



Crystal Bridges
Museum of American Art

The Art of Architecture

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Welcome to Crystal Bridges

NARRATOR: Hello and welcome to the Crystal Bridges architecture tour! Let's start by sitting on the benches or standing near the front doors, out of the way of traffic. Throughout this tour, we will point out ways in which the museum architect, Moshe Safdie, designed the building to bring together art, architecture, and nature.

[Long pause]

GUIDE: Moshe Safdie, who designed this Museum, is an Israeli-born architect based in Boston who has worked on major cultural, civic, and educational structures across the globe. He was chosen for Crystal Bridges because of his mastery in connecting architecture to place, stemming from his belief that a building must be a part of its community and environment. Safdie believes that large-scale structures must still connect with people on an intimate human scale.

[Long pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: Take a moment to watch a short video on this screen. When you arrived at the museum, you came up the winding entry road through the Ozark forest. This meandering approach references the Ozark experience of walking down a winding forest trail. The circuitous entry offers a sense of both mystery and discovery as we anticipate seeing the museum for the first time at each turn.

[Long Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: The first view of the building itself is the simple, curved colonnade. Many museums feature a row of columns at their entrances, usually accompanying a broad flight of stairs up to an imposing building. Instead, Safdie presents this colonnade with no steps or platform to raise it above the visitor. Rather than look *up* at a large façade, we discover the museum unfolding *below* us as we pass through the colonnade to the elevator tower. The intention is that we feel embraced by the structure as we descend into the ravine.

[End of Stop]

Main Lobby

Main Lobby

GUIDE: Turn your attention to the main lobby. Running through the middle is a colonnade. Notice that the spacing between these columns is the same as that of the columns at the Museum's entrance. Later, that same proportion can be found in the spacing of the beams overhead in the galleries and the glass panels on the bridges. This consistency, maintained throughout the Museum, suggests a steady pace at which to move throughout the galleries. The spacing between the columns is large enough for us to move about two paces within each section, creating a leisurely and meditative rhythm and encouraging us to slow down and take our time.

[Short Pause]

NARRATOR: Now let's walk over to the double doors across the lobby from the Guest Services desk and enter the Museum's permanent collection galleries. Begin by pausing in the center of the first grouping of artworks, but as you listen, feel free to move through the gallery and enjoy the artworks on view.

[End of Stop]

Early American Art Gallery Entrance

GUIDE: Notice that when you walked through the doorway into this gallery the space became more compressed around you, creating a more intimate feel and encouraging personal interaction with the artwork. Your experience in this space begins at a narrow point and then opens out to reveal artwork on either side. This is one of the ways Safdie humanizes the monumental scale of the museum buildings.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: Notice the curve of the walls around you. The shape of each of the eight buildings that make up the Museum's campus was determined by the natural formation of the ravine in which they were built. Consequently, the long walls in this gallery, as in most of the other galleries in the museum, are curved, just as the ravine walls are curved.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: Looking up, you can see that the ceiling curves inward, with one side higher than the other. The high side reaches up to meet the edge of the ravine. The low side is closest to the water. This slope directs rain runoff to the pond, and it also helps you orient yourself within the building because the low side is always closest to the pond at the center of the campus.

[Long Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: The beams overhead are not merely ornamental, but fully support the roof structure. Notice that Safdie doesn't seek to hide how the building is put together. Like many Modern architects of the early twentieth century, he ascribes to the idea that the simple elements of a building's structure can also function as the ornamentation of the space: a principle referred to as "honesty of materials."

[Short Pause]

NARRATOR: When you've passed through this gallery, you'll see a glassed-walled hallway that bridges this gallery to the next. Find a spot on one of the benches along the glass for the next stop.

[End of Stop]

East Terrace Outlook

GUIDE: From this spot, we can see how the building serves as a tool to make art accessible and relatable by connecting it to nature. This hallway gives us the first glimpse of the landscape outside the museum since we've entered the galleries.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: If you look across the pond to the opposite building, which houses contemporary art, you will notice that its roofline follows the natural slope of the hillside above it. You might imagine that the builders simply removed part of the hillside and replaced it with the museum.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: Look at the buildings surrounding the pond. You can see that the museum is essentially made up of distinct structures, connected by glass, all built around the water. Each unique glass space between the structures offers a “reflection area” like this one, all framing different views of nature.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: These reflection areas are designed to refresh guests between their art experiences, providing natural light, views of the outside world, and a chance to rest between galleries and process what they’ve seen.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: The view from each one of these reflection areas also lets you know where you are within the museum, and you have the pond to help orient you. What you see here is the “lower pond.” Later in the tour we’ll visit the museum’s “upper pond.”

