



# Will County Courthouse

## *Joliet*

“The Will County Courthouse presents limitless reuse options. Its large footprint and historic function as a multifunctional space provides for immediate adaptability. It would be a travesty for the county to repeat past mistakes and not exhaustively explore redevelopment options.”

**- NICHOLAS MACRIS**

*Co-Chair, Courthouse Preservation Partners*



## QUICK STATS

### LOCATION

14 W. Jefferson St.  
Joliet, Will County

### YEAR BUILT

1969

### ARCHITECT

Otto Stark of C.F. Murphy  
Associates & Krugel, Healy &  
Moore

### CURRENT OWNER

Will County



*Credit: Courthouse Preservation Partners*

### HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE

The most unapologetically Brutalist-style building in the region and is the lone Brutalist example of this magnitude in the downtown and greater Joliet area.

### WHY IT IS ENDANGERED

The vacant former county courthouse is at risk of demolition as county officials have not expressed a desire to explore reuse opportunities for the architecturally significant structure.

### TAKE ACTION

Join local advocates in their efforts to encourage public officials to issue an RFP for the redevelopment of the 1969 Will County Courthouse.





# BACKGROUND

The [1969 Will County Courthouse](#) was built as the county's fourth courthouse. It replaced an ornate [1887 structure of native limestone](#) designed by John Colby Cochrane. Because the 1969 courthouse was designed to [house other county departments](#) including the county jail, the Old Will County Jail also became surplus property. Predictably and unfortunately, county officials made the short-sighted decision to demolish both historic structures, which is still resented by local residents.

The 1969 Will County Courthouse is the most unapologetically Brutalist style building in the region and is the lone Brutalist example of this magnitude in the downtown and greater Joliet area. The award-winning design was created by Otto Stark of C.F. Murphy Associates (now JAHN) in partnership with Krugel, Healy & Moore Architects (now Healy Bender Patton & Been Architects). It is thoroughly utilitarian, with an emphasis on form following function rather than architectural embellishments. Key architectural attributes include an unadorned concrete exterior, a lack of interior load-bearing walls or architectural ornament, trayed concrete ceilings and an impressive lobby flanked by triangular concrete forms that frame floor-to-ceiling windows around the entire building.

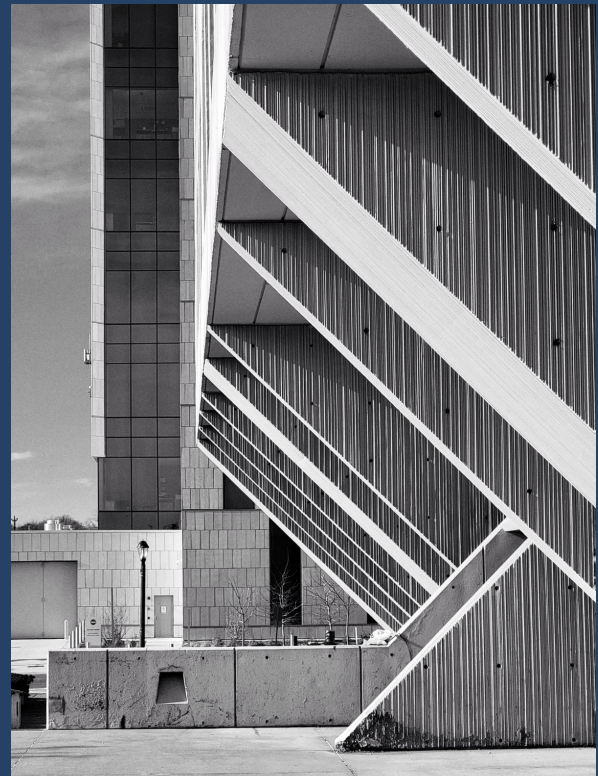
The [1965 Groundbreaking program](#) boasted of the building's modern amenities, stating, "The building will be reinforced concrete cast in place and is designed to a specific module compatible to flexible office arrangement. The interiors will be fully air-conditioned, acoustically treated and designed for efficient use and economical maintenance."





## BACKGROUND cont.

Located on a public square on the Historic Route 66 corridor in downtown Joliet, the imposing courthouse stands in stark contrast to other nearby historical buildings, many of which are designed in an array of late 19th century and early 20th century styles including Beaux Arts, Renaissance Revival, Art Deco and Gothic Revival. With its legacy as the replacement of the 1887 courthouse—one of Joliet’s most cherished historical buildings and mourned architectural losses—the contrasting Brutalist style of the 1969 courthouse serves as the definitive memento of Joliet’s failed urban renewal experiment. For some in the Joliet community, the courthouse symbolizes the loss of opportunity and the decay of downtown during that period; for others, the courthouse is a reminder of past mistakes and could serve as a fulcrum and catalyst for the ongoing downtown renaissance.



*Credit: Courthouse Preservation Partners*

The 1969 Will County Courthouse was built and opened during a tumultuous period, both nationally and locally. Like the courthouse, many government buildings during this period were designed in the Brutalist style. Fittingly and symbolically, the 1969 courthouse, as the center of justice in Will County, has been used frequently as a site for public demonstrations and protests from groups seeking justice on a variety of issues. This structure has served as a center for people challenging the establishment through [protests, demonstrations and riots](#); it stands as a part of regional history that cannot be replaced.





