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Q&A: Architect Jon Pickard on how Houston could be better

By **Nancy Sarnoff**



Jon Pickard of the architectural firm Pickard Chilton, poses for at The St. Regis Houston, 1919 Briar Oaks Lane, Thursday, Aug. 7, 2014, in Houston. (Melissa Phillip / Houston Chronicle) Full Gallery [here](#).

As the nation's fourth-largest city and one of its most diverse, Houston should be better.

So says architect Jon Pickard, principal of New Haven, Conn.-based Pickard Chilton, who comes to Houston and clamors for a vibrant street life, more parks like Discovery Green and an overall energy he gets from such cities as Chicago, Seattle and Denver.

Pickard, who has designed office buildings here for BHP, Exxon Mobil, Amegy Bank, Hines and ConocoPhillips, was in town this week giving the keynote speech at an architecture and design summit held by Bisnow. After the event, he chatted with Chronicle.

Q: What was the subject of your talk?

A: The title of the keynote was “Elevating the public realm.” The premise was to encourage participants to expand their vision, to create a vital civic place for Houston. Houston is the

fourth-largest city in the county with a such a diverse population, and it comes in 30th in livability rankings from U.S. News & World Report. Seattle, Austin, Denver all score very highly.

What's important about that is we're all in the business of helping our clients recruit and retain talent. But we need to have the total environment. I cited the positives for how Houston is progressing, how Gerry Hines has done a great job of engaging that public realm going back to the '70s with the Galleria. And there's Discovery Green. But we need to do more. It came up in the Q & A that somebody asked about the tunnel system. I was honest. I said the tunnels are an urban disaster because they suck the life off the city streets. I recognize they're practical, but if you have protection from the sun you can move throughout the city quite comfortably.

Q: What's a recent project you're really excited about?

A: A building in Seattle called 2+U. It's a tight urban site where we decided we'd physically lift the building on giant stilts and put an urban village below it. The site becomes totally permeable. You can walk literally through the base of the tower. Where a normal building would just come to the ground and you'd maybe have a coffee shop, we lifted the project so we have about 40,000 square feet of retail that's in these little pavilions at the base. It comes to life. I think it's going to be an important project. It's something we've never done.

Q: How'd that design come about?

A: We had a very inspired client, Skanska, that wanted to make sure that this project really captured the spirit of Seattle and was dynamic and engaging.

Q: What are you working on in Houston?

A: We're working on two fun projects. We're about to have a groundbreaking for Hewlett Packard Enterprise. Patrinely is the developer on that. We're hoping to start construction soon on The RO, a mixed-use development with a very exciting vision. Phase one is looking at 600 units of multifamily and another 300,000-plus square feet of creative office, a boutique hotel and retail. It's ultimately about 14 acres.

As land costs continue to soar, there's such pressure on our clients to get a return. They can't justify the land costs of putting in just an office building. If you consider vibrant retail at the base of the office, multifamily and a hotel above, you can hopefully increase your returns. We're seeing that as one of the emerging trends.

Houston continues to be a really vibrant city. We've got a lot of business going on. But it's an efficient trip. I'm off tomorrow.

Q: Where are you headed?

A: I'm off to another major city in Texas for a job interview for what would be a pretty cool building. In essence, it's a corporate headquarters.

<https://www.chron.com/business/real-estate/article/Q-A-Architect-Jon-Pickard-on-how-Houston-could-15017078.php#photo-7976011>