Modern Architecture, Urban Design & the Suburban Streetscape

Celebrating Edgar I. Williams, New Jersey Architect, on the 125th Anniversary of his birth

by Janet W. Foster

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Edgar I. Williams (1884–1974) was a New Jersey architect of the generation that bridged neoclassicism to modernism. He spent his professional lifetime trying to balance these two impulses. Although trained as an architect, his best work reflects a capacity to understand larger and more complex groups of buildings, in the way a modern Urban Designer would. Williams' life occurred in a period of unprecedented change in the material circumstances and surroundings of Americans, and the development of "modernity" in all the ways we know it.

Edgar Williams was raised in Rutherford, NJ, a Bergen County community that was developed as a suburb of New York City, less than 10 miles away. The family valued education—and had the money to support it—sending Edgar and his brother to private boarding schools, college, and graduate school, punctuated with educational trips abroad. Edgar's brother, William Carlos Williams was trained as a physician and served as a general practitioner and pediatrician in Rutherford for most of his adult life. But his name is best known to posterity as a poet of Modernism, part of a movement of writers and poets in the 20th century who broke the old strictures of rhyme and cadence that had bound English language poetry for centuries. Edgar, the younger brother, pursued his interest in the arts not in literature but through architecture. He earned his undergraduate degree at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1908, and then stayed on for a year to earn a master's degree in architecture there in 1909. MIT is the oldest architectural training school in the United States, having been established in 1865.

Both his senior thesis and his graduate thesis from MIT clearly show the influence of the Beaux Arts training that was the standard for teaching in American architectural schools in the latter 19th century. The official French School of the Fine Arts, or *Ecole des Beaux Arts* was probably the most prestigious institution for training architects, sculptors and painters during the 19th century. Its curriculum focused on learning the famous monuments of the Classical legacy of Greece and Rome, and the successful reiterations of the classical styles in Renaissance buildings, sculpture, and painting. Although creativity was expected, it was to be held within a realm of teachable, quantifiable elements. "Good design" in architecture could be identified and measured through the application of classical proportions, rules of appropriate use (which order of column was appropriately placed on what building), and a clarity of floor plan and design that emphasized the role of the human form in a procession through space.

His undergraduate "thesis" or final studio project was for a theater and opera house. The design drew heavily from French academic classicism, and is the sort of derivative design that guaranteed him a respectable grade. His watercolor elevation drawing, while beautiful in its execution, was nothing remarkable in 1908—indeed, it merely showed his proficiency at the type of architectural drawing then being taught and promoted in the United States and Europe.

Despite his classical education, Williams was a young man interested in the modern life around him. He wrote as an introduction to an undergraduate paper, "The spirit of advance which has characterized the past half century in this country has found its way into almost all the channels of human occupation."[1] Williams' Master's Thesis, "A Summer Resort in the Mountains Designed Especially for Those Interested in Aviation" was jointly done with Mabel Keys Babcock, a landscape architect.[2] The site and architectural program appear to be entirely imaginary; there is no evidence that either Williams or Babcock knew how to pilot an airplane or what was required for take-offs and landings. But it was clear they were fascinated with the new invention of airplanes and even in 1909 they could foresee that air travel would not only be possible for many, but that it would open new locations for development. It was apparently more an urban design study for a rich man's resort than a single architectural solution, proposing airfields, hotel, nearby village with commercial establishments, clubs, and housing for the workers who kept the resort going. Alas, only the text and not the drawings for this thesis survive.

In the great classical tradition of arts education, a young man would travel to Europe to learn first-hand the artistic and architectural legacy there through the "Grand Tour." So despite his affection for modernity, Williams followed this traditional track, and

went to Italy. He must have continued to study architecture on his own, for in his third year out from MIT, he won the Rome Prize in architecture.

The Rome Prize continues to be awarded annually to a group of talented Americans who can make the case that their professional lives would be enhanced by a year of study in Italy. Rome prize winners are funded for a year of study; the American Academy in Rome still occupies the McKim, Mead and White-designed building where Edgar Williams would have stayed in during his time there. The Rome Prize allowed Williams the opportunity to see first hand, and draw and photograph, many monuments of Roman antiquity. It also put him firmly within an elite circle of architects and artists, who, having been awarded the Rome Prize, could return to the U.S. with the best connections and the best prospects for a smooth career path.

