven by her emotional connection to nature, which she calls "the DNA of my family."

Walton grew up in a forest-ensconced home built by the revered Arkansas architect [E. Faye Jones](#) and spent many days with her parents and siblings camping and hiking in state and national parks. Inspired by her mother, Helen, an amateur painter, she would bring watercolors and charcoal to capture those surroundings.

Instead of perching on a hill as an isolated object, Walton's museum occupies a deep ravine, crossed by thick woods and winding trails. It takes the form of curved concrete, copper and wood pavilions connected by glass-walled bridges. Quiet, spring fed ponds create a meditative background.



Nearly hidden at far right, Buckminster Fuller's Fly's Eye Dome, a geodesic structure, is tucked into the walking paths at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. Credit...Michael Davello for The New York Times

With the opening of Crystal Bridges' expansion, the evolving regional approach of Walton and her family is on full display: a carefully curated integration of art and nature, education, community and wellness.

The addition includes skylit exhibition halls, a glass bridge art gallery and a circular plaza hovering over the north pond. It also offers studios for artists in the community and the Ozark Discovery Canopy, with walking platforms and wide slides capable of fitting whole families.

"It's become a little village," Safdie said.

That village has expanded to the eastern edge of the museum's wooded site to include two artful new buildings that embody Walton's ambitious plans in the realm of health care, where Arkansas still lags behind other states.



Wesley Walls, an architect with Polk Stanley Wilcox, which designed the Alice L. Walton School of Medicine (AWSOM) in Bentonville. The glass facade is edged with weathered brass fins. Credit...Michael Davello for The New York Times

Walton speaks openly about how a serious car accident in the 1980s exposed her to the shortcomings of the American medical system; she said her goal is to catalyze a more holistic approach to wellness. The Alice L. Walton School of Medicine — nicknamed AWSOM — emphasizes preventive care and the beneficial impact of art and nature.

Designed by a local firm, [Polk Stanley Wilcox](#), with the landscape architects OSD of New York, the glassy wedge springs forward like an Ozark bluff shelter. Students and visitors can ascend its thickly planted roof, shaped by layered sandstone blocks. Wesley Walls, a principal of Polk Stanley Wilcox, calls it a “machine for exercise, climbing out of the ground.”

Ten minutes away, the Heartland Whole Health Institute houses three of Alice Walton’s nonprofits, focused on health, economic opportunity and access to art. Clad in textured stone and weathered brass, its meandering, levitated design by [Marlon Blackwell Architects](#), of Fayetteville, evokes Ozark landforms and “dogtrot” houses. Inside, dappled light and timber-lined paths create the feel of a forest.

A Design Vision, a Building Boom

On Sept. 17, Walton broke ground on the AWSOM Whole Health Campus, which, when complete, will be the largest health care facility in Arkansas, according to the foundation. It will sit about two miles from the Crystal Bridges campus. But that distance is no longer so important: The Waltons' vision has grown to include much of Northwest Arkansas.

In 2015, the Walton Family Foundation began the Northwest Arkansas Design Excellence program, which helps cities and nonprofits commission local and national designers to create civic projects for the region. The foundation supports design selection and completion, while the institutions pay for construction and upkeep. Projects include [Thaden School](#), a private Bentonville academy by Marlon Blackwell Architects, with buildings inspired by farm sheds and undulating terrain, and [Carol Ross Barney's Railyard Park](#) in Rogers, with its metal tunnels, water towers and bandshell. Trahan Architects' twisting steel performance pavilion is a striking addition to [Luther George Park](#) in Springdale.



The Thaden School, a private academy in Bentonville, designed by Marlon Blackwell Architects, was funded in part through a Design Excellence grant. It was inspired partly by farm sheds. Credit...Michael Davello for The New York Times





Marlon Blackwell at the Thaden School, which he designed with Meryati (Ati) Blackwell, his wife and partner in the firm. Credit...Michael Davello for The New York Times

[Tom Walton](#), Alice's 43-year-old nephew, chairs the Walton Family Foundation's home region program committee. He credits Crystal Bridges with drawing him back to the area after a long time away. "It breathed life into the area's possibility," he said.

In 2020, Tom and his brother Steuart created the Momentary, an art and music venue in a former Kraft cheese factory in Bentonville, and they have been shaping the town since, one investment at a time. Last year, their real estate company Blue Crane opened a hotel on the bustling square, and their hospitality company Ropeswing debuted three new restaurants, among other projects.

Southeast of downtown, Walmart built a 350-acre Home Office campus, creating a whole new neighborhood. Softening the new developments are dozens of parks and upward of 200 miles of bike trails, funded in part by the Waltons.



Railyard Park in Rogers, Ark., designed by Carol Ross Barney Architects, with steel and fabric canopies; the Luther George Park Performance Pavilion by Trahan Architects, made of weathered steel. Credit...Kate Joyce Studios/Ross Barney Architects; Tim Hursley/Trahan Architects

The building boom is luring starchitects. This year Tom, Stuart and Alice Walton hired [Bjarke Ingels](#) to design the [Bentonville Institute of Technology](#), which will arrange patinated steel buildings around a plaza on the site of the original Walmart Home Office. Ingels, whose firm BIG is also designing the Bentonville Ballroom, a 2,500-seat concert venue for Live Nation, called Bentonville's transformation a "renaissance."

