

August 4, 2021

## Despite pandemic, New Haven architectural firm Pickard Chilton adds 11M square feet of new projects



The three principals of New Haven-based Pickard Chilton are: (from left) Jon Pickard, William Chilton and Anthony Markese. PHOTO | BOB HANDELMAN

By David Krechevsky

Executives of New Haven-based architectural firm Pickard Chilton like to say the company “punches above its weight.”

That may be one reason the firm not only weathered the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it thrived during that time.

From March 2020 through May of this year, Pickard Chilton added contracts to design new headquarters or redevelop existing buildings totaling almost 11 million square feet. That’s in addition to the approximately 19 million square feet of projects it already had under contract.

To put that in context, the company calculated there is about 10 million square feet of office space in Hartford, so Pickard Chilton's contracts equal three Hartford's worth of space.

The projects include designing a new headquarters for Sherwin-Williams in Cleveland (about 1 million square feet); redeveloping the nearly 2 million-square-foot former PG&E headquarters in downtown San Francisco that is now owned by Hines Atlas U.S. LP; and designing a nearly 1.5 million-square-foot, mixed-use development for Boston Properties in Cambridge, Mass.

Jon Pickard, a principal in the privately-held firm, declined to disclose revenue figures. He said Pickard Chilton typically sees revenue growth of 5% to 10% annually, but over the past year it saw 15% to 20% growth.

### **A perfect storm**

Such a strong revenue increase runs counter to what the rest of the industry experienced. The pandemic hit the architectural services industry like a perfect storm in 2020, shutting down most of the U.S. economy and halting construction projects nationwide.

According to the Architecture Billings Index produced monthly by the American Institute of Architects (AIA), firms reported a decline in billings for 11 consecutive months — from March 2020 through January 2021.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO | ANTON GRASSI

Pickard Chilton designed Akamai Technologies' global headquarters in Cambridge, Mass.

In April 2020, AIA reported that more than eight in 10 architectural firms nationwide had applied for loans through the U.S. Small Business Administration's Paycheck Protection Program (PPP).

That included Pickard Chilton, which received a \$1.23 million loan to retain its then-51 jobs. Pickard said his firm applied for the loan out of an abundance of caution, seeking to ensure it could continue to meet its financial obligations and the needs of staff and clients.

"Our ability to weather the financial interruption in our business was definitely helped by the PPP," he said.

The firm bucked the national trend and expanded its portfolio in part because of its reputation for designing unique corporate headquarters and high-rise office buildings, Pickard said.

"We're known for creating environments that promote the well-being of the folks that live and work there," he said. "So, what's happened in the tragedy of COVID is, the characteristics

of the buildings that we have historically designed have become of paramount importance."

Those characteristics include providing workers with access to daylight and good views, which Pickard said helps improve cognition and productivity, while also providing enhanced ventilation — vitally important in defending against viruses.

The firm often does this by designing outdoor meeting spaces that are also protected from the elements, something they did for Exxon Mobil's Energy Center in Houston, among others.

“Our reputation was very well established before the pandemic,” Pickard said. “The pandemic has simply given our clients more of an excuse to reach out to us for the expertise that we have.”

### **Adaptability and flexibility**

Anthony J. Markese, also a principal of the firm, said another factor in Pickard Chilton's success during the pandemic is that both its size — it now employs nearly 60 people after adding staff over the past year — and the way it collaborates with clients enhances its flexibility. He said staff easily adapted to working remotely during the pandemic.

“Although we were working remotely, we pretty quickly and efficiently figured out how to keep doing what we do at a high level as a team to collaborate,” Markese said.

He added that Pickard Chilton can handle projects of different size and scale, while also addressing specific design problems.

“There are a lot of big firms that do specific things really well,” Markese said. “There aren't a lot of firms that are as nimble as we are. We can quickly adapt and respond; it often gives us a competitive edge, and throughout COVID it really helped us.”

### **Old-fashioned guys**

In early June, Pickard Chilton staff returned to the office, located in a 15,585-square-foot building at 980 Chapel Street, across from the New Haven Green. The principals, which in addition to Pickard and Markese includes William D. Chilton, continue to fly to meet with clients, though the pandemic curtailed that.

Pickard said that, before the pandemic, the three principals would “be on planes at a minimum of three days per week.” But after April of last year, that virtually stopped. Instead, they met remotely with clients via Zoom, Microsoft Teams and GoToMeeting, he said.

“That's not how we're wired; we're old-fashioned guys,” Pickard said. “But it worked.”

Travel for key presentations has resumed, he added, noting that Chilton recently flew to close a deal to design a more than 1 million-square-foot corporate office building on the East Coast for an undisclosed company.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO | DAVID SUNDBERG/ESTO

Pickard Chilton designed the ExxonMobil Energy Center in Houston.

“I think we all had the sense that this is great for now, but it’s not sustainable,” Markese said of the virtual meetings.

“The touch, the tangible, the human is still essential,” Pickard said.

In addition to returning to its offices, Pickard Chilton also announced the pending release of a book about the firm’s collaborative efforts.

“The Art of Collaboration,” was written by Michael J. Crosbie, an author, contributor and editor of more than 70 books on architecture.

It includes a forward by the late New Haven-based architect Cesar Pelli, who wrote it before his death in July 2019. The book is available on Amazon.com.

## Pickard Chilton added these new projects during the pandemic

Project	Square feet
Office building for undisclosed corporate client on the East Coast	1,000,000
Mixed-use development for Boston Properties in Cambridge, Mass.	1,480,000
Corporate headquarters for undisclosed client in the Midwest	1,000,000
Sherwin-Williams corporate headquarters in Cleveland	1,000,000
Redevelopment of 600 Fifth Street NW, Washington, D.C.	450,000
490 South Mathilda office development in Sunnyvale, Calif.	400,000
One Newpark mixed-use development in Dallas	1,000,000
Mixed-use development for undisclosed client in Denver	1,500,000
901 West Peachtree South, an office tower in Atlanta	750,000
Redevelopment of PG&E headquarters in San Francisco, now owned by Hines Atlas U.S. LP	1,900,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>10,480,000</b>