Emerging Trends in Real Estate®

Asia Pacific 2020
Contents

iv Executive Summary
vi Notice to Readers
1 Chapter 1: Defying Gravity?
3 Geopolitics: the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly
4 Trade Friction: Winners and Losers
6 More Caution, More Core
7 Spreading the Load
7 Yields Begin to Rise . . .
8 . . . But Not Everywhere
9 Focus on FX
10 Pockets of Distress
12 Sustainability: Coming of Age
13 Coworking: Does It Work?
14 Retail: Is Asia Different?
16 Focus on the End User
16 Nervous about Niche?
18 Accounting for Climate Change
19 Embracing Technology
22 Chapter 2: Real Estate Capital Flows
24 Global Funds Under-Allocated
25 Japan’s Slow-Motion Exodus
26 Fundraising Slows
26 Dry Powder Builds
27 Tighter Bank Lending
28 Nonbank Lending Picks Up . . .
29 . . . But Appetite Remains Low
30 REITs on the Rise
30 Singapore
31 Japan
31 Australia
31 India
34 Chapter 3: Markets and Sectors to Watch
35 Top Investment Cities
47 Property Types in Perspective
53 Interviewees
Executive Summary

More than a decade since the global financial crisis, Asia Pacific real estate continues to produce strong returns. But as the clock ticks down towards the end of the current cycle, caution is increasingly embedded into investor strategies.

This despite the fact that there is no clear consensus as to whether the market is near, at, or beyond its peak. In part, this is because of the heterogeneous nature of local markets. As one Singaporean developer observed: “The risk of a market downturn has increased significantly, but it’s market specific.” In addition, markets and sectors across the Asia Pacific are often at different stages of their own cycles. Singapore, for example, has only now rebounded from a slump that bottomed around three years ago, while other markets have been riding the same wave after six years or more. Finally, with economic growth continuing at a reasonable clip, interest rates remaining at near-record lows, and with ever-increasing amounts of capital circulating around the region looking for an investment home, it is hard to see where the catalyst for the next recession is going to come from. In the words of one private-equity investor: “If you compare where Asia is today versus where the developed markets are, cyclically we feel like we’re in a better position.”

Nonetheless, caution is widespread, especially as yields begin to rise in some markets. Unusually, geopolitics has become the new wildcard, with China-U.S. trade friction, protests in Hong Kong, and the spat between Japan and South Korea causing the most concern. Interviewees highlighted a handful of markets or sectors that look most vulnerable to localised downturns—mainland China, Hong Kong SAR, and India—and these may offer buying opportunities in the longer term.

Nevertheless, sourcing deals remains as hard as ever, forcing investors to find other ways to get capital into the market. Some, for example, are turning to joint ventures, buying slices of larger assets that also allow them to spread their risk. Larger investors, meanwhile, are boosting their commitment to core markets and, where possible, core assets, with Australia, Japan, and Singapore the most popular. An outlier, but a very popular one, is Ho Chi Minh City—an emerging-market growth hedge against more muted core market performance.

The office sector remains the most popular asset class, although business models in the fastest-growing component of that sector—flexible workspace—are increasingly being called into question. The industrial and logistics space, meanwhile, is still the sector most often tipped for outperformance. While the Asia Pacific region is still undersupplied with modern logistics space, more investors are now seeking excess returns in subsectors of that market, such as cold storage or last-mile warehouses.

There is a growing perception that the retail sector in Asia has been oversold, with too many good assets penalised due to problems surfacing elsewhere in the world. Selective but sometimes large-scale buying has been seen in several markets, with investors now increasingly focused on adapting existing assets to meet the changing demands of modern consumers.

After years in the shadows, sustainability is now finally becoming a priority for the region’s largest investors, and also many smaller ones. Landlords have come around to the view that incorporating sustainable features into their buildings will allow them both to cut running costs and increase rents as tenants become more willing to pay for space that acts as a magnet for talented staff.

In terms of capital flows, cross-border investment patterns into the Asia Pacific are being affected this year by the rising tide of anti-globalism in markets worldwide, with incoming capital from the United States and Europe down 28 per cent year-on-year in the second quarter of 2019 to just US$2.54 billion—the lowest figure since 2012. At the same time, however, the value of cross-border deals involving money from within the Asia Pacific was up 23 per cent year-on-year to US$7.76 billion. This reflects the huge volume of capital held by regional institutions and sovereign funds that is outgrowing the capacity of domestic markets to absorb.

In China, local regulations have drastically restricted outflows in 2019, but the slack has been taken up by others, in particular Singapore and South Korea, while outflows from Japan are also picking up and can be expected to grow rapidly in coming years. The sheer weight of capital now in circulation means that competition to place it in regional markets continues unabated. One result of this is that investment funds are holding increasing amounts of capital they are unable to spend. When they do spend it, however, financing for deals is for the most part readily available (apart from in China and India, where the dynamics of domestic markets have seen banks retrench). Lending practices have been tightened to an extent, but for creditworthy investors there is no problem. As one Hong Kong-based advisor put it: “There’s no change at the top. We see easy access for low-leveraged deals from good-quality sponsors.” With interest rates in the second half of 2019 reversing course to the downside, the overarching trend in terms of access to bank finance will probably continue to be accommodative.
Asian REIT markets have rebounded in 2019, as interest rates in the United States began to decline. Many REITs in the region, and especially in Singapore, are now on acquisition sprees to take advantage of the lower cost of capital for new purchases, as well as an anticipated upswing in investor interest in yield-bearing stocks, including in particular from investment funds, which have become more willing to buy into REITs as opposed to fixed assets.

The first domestic Indian REIT listed in 2019. Its shares were rapidly bid up in value until by the end of 2019 its implied yield had compressed to under 6 per cent—a remarkably low level for a market that is the preferred targets of regional institutional investors that today constitute the biggest driver of new demand for assets.

While investor sentiment towards local emerging markets is now on the wane due to global economic concerns, Ho Chi Minh City received consistently strong feedback in all areas. While placing significant amounts of capital in Vietnam remains problematic given the relatively small size of local markets and a general shortage of investment-grade assets, it is receiving strong inflows of capital as a result of incremental shifts of manufacturing capacity away from China. Remarkably, Ho Chi Minh City this year, also ranked as the top city for all asset classes in this year’s buy/sell tables.

Emerging signs of a potential recession in the U.S. economy have only added to concerns. In a September 2019 report, analysts Oxford Economics stated: “Of seven indicators that have been strongly associated with global recessions over the last 45 years, only two are currently sending recession signals. However, one of these two—the U.S. yield curve—has the best predictive record and tends to send the earliest warning.” Recent statistics add to the sense of unease. Respondents’ expectations of profitability declined in this year’s survey to an eight-year low, while data from analysts Real Capital Analytics (RCA) show a 20 per cent decline in year-on-year transaction volumes through the first half of 2019, together with a fall in rolling year’s buy/hold/sell tables.

While investors across the Asia Pacific region are notably more cautious about market prospects than in previous years, the jury remains out on whether the top has been reached or breached. What’s certain, though, is that concerns today are greater than ever. As one interviewee commented: “I have been cautiously optimistic for years—now I’m just cautious.” And as an investment manager in Australia noted: “For the past five or six years I’ve probably sounded like a broken record, but it is a little bit different this year.”

The biggest single factor, as cited by respondents to our Asia Pacific survey, is the impact of the ongoing U.S.-China trade friction, which is being felt across the region as the Mainland economy slows.

“...a little bit more cautious in investing in APAC, particularly in areas of the economy that are going to be impacted by U.S.-China trade relations.”

Notice to Readers

Emerging Trends in Real Estate® Asia Pacific is a trends and forecast publication now in its 14th edition, and is one of the most highly regarded and widely read forecast reports in the real estate industry. Emerging Trends in Real Estate® Asia Pacific 2020, undertaken jointly by PwC and the Urban Land Institute, provides an outlook on real estate investment and development trends, real estate finance and capital markets, property sectors, metropolitan areas, and other real estate issues throughout the Asia Pacific region.

