

## Business With Pleasure

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In June 2006, the Economics and Security Committee of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly visited one of the fastest growing metropolitan regions in the United States, home to three of the country's largest corporations and a major hub of global trade. Yet its population density is barely 150 people per square mile (compared to, for example, Chicago's 12,649). The area is Northwest Arkansas; home to Tyson Foods, J.B. Hunt, and Walmart, one of the country's top-earning corporations (\$405 billion in FY 2009) and its largest private employer (with a workforce of 1.4 million people, second only to the U.S. Government). NATO delegates visited the area because they saw it as a "positive example of local economic development through global business activity."<sup>1</sup> Because of its international position, Northwest Arkansas—otherwise known as the Fayetteville-Springdale-Rogers Metropolitan Statistical Area—is arguably a global city. However, the diffuse, remote, and until recently, demographically homogeneous region shares few of the characteristics associated with such a category. Thanks to this surprising mix of ingredients, the region demonstrates certain latent radicalities in mobility, programming, and cultural production, each linked to specific spatial conditions at infrastructural, architectural, and regional levels. Taken together they suggest that these diffuse metropolitan conditions are producing new forms of urbanity and could be vital sites of experimentation.

### RECONNAISSANCE

Rather than "leap frogging"—opening stores in locations not immediately adjacent to existing Walmart holdings—the company builds steadily outward from its headquarters in Bentonville. In the early years of

its operation, this territory was concentrated around Northwest Arkansas and could be managed by driving from location to location. However, as Walmart continued to expand it became increasingly difficult for Sam Walton to visit all his sites by car with a frequency that satisfied him. To resolve this difficulty, Walton purchased a small private airplane and would instead fly from store to store. According to Walton, "Once I took to the air, I caught store fever."<sup>2</sup> This fervent approach to expansion enabled by air transport also brought with it certain ways of understanding the terrain only visible from the pilot's seat. These aircraft are agile in terms of maneuverability but also in their capacity to access the nation's numerous small municipal airports. Without the constraints of roads, Walton could fly directly from location to location. He could also scout for real estate from a privileged vantage point. Walton's reliance on private, small-scale air travel demonstrates an opportunistic approach to mobility infrastructure that in turn suggests novel ways to approach the connection of territory in general. Faster and more direct than an automobile, but capable of slowing down and zooming in, Walton's planes allowed him to access his territory quickly but also to understand it in ways that anticipated the aerial imagery that would soon dominate the company's location practices. John Huey, Walton's ghostwriter, observed that Walton used his plane, "pretty much like a station wagon. He would just go out, get in it, turn the key and leave. Never any checklist. One time we took off and the door wasn't closed yet. He would swoop down low and say, 'Okay, you look for the airport' and the FAA would come on and tell him he wasn't allowed to be that low and he'd just turn off the radio."<sup>3</sup> This description suggests the

casualness— and perhaps recklessness—with which Walton operated his aircraft. However, this willingness to challenge the limits of a certain set of infrastructural protocols allowed his company to grow in an unprecedented way. By taking off without proper checks, flying too low, or landing without permission, Walton was certainly taking risks, calculated as they may have been. As the same time, his reluctance to be there and an uncertainty of how long they shall remain. The buildings themselves, however, will remain and will continue to absorb the continuing supply of suppliers who come from a range of places, and many from large cities. Through this process of locating adjacent to Walmart headquarters they also bring with them their own habits, desires, and needs that in turn trigger subsequent transformations at larger social and cultural levels.<sup>4</sup>

### COLLECTION

In 2005, the 1859 painting “Kindred Spirits” by Asher B. Durand was sold by the New York Public Library to expand its endowment. The favored bidder going into the auction was a joint effort by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Art. However, to the surprise of many, their bid was substantially surpassed by that of Alice Walton who purchased the painting for over \$35 million as part of her effort to develop one of the premier collections of American art. Alice Walton is the daughter of Helen and Sam Walton and considered to be the second wealthiest woman in the world with a fortune estimated at \$19.5 billion (the top spot goes to Christy Walton, the widow of Alice Walton’s brother worth \$ 20 billion). The collection Walton is currently amassing will be housed in a museum complex called Crystal Bridges. The new project is designed by Moshe Safdie and currently under construction at a site that is only a short walk from the main square in downtown Bentonville. If a complaint about attenuated settlement patterns in America is their dearth of cultural institutions, then Walton’s efforts to build up Crystal Bridges offers a potent counterexample. Likewise, it would seem, perhaps obviously, that intense concentrations of wealth are able to override certain path-determinants. However, the institutional patrons of the past were often located in cities not just out of choice but also out of necessity. Furthermore, in the case of cultural institutions at least, there is also the need for an audience, making urban concentrations desirable because of the assured presence of visitors.

Walton seems to be genuine in her educational and philanthropic impulses and while her collection may be a sound investment, who exactly, one wonders, will end up visiting this museum? Certainly Crystal Bridges is part of a larger redevelopment effort and one that hopes to attract new tourists to the region. However, the asymmetry between institutional scope and local constituencies remains significant. In this sense, Crystal Bridges is designed to produce its own audiences located in large regional populations. Thus the museum cannot be understood as being only for municipal Bentonville but is designed to be both regional attraction and growth catalyst. Given Walmart’s success accommodating a “pull” economy in which consumer demand dictates growth decisions, it is surprising to see Crystal Bridges “pushing” its supply onto a public that may or may not be interested. However, in the same way that Walmart can effectively produce desire in its consumers, so too could Walton succeed in creating new groups around her museum. The implications of this privatization of culture notwithstanding, if Walton’s wager pays off, it will challenge certain assumptions about growth. Rather than cultural institutions resulting from urbanization, the institution comes first with the hope that the city will follow.

So what can these three examples tell us about the metropolis? In her essay “Why Cities Matter,” Saskia Sassen writes, “The more these [information] technologies enable global geographic dispersal of corporate activities, the more they produce density and centrality at the other end; the cities where their headquarter functions get done.”<sup>5</sup> But in the case of Walmart, a geographically dispersed corporation if there ever was one, its “other end”—while most certainly a concentration of power and technology—is not part of a global city and is hardly even recognizably urban. And to some extent, this is fine with Walmart because they have little to gain from the complications that would arise from a visible urban presence. Rather they seem content to operate on the geographical margins while in the mainstream of the market. Indeed, the growth of the region has never been in relationship to an urban core. It has always been a rural condition speckled with small concentrations of populations. As the area has developed, largely as a result of Walmart’s astonishing growth, its character has continued need to transform. Northwest Arkansas is functioning as a kind of metropolitan laboratory whose suppleness can sustain experimentation,

supported here by the casual use of one infrastructure to supersede another, new hybrid forms of inhabitation and work, and counter-intuitive sites of cultural production. This in turn suggests the continued to understand and develop the possibilities latent in such diffuse metropolitan environments.

#### ENDNOTES

1 "NATO Group Tours Arkansas Wal-Mart Boom," *Associated Press*, June 27, 2006.

2 Sam Walton and John Huey, *Sam Walton: Made In America, My Story*, (New York: Bantam, 1992), 52.

3 John Huey, quoted in *A&E Biography: Sam Walton - Bargain Billionaire*, (A&E DVD Archives, 2004).

4 For example, in the last four years, a mosque and a synagogue have both been established in Bentonville, the latter also functioning as a Hindu prayer space from time to time.

5 Saskia Sassen, "Why Cities Matter," in *Cities, Architecture, and Society*: exhibition catalogue of the 10th International Architecture Exhibition, Arsenale, Venice (Venice: Marsilio, 2006), 38.