

## ***Planning News – Commentary***

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### **Bentonville West**

I am not a big fan of Wal-Mart, which is actually rather surprising. I went to college an hour north of Wal-Mart headquarters, was in classes with some of the Walton clan, attended Economics 101 in a building named after a wealthy Wal-Mart corporate alumnus and even took Sam Walton's granddaughter to a fraternity dance! In southern Missouri, we knew about Wal-Mart years before the rest of the country did. We also saw its impacts in our communities long before the Wal-Mart effect played out nationally.

So, I have been watching with piqued interest the progression of the renovation of the former downtown Macy's into a new Wal-Mart. For those who follow these things, Wal-Mart has apparently saturated the rural/suburban hinterlands of America and now, like so many millennial, empty-nesters and creative class-serving companies, has set its sights on immersion into the urban frontier.

Stranger bedfellows I cannot imagine. By way of comparison, Seattle-based Costco has always focused on urban infill sites, invests in well-paid, engaged employees, stocks many local products and exudes a savvy city-centric vibe. Not Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart doesn't know how to "do" urban. It is not in their rural Arkansas DNA.

Proof of this can be seen in their Macy's conversion on King Street. They first completely boarded up what little window display space there was along all street fronts, further creating a cold wall to pedestrians. Their garish outside signs now provide the only visual interest on three sides of the box-building. They then closed the makai entrance on King Street, replacing it with a blacked-out emergency exit. The sole remaining entrances look cartoon-ishly squat and the only feature visible from the narrow entries is a metal-detector/shop-lifting alarm right at the glass doors.....not the most inviting retail experience from my perspective.

From what I can surmise, Wal-Mart designers just took their cookie-cutter, standard issue, rural sprawl-box and plopped it down into the center of one of the most potentially-pedestrian friendly corridors in one of the densest urban cities in the country. What a shame, this missed opportunity. What could have anchored an active urban pedestrian thoroughfare and urban space, instead completely removes itself from its context, shuns pedestrians and turns its back on its other urban retail neighbors. While the prices are certainly low and range of products large, I won't be shopping at Wal-Mart. I am going to vote with my dollars and not support a company that doesn't support good urban planning values.