Emerging Trends in Real Estate® Asia Pacific 2020 reflects the views of individuals who completed surveys or were interviewed as a part of the research process for this report. The views expressed herein, including all comments appearing in quotes, are obtained exclusively from these surveys and interviews and do not express the opinions of either PwC or ULI. Interviewees and survey participants represent a wide range of industry experts, including investors, fund managers, developers, property companies, lenders, brokers, advisers, and consultants. ULI and PwC researchers personally interviewed 84 individuals and survey responses were received from 463 individuals, whose company affiliations are broken down below.

| Private property owner or developer | 26% |
| Real estate service firm (e.g., consulting, financial, legal, or property advisory) | 23% |
| Fund/investment manager | 21% |
| Homebuilder or residential developer | 10% |
| Institutional equity investor | 3% |
| Bank lender or securitised lender | 1% |
| Other entities | 15% |

Throughout the publication, the views of interviewees and/or survey respondents have been presented as direct quotations from the participant without attribution to any particular participant. A list of the interview participants in this year’s study who chose to be identified appears at the end of this report, but it should be noted that all interviewees are given the option to remain anonymous regarding their participation. In several cases, quotes contained herein were obtained from interviewees who are not listed. Readers are cautioned not to attempt to attribute any quote to a specific individual or company.

To all who helped, the Urban Land Institute and PwC extend sincere thanks for sharing valuable time and expertise. Without the involvement of these many individuals, this report would not have been possible.
Emerging Trends in Real Estate®

5.5 per cent and 7.6 per cent annually Asia Pacific real estate to range between unlevered aggregate total returns for core Meanwhile, DWS research projects they support values."

people rock up with billions of dollars to ready for a correction? And then all these for about five years, and every year we sit According to another, liquidity is also a feel like an attractive asset class vis-à-vis one investor pointed out: "Real estate still
downturn."

According to one fund manager: "In most asset classes, you have reasonably decent operating fundamentals in terms of occupancy levels and demand. There is a limited amount of new supply, credit growth to the sector has been reasonable, [and] lending standards for new construction have been responsible. Those are all typically the areas that would precipitate some sort of cyclical downturn." Other indicators are also supportive. As one investor pointed out: "Real estate still feels like an attractive asset class vis-à-vis bond yields and where interest rates are."

Although central business district (CBD) sector has emerged largely unscathed. over the same period. That said, the office same-store sales down 50 to 90 per cent retail sector, one major landlord reported were on average only half full and, in the per cent year-on-year in August, hotels were on average only half full and, in the retail sector, one major landlord reported same-store sales down 50 to 90 per cent over the same period. That said, the office sector has emerged largely unaffected. Although central business district (CBD) vacancies were up and rents were down marginally, there has been little effect on investment values. According to a locally based investor who acts for a number of large institutions and sovereign wealth funds, "A couple of the big sovereign funds called to ask if this is an opportunity, but I had to tell them, essentially, that no one is selling. Apartment owners may panic- sell, but you’re not going to see anything on the commercial side. The sentiment is wait and see—if they don’t have to close a deal, they’re not going to close, but basically, the Singaporeans and Koreans see it as just a blip—no one is expecting carnage."

Going forward, there was also a consensus that Hong Kong is unlikely to suffer an exodus of businesses to other destinations. In particular, the prospect of Hong Kong’s financial industry migrating to locations such as Singapore or Shanghai is seen as unlikely due to the continuing advantages offered by Hong Kong’s reliable legal system, its low tax rate, and its proximity to mainland China. Given that the Mainland’s capital account is unlikely to open up, Shanghai will remain unable to compete as a major finance hub.

Geopolitics: the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Historically, real estate investors prefer to focus on bottom-up rather than top-down macroeconomic factors. Hence: "location, location, location" trumps "events, my dear boy, events."

Nonetheless, political upheaval has become a common theme across the world in 2019. U.S.-China trade friction may be the obvious harbinger of doom, but it is hardly the lone red flag. Japan and South Korea are also engaged in a renewed political spat, while a series of street protests over a number of months have also flared up in Hong Kong, wreaking havoc on the city’s retail and hotel sectors.

What are the consequences from a real estate point of view? While undoubtedly negative for the markets, the current dislocations are also creating opportunities. In China, for example, the trade friction has followed hard on the heels of an ongoing regulatory crackdown on alternative finance products as well as a general tightening of credit imposed by the central bank. Interviewees based in China warned that the malaise was starting to gain traction. In the words of one private-equity investor, the economy is getting hit harder than people outside China realise.

As a result, for many multinational corporations (MNCs), expansion plans are now on hold. "They’re more treading water than anything else, which certainly impacts commercial office leasing," one China investor said. However, "If you look at the market as a whole, the growth story is still very much about the tech sector, and Chinese tech firms are doing very well. They are absorbing a lot of space."

According to a different fund manager, "There is clearly an impact in the Shanghai and Beijing markets. Shanghai, in particular, has recently had quite a bit of office development — so you have shrinking demand from MNCs nervous about the trade friction at the same time as a spike in supply. Having said that, the biggest occupiers in Shanghai are domestic companies, and the reprofiling of the economy from exports to domestic demand-driven activities will mop up that supply relatively quickly. So, there could be a short window to buy." RCA data show Chinese transaction volumes falling by 19 per cent year-on-year to $15 billion in the first half of 2019, with a more dramatic 39 per cent fall in the second quarter. Given that domestic players have been handicapped by restricted access to capital, foreign buyers are now especially active in the market.

In Hong Kong, meanwhile, the impact of street protests has begun to be felt in earnest. Tourist arrivals were down 40 per cent year-on-year in August, hotels were on average only half full and, in the retail sector, one major landlord reported same-store sales down 50 to 90 per cent over the same period. That said, the office sector has emerged largely unaffected. Although central business district (CBD) vacancies were up and rents were down marginally, there has been little effect on investment values. According to a locally based investor who acts for a number of large institutions and sovereign wealth funds, "A couple of the big sovereign funds called to ask if this is an opportunity, but I had to tell them, essentially, that no one is selling. Apartment owners may panic- sell, but you’re not going to see anything on the commercial side. The sentiment is wait and see—if they don’t have to close a deal, they’re not going to close, but basically, the Singaporeans and Koreans see it as just a blip—no one is expecting carnage."

Other indicators are also supportive. As one investor pointed out: "Real estate still feels like an attractive asset class vis-à-vis bond yields and where interest rates are. According to another, liquidity is also a factor: "We’ve been at the top now in Asia for about five years, and every year we sit down and say, ‘Well is this it, are we now ready for a correction?’ And then all these people rock up with billions of dollars to spend on Asian property and of course they support values."

Meanwhile, DWS research projects unleveraged aggregate total returns for core Asia Pacific real estate to range between 5.5 per cent and 7.6 per cent annually from 2019 to 2023, well below the 2018 figure of 10 per cent.
Singapore, meanwhile, is too far away to be a major player, offers minimal cost savings compared with Hong Kong, and struggles with a number of challenges of its own, including difficulties obtaining working visas for staff.

Still, with so much capital circulating in the region, certain markets probably stand to benefit. Little new capital is finding its way to China, for example, which must therefore be heading elsewhere. As one fund manager said: “I think at the margins, people hesitant to put money to work in mainland China and Hong Kong SAR will perhaps be even more focused on Tokyo and Australia. And maybe Singapore is also a net beneficiary of what’s going on in China.”

Trade Friction: Winners and Losers

Another way that trade friction is altering regional investment patterns relates to the migration of manufacturing capacity out of China. This shift had been underway for several years, but tariff hikes have now accelerated the process. While the amount of capacity leaving China is still small relative to the total, even a minor shift in a market as big as China can have a major impact on the emerging-market economies where most of the outgoing capacity is now heading. So far, the prime beneficiaries have been South East Asian economies, although some countries have benefited more than others. According to one interviewee: “Over the past year, of the 25 major industrial refugees that have left China, most have gone to Vietnam, Thailand, or Myanmar.”

Indonesia has so far seen little activity, and the same applies to the Philippines. This is because, although “they’ve been poking around, they’re very used to competing on tax incentives, and that’s where Vietnam trumps the Philippines, despite having a more opaque legal contract system.”

One result of this migration is that space in emerging-market logistics and business parks “has been selling like hot cakes”, as investors scramble to find a home for new factories. Industrial real estate rents rose by double digits year-on-year in the first half of 2019 in several Vietnamese provinces, according to Savills research, including 54.6 per cent in Binh Duong and 31.1 per cent in Tay Ninh, northwest of Ho Chi Minh City. With incoming foreign investment, meanwhile, rising 65.1 per cent to US$16.74 billion in the first five months of the year, Vietnam is now well-entrenched as the favoured China-plus-one model.

