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In Arkansas, a Fast-Growing Museum Anchors an Unusual Campus

Safdie Architects' addition to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville expands on Alice Walton's vision of a hub for culture and wellness.

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The expanded Crystal Bridges complex lives up to its name, with two new pavilions perched over waterways. Photographer: Timothy Hursley

In the late 2000s Alice Walton swept through a gobsmacked art world like a human tornado, paying breathtaking prices to assemble a collection of blue-chip American art. Then Walton, daughter of Walmart Inc. founder Sam Walton, announced her intention to build a museum in Bentonville, Arkansas, where she grew up and where the discount retail giant was founded.

It was, to say the least, [a controversial](#) way to launch a new museum. [Art elites](#) were appalled when she paid \$35 million to the New York Public Library for Asher Durand's painting *Kindred Spirits*, an [icon of New York's Hudson River school](#). Critics drew a line between the values embodied by the work in Walton's collection and [the business practices of her late father's company](#).

But after the [Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art](#) opened in November 2011, the furor largely faded. Designed by Boston-based architect [Moshe Safdie](#), best known for Singapore's skyline landmark [Marina Bay Sands](#), the 200,000-square-foot art campus draws some 800,000 visitors annually, even though it is far from populous cultural hubs. Its collection has grown from a few hundred works to 4,100 items thanks to the Walton Family Foundation, which gave \$1.2 billion for the museum's endowment and construction. (Free admission is underwritten by Walmart.) On June 6, the museum cut the ribbon on a 114,000-square-foot addition.



An aerial view of the Crystal Bridges campus shows the two newest pavilions in the foreground. *Photographer: Timothy Hursley*

Walton's aspirations for the museum have grown, as has her wealth, now [estimated at \\$143 billion](#), making her the world's richest woman. The expanded museum has become the fulcrum of a 134-acre campus that also includes the Heartland Whole Health Institute, a healthcare-focused think tank that opened last May, and the Alice L. Walton School of Medicine, which welcomed its first 48 students in 2025. Known collectively as the [Crystal Bridges Campus for Art and Wellness](#), the three facilities represent an audacious attempt to fuse nature, culture and public health.

Art in Nature

Safdie Architects was brought back to design the addition to the museum only, and he stuck with the template — at once spectacular and serene — of his original. The facility is influenced by Walton's childhood: She grew up in a house tucked into a woodland that was designed by [E. Fay Jones](#), a local architectural luminary much influenced by his apprenticeship with Frank Lloyd Wright.

Safdie set the buildings in a wooded ravine that had been carved by a stream through layers of sandstone. He added dams to form two ponds lined with three art-display pavilions, spanning the waters with a pair of glass-walled bridges that swell outward and vault upward, like the belly of a wood-ribbed whale. Between each pavilion he placed small lounges — glassy hinges within which visitors can rest, take in the water and forest views, and reflect on what they have seen.



An exhibition of glass art inside a new gallery. *Photographer: Timothy Hursley*



Sculptures by Keith Haring are shown in a new exhibition space at Crystal Bridges. *Photographer: Timothy Hursley*

Safdie Architects has added a new pond and extended the ensemble with two exhibition pavilions in the same style as the original. One is a 40,000-square-foot space for temporary exhibitions, which is opening with a spectacular collection of sculpture and objects (including a car) [decorated by Keith Haring](#).

“The new spaces are more flexible and introduce more daylight,” Safdie told me. A third curving glass bridge spans the stream. The new pond is activated by a broad round splash pad, accessed from across the water by a footbridge. It is among considerable new space added for events, social gatherings and education.

On a recent walkthrough of the museum, chief curator Austen Barron Bailly explained how Crystal Bridges’ mission plays out in the galleries.

