

# The Walton Project

by Jennifer Seward

When one thinks of “capital” cities, one tends to think of large cities that are changing the cultural landscape. Cities with rich histories and vibrant cultures. Cities with diverse demographics and monumental architecture. One probably doesn’t think of Bentonville, Arkansas. However, this little town has gone from main-street to mainstream in just a short time.

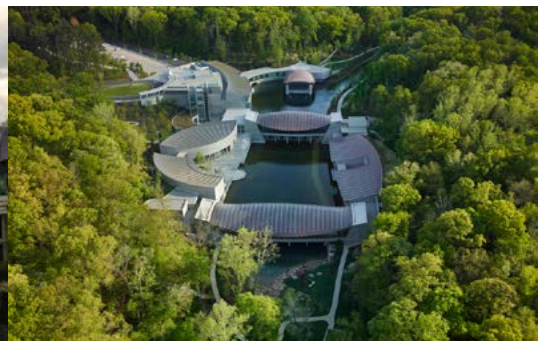
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## The Rise of Walmart

Reminiscent of the Rockefeller’s or Carnegie’s a century ago that helped shape the northeast, Sam Walton has created and left a legacy whose fortune has truly changed the landscape of Northwest Arkansas (NWA) in his own backyard. New housing developments, new roads, a new airport, museums, office buildings, restaurants; the physical landscape of NWA is nothing like it was only a few decades ago. And in fact, until 60 years ago, Bentonville was barely on Arkansas’ map let alone the world’s stage. Walmart suppliers

moving into the region caused a huge boom, increasing the population to an estimated 51,000 in 2020 nearly doubling every decade for the last 30 years. [1]

Walmart could have brought big investment into any of America’s biggest and most expensive cities, but the Walton family has kept it continuously headquartered in Bentonville. Walmart overtook the identity of the region entirely, and this decision has affected the local community greatly.



## Culture at a Discount

Walmart’s impact can be felt in many other ways, starting with the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. Funded by the Walton Family Foundation under the leadership of Sam Walton’s daughter, Alice, the 200,000-square-foot museum exhibits about 500 pieces of art at any one time, all free to the public. [2] It has welcomed more than 2.7 million visitors (only half are Arkansas residents) since it opened on November 11, 2011 (11-11-11). It was the biggest art museum opening in America in almost 40 years – and it launched Bentonville – previously known only for Walmart – into the cultural spotlight overnight.

Bentonville will also be unveiling The Momentary on February 22, 2020 (2-22-20). First one, and now two gifts from the Walton Family Foundation to Benton-

ville. The Momentary is a multidisciplinary venue for contemporary art focusing on “visual, performance and culinary discovery” with an emphasis on contemporary art. [3]

New, locally owned business have come in to support this new cultural spring. Boutique hotels, fashionable bars, artisan shops, and restaurants have emerged. Walmart, previously perceived as an enemy for wreaking havoc in small communities by eliminating downtown areas and locally-owned businesses is now, in a way, responsible for a new invigoration of its hometown. Walmart, via the Walton Family Foundation and its subsidiaries, is now providing culture and giving back community rather than taking it away.



## Growing Pains

In a search for a growing labor force and to attract potential employees, Walmart is having to keep up with the Jones' if you will. Now competing with Amazon as the countries' largest retailer, Walmart is undergoing its own personal growth. In 2017, Walmart announced it would consolidate its existing home office – which is multiple physical offices-- into a new 350-acre campus similar in style to Google and Amazon. [4] They are hoping to attract top talent and cater to a millennial workforce. This workforce, drawn to location/lifestyle over salary, is driving this culture community development in NWA.

This mass materialization (pun intended) of people have brought big growth to the region. And growth

is good. But as people move in, snapping up the best and most economical places to live, prices tend to rise, creating an affordable housing problem for this growing community. Bentonville has seen the price of downtown property soar to \$200 a square foot. The median house price in the state is \$81. With prices like these, you can't be from Arkansas and live in this part of Arkansas unless you work for "the man". The influx has caused major traffic congestion and transportation issues as well.

But, don't worry, the Walton family has a plan on bringing more attainable housing, on-street cycling infrastructure, and mass transit to Bentonville and Northwest Arkansas. [5]

From the outside Bentonville seems to be emerging from Sam Walton's shadow, its listed on top places to live websites, destination vacation publications, and as an arts and culture mid-continent mecca. But, truly all roads in Bentonville lead to Walmart. Whether or not this cultural growth was planned when someone first decided to bring an Andy Warhol painting to the Ozark Mountains, the change in the cultural landscape is still lit by the "spark" [6] of Walmart. And will continue to influence the region and beyond.

[1] Wal-Mart influences continue to push rapid growth in Bentonville  
<https://talkbusiness.net/2014/03/wal-mart-influences-continue-to-push-rapid-growth-in-bentonville/>

[2] 2.7 million people have visited Crystal Bridges  
<https://talkbusiness.net/2016/11/2-7-million-people-have-visited-crystal-bridges-in-5-years/>

[3] The Momentary  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GL0DdzIB9y0>

[4] Walmart's new headquarters ditches cubicles for running trails  
<https://www.fastcompany.com/90351045/walmarts-sprawling-new-hq-will-feature-hiking-trails-daycare-and-fitness-facilities>

[5] Our Housing Future  
<https://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/learning/our-housing-future>

[6] Walmart Spark Logo  
<https://turbologo.com/articles/walmart-logo/>