Another result is that Bangkok is now figuring increasingly as a candidate for multinational regional headquarters. According to one executive active throughout South East Asia, “Thailand is featuring more and more in people’s minds just because executives like being in Bangkok. The quality of lifestyle products for their families is abundant, and people have gotten used to commuting by the Skytrain and metro, so the traffic is surmountable, and of course liquidity in Bangkok is the best, in terms of buying and selling real estate generally. As companies become more fly-in-fly-out, and as there’s a lot more regionalism, a high-cost base like Singapore, especially with its tightening visa requirements and high home prices, make places like Bangkok an interesting option as a base.”

China: Key Themes

Despite a slowing economy, concerns over ongoing trade friction, and a tighter regulatory environment, more and more overseas investors are beating a path to Chinese real estate markets. First-tier cities, and especially Shanghai, are today regarded as gateway destinations where the largest global institutions feel they must have a presence as they diversify their portfolios.

Commercial real estate transaction volumes in China hit a record high US$25 billion in the first half of 2019, according to JLL. The results were driven by a bumper first quarter, with investment volumes rising 174 per cent year-on-year to some US$17 billion. As usual, most activity was focused on Shanghai, which saw US$10.0 billion of transactions, making it the fourth-most liquid city in the world, behind only New York, Tokyo, and Paris.

A few years ago, foreign investors often had trouble landing deals in China’s primary cities. Today, however, the number and size of such transactions have increased significantly: “I think there’s been a dramatic shift over the last few years,” one investor said. “Historically, the Chinese [imposed] tight controls over foreign capital entering the market, and it was very difficult to compete against the locals. Clearly, as the economy has loosened, that’s where the pressure has been. However, with less aggressive domestic capital and a weaker Chinese currency, there is also a desire from Beijing to see more foreign capital come into China.”

A further boost for foreign investors has been Beijing’s reluctance to slacken lending restrictions for domestic real estate buyers, even though some loosening has been allowed for small and medium-sized companies. “We’re still seeing a very tight lending market towards real estate, and as of right now, I don’t see that changing,” one developer said.

The Chinese office sector has been the asset class hit hardest by the trade friction, although investors continue to selectively target assets in the biggest destinations. According to one fund manager, “We prefer to invest in the first-tier cities, where we tend to see higher levels of growth, greater levels of liquidity, and larger opportunities. Cities that have the most innovative companies, particularly oriented towards the technology sector, are where you have the highest growth.”

The current regulatory environment, which has tightened access to capital for developers, investors, and consumer buyers and introduced price controls for residential properties in some cities, has led some investors to take a cooler view of China. However, the logistics sector continues to be a favourite. According to one overseas investor: “We are looking at some logistics deals in China. There’s still a massive undersupply of good-quality stock, and it’s hard to get the land. It takes years to line those deals up, but they certainly seem to lease well and quickly once they’re built. There is massive domestic growth in consumption, which is supporting logistics, the trade war notwithstanding.”

A notable change in markets in first-tier cities has been requirements in public land auctions insisting that buyers agree to long-term ownership. For example, the buyer of a mixed-use development site will be able to sell the residential element as usual, but must continue to hold the commercial part of the development for 10 years or more after construction is complete. This naturally makes life difficult for fund managers, unless they are investing in conjunction with a source of long-term capital. As a result, “we’ve been moving to more brownfield, value-add projects,” one fund manager said. “The requirements on greenfield development are becoming onerous for anyone investing via a fund.”

Finally, a number of interviewees predicted that the days of “easy growth” have already ended in China. According to one investor: “We still want to invest; however, we do have to be cognizant of the fact that growth is slowing. China has fantastic growth prospects, but it is not likely to achieve the growth levels it has been historically achieving. We are probably more enthusiastic about areas or assets within the Chinese economy that face domestic consumption.”

Chapter 1: Defying Gravity?
More Caution, More Core

The reluctance to declare a downturn does not mean that Asia Pacific real estate investors have their heads in the sand. More and more, they are turning to defensive strategies in order to hedge against a potential reversal.

One way of doing this is to hold on to investments longer. Our 2020 survey confirms a steady decrease in short-term plays over the last five years and a corresponding increase in longer-term investment horizons, with more than twice as many respondents (i.e., 24 per cent) indicating an intention to hold for 10 or more years compared with 2016 data. To an extent, this phenomenon also reflects the increasing volumes of institutional money now looking for an investment home.

According to one fund manager, “Over the next 12 to 24 months, we would like to rebalance a little bit by doing more core investments, buying a steady stream of cash flows with a long weighted-average lease length and downside protection. So, even if there is a correction, we still have those cash flows coming in and are not dependent on capital gains.”

There is also a flight to quality in terms of location. RCA data show that since the third quarter of 2017, investors’ caution, expressed by their preference for core markets, has been rising (see Exhibit 1-6). “Investors generally are probably a little bit more cautious on opportunistic [investing] and leaning a little bit more towards core strategies because of their concerns around valuation and risk. So they are orienting a little bit more towards lower-risk strategies and probably a little bit away from more cyclical asset classes, like hotels, and more towards less risky assets,” one investment manager said.

This assertion is also backed by the data. RCA statistics for the first half of 2019 show a 39 per cent fall in hotel investment volumes. The top metropolitan areas for real estate transactions in the first half of 2019 were Hong Kong, Tokyo, Seoul, Beijing, and Sydney—all large markets with core assets. According to one investor, “We’ve been super defensive for the past three years, just looking at things where there is really strong local demand and that are very, very affordable.”

Another said, “We have become extremely disciplined in terms of underwriting and making sure the rental growth profile is something that we validate extensively. We also need to be focused on costs such as tenant incentives, capex [capital expenditures], and maintenance.”

Spreading the Load

Another way to reduce risk is to share it with others. Larger players are therefore increasingly willing to structure deals as partnerships, and are even turning to funding investments as a way to diversify. JLL reported that Asia Pacific investors racked up some $13 billion of joint venture transactions in the first half of 2019, after an equally busy 2018. “These deals help investors access prime assets with large lot sizes and also reduce concentration risk,” according to one investment adviser.

Joint ventures and club deals are particularly favoured in China, where a number of recent deals have resulted in partnerships between domestic and international investors, often involving multiple partners. Anecdotal evidence, however, also suggests that some larger investors, who in the past have been more inclined to target joint ventures or club deals, are beginning to invest in funds once more. According to one fund manager, “We hear that some investors that you don’t think of as fund investors are going into multiple funds. We understand this is partly to reduce risk but also a way to gather information—if you are investing with five fund managers, you have five research departments and acquisitions teams to tap into.”

Yields Begin to Rise . . .

For the past four or five years, real estate professionals across many markets have been nearly sucking their teeth and declaring that cap rate compression cannot go on. So far, however, they have been wrong, with transaction yields continuing to drop incrementally or at least remain compressed.

More recently, however, office yields in some markets have begun to turn. In Hong Kong, where cap rates moved out 35 basis points from their 2018 lows to reach 2.6 per cent as of June 2019, the outward move may be attributed to social tensions. But yields have also begun to expand in major markets such as Melbourne and Tokyo. Whether this turns into a trend remains to be seen, but as one interviewer noted: “I can’t see cap rates getting lower. I know the U.S. has cut interest rates, but I really cannot see any sensible opportunities for cap rates to [continue to] come down.”
Chapter 1: Defying Gravity?

In any event, the mild unwinding of cap rates seen in some locations still leaves prices very much on the risk side of the risk/return spectrum as too much capital continues to chase too few assets. “The weight of capital has readjusted all the returns,” as one Singapore-based fund manager said. “It has mispriced risk because no one can find a home for the capital, so you’re finding extraordinarily low cap rates for assets that are, frankly, an opportunistic play. And that’s the funny thing about it. In a lot of cases, you should be saying, ‘Time to hit the door.’”

Focus on FX

Instability in global currency markets means that exchange rates and foreign exchange (FX) hedging strategies are becoming increasingly important for returns.

According to one European investor, currency is “an important factor in every transaction, [but] now the impact can vary. It is huge in certain places like India, [while] there is a lower impact in places like Japan and Singapore.”

Approaches to currency hedging vary widely. Broadly speaking, European, South Korean, and Japanese investors are more inclined to hedge, while very large global investors tend to adopt diversification as a natural alternative to conventional hedging strategies. Overseas investors also tend to borrow in local currencies in order to gain a partial hedge.