## CURRENT THREAT

On [December 18, 2017](#), the Will County government broke ground to build a modern 365,000-square-foot courthouse, replacing the 140,000-square-foot 1969 courthouse. In early January 2018, members of the Will County Board [indicated a desire](#) to demolish the 1969 structure rather than explore possible reuse. Though consideration was given to reuse, the county board chose not to research possible redevelopment options; instead, it unanimously [passed a resolution](#) on April 18, 2019, calling for demolition.

The [new courthouse opened](#) in November 2020. Concurrently, the 1969 courthouse was closed and the unused structure has suffered from [vandalism](#). In October 2021, some members of the Will County Board's Capital Improvement Committee expressed interest in moving forward with demolition.

Courthouse Preservation Partners, a [local advocacy group](#), formed in the summer of 2021 and launched a pro-redevelopment campaign, with public online meetings commencing in December. The group called for the Will County Board to issue an RFP for redevelopment, and some group members created a [concept plan](#) to serve as an adaptive reuse example. The argument for an [RFP and the concept plan were presented](#) to the Will County Board's Capital Improvement Committee on January 4, 2022. In response, the county board continues to [seek cost estimates for demolition](#) while ignoring the request for redevelopment RFP to be issued.

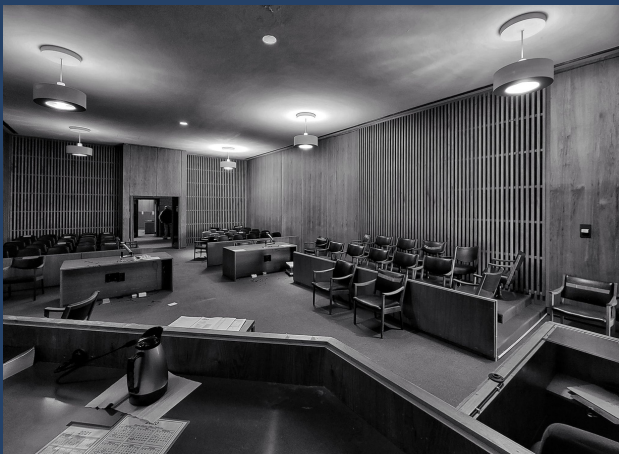




## CURRENT THREAT cont.

In addition to the expressed desire of demolition by county officials, the 1969 courthouse rests on land that is deemed held in public trust by the county and, according to a [1961 court ruling](#), cannot be used for private development.

The county [received an opinion](#) from the State's Attorney of Will County that affirms the 1961 court ruling. Advocates believe the State Legislature can amend the City of Joliet's incorporation to render the ruling moot. Additionally, advocates argue, since historic preservation is an established public purpose, the county could potentially lease the courthouse for redevelopment and preservation, within the limits of the court order; the court could be petitioned to modify the 1961 order in view of changed understandings of public purpose.



*Credit: Courthouse Preservation Partners*

Reimagining the 1969 courthouse should be pursued by Will County officials. Before the issuance of an order for demolition, the county should issue a Request For Proposals (RFP) for redevelopment to determine what creative adaptive reuse options may be available. Creative lease arrangements could potentially address the concern raised by the 1961 court ruling.

Will County should [look to the Old Cook County Hospital as a model project](#), as it is owned by Cook County but operated by a private firm. Additionally, as of press, the total cost to demolish the courthouse is unknown but will be substantial. Beyond money, the environmental cost associated with demolition is enormous. Will County should debate and consider whether spending tax dollars on demolition without investigating possible reuse options is a proper investment over incentivizing a developer and protecting the environment.





## CURRENT THREAT cont.

The courthouse received a [positive opinion](#) from the Illinois State Historic Preservation Office for listing on the National Register of Historic Places; as such, a redevelopment project could incorporate historic preservation tax credits, potentially making the project more attractive to developers.

Two recent redevelopments of Brutalist buildings underscore the possibilities for the Will County Courthouse. First, a non-tax credit project, the [\\$30 million](#) redevelopment of a 1969 office building in Indianapolis resulted in the [Hotel Indy](#), which opened in 2021.

Second, a tax credit project, the [\\$50 million redevelopment](#) of a 1970 factory in New Haven, Connecticut, resulted in the net-zero [Hotel Marcel](#) ([the most energy-efficient hotel in the United States](#)), which opened in April 2022. As these recent examples show, the cutting-edge redevelopment of the Will County Courthouse is an opportunity for Will County and the City of Joliet. To ignore the possibility of a redeveloped 1969 courthouse and to hastily pursue demolition would be a [repeat of a past mistake](#).



*Credit: Courthouse Preservation Partners*





# WHAT YOU CAN DO

Landmarks Illinois believes the real estate market should have the opportunity to propose reuse opportunities before demolition is pursued. Reuse is the better choice economically, logistically, environmentally and for Joliet's architectural legacy.

Contact the Will County Executive and the County Board Speaker and encourage them to work together to issue an RFP for redevelopment. Reach out to local advocates to offer support and assistance and leads to potential developers.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

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### **Courthouse Preservation Partners**

[Facebook group](#)