One outcome of Williams' Italian sojourn was a short article published in *Landscape Architecture,* on Isola Bella, an island in Lake Maggiore in northern Italy. An estate that came to be built there from 1654 to 1690 took the same name. Williams documented the existing buildings, and then produced a design to complete the development of the island, which had been halted at the death of its patron, Count Borromeo, in 1690. In his fantasy reconstruction, he returned to some of the ideas of his thesis, creating a new access point, or dock, as well as a Fisherman's Village for the local residents and support staff of the palatial villa and its gardens. He concludes, "The real charm of Isola Bella is in the ensemble...Its effect is not in the details...but in the broad sweeping lines."[3] Such a macro view of the role of architecture, site, and landscape is also evident in his work in his hometown of Rutherford, New Jersey.

On his return to the States in 1912, Edgar I. Williams began to teach architecture at MIT, and then Columbia University, while maintaining a small private practice. His academic life, and the Rome Prize connections, no doubt drew him to membership in the National Academy of Design (a New York-based organization that advocated for tradition in art) and eventually he served as its president. The National Academy of Design, if not an active opponent of Modernism in design, became a bastion of conservatism in the arts, becoming every more so as the 20th century went on. Williams also served on boards of other New York organizations that promoted "good design" and tended to shun the avant-garde, the Architectural League and the Municipal Art Society. As such, he was very much a "gentleman architect" who could pick and choose commissions, and operated in the clubby circles of New York's wealthy elite.

Yet, the modernity that shone through in his youthful thesis stayed with him, and Williams's buildings, at least in Rutherford, show that he was always considering how to balance the inherited traditions of classicism and "Good Design" with the insistent rumblings of modern materials and forms.

The earliest monument in Rutherford of Williams' design is the World War I memorial, or "Soldiers and Sailors Monument" located at the center of a busy intersection. The site was, at the time the monument was commissioned in 1918, a large, disorderly intersection of five streets, at the junction between the residential and commercial parts of town. Williams had in fact grown up just down the street.

The monument is at first glance an exercise in the Beaux Arts training he had received—a single masonry column on a drum-like plinth, with bronze eagles on each corner of the plinth and a bronze tablet commemorating the names of nineteen war-dead affixed to the plinth. Simple and sober in design, it recalls a long tradition of single columns erected in civic spaces to commemorate people and events of great importance.

However, closer inspection reveals that the Rutherford War Memorial is not just a copy of an old form and idea. It is made of cast stone—a close cousin to concrete and an innovative material in the early 20th century. Cast stone used real stone chips as the aggregate, bound together in a lime-based cement. In the case of the Rutherford monument, granite is the primary aggregate material, giving rise to the local belief that the war memorial is "granite." It is a very good "synthetic"—cast stone is not an inferior material, and depending on the materials used it and the extent of its design work, not necessarily less expensive.

Cast stone's interest for the designer comes from the fact that cast stone can be poured—or cast—into a mold, thus allowing more design flexibility for a more economical price than carving a sold block of granite into a column form. The cast stone monument is essentially a hollow tube, which allows electrical wiring to go up and inside the column shaft and provide power to the monument's most interesting feature, the electric light on top shaped like a flame. The idea of the "eternal flame" as a memorial device is one that dates back to antiquity, but it is here realized in the most modern terms, with a light bulb, albeit a fancy one. It may not be the most successful translation of ancient funerary ideas to modern form and location as the light on top turns the monument into a kind of lighthouse in a traffic island. But its youthful designer saw it through the eyes of his classical idealism, and, as Edgar Williams wrote, the illuminated glass torch "symbolizes the light which our boys helped give the world."[4]

The location of the monument began to give order and form to the intersection. Williams was able to return to the intersection two more times in his career, and thus patiently shaped this section of Rutherford into something resembling the formal civic

spaces he admired so much. The war memorial showed how Williams' conservative Beaux Arts training came through in the urban design aspects of the commission. It also showed how Modernism, in the use of cast-stone as a material, and in the addition of an electric "eternal flame," was entering into his personal architectural vocabulary.

Williams received the commission to act as designer of the Rutherford Post Office, constructed as part of the great WPA (Works Projects Administration) program of Post Office construction from 1935 to 1936. The size and general layout of Post Office buildings was controlled by oversight from the Secretary of the Treasury's Office, but local architects could create individual expressions reflecting their local heritage, and use materials and forms that best reflected the community's needs and aspirations.

In New Jersey, WPA-era post offices overwhelmingly reflected a taste for the Colonial Revival style. New Jersey communities with 18th century roots (and there are many) and with Revolutionary War associations were particularly likely to construct a Post Office with design allusions to that past in multi-paned wooden windows, central cupolas, and dentil molding at the cornice. Rutherford had no particular 18th century history as a community—its development was not spurred until the post-Civil war period when it became a pleasant commuter suburb to New York City. So Williams looked at the sophisticated architecture of New York City in designing Rutherford's Post Office, and created a design strongly influenced by Art Deco. It was essentially a "modern" look at classical architecture, with applied decorative elements stripped away and design interest coming from manipulations within the dark brickwork and in the form of the building itself. The plan is a flattened "Y," putting its main entry on the corner to directly address the traffic circle and War Memorial there. There are niches flanking the main entry, and a clearly demarcated cornice and water table, expressed through variations in the laying of the smooth, blackish-red brick. The building is a very good expression of Beaux Arts planning—symmetrical, with a center entry clearly identified visually and reached by paired staircases. Williams' classical training is still very much a part of his architecture, even when the exterior details look to contemporary work.