“Ours is a more accessible approach than the classic art museum presentation,” she said. Crystal Bridges attracts “a high number of visitors who have never been to a museum before.” Part of that is because of the museum’s remoteness from big-city institutions, but it also reflects Walton’s determination to invite everyone. (About [60%](#) of museum visitors travel from outside the state.) Nor do its holdings stay in Arkansas. The museum frequently lends art and partners with other institutions through its Art Bridges Foundation.

The museum opened with more conventional displays of American art, but its approach evolved. Paintings are hung densely, often in broad themes and salon-style groupings that provoke comparison by juxtaposition, mixed with brief explorations of artists, eras or styles the way traditional museums do. “We weren’t engaging people with the chronological approach,” said Bailly. “So we look for ways to help people see into the works.”

A section devoted to figurative portraits mixes works in a dizzying range of styles and subjects,

asking visitors to consider why depictions of the human form fascinate us. In a section on nature, Durand's *Kindred Spirits* hangs opposite a Tiffany-designed monumental stained glass window.

Some display norms are overturned. Donald Judd, who was very concerned with the size and proportion of space around his works, would not be amused by his untitled 1989 copper and red painted stack boxes being crowded by other large-scale contemporary works, including Mark Rothko's *No. 210/No. 211 (Orange)* of 1960.

In the Semiquincentennial exhibit "[America 250: Common Threads](#)," one room displays many images of George Washington (mounted on Washington-themed wallpaper), not just the pair of famous 18th-century paintings in the collection. The historic value of the works is less important in this context than what visitors learn about the highly varied meanings Americans hold about Washington.



The museum's non-chronological approach arranges works in thematic collections. Photographer: Hasan Akbas/Anadolu via Getty Images

While many museums across the US struggle with expanding and diversifying their audiences, Crystal Bridges is known for its youth outreach, busing in some 80,000 K-12 students at its own expense annually. Safdie provided an array of new studios, where visitors can try their hand at drawing, throwing pots, quilting and traditional basketweaving.

The museum goes outside its walls to connect art to the community. Mountain biking enthusiasts, drawn [by a Walmart Foundation-funded network of trails](#), encounter a variety of artworks along a woodland path, most surprisingly a monumental spider sculpture, *Maman* (1999), by Louise

Bourgeois. A second art trail is being inaugurated to enhance the invitation by including a [family forest](#) playground. Located in a converted cheese plant nearby, the [Momentary](#) is an in-town experimental music, art and dining destination conceived as an extension of the museum by family members Tom, Olivia and Stuart Walton.

The bike trails and museum annex are just a few elements of Bentonville's utter transformation over the past decade and a half, spurred by Walton investments and the expanding footprint of Walmart itself. When I visited in 2011, I was struck by the contrast between the museum's elegance and the big-box bleakness of the surrounding sprawl, a brand of American landscape that retailers like Walmart played no small role in creating. Bentonville's population [has nearly doubled since](#); an [art hotel](#), [ecological](#) and [historic](#) parks, as well as new schools, museums and performing arts venues have popped up amid the strip malls and subdivisions — all hooked together by the [Razorback Greenway](#), a 40-mile paved multiuse path.

That Greenway loops through water features and under walking bridges, a lush landscape wrapped by the buildings of [Walmart's new corporate headquarters](#), a 350-acre complex bursting with amenities. The company's former home office, meanwhile, is set to become a [STEM-focused university](#); renderings of the project, designed by Bjarke Ingels Group, show a three-building campus that will be integrated with the town's park system. Still more Walton-backed projects are on the way, including a [Bentonville Health Care Campus](#) on 100-acre site two miles from downtown.

Healing Campus

Alice Walton's interest in art and health is informed by painful personal experience: After a 1983 car crash, she [endured more than a decade](#) of surgeries and discovered "the therapeutic possibilities in art," she said at a press briefing last September. "It's amazing that museums don't look intentionally at the health and welfare of the community."

Two new institutions near the museum seek to do just that, connecting art and nature to Walton's holistic vision of health.