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: As you can see, water is an essential element in Moshe Safdie’s design of Crystal Bridges. The water becomes a sort of central “exhibit” in the museum, one that reflects the constant presence of nature all around us.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: The water that forms the Museum ponds comes from Town Branch Creek, a natural waterway that is a tributary of the Elk River. The creek is also fed by the water from Crystal Spring, a nearby natural spring that has flowed for over a hundred years and from which the museum derives its name.

[Long Pause]

NARRATOR: Let's continue now into the next gallery.
Find any bench near the middle of the space for our next
stop.

[End of Stop]

Near People on the Move Gallery

GUIDE: At the center of this gallery, you'll notice wood is everywhere. This material speaks to the importance of *place* in Safdie's designs. Above you, the wood beams are crafted of many layers of Southern white pine, glue-laminated together and shaped by craftsmen in Magnolia, Arkansas. At your feet, the wood floors are made of red oak, milled in Monticello, Arkansas. The benches you see throughout the galleries were built of wood milled from oak and walnut trees that were cut down during construction of this museum.

[Long Pause]

NARRATOR: Continue on to the far end of this gallery and look to your left, where you'll find a door that provides a view out to the central patio below, known as Walker Landing. Although you can't open the door to go outside, pause there for our next stop.

[End of Stop]

View from Notions of Beauty Gallery

GUIDE: Standing next to this door inside the gallery, look up and out to note the roof beams above. You can see through the glass the massive beams of the ceiling pass through the walls. This helps to visually blur the boundary between indoors and outdoors.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: The view we're looking at offers a good example of how Safdie's architecture serves as a frame to nature: throughout the Museum there are a series of controlled vistas to the outdoors that remind us to slow down and take notice of something beautiful or intriguing, just as you would a framed painting in the gallery. The picture in this particular frame changes with the seasons. In winter, you can see and admire the architecture rising in stepped levels from the pond all the way up to the elevator tower at the entrance. In summer, the view is dominated by the leafy green of the forest and the trees on the landing below.

[Long Pause]

NARRATOR: When you have finished exploring this gallery, move through the doors directly across from this balcony and continue into the next room. Turn to your left to face the two-story wall of windows for our next stop.

[End of Stop]

Reflection Room

GUIDE: From this vantage point you can see the structural systems of the museum's iconic bridges. The cannon-like element inset in the concrete in front of you is the end of the four-inch suspension cable that supports the bridge's roof. The cables are anchored in these concrete structures, called abutments. The shape and massive size of these structures are completely dictated by the engineering needs of the building. The abutments dive more than 30 feet into the ground in order to sustain the enormous amount of weight they must support. We'll talk more about the engineering of the roofs in a future stop.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: You'll notice several small, circular divots in the concrete on the abutment. These are impressions left by the plywood forms used when the concrete walls were cast in place. Now look at the cedar-banded walls to your left and right and notice that the divots left by construction of these walls have been covered up by the inset wood bands. Safdie underscores the functionality of the massive concrete abutments by allowing the divots on them to remain visible.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: Also notice here how the cedar bands line up with the horizontal line of the window frames. The banding is another example of the consistency of the proportions and alignment of materials used throughout the building.

[Long Pause]

NARRATOR: Pass on into the next small gallery and then continue down the stairs, or take the elevator down, to the floor below us. Pause in the small gallery there for our next stop. If you take the stairs, be sure to admire the colorful artwork installed over your head. Created by artist Gabriel Dawe, this installation is an example of artwork inspired by and created especially for the architecture of Crystal Bridges.

[End of Stop]

Lower North Gallery

GUIDE: Notice the change in space in this gallery, as compared to the open feel of the previous galleries. We are entering another area of “compression,” with closer walls and a lower ceiling. This space is designed to close in around you in order to emphasize the openness and magnitude of the next space we’ll enter, one of the museum’s bridge structures.

[Long Pause]

NARRATOR: The doors to your right lead to the museum’s north elevator tower, which provides easy access to the north forest trail on the ridge above us and to the north lawn below. After this tour, we encourage you to take the elevator up and enjoy the view of the Museum campus from the 100-foot-long bridge that connects the elevator tower with the trailhead.