Just following the construction of the Post Office, Williams wrote an article for *American Architect and Architecture*. In it, he argued for the return of the architectural competition for commissions for public buildings. It seems that he took pen to paper following heated arguments at a 1937 American Institute of Architects meeting, where the subject came up. Established "old guard" architectural firms were being "pre-qualified" and "short-listed" for many government contracts, and though they of course argued that this was a rational approach to allocating architectural work, those on the outside of this charmed circle were not in agreement.

In the article, Williams applauded the fact that the Board of Design for the New York World's Fair of 1939, then in its planning stages, had held a competition for a building and among the finalists and winners, none of the "older established firms" were represented. Williams said that "the results of the competition showed much vulgarity" but he applauded the new ideas that were introduced to the design of the World's Fair.[5] As a student, his own Beaux Arts training would have been a series of student competitions, so he had participated in his fair share. His Rome Prize was won based upon competitive submissions to a jury. That Williams, by 1937 an established figure in the New York architectural scene, could argue for open competitions was both a nod to his own training, and an acknowledgement that youth and new ideas needed a way to be seen and developed. Williams' architectural practice, mostly in and around New York City, included service as consulting architect for the New York Public Library, overseeing the library's architectural needs in the 1930s and '40s.[6] He himself did not rely on competitions to gain his work—but he liked the idea of them for the up and coming.

He was no radical; he characterized the emerging Modern designs that would delight millions of visitors to the World's Fair as having "little of an inspiring nature."[7] Williams wrote no manifestoes for abandonment of classical forms for the new, such as were beginning to appear in the architectural press with the writings of European architects who had trained at the Bauhaus in Germany, and were now fleeing to the United States as the Nazis rose to power. The placement of these Europeans in major American architectural schools—Marcel Breuer and Walter Gropius at Harvard, Mies van der Rohe at Chicago's Armour Institute of Technology (later renamed Illinois Institute of Technology)—had a significant influence in turning American architectural education away from the Beaux Arts and its classical training and toward a modernist aesthetic.

That Williams began to feel out of place in this rising generation of architects and architectural ideas is apparent in his 1959 article, "The Dear Old Timers" in which he argues that the modernist approach to toss out history is wrong. He suggests that there is something to learn even from the late 19th century practitioners in America, those "Victorian" architects who, along with their buildings, were at their low point in public esteem in the 1950s. The piece reads like the rant of an old man, who is losing patience with the younger generation, and there are many digressions in his thoughts. He bemoans the loss of quality in architecture of the day, in both materials and the imagination that fires the design. Williams recommends to other members of his profession to re-examine the work of earlier architects; to look at the materials, and return to the boldness of innovation with conviction.[8] Not a bad prescription for any age, although clearly for him, it was more rooted in his personal circumstances than

anything.

For a man who had learned to innovate within the classical guidelines, and who appreciated history, the commission for Rutherford's new public library in the 1950s must have been particularly difficult. The town library had long occupied the old (and de-consecrated) Presbyterian church building, a frame building outgrown by the congregation by the 1870s. But the library building/former church was in poor condition by the 1950s, and Williams saw that it had to go to provide the space, structural capacity, and access needed for a modern library building.

During the 1950s, he was chairman of the Rutherford Planning Board and he led the decision to improve the library, while keeping it at this location. Many communities at the time were rebuilding libraries, town halls, and other civic functions on the outskirts of town, in more modern "suburban" facilities that could provide parking and more expansive single-story buildings. Williams advocated keeping the library in town, in its traditional location, in part because it enabled Williams finish a unified vision for the civic center of the community, returning to the intersection that was the location of his first local commission.

Surely, Williams had designed both the war memorial in 1920 and the Post Office in 1936 with the old and new church buildings across the way in mind. The "new" Presbyterian church, an impressive Romanesque Revival brownstone building completed in 1888-90, stood across the street from the old one. Both faced the intersection which is anchored by Williams' World War I memorial, and faced his 1936 Post Office. The entrance of the Post Office was in fact angled to face the war memorial and the old church/library, creating a strong axis that helps to knit together two sides of a rather broad expanse of paved street.