Other patrons have felt inspired — or perhaps pressured — to follow suit. Marlon Blackwell, whose architecture firm designed a pediatric clinic in Rogers, clad in fire engine red ribbed metal panels on

one side and aluminum-zinc panels on the other, suggested it might never have gotten client approval before Crystal Bridges was built.

“Alice has created a kind of cultural tipping point,” he said. “It’s contagious. It raises expectations to see this level of design.”

Fear of Becoming ‘Big Hat Dallas’

Yet local leaders say it has become clear that the Walton family can’t single-handedly spend its way to regional improvement. That fact registers in towns suffering from heavy traffic, doubling or even tripling housing costs, ugly and disconnected sprawl and what [Peter MacKeith](#), an emeritus dean of the Fay Jones School of Architecture, describes as “big hat Dallas North Texas style houses,” completely removed from their context.

“It’s all contradictory and scary,” he said. Lasting improvement, he added, will require better coordination among governments, businesses, institutions and residents across the region.

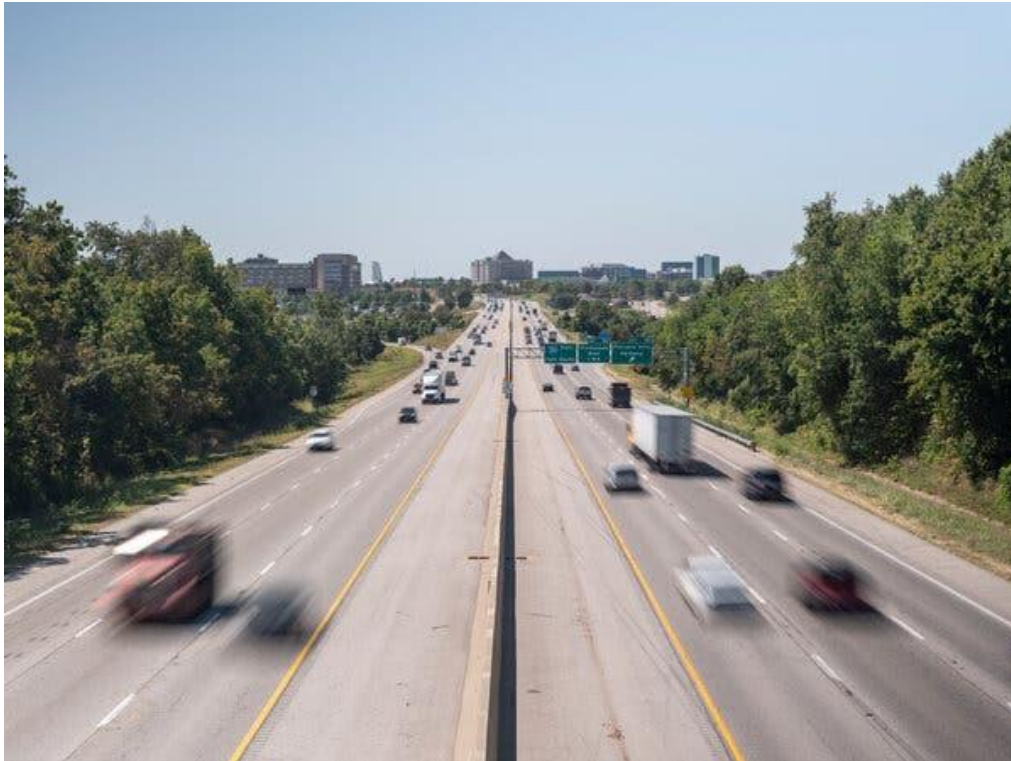


Luke Harper, a local resident, schoolteacher and Uber driver. “Everybody misses the small town,” he said. “You saw everybody you knew.” Credit...Michael Davello for The New York Times

Luke Harper, a teacher in [Tontitown](#) — whose motto, “A Little Town, A Lot of Tradition,” may soon need updating — welcomes the new amenities and improved health care. But he said, “I’m in the minority, I assure you. Everybody misses the small town. You saw everybody you knew. People lament that.”

He pointed toward Interstate 49, the connector between Bentonville and Fayetteville. “At 8 in the morning it’s bumper to bumper,” he said. “You can’t build a road as fast as you can build a neighborhood.”

Jared Phillips, a professor of history at the University of Arkansas and a farmer from Prairie Grove, mourns a local identity in flux, especially for small farmers facing price increases and development pressures. Between 2011 and 2026, Arkansas experienced a net loss of 19.6 percent of its total farms. “We don’t recognize our home anymore,” he said.



Interstate 49, the connector between Bentonville and Fayetteville, shows signs of the disconnected sprawl that critics say did not exist in the region several years ago. Credit...Michael Davello for The New York Times

Phillips says the Waltons and other local leaders tend to favor pet projects, such as museums and bike paths, but don’t effectively budge serious issues like food scarcity and housing costs. “We know the things that are being built here are not for us,” he said. Food insecurity in Benton County grew to 17 percent in 2024, from 13.7 percent in 2011, according to [Feeding America](#), a hunger relief nonprofit.

The Walton Family Foundation’s Strategy 2030, announced in May, is a grant-making plan for the home region, outlining future investments supporting housing, transportation, infrastructure and stronger education-to-career pathways. The foundation has not yet disclosed how much it plans to spend or when specific commitments will be announced.

“I feel like we’re engaged,” said Tom Walton. “We might not get everything right, but our hearts are in the right place. We’re here to help solve problems and make this one of the great places to live. And I think that’s what keeps us going.”