[Short Pause]

NARRATOR: Once you finish enjoying the artwork in this gallery, continue through the double doors and pause just to the right inside the entrance to the gallery bridge.

[End of Stop]

Modern Art Gallery Entrance

GUIDE: Notice the expansiveness of this space and the feeling of brightness from the outside. Safdie wanted this area to feel like an “in-between space,” meaning that it has characteristics of the outdoors while remaining completely enclosed. Above us, sunlight pours through the skylights and across the surfaces of the beams on clear days—making the impression of a glowing halo on the ceiling.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: The large concrete arch above you is a part of the abutment we saw from upstairs. Again, Safdie is allowing the functionality of the building to reveal itself.

[Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: As you can see from this arch, the walls of the museum are from 12 to 18 inches thick. They can widen to 24 inches thick below ground. More than 45,000 cubic yards of concrete were used in construction of the museum complex.

[Long Pause]

NARRATOR: Move along the glass wall to your right. As you go, notice the row of reflections captured in the repeated window panes. Although the glass walls emphasize the size of space, the repeated reflection humanizes its scale. When you reach the center of the bridge, pause and admire the view of the North Lawn for the next stop.

[End of Stop]

Modern Art Gallery Lawn View

GUIDE: The roofs of several of the Museum's buildings utilize a suspension system, meaning that the entire weight of the roof is supported by the suspension cables, while the floors and glass walls rest on concrete piers. Looking up through these windows, you can see how each roof beam has connectors that bolt around the suspension cables at each end.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: The glass walls of the bridges help create the illusion that the massive roofs are floating unsupported. The glass is angled outward at the top by about 12 degrees, contributing to the overall expansive feeling of the interior space. Look at the hardware at the base and top of the glass panes. The vertical poles that extend from the concrete base up to the beams provide lateral support for the glass walls, but do not support the roof. The glass is held in place by “spider connectors” along these poles, while flexible accordion joints along the ceiling allow the glass walls to shift independently of the roof, which can move slightly side to side with changes in temperature.

[Long Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: Outside, you'll see the Fly's Eye Dome, designed by mid-century designer, architect, and theorist Buckminster Fuller in the early 1980s. This structure was conceived as a prototype for a new form of affordable housing. Be sure to come back after this tour and take the elevator down to the north lawn to visit the dome.

[Long Pause]

NARRATOR: Now cross through the center of the bridge to check out the view of the pond and dining bridge to the south.

[End of Stop]

Modern Art Gallery Pond View

The View of the Building

GUIDE: This is Moshe Safdie's favorite view at Crystal Bridges. From this point, for the first time, you can see where you entered, where you are, and where you are going.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: By now you've had time to get immersed in the rhythm of the structure and in the experience of Crystal Bridges and can appreciate the full scope of the campus. This space completely connects art, architecture, and nature by providing a view of them all.

[Long Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: This view brings together several prime elements of Safdie's architecture.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: The square form of the elevator tower to the upper left recalls the stacked-box-like structure of Habitat 67, Safdie's first major building, designed for urban housing in Montreal in 1967, as seen in the photo on your device.

[Long Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: You'll notice that the outer walls of the museum buildings are striped with inset wood bands made of cedar heartwood. There are some 20,000 linear feet of cedar banding throughout the entire museum. Wood bands and curved walls are also featured in Safdie's design of the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles. An image of the Skirball is available for viewing on your device.

[Long Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: Look to your left at the concrete tiers of Walker Landing. The way the landing's circular amphitheater steps down to the water here is inspired by eleventh-century stepwells found in India: These elegant architectural structures are designed to allow access to deep wells through seasonal fluctuations in their water-level.

[End of Stop]

Modern Art Gallery Pond View

The Weir System

GUIDE: Straight ahead of you, under the dining bridge, you can see the weir structures that create the museum's ponds and control water flow.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: Weirs are designed to span the width of a body of water to help control how the water flows. In this case, the weirs serve as a dam, creating the Museum ponds, while also keeping the water level from rising too high.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: They are called “labyrinth weirs” because of their zig-zag-shape which increases their surface area, enabling them to discharge a great deal of water quickly when needed. Water continuously flows over the top of the weirs and through the museum ponds, returning to the natural stream bed to the north, on the other side of this bridge. Town Branch Creek is a natural stream that carries 500,000 gallons of water through the site on an average day, and considerably more after heavy rain.