In some cases, FX hedging can have a significant positive effect on returns, depending on the currency pairing. For example, as of mid-2019, Singaporean capital received much stronger currency returns in Europe or Japan than it did in Australia. As one adviser commented: “There is a strong FX arbitrage for Asian investors into Europe at the moment and [also] from the U.S. into anywhere else.”

Nonetheless, currency movements can make life difficult. According to one investor, “Currency is becoming more of a factor because we have had some dramatic movements. You can do well at the property level and then lose it on the currency. Generally speaking, it is so expensive to hedge that it takes a massive knock off your returns and, until you have some certainty about when your money is coming out, it is difficult to actually hedge it effectively.”

The most notable trend in the past 12 months has been the strength of the U.S. dollar, particularly compared with the Indian rupee, the Australian dollar, and the Chinese yuan.

Exhibit 1-9 Office Sector Cap Rates, Core Locations H1 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Outlook</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>4.00–6.00</td>
<td>↓↓↓</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>4.25–6.00</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Brisbane</td>
<td>4.75–6.75</td>
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<td>Perth</td>
<td>4.75–6.50</td>
<td>↓↓↓</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>Auckland</td>
<td>5.00–6.50</td>
<td>↑</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wellington</td>
<td>5.50–7.50</td>
<td>↓↓↓</td>
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<td>China</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>3.00–4.50</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>3.00–4.25</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Guangzhou</td>
<td>3.75–4.75</td>
<td>↑↑↑</td>
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<td>Shenzhen</td>
<td>3.50–4.50</td>
<td>↑↑↑</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>1.50–2.80</td>
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<td>Japan</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>2.20–3.50</td>
<td>↑↑↑</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Osaka</td>
<td>2.80–4.00</td>
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<td>South Korea</td>
<td>Seoul</td>
<td>4.00–6.00</td>
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<td>Singapore</td>
<td>3.00–3.75</td>
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<td>Bangalore</td>
<td>8.00–8.75</td>
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Source: CBRE

Exhibit 1-10 Internal Rate of Return Impact to Investor Returns Using Cross-Currency Swaps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Property currency (investing into...)</th>
<th>Home currency (investor capital from...)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan (JPY)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainland China (CNY)</td>
<td>0.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore (SGD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Korea (KRW)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Europe (EUR)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Australia (AUD)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.K. (GBP)</td>
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<tr>
<td>U.S.A. (USD)</td>
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<td>U.S.A. (USD)</td>
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</table>

Source: JLL
Interest in office assets is buoyed by “super-strong fundamentals,” according to one private-equity investor. “It’s been impressive to see the steady demand for office—I think that’s surprised most people because there’s been substantial supply in 2018 and 2019. But that’s pretty much been spoken for, so the office market in Tokyo is still very promising.”

However, strong activity by Japanese REITs and the continuing dominance of large domestic developers over high-end office space mean that pickings are slim for all but the best-established foreign players. “We are trying to find stuff in the market, but we just cannot find enough to buy,” said one fund manager. “The foreign guys who bought office have sold most of it, so the sellers are domestics and they’re selling to other domestics.”

Despite rising tourist numbers, the outlook for Japanese retail property is somewhat flat: average prime retail rents in Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya have been unchanged for 10, 12, and six quarters respectively, according to CBRE research. However, there are pockets of growth: Ginza, Tokyo’s prime shopping district, is seeing rising rents and interest from investors.

According to one investment manager, “People are looking for high street retail, but it is not really available. Domestic [players], especially the trading companies, continue to be the most aggressive buyers, picking up whatever they can. But there’s also concern over the consumption tax going up and whether that will be sustainable, particularly if tourism tails off because of the [problems] with South Korea and China.”

Although Japanese shoppers remain seemingly immune to the appeal of e-commerce, the structural shortage of modern warehousing stock has provided bumper opportunities for developers and investors. Nor is there any sign of the logistics boom ending—vacancy rates in the core markets of Greater Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya have been declining, according to CBRE, with vacancies in the Tokyo Bay Area falling to zero in 2019 for the first time since 2008.

“Whether you are looking at assets focused on e-commerce, or just general logistics, there is a lot of life in the sector and the price is still making sense when you can buy in the mid-4s as opposed to the low 3s,” according to one interviewer.

Difficulty placing capital in Tokyo is leading growing numbers of investors to look to other domestic markets as sources of more affordable deals. “The liquidity has improved,” said one fund manager.

Other opportunities for distress relate to overcapacity. In Japan, for example, the tourism sector has been a huge success story over the last few years. There have been too much of a good thing, however—overbuilding in the hotel sector is already creating distress situations.

If Japan’s current diplomatic quarrel with South Korea is not resolved, distress may become worse, given that nearly a quarter of Japan’s 2018 tourists came from that country. According to one Tokyo-based fund manager, “You have a lot of construction, and a lot of these hotels have unsophisticated owners and small, undercapitalised management companies that are in either a lease or an operating agreement, but they will not have the ability to perform. These guys have been backed but can’t service the debt. So, I think going forward there’s going to be opportunity once there’s a bit of distress in tourism.” While the problem is likely to worsen after the Olympics, less savvy owners and operators could run into trouble before that.

Further opportunities exist in Vietnam, which suffers a perennial problem from overbuilding in the condo sector, and also in Australia, where Chinese buyers of residential development sites in recent years bid heavily to buy land but today are sometimes unable to source capital to complete their projects. One local private equity investor said that his company had been active in the “for-sel” condominium market, where there’s been a lot of overbuilding, the capital market flow is disrupted, and the financing market is disrupted. That’s creating an opportunity we’re taking advantage of.”
Sustainability: Coming of Age

Over the last decade or so, interviewees in the Asia Pacific region have spoken at length about efforts to improve the efficiency of their buildings. Green was good, but all too often they were deterred by the perceived costs of upgrading. Today, though, a threshold of sorts appears to have been crossed. For developers, owners, and occupiers of prime real estate, sustainability is now intrinsically linked with quality; it is hard to imagine a worthy grade A office building not rated under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) or some other local certification scheme.

According to one global investor, “For all our office investments, we are now required to have some sort of green certification, and we are happy to spend the money required to achieve it because we consider it (both) a differentiator and downside protection.”

The drivers for this are twofold: capital and regulatory. On the one hand, there is growing awareness that upgrades to building infrastructure can create real financial value—either through reduced costs such as electricity, or through higher rents. According to one investor involved in fitting out a building in Kuala Lumpur, “You’re looking at cloud management and very sophisticated artificial intelligence that can optimise the building in terms of things like predictive maintenance, occupancy usage patterns, and optimisation of temperatures using a number of different data points, including satellite weather forecasting.”

In addition, private-equity investors, large real estate investment trusts (REITs), and most major developers almost inevitably have to cater to the requirements of institutional investors from Europe and North America, who by and large require entities in which they invest to meet a minimum standard in terms of sustainability. Larger European pension funds, for example, will not give capital to managers who cannot demonstrate environmental credentials.

According to one fund manager, “To get investor funds, you need to have a real ESG (environmental, social, and corporate governance) programme and platform. When we see REITs [requests for proposals] come in, there’s a huge ESG section. From our perspective, you need energy efficiency as one of the key requirements of any asset, simply because the capital markets are going to start discounting it if that stuff is absent.”

The other catalyst is the need for regulatory compliance. Requirements vary from government to government around the region, with Australia and Singapore seen as the strongest promoters of environmental sustainability, and smaller developing markets having less imposing rules. That said, buildings in emerging markets are often some of the least efficient, meaning they have more to gain by introducing efficiency measures, even without mandatory measures.

In any event, larger real estate players expect more regulatory control in this area as governments fall increasingly in line with the Paris Accord, which aims towards net-carbon-neutral economies. “The biggest risk,” said one investment manager, “is that you buy something now that will fail the regulations or the requirements of investors some way down the line. In three or four years’ time, you might find that you can’t lease it or sell it because it doesn’t have the environmental credentials.”

There is also growing pressure on this front from multinational occupants, although the environment in the Asia Pacific is not currently as demanding as in the West. According to one advisor: “Elsewhere in the world, we are starting to see major corporates requiring LEED Gold certification as a condition of tenancy. ‘We have not seen that yet here, but I think that will eventually be the direction of travel.’”