So Williams designed the new library with a form that both balanced his Post Office across the way, in its basic monumental single-story form, and offered a nod to the imposing Presbyterian church to the north in its cut brownstone facade. The two Williams buildings, the Post Office and library, offer a strong civic presence; their forms giving dignity and a scale to balance the large 1887 Presbyterian church with its central square tower.

The library design is, like the post office, a Modern interpretation of classicism, of the sort that was being strongly advocated through the work of Louis Kahn and Eero Saarinen in the 1950s. Williams in fact worked with Sarrinen in the 1950s when he had the commission to redesign American embassies around the world.[9] Saarinen is today recognized as one of the great designer of mid-20th century American architecture, particularly for his "modern classicism." The library has a trapezoidal form that maximizes the use of the triangular lot, and is sited so the main entry is on a clipped corner, like the Post Office, which it faces across the War Memorial. Williams incorporated cut brownstone in the façade elevation, a reference to the brownstone Presbyterian church and a common, historic building material in the area in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Williams knew about the use of brownstone in early Bergen County buildings, both from observation and then from involvement in the effort to move and restore the Ackerman Farmhouse. Built in 1820 in what is now East Rutherford, an area that became heavily industrialized and developed in the 20th century, the house was slated for demolition in the 1950s. The building was recognized as historic, a classic "Dutch Colonial" with hand-cut brownstone blocks on the façade, rough cut brownstone on the sides, and the characteristic graceful gambrel roof with sweeping eaves. It was moved and rebuilt on the corner of Union Avenue and Prospect Place in Rutherford in a quiet residential neighborhood under Edgar Williams' supervision in 1957-58. Williams' interest in setting and place-making is evident even in this project, for he arranged for the old farmhouse to be placed near another, early dwelling. The two are sited facing in opposite directions; an addition that has the scale and materials of an authentic kitchen wing connects the rear portions of each old farmhouse into a single structure.

Edgar Williams did one other building in Rutherford. It is Becton Hall, built as the first new structure for the Fairleigh Dickinson University when it was created. The institution acquired the Queen Anne/Romanesque mansion known as Iviswold (1869/1887) and its extensive grounds in the 1950s, and set about developing a new, private university there. As a local architect of some prominence, Williams was called upon to design Becton Hall, and he produced a straight-forward Georgian-style structure that calls upon a long tradition of American academic buildings from Harvard University to William and Mary College. It is simple, well-made, and a complete anachronism to both the adjacent, existing Victorian house and the slightly later, Modernist buildings that were constructed by other architects on the rest of the campus. Williams did not have an on-going association with Fairleigh Dickinson after designing Becton Hall. One wonders if he had been offered an opportunity to master plan the campus if he might not have had more success at the university.

Edgar Williams' work is not ground-breaking; but his architectural work in Rutherford provides a good opportunity to follow the development of a traditional modernist or modern traditionalist. The solid body of his work that survives in Rutherford shows how one architect tried to balance tradition and modernity during a generational shift in architecture, design and culture that saw all architects dealing with the changes. The introduction of a vast array of new materials, and

Modernism's "clean slate" approach to history was both exciting and terrifying. How to build for the ages when the ethos of the age was to be "new" and outside of history?

Author's note: This article owes its inspiration and its research foundation to Rod Leith, Borough Historian of Rutherford, and a long-time member of the Historic Preservation Commission there. He first brought Edgar Williams to my attention, and Rod's meticulous research brought to light several of the source materials quoted here. His efforts are acknowledged and saluted. Mr. Leith will be conducting a tour of Edgar I. Williams' work in Rutherford as part of the William Carlos Williams Poetry Symposium, held this year on October 3, 2009.

1. Williams, Edgar, "A Large Establishment in the Country for the Celibration [sic] of Histrionic Festivals," Student paper, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1908; courtesy MIT Document Services.

2. Babcock, Mabel Keyes and Williams, Edgar Irving, "M.S. Thesis—Course V, May 1909," Student Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1909; courtesy MIT Document Services.

3. Williams, Edgar I., "Island in Lake Maggiore, Italy," *Landscape Architecture,* 1914.

4. Coyne, Kevin. "The War to End All Wars? If Only...," *The New York Times,* New Jersey section, November 11, 2007. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/11/nyregion/nyregionspecia12/11colnj.html

5. Williams, Edgar, I., "Architectural Competition...A Hope," *American Architect and Architecture,* Vol. 5, March 1937, pages 27 & 28.

6. 1. Edgar I. Williams in "Class Review," *Technology Review,* May 1974.

7. Ibid, page 28.

8. Williams, Edgar I., "The Dear Old Timers," *AIA Journal,* Vol. 45, July 1959, pages 33–35.

9. *Technology Review,* Ibid.

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She will begin a series of articles about the history of New Jersey's architecture in the December issue of Garden State Legacy.