[Long Pause]

NARRATOR: We encourage you to explore the two galleries located here in this bridge. Once you have done so, please continue down the glass walls and into the hallway that leads to the 1940s to Now Gallery. When you enter this gallery, step to your right for the next stop.

[End of Stop]

Contemporary Art Gallery Entrance

GUIDE: You'll notice that the ceilings here are higher than those of the first gallery we entered. While the wall to your right still matches the height of the ravine edge above, we are one level lower than we were in the galleries across the pond.

[Long Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: This gallery also has curved walls. The long curve of the wall to your right offers an opportunity to present an uninterrupted view of post-World War II American art.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: While the curved walls provide unique opportunities for viewing art, they also present challenges to our preparators who install the artworks. They've invented their own system for hanging large, flat objects on curved walls, sometimes using wedges and special hardware.

[Long Pause]

NARRATOR: Now we'll find our way outside again, to a small balcony overlooking the ponds at the midpoint of this gallery. To get there, follow along this curved wall, and take your first left into a small gallery space. Pass straight through into the side gallery and then turn right and pass through a set of doors into a glass-enclosed vestibule. Feel free to step out onto the balcony overlooking the water, if the weather permits.

[End of Stop]

Contemporary Art Gallery Balcony

GUIDE: This small balcony space feels quite intimate, yet provides expansive views of the museum's architecture and the various materials used in its construction.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: Moshe Safdie chose concrete as his building's material because it is versatile, weathers beautifully, and its weight balances with the visual lightness of all of the glass. Note that the bridge structures appears to defy physics: the heavy concrete almost seems to float on the water, while the seemingly unsupported glass appears to carry the weight of the roof.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: Also note the differences in color of the Museum's cedar banding in the structures across the pond. Where the wood is exposed to the weather, it has faded to a muted silver. Where it is protected, the cedar still retains its fresh-cut red-gold color. Safdie deliberately chose materials that would record the effects of time and nature in much the same way the trees and rocks around us do.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: Also notice the color of the copper roofs. Although these were a very shiny orange color when they were installed, they have now oxidized to a deep brown, and will continue to patina with age. In a few places you can see blue-green streaks of highly oxidized copper runoff along the concrete at the roofline, but in the low-pollution atmosphere of Northwest Arkansas, it is unlikely that the roof itself will ever oxidize to this color.

[Long Pause]

NARRATOR: Now you may retrace your steps to continue your exploration of the 1940s to Now Gallery. When you've finished, pass through the large glass doors into the final reflection space and climb the stairs--or take the large elevator just past the staircase on your right—back up to the museum's restaurant bridge. Enjoy the view as you move along the glass walls on your left, then pause near the big gold heart at the center of the bridge for our next stop.

[End of Stop]

Eleven

GUIDE: In the restaurant space, skylights in the roof of the bridge allow sunlight to interact with the wood beams, glass walls, and—with particularly stunning effect—the *Hanging Heart* sculpture by artist Jeff Koons. In the work’s mirror-like surface, the roof beams and light from the skylights and windows are reflected and bent to create ever-changing patterns. Because of the curved roof beams and its placement at the center of activity, Alice Walton, the Museum’s founder, calls this spot “the heart in the ribcage.”

[Long Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: From this vantage point you can enjoy views of both the lower pond, where we just came from, and the upper pond, where we are yet to go.

[Short Pause]

NARRATOR: With your back to the lower pond and the gallery bridge, look through the windows on the opposite side of the restaurant to the south. On the left you see the tall face of a glass corridor curving around the water to the Great Hall which juts out into the pond in front of you. The third floor of this corridor holds the museum's library, which is open to the public and features more than 60,000 volumes of art history reference materials. It also offers one of the best views anywhere on the Museum's campus. We encourage you to take time to visit the library after your tour.

[Long Pause]

GUIDE: On the right side of the Great Hall, you can see the inlet where Town Branch creek flows into the museum's campus to form the upper pond. The upper pond drops ten feet over the weir under this bridge down to the lower pond on the other side. As this is a natural waterway, the color of the ponds changes depending on how much rain we've had. When undisturbed, the ponds are a deep green. Heavy rains stir up the sediment and turn the water a muddy brown.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: While we are talking about the color of the water, I want to draw your attention to the stone tiles at your feet. This natural stone, quarried in China, is green quartzite. Although not native to our region, it was chosen specifically for its similarity to the color of our ponds. This distinctive color is caused by microscopic shale particles suspended in the water, and is common in many lakes and rivers across Northwest Arkansas.