Meanwhile, more and more Asia Pacific real estate players are signing up to the Global Real Estate Sustainability Benchmark (GRESB), which requires managers of assets to report on environmental policies and performance, with data then made available for use by investors to support their allocations of capital.

“GRESB gives investors a number,” said one subscriber to the program. “They can see that firm X scores 96 and firm Y scores 50 and they can point to firm X being better. They don’t even need to know how. And, of course, it makes you look worse if you’re not in GRESB.”

One frustration for ESG advocates is the difficulty in demonstrating a causal link between ESG initiatives and improved asset performance. However, according to one interviewee, “If you look at the investor-led indices and benchmarks, better risk-adjusted returns are linked to a broader management of ESG issues.”

Given the sheer volume of coworking space now on the market, these risks apply not only to coworking operators, but also to building owners and potentially also banks that have financed the purchases of buildings in which there are large concentrations of coworking facilities. According to CBRE, the total office footprint of coworking operators in the Asia Pacific region has more than 300 per cent since 2016, reaching some 54 million square feet as of March 2019. The industry now occupies more than 3 per cent of office supply in the Asia Pacific region, compared with 2 per cent in the United States.

According to one Shanghai-based fund manager, “Lots of smaller coworking companies in China are now having trouble servicing debt.” There is definitely demand, but the dilemma for investors is the need to consider whether there will be a negative impact on exit in terms of pricing because the credit standing of the industry is deteriorating.

As a result, landlords are now changing the way they contract with coworking operators as they seek to reduce the risk. “We are shying away from leasing out the whole building [to operators],” continued the fund manager. Instead, “we may give a third or a quarter of our space to them, and then try to include more covenants, requiring a big deposit or guarantee.”

Another way the flexible space dynamic is changing is through the emergence of landlord/tenant partnerships, where operators looking to secure management contracts to create flexible workspaces, either within individual buildings or across an entire portfolio of assets. Coworking companies thereby gain access to a large client base of established corporate tenants while simultaneously slashing both rental overheads and the large capex commitments needed to set up new coworking centres. Landlords, meanwhile, to managers of existing tenants and are spared from having to compete with the operators by creating standalone platforms.

This type of relationship is becoming increasingly common in the United States. According to an executive of one U.S.-based coworking operator who has negotiated numerous such deals, “The landlord is now our client, so we’re structuring these top-line revenue-share structures or profit-share structures where landlords put up the majority of capital, but get a premium to the market rent. For example, in New York our rent is $64 per square foot, but we’re rethinking that space for $200 per square foot. So, we say to the landlord, ‘You’re missing out on that opportunity—you could be making a 40 per cent on 50 per cent premium on a traditional rent.’” Although so far this model is relatively rare in the Asia Pacific, landlord/tenant partnerships can be expected to evolve quickly over the medium term.

Chapter 1: Defying Gravity?

Exhibit 1-12 Penetration of Coworking Operators in Asia Pacific Cities


<table>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seoul</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
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<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osaka</td>
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<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exhibit 1-11 Role of ESG Factors in Investment Decisions

Source: Emerging Trends in Real Estate Asia Pacific 2020 survey.
Australia: Key Themes

“If I was putting my money anywhere in the Asia Pacific in the long term, I would continue to put it in Australia.” With both Sydney and Melbourne continuing to rank near the top over this year’s investor ranking survey, this fund manager’s opinion clearly has widespread support. Australian markets offer good (for Asia) investment opportunities compared to the weakest prospects, rating it less than 5 per cent.

According to one interviewee: “Landlords are locking in strong occupational markets. Vacancy rates in Sydney and Melbourne are at historic lows.” Australia’s residential sector has been one of the few in the Asia Pacific region to suffer a downturn over the last couple of years. Prices may now be stabilising, however, following two interest rate cuts, tax breaks, and the easing of mortgage borrowing requirements. In Sydney and Melbourne, markets have also been boosted by a spike in purchases by Hong Kong investors looking for a safe haven as the city’s street protests continue. One developer cited how the influx of new capital has resulted in a resurgence of sales at some inner-city projects that had previously been lagging.

Despite a significant pullback from Chinese investors due to restrictions on outbound capital, Australia continues to attract global players. According to one fund manager: “A lot of the guys we are talking to are new guys, and mainly Asian groups—a lot of pension funds, insurers, or sovereign wealth funds.”

Various reasons have been cited for this, one being that most locations in Asia are structurally undersupplied compared with developed markets. Only in Australia is there substantial per capita retail supply. While there has been localised overbuilding in China and India, these markets still lag Europe and North America in total supply.

More important, the fact that Asian consumers are the most online savvy in the world creates potential to incorporate digital technologies within new retail developments. Nowhere is this clearer than in China, where malls now serve both online and offline shopping as well as providing a higher proportion of entertainment, education, services, and food and beverage (F&B) space. “China will come out of the retail slump before others because they’re further along in this amalgamation of online and offline, of logistics, of the next iteration of what retail space is really about,” said one developer. “But to get there, retail has had to go through a revaluation, mostly because if you have a lot more retail space devoted to entertainment and F&B, that traditionally won’t pay as high a rent as fashion.”

Meanwhile, non-discretionary retail continues to find favour as a defensive asset because shoppers will always need neighbourhood retailing. In China, non-discretionary expenditures in retail, food and beverage, and some mall properties are still doing pretty well, one investment manager argued. A number of interviewees also commented that retail assets are the least homogenous in real estate, making generalisations difficult. The best mall in a city can therefore thrive, while all those around it are struggling.

Retail has always been the most actively managed of the core property sectors, and that has intensified as landlords try to create spaces that will attract footfall. According to one interviewee: “Landlords are starting to look at providing a more immersive experience and a more personalised offer in their malls, which technology—the ability to collect and analyse data—is enabling them to do.”

The other crucial factor in shopping centre management is positioning the mall in its community. “The Asian shopping centre has always been closer to the heart of the community than elsewhere,” one developer said. “And I think that goes to the oldest paradigm of what a shopping mall actually is, which is a town centre. The innovation is a really simple one, which is just to look at any neighbourhood retailing and what makes it thrive and provide all that front and centre.”

Often, the most innovative malls are those in a niche location, or where space is constrained. “If you go to a place like Shibuya in Tokyo, you can see malls which are constantly remaking themselves organically. They don’t have long-term leases or anchor tenants, or if they do, it will be retailers who turn their stock over really quickly.”

Some interviewees also see an opportunity in secondary malls, which can be bought cheaply and refurbished to provide more up-to-date offerings, which might include coworking and other service commercial real estate debt specialist. As one investor said, “With [domestic] banks unable to participate at the same level, or in some cases not able to participate in some of the foreign deals, it has opened up this opportunity for nonbank lenders. And it’s a pretty exciting opportunity, particularly at this point in the cycle where for some investments you would much rather have debt than equity exposure.”

Some investors strike less positive notes, however. Many of Australia’s prime properties are tightly held by local REITs, and the huge volumes of cash held by Australian pension funds mean that competition for assets in that market will always be tough. In addition, there is little incentive for building owners to sell because they may not be able to get back into the market if they do.

Also, as cap rates continue to compress across the board, some asset classes are experiencing their appeal. For the past few years, for example, Australian logistics has been a go-to sector for investors. Today, this is changing. According to one fund manager, “Industrial is so ridiculously priced at the moment—I think you would be mad buying it at a 4.5 per cent yield when you can buy prime offices in Sydney and Melbourne off similar cap rates. Australia’s a big place, with a lot of land. Industrial has never really generated rental growth above inflation, and with the land supply available, I don’t think 40-odd years of history is going to change too much. There’s also an insurmountable risk with industrial and logistics.”

Overall, though, prospects remain positive; 2019 marks the 27th year since the last Australian recession.
Focus on the End User

Today, real estate investors across the Asia Pacific are taking an increasing interest in their end users—the shoppers and office workers in their buildings—as opposed to the companies that sign the tenancy agreements.

In the office sector, this manifests as an increased focus on health and well-being, whether this means providing end-of-trip facilities for cyclists, health programmes, or clean air for tenants. “In China, there is a very strong focus on indoor air quality, and this is a focus for workers and thus also for HR [human resource] departments. That translates into tenant stickiness,” said one investor.

The concept of “space as a service” has until now been popularised mainly by coworking companies, but real estate investors—even if they have conventional leases in place—are starting to see opportunities in providing more services for end users, including retail space within offices, for example.

