The Court Archive:
Mid-Continent Modern Courthouse in Elgin

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Illinois courthouse architecture evolved from simple log cabins to frame structures to classical revival temples of justices to Richardsonian Romanesque castles to art deco concrete structures to brutalist buildings to post-modern brick and stone courthouses. Generally overlooked in this progression is mid-century modern, which lasted from approximately 1945 to 1970. Mid-century modern architecture can be found all over the United States, but a distinctive form, called mid-continent modern, can be found in the Midwest. This style is epitomized by the work of architect A. Richard Williams and the Second Judicial District Appellate Courthouse in Elgin, Illinois.

In 1964, Illinois replaced its judicial article in the 1870 constitution. Prior to 1964, Illinois had four appellate districts but expanded to five with the new article. The appellate courthouses in Mt. Vernon, Springfield, Ottawa, and Chicago remained in use, and a new appellate courthouse needed to be built in the Second Judicial District, which encompassed 15 northern Illinois counties. Elgin was selected as the site, and the Bloomington architectural firm of Lundeen and Hilfinger was chosen to design the building. A. Richard Williams served as the principal designer.

Williams's design placed the courtroom in the center of the building with offices, library, and file rooms radiating concentrically from the center. The second floor included apartments for the appellate justices. Inside the courtroom, vertical teak planks extend from floor to ceiling creating simple lines of formal simplicity, typical of the mid-continent modern style. The dark teak and red center opening that stretches above the roof also evokes an understated design that is quite similar to Frank Lloyd's Wright prairie style of decades prior.

The Second Judicial Appellate District Courthouse opened in 1966, hearing appeals from northern Illinois counties. In 2022, the Illinois legislature redistricted the judicial districts, reducing the second appellate district to five counties: Lake, McHenry, Kane, Kendall, and DeKalb.

Richard “Dick” Williams was born in Evanston in 1914, moved to Bloomington, and graduated from the University of Illinois and M.I.T. After naval service in World War II, he moved to Champaign to become an architecture professor at the University of Illinois from 1946 to 1970.

Williams was critical of pretentious modern and postmodern architectural styles. Instead, he emphasized a more modest style that reflected harmony with natural features. While the Elgin courthouse is one of Williams’s finest examples of mid-continent modern architecture, he had impressive buildings throughout the Midwest, including the College of Education Building at the University of Illinois, the Concordia Seminary Library in Springfield, the St. Ignace Public Library in Michigan, Bloomington (Illinois) High School, and many residences. Williams died at the age of 100 in 2014.

Members of the Illinois Supreme Court Historic Preservation Commission met Williams at the Elgin courthouse for a tour and conducted a brief oral history interview before his death. For further information, see, https://www.illinoiscourthistory.org/News/35/Tour-of-2nd-Appellate-Court-Elgin-Illinois-with-architect-A-Richard-Williams-faia/news-detail/.