[Long Pause]

NARRATOR: Continue on through the restaurant. Just before you re-enter the lobby, you'll pass the museum's Coffee Bar, designed by Arkansas-based architect Marlon Blackwell who also created the award-winning interior design for our Museum store, which is located just across the courtyard.

[Short Pause]

NARRATOR CONTINUES: When you reach the lobby, turn right, pass the guest services desk, and walk a ways down the long, curved hallway to pause somewhere along the row of windows for our next stop.

[End of Stop]

Great Hall Corridor Windows

GUIDE: The light-filled colonnade is a key element of Safdie's design. The spacing of the window panels continues the rhythmic pacing of the entry colonnade and of the columns of the main lobby. Natural light floods this space even in gray weather, and the water reflects the light in ripples on the walls and ceiling at certain times of day.

[Long Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: Moshe Safdie has incorporated a similar grand colonnade in almost all of his buildings. Look at your screen now to view an image of one such example in the National Gallery of Canada.

[Long Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: Run your hand along the concrete columns as you pass through this space. The silky smoothness of the architectural concrete may surprise you. Every concrete surface at Crystal Bridges has been hand polished to a texture that mimics marble.

[Short Pause]

NARRATOR: Continue down this hallway and, if weather permits, step out onto the balcony you'll see to your right halfway along the corridor.

[End of Stop]

Great Hall Corridor Balcony

GUIDE: From this viewpoint, you can see how the cables that support the Great Hall's roof are anchored to the bedrock below.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: You can also see that here, too, the curve of the building to your left follows the natural shape of the ravine, with one surprising exception. About midway along the corridor, you can see two large tulip trees rising above the ridgeline. The original plan for the museum called for the removal of these mature trees, but Museum founder, Alice Walton, was reluctant to cut them down. She asked Moshe Safdie to adapt his design in order to spare the trees, and he added a semi-circular cut-out along the back curve of the corridor, allowing the trees to remain in place. Because of their proximity to the cliff's edge, the contractors nicknamed these trees "Thelma and Louise." They now serve as models for the logo of Eleven, Crystal Bridges' restaurant.

[Long Pause]

NARRATOR: Resume your walk down the Great Hall Corridor until you reach a large reflection area opening to your left. Pause here for our last stop.

[End of Stop]

Corridor Reflection Room

GUIDE: Enjoy the serene and peaceful view from this reflection area. If the space is busy or closed for installation, look at your screen to view a photograph of it.

[Short Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: This multi-use space features what is perhaps the best example in the museum of the architecture serving as a frame for nature. The large windows look out onto a scene that serves as a beautiful rock garden showcasing native plants. This engineered landscape also has a functional purpose as part of the water management system. Although it is usually dry, this area is an important natural drainage path during major rain events. The museum's landscape architects constructed this dry-creek landscape and drain system to prevent erosion and also to safely carry rainwater—which might contain runoff from the parking lot—away from the ponds.

[Long Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: Crystal Bridges' trails and grounds teams are devoted to creating and maintaining a landscape around the museum that features native Ozark plants and carefully balances accessibility for our guests with the health and well-being of our forest and pond system.

[Long Pause]

GUIDE CONTINUES: Turn around and walk over to the glass wall overlooking the ponds. Architect Moshe Safdie was called in to execute the vision of Alice Walton, and design a museum of American art that nestles into its natural setting, welcoming all to enjoy art, nature, and a building that unifies them.

Crystal Bridges Museum embodies the culmination of Safdie's lifetime of dedicated experimentation and practice, and now stands as a monument to his enduring belief that architecture elevates the human spirit and connects communities with their natural world. In Moshe Safdie's words "I think you need to, as an architect, understand the essence of a place and create a building that feels like it resonates with the culture of a place."

This is what Crystal Bridges does.

[Long Pause]

NARRATOR: This concludes our architecture tour. Thank you for joining us. From here, you have two options. You can retrace your steps back toward the main lobby or continue along the Great Hall Corridor to the south lobby, exiting the building there to visit the Frank Lloyd Wright house and explore the trails. Remember, if you've borrowed a device, please drop it off before going outside. Be sure to check out our outdoor app, CB Outdoors, on your own device for trail maps, photos, and additional information about the natural features, native plants, and outdoor artworks you'll find on Crystal Bridges grounds. Thank you for joining us on this tour and enjoy the rest of your visit!

[End of Stop]