The service component is increasingly important in retail spaces too, as omni-channel retailing begins to challenge the traditional landlord/tenant dynamic. Whereas previously, retail landlords simply provided space for tenants and let them focus on customers, they now have more direct involvement, with an increasing focus on “programming,” i.e., the software of their spaces. According to one developer, “I think the general investment into programming has had to increase significantly to keep people there. And then working with some of the tech-related companies as they roll out new products and showrooms and display their products in a different way, it’s all about trying to create a more unique experience.”

Some observers take a more philosophical approach to this phenomenon. According to one adviser, “There is no return on capital anymore, so you look to make money on the service component—you want a bit of real estate in the densest location you can find where you can get the greatest number of people using your real estate and then make money through services to them. It is all about owning assets in dense urban locations.”

Nervous about Niche?

For several years, higher returns offered by alternate sectors created a favoured refuge for regional investors seeking to hit targeted returns. These remain popular today, although concerns are emerging about niches that feature a heavy operating element. Sectors such as student housing, data centres, self-storage, and senior housing are high-maintenance plays, where investments are often structured using separate operating companies. As one investor noted, “There are a lot of moving pieces that real estate investors do not understand—it’s a different way of investing, where you’re trying to capture more of the operating profit and move up the value chain. It is a lot more complicated, and running a business is very, very different from collecting rent. It is part of that continuum between being a landlord and being an owner-occupier.” As a result, some investors are beginning to question whether the investment required in an operating company is actually diluting real estate returns.

The industrial and logistics sector has proved one of the most popular with global real estate investors over the past decade, with the bulk of investment dollars going to create modern logistics facilities. But with logistics now firmly established as a core asset class, a range of subsectors within the industry is drawing investor attention.

LAST-MILE FULFILMENT is one emerging subcategory. According to one Singapore-based adviser, “There is clearly a need for urban logistics now, because if you are going to order online and expect a man on a bike to arrive in 30 minutes, the centre must be within 30 minutes’ ride of where you are sitting.”

Enabling last-mile delivery is tricky, though, because city-centre land is expensive and logistics warehouses are rarely small. Investors are therefore thinking creatively about using space. For example, as shopping centres lose business to e-commerce retailers, vacated capacity can be leveraged as a fulfilment facility, as can older, lower-grade industrial buildings, as long as they are accessible. Vacant floors in fringe office locations could also be adapted as logistics space.

COLD-STOREAGE FACILITIES are another logistics spinoff, driven in this case by evolution of the online grocery sector. Aggregate online sales of groceries in the Asia Pacific are forecast to surge from US$80.7 billion in 2018 to US$265 billion in 2023, according to researchers Forrester.

“Cold storage is interesting, just because of the rise of the middle class, and the consumption trends around frozen-food,” a private-equity investor commented. And not just in China, but places like Australia [sic] have pretty significant food exports, so frozen-food growth is driving demand for cold storage above and beyond what you would expect in a developed market.”

CBRE research suggests that for the Asia Pacific to build the same per capita cold-storage capacity as the United States would require 411 million cubic metres of new supply. It also said that yields for cold-storage facilities are 50 to 150 basis points higher than for warehouses, with tenants generally also taking longer leases of 10 to 25 years.

DATA CENTRES are the favoured niche sector in this year’s Emerging Trends survey, driven by growing appetite for data by cloud computing providers and the impending advent of 5G mobile technology. “There is huge demand for data centres,” according to one adviser.

“It’s probably up with logistics as the sector everybody wants to get into. The problem for the big investors is scalability, because data centres are generally not very big physically or even in value. So, if you’re going to invest, you need a lot of them, and I think some of the big investors will find that a little bit fiddly.”

South Korea, Japan, and Australia are the first Asia Pacific nations to begin the rollout of 5G services and, alongside Singapore, are the prime targets for investors in the sector. But emerging markets also are consuming ever-growing volumes of data, and investors from Jakarta to Manila mentioned the sector as one with a high local growth trajectory.

China is an entirely separate market, and many investors prefer to stay away because of regulatory barriers and concerns over data security. However, it has huge potential and notable undersupply. A recent report from DBS Bank found a huge mismatch in supply and demand in markets across the mainland, with all the primary cities lacking sufficient capacity. The prime challenges for China data centres lie in finding land in cities where demand exists and in securing required supplies of power.
Chapter 1: Defying Gravity?

Accounting for Climate Change

A relatively new concept for real estate investors is that of climate risk and resilience—how exposed an asset or a portfolio is to the various impacts of climate change, including warmer temperatures, higher sea levels, and the increased risk of extreme weather events.

As extreme weather events increase in frequency, awareness of potential negative impacts on long-term asset values is forcing owners and investors to change the way they underwrite investments. According to one fund manager, “Most commercial properties tend to be around water—close to either an ocean or a river, because that’s where everybody is. So, if we have more severe weather events, there is potential for flooding, for example. I think the industry will move quickly on this, even more quickly than with regard to carbon reduction.”

“There’s a huge amount of climate risk in sea-level rise in Greater China, and [particularly] in the Greater Bay Area there’s lots of risk exposure,” one interviewee stated. “For areas such as Miami, there is an emerging ecosystem around climate resilience, but I am not sure that is the case in China.”

The real estate industry as a whole has begun to develop more advanced strategies to recognise, understand, and manage risks, but still mainly relies on insurance to cover the majority of the shorter-term climate change risk. However, while insurance has remained generally attainable in risk-prone areas, being insured does not protect investors from a reduction in asset liquidity.

In the words of one fund manager, “Pretty soon, the insurance industry is going to reach a tipping point, where they don’t just look at historical events to try to determine the premium for a property, they are going to use modelling to see what potential future events might happen. So, they will model the risks for a building and charge accordingly. If a buyer gets a report that says the chances are that over the next 10 years the asset may be knocked offline six times by flooding and there are no protections in place, well, nobody is going to pay you for that building.”

Owners and investors are seeking to harden assets against the risk of extreme weather events. They are also using energy efficiency and other mitigation measures to reduce their risk and improve asset efficiency. For example, firms in Australia are using native landscaping to absorb heat and reduce air-conditioning costs.

“We have to worry about what those models are going to say and make sure we have a mitigation plan in place,” the fund manager continued. “In most cities, we as individual asset owners should not assume the government will take care of this for us.”

Embracing Technology

While the real estate industry has been a notoriously slow adopter of new technology, both awareness of and investment in property technology (proptech) strategies are growing rapidly. Several developers have launched their own funds or incubators to gain exposure to potentially game-changing applications. This has become necessary because most innovation in proptech now comes from the technology industry rather than from real estate.

Perhaps the simplest (and often the cheapest) way for landlords to use technology is via software: retail landlords use customer loyalty apps, which can also be used for parking or food ordering, while larger office investors in the region are trialing apps allowing tenants to book facilities and services. Apps can also be used, in tandem with sensors, to control or monitor different aspects of building functionality, including in particular air-conditioning and lighting systems. Creating “smart” buildings reduces costs and can provide crucial occupancy-related data that help boost efficiency.

One upcoming technological development that will have a significant effect on real estate in the near future is 5G mobile networks, which are already being rolled out in South Korea, Japan, and Australia. According to one property advisor, “5G will offer richer and more immediate data, which can be used to adjust heating and cooling, automate security, and improve the performance of a building.”

As dozens of cities in China, India, South Korea, and Japan undertake smart-city initiatives, 5G devices will be crucial to transmitting the big data required for efficient processing of traffic, waste, water, and power.

Technology is not without controversy, however. Some observers believe that data security will become a major governance issue for landlords as they deal with the thorny issue of data collection and use. According to one advisor, “Data privacy is going to become a C-suite issue for real estate companies. With smart cities, increasingly digitised operations, and tenant data, it is on the horizon.”

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Exhibit 1-15 Prospects for Niche Property Types in 2020

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<td>Resorts</td>
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Source: Emerging Trends in Real Estate Asia Pacific 2020 survey.

Exhibit 1-16 Reasons for Investing in Niche Sectors

- Less competition from other investors (27%)
- Diversification (22%
- Stable income return (20%)
- Higher yields (13%)
- Demographic demand drivers (15%)

Source: Emerging Trends in Real Estate Asia Pacific 2020 survey.