Opening in 2025, the Heartland Whole Health Institute is showcase for local stone and wood. Photographer: Timothy Hursley

As they near Crystal Bridges, visitors can't miss a serpentine glass-and-metal structure that erupts from the ground to bridge two ground-floor wings clad in a riot of multicolored stones. This striking building serves as the new home for the [Heartland Whole Health Institute](#), a Walton-founded nonprofit that seeks to lower healthcare costs and reduce chronic diseases of poverty, especially in underserved areas across Northwest Arkansas.

Fayetteville architects [Marlon and Ati Blackwell](#) designed the institute's 85,000-square-foot building as a showcase for the region's natural materials. Roughly cut slabs of local sandstone — called Giraffe Stone for its multicolored patterns — clad the ground floor wings. Inside, Arkansas pecan wood is sliced into slats assembled to form an appealingly undulating lobby ceiling, which extends into a gallery displaying art from the museum's collection. A huge window invites passersby into the lobby, which is open to the public.

The Alice L. Walton School of Medicine (with the unsubtle acronym AWSOM) is an initiative of even greater ambition. Designed by local architecture firm [Polk Stanley Wilcox](#), the fledgling medical college launched in 2025 with a four-level building that makes a powerful sculptural statement across a broad lawn that fronts busy J Street. Above a shimmering base of brass panels, three glassed-in floors tilt toward the street.



The School of Medicine showcases a green roof and extensively landscaped grounds that reflect its nature-themed approach. *Photographer: Timothy Hursley*

A portal cut out of the base of the facade reveals a 215-foot-long cascade of water tumbling over slabs of local stone — a recreation of local streams that seep from between the sedimentary strata. The water feature places the calming power of nature literally at the center of education that is more commonly delivered in corridors of glaring strip lights and windowless, equipment-crammed treatment rooms.

Wesley Walls, a principal at Polk Stanley Wilcox, worked closely with Simon David, founder of the Brooklyn-based [landscape architecture firm OSD](#), “designing the school to be place specific, to capture the unique nature of the Ozarks,” he said.

The 154,000-square-foot building houses classrooms and clinical spaces, many of which overlook — and offer access to — extensively landscaped grounds that deliver “social spaces, work spaces and opportunities to be physically active,” said David as we toured the site.

Shared spaces prominently display art. A handsome internal stair that runs parallel to the terraced stream invites students to enhance fitness by taking the steps. Corridors borrow daylight and views through glass-walled seminar rooms that line the exterior. An upper-floor cafe encourages socialization and opens onto an outdoor terrace. The rear of the building is almost entirely devoted to a topography of stairs, paths and small plazas.

The outdoor areas are shaped by rough-hewn sandstone slabs and planted with a variety of native species. They spill down the back of one wing of the building and rise two more stories up the planted roof of the other. The outdoor space totals two acres and includes a farm garden, orienting

aspiring practitioners to the nutrition focus of the curriculum.



Ugo Rondinone's sculpture *The Melancholic* stands in front of the School of Medicine. Photographer: Timothy Hursley

Walls said that the need to screen the medical school from the museum — which is just a five-minute walk away from the via a forested trail — “helped us decide that the building should climb out of the topography.” Plans call for a clinic that will open within the building to serve area residents who struggle to access primary care.

Walton is hardly alone in exploring better ways to deliver healthcare. Many newer hospitals have adopted [wellness-focused design features](#), bringing in natural light and adding outdoor spaces as modest “healing” gardens, for example. A British initiative engaged famous architects to build greenery-swaddled [Maggie’s Centres](#) that give comfort to cancer patients; some [community health clinics](#) are designed to comprehensively address nutrition, fitness and mental health. But these efforts have had limited impact, as healthcare seems to default to traditional mechanistic treatment regimes.

Walton and her growing campus make these aspirations uniquely real. In September, she talked about seeing “doctors in training walking the museum galleries in scrubs,” suggesting that this collaboration between art and science was working. Still, she said, “I don’t know where this will lead.”