Exhibit 1-17 Global Economic Losses by Peril

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<td>Others</td>
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Source: Aon.
Chapter 2: Real Estate Capital Flows

"The appetite for real estate inflows into Asia has tightened the last six to nine months. Has it gone to zero? Certainly not. But a lot of investors have been looking to take risk off the table, so their propensity to invest into Asian real estate has diminished."

In the face of dwindling global trade and growing geopolitical headwinds, cross-border investors turned decidedly cautious in 2019. And with anti-globalist agendas now increasingly prominent in global politics, cross-border investment in the Asia Pacific declined in the second quarter of 2019 to some 30 per cent of total transactions, according to analysts Real Capital Analytics (RCA), down from a record 41 per cent in the first quarter.

Unsurprisingly, this drop was due mainly to declining activity by American and European investors, with such deals falling a substantial 28 per cent year-on-year in the second quarter to just US$2.54 billion—the lowest figure since the start of 2012. At the same time, though, the value of cross-border deals involving capital sourced from within the Asia Pacific region saw a substantial increase (i.e., up 23 per cent year-on-year) to some US$7.76 billion. This suggests two things: first, anti-globalisation is not as big an issue in the Asia Pacific as it is in the West, and second, the relentless exodus of Asian capital into cross-border investments seen over the last five years shows no sign of abating. In fact, with intra-Asian deals hitting record levels in the first half of 2019, at just under US$17.3 billion, another new high-water mark is likely to be set for full-year transactions.

The main driver of Asian cross-border outflows remains the same: a huge surplus of investment capital held by regional institutions and sovereign wealth funds that cannot be reinvested domestically without creating asset price distortions. Increasingly, too, investors are recognising the value of diversification of asset bases as a hedge against home-market risks.

In 2019, the biggest exporter of capital regionally was Singapore, which was also biggest last year. Although the current dominance of Singaporean capital is due partly to slowing outflows from China, Singapore’s outbound cross-border investment has been growing at a consistent 12 per cent annual rate for the last five years. Often involving portfolio purchases, Singaporean outflows comprise a mix of sovereign wealth fund money, investments by the city-state’s various integrated developers, and also capital from Singapore’s large (and for the most part very liquid) REIT sector, which is forced to look overseas given the relative shortage of suitable investment opportunities remaining in the domestic market. In addition, Singapore acts as an aggregator of capital from around South East Asia, packaging money into locally based investment funds that is then deployed internationally.

China, meanwhile, continues to restrict capital outflows on policy grounds. This looks unlikely to change soon, but while Chinese flows to Western markets (in particular the United States) have therefore ground to a halt, Chinese investments within Asia have remained stable, with capital directed mainly to Hong Kong and Singapore. This is because significant amounts of Chinese capital are still in circulation that are beyond the reach of domestic export controls. According to one institutional fund manager based in Singapore, “You can definitely see there still is Chinese capital, particularly from the large and well-funded [players]. It’s capital that’s already overseas—and even if you are just looking to rotate [that], you’re still talking about massive amounts [invested] in real estate.”

South Korea is another market exporting large amounts of money offshore, and was the only major market in Asia where year-on-year outflows increased in the first half of 2019. Most South Korean money is heading out of the region, though, due to the dynamics of currency hedging, with the focus switching from the United States to Europe. According to one Seoul-based consultant, “Nowadays, FX [foreign exchange] hedging gives you a premium for investments in Europe. So if we get a 6 per cent yield in, say, Paris, then after FX hedging, we get an extra 1.5 per cent. In the U.S. market, though, it’s the opposite—we lose 100 to 150 basis points [bps].” Because South Korean investors tend to focus on cash-on-cash returns, hedging costs have become a major differentiator for investors, as are lower interest rates available in the Eurozone.

South Korean investors are targeting assets mainly in Paris, Amsterdam, and Frankfurt. In addition, interest is growing in further-flung destinations in Eastern Europe. In part, this is because London, long a favourite of international capital, has somewhat lost its shine due to the uncertainties created by Brexit. Beyond that, though, markets such as Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia are now drawing more attention from international investors due to tightening yields across Europe. One South Korean consortium, for example, recently purchased an office building in Slovakia’s capital, Bratislava at an acquisition yield of 5.75 per cent. This migration of capital towards emerging European markets is likely to continue.

In terms of the biggest regional recipients of cross-border flows, Australia and Singapore were the major winners in 2019. Perhaps surprisingly, given current trade tensions, China also featured strongly. This is because, although many foreign funds have put China strategies on hold due to uncertainties caused by U.S.-China trade friction, substantial volumes of capital that were already committed to China-facing funds are now being actively deployed.

Exhibit 2-1 Capital Flows, Share of Capital Source by Country/Territory, FY’18/H1’19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country/Territory</th>
<th>Domestic</th>
<th>Cross-border within APAC</th>
<th>Cross-border from outside APAC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>62.1%</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
<td>68.9%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>99.9%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>56.4%</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainland China</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
<td>64.8%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong SAR</td>
<td>62.1%</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Apartment, hotel, industrial, office, retail, and senior housing transactions included. Entity-level deals included. Development sites excluded.

Source: Real Capital Analytics.
While for the time being many real estate investors in the West are adopting a wait-and-see attitude, the last several years have seen strong increases in global allocations to Asia Pacific markets. This is mainly an exercise in diversification, as fund managers seek to plug an Asia-shaped gap in their portfolios. In principle, therefore, although some may question whether risk-adjusted returns are adequate, international investors need little convincing of the merits of an Asia Pacific strategy. According to a fund manager at the investment arm of a large global insurer, “Both the demographics and the urbanisation in Asia are strong trends relative to the other continents. So, although historically a lot of our allocation was back in Europe, with more transparency, a lot more information, and people travelling a lot more, there is clearly more confidence that real returns can be found [there].”

One issue that has historically been a stumbling block for global investors has been in finding suitable assets. “If you asked most of the large global investors, they would like to invest more in Asia,” one local broker said. “It’s largely been lack of opportunity. They don’t have teams, they don’t have the opportunities, they don’t have the approval.” Since the global financial crisis, they have gravitated to safe core plays, but prefer direct investing rather than into direct purchases. “We’ve been dealing with one Tokyo-based fund manager, “You’re starting to see a pickup in terms of institutions getting asset managers and gatekeepers in place who can understand these markets and put more capital into play. We’ve been dealing with a couple different companies, and I’ve been relatively impressed by the fact that they are spending a lot of time trying to understand the markets and see what fits and what’s strategically the best bet long term.”

U.K. If you look at London, which has one-third the population of Shanghai, it’s a very liquid market, turning over in its entirety every five years. So even including Japan and Australia, which are more liquid markets, Asia Pacific transaction volumes are remarkably low, which means that—especially in relation to core-type assets—you’re aiming at quite a small opportunity set.” This is one reason why build-to-core has become such a popular investment strategy among institutional investors across the region.

Japanese institutional funds, such as the US$1.4 trillion Government Pension Investment Fund, have been preparing to move a portion of their assets offshore for several years, driven by shrinking investment returns at home as well as the dwindling stock of Japanese 10-year government bonds (JGBs) left to buy after authorities bought up most JGB supply as part of the government’s quantitative easing strategy. So far, though, the migration out of Japan has been a slow and spotty process, driven by shrinking investment returns at home as well as the dwindling stock of Japanese 10-year government bonds (JGBs) left to buy after authorities bought up most JGB supply as part of the government’s quantitative easing strategy. So far, though, the migration out of Japan has been a slow and spotty process, driven by shrinking investment returns at home as well as the dwindling stock of Japanese 10-year government bonds (JGBs) left to buy after authorities bought up most JGB supply as part of the government’s quantitative easing strategy. So far, though, the migration out of Japan has been a slow and spotty process, driven by shrinking investment returns at home as well as the dwindling stock of Japanese 10-year government bonds (JGBs) left to buy after authorities bought up most JGB supply as part of the government’s quantitative easing strategy. So far, though, the migration out of Japan has been a slow and spotty process, driven by shrinking investment returns at home as well as the dwindling stock of Japanese 10-year government bonds (JGBs) left to buy after authorities bought up most JGB supply as part of the government’s quantitative easing strategy. So far, though, the migration out of Japan has been a slow and spotty process, driven by shrinking investment returns at home as well as the dwindling stock of Japanese 10-year government bonds (JGBs) left to buy after authorities bought up most JGB supply as part of the government’s quantitative easing strategy. So far, though, the migration out of Japan has been a slow and spotty process, driven by shrinking investment returns at home as well as the dwindling stock of Japanese 10-year government bonds (JGBs) left to buy after authorities bought up most JGB supply as part of the government’s quantitative easing strategy.

“Japanese capital is active, but very focused on mature core markets—the United States, and to a much lesser extent the U.K. and Australia,” an investment adviser said. As a result, according to one Tokyo-based fund manager, “You’re starting to see a pickup in terms of institutions getting asset managers and gatekeepers in place who can understand these markets and put more capital into play. We’ve been dealing with a couple different companies, and I’ve been relatively impressed by the fact that they are spending a lot of time trying to understand the markets and see what fits and what’s strategically the best bet long term.”

Until now, relatively little Japanese capital has been directed to Asia Pacific assets, although Japanese banks are moving offshore and are active in a number of markets across the region, again seeking out higher returns than can be found in U.K., where borrowing costs are generally well under 100 basis points. In particular, Japanese developers are actively investing in South East Asia, often in support of Japanese manufacturers as they set up new production facilities.

Infrastructure is another focus. According to one Manila-based developer, “You do have some [Japanese] state-backed industrial investment that’s poking around the edges trying to find the right thing. They’ve been very active in encouraging [Japanese outsourcing businesses] and with financing the big industrial players to strike deals with the Philippine government, especially around health care/medical and smart city tech.”
Fundraising Slows

After a record haul in 2018, when Asia Pacific investment funds raised a record US$20.2 billion in real estate–related capital, fundraising has fallen precipitously in 2019. According to analysts, only US$6.7 billion was brought in during the first nine months of the year, implying a full-year figure of just US$9 billion—on pace for the slowest total since 2011.

The speed of the dropoff comes as a surprise and does not bode well for funds holding roadshows in 2020. Fund managers have groaned accustomed to setting their sights on a target of, say, US$500 million in assets, only to raise US$250 million or less.

The rate at which funds have been deploying capital has also fallen. Following a record number of deals completed in the fourth quarter of 2017, when US$49.6 billion in assets changed hands, according to RCA, the market has faded, with four straight quarters of decline (on a rolling 12-month basis) experienced in the year to June 2019, the most recent figures available at the time of writing. The pace of deals seems set to slow further in 2020. A lack of deals does not imply lack of liquidity, however, nor does it mean that investors have lost their appetite for placing capital. The likely explanation is that funds have been unable to source sufficient assets that meet their risk/return profiles.

Dry Powder Builds

Although fundraising slowed dramatically in 2019, considerable amounts of raised capital are still looking for an investment home across the region. According to Preqin, the US$34 billion in Asia–specific mandates awaiting deployment as of September 2019 is down only modestly from the US$37 billion on hand at the end of last year, which was the highest level since 2009.

These large reserves of dry powder only reinforce the difficulty that global investors have in getting money into the market. They also underline how hard it will be to remedy their historical under-allocation to the region. As one Hong Kong–based fund manager said, “European and American investors are still very underweight in Asia—at the end of the day, there is potentially way more capital than there are suitable deals.”

Still, the unused capital held by Asia Pacific funds is a far cry from what is currently piled up on the sidelines in the West. With US$208 billion in dry powder waiting for deployment in North America, as of September 2019, and some US$88 billion held by European funds, European allocations have risen rapidly since 2012, when they were roughly at the same levels Asia–focused money is now.

Tighter Bank Lending

Raising finance from banks is certainly tougher in 2019. Slowing global trade and economic growth have led to tighter loan underwriting standards. As a result, a flight-to-quality mentality has emerged among lenders, with rates drifting up and loan tenures falling. “If you are a credit provider, trade disputes do not give you a large appetite to advance related credit,” one debt specialist said. “Do you want to lend into recession? Or wait for a recession and then, when there is blizzard in the street, buy real estate, as they say?”

That said, banks remain by far the largest provider of capital for Asian public and private deals, simply because they have such vast amounts to deploy. As a result, in most markets, financing is not hard to find for high-quality assets. In the words of one Hong Kong–based broker: “There’s no change at the top. We see easy access for low–leveraged deals from good-quality sponsors—they have no problem raising money because their track record is so good.”

In addition, even as banks become more wary of overall macroeconomic risk, interest rates are again starting to sink, removing some of the stress in the system. In the second half of 2019, most major Asian markets have seen the cost of debt charged by banks decline by something approaching 100 basis points for five–year loans, in line with ongoing rate cuts introduced by the U.S. Federal Reserve. As interest rates fall, banks also have the opportunity to widen spreads to address the perception of extra risk without increasing the real cost of capital.

Beyond that, other secular drivers also mitigate towards an environment of lower–for–longer interest rates. First, vastly increased levels of liquidity are now the norm for both real estate mandates and the global economy generally, meaning that conventional laws of supply and demand will tend to suppress borrowing costs. Other factors are also in play. As a recent paper published by fixed-income investment manager Pimco argues: “The two most important secular drivers are demographics and technology. Rising life expectancy increases desired saving, while new technologies are capital saving and are becoming cheaper—and thus reduce ex–ante demand for investment. The resulting savings glut tends to push the ‘natural’ rate of interest lower and lower.”

Japan is probably the poster child for the long-term, low–rate scenario. The government is continuing its accommodative policy, though this has not prevented Japanese interest rates drifting up marginally over the last year. According to one Japanese–based investor: “There still continues to be a bit of tightening, and banks are much more selective on what they’ll lend on. So, for true noncourse [debt] with non–Japanese sponsorship, you’re still in the 60 to 90 bps area, and between 55 and 60 per cent LTVs [loan–to–value].” At these levels, interest rates have become one of the major draws for investors in Japan. Cap rates may be low, but the spread over the cost of borrowing means that returns are comparable to markets offering significantly higher yields.

Exhibit 2-5 Asia–Focused Real Estate Fundraising, 2009–2019 YTD

Exhibit 2-6 Real Estate Dry Powder by Region, 2009–2019

Exhibit 2-7 Expected Change in Availability of Debt and Equity Finance

Exhibit 2-8 Availability of Debt by Type of Lender
construction and land-acquisition deals, therefore is increasingly filling the gap for Four domestic banks are unable to satisfy further in July 2019. As a result, the Big Capitalisation requirements were hiked commercial and consumer borrowers. underwriting standards for both domestic banks to adopt more rigorous dramatically—the availability of bank finance. At the same time, there are growing numbers of investors who are either seeking out better returns than can be found in the bond markets or who prefer ‘‘liquidity— anything from distress debt transaction risk was low because there the field: “The reason it got done is that have structured it as a club deal, but providers offer mezzanine lenders are therefore very much in the frame. Nonbank Lending Picks Up . . . In some markets, however, regulatory pressure is cutting—sometimes drastically—in price,” continued the debt specialist. “There’s no upside in debt—if you got 6 per cent IRR from a debt deal, but get 12 per cent from an equity deal, your resources are going to be focused on the 12 per cent IR 310–360 cent loan-to-value, or struggle to do the offshore component with an onshore bank that’s not them.” In addition, by some estimates, approximately US$70 billion worth of commercial real estate loans is due to be repaid over the next five years. Lending to distressed situations in China is also a possibility, as discussed in Chapter One, although this type of opportunity has not historically proven fruitful for foreign investors in that market. Indian banks, meanwhile, have flattened their exposure to commercial real estate over the last two years, due partly to regulatory tightening and partly the need to minimise their exposure to a sizeable portfolio of nonperforming loans issued to local developers. Indian nonbank financial companies (NBFCs) originally stepped into this void, but have since run into financial problems themselves and are therefore no longer in the mix. Opportunities for foreign funds to offer senior debt to stressed developers are therefore very much in the frame.

.. But Appetite Remains Low Despite the opportunities surfacing in Australia, China, and India, however, demand for nonbank debt remains low in most Asian markets. With interest rates now again in decline, and banks opting to absorb some of the impact (i.e., by tightening spreads) even when they were rising, the amount of nonbank finance issued has not been as high as expected. As one investor said: “There is nonbank money [available], but I’m not sure there’s no credit available for retail assets,” according to one Asia debt specialist.

China is another market where the central bank has curtailed domestic bank lending to the property sector, which has therefore been deprived of funding to buy and/or develop real estate and land. This is providing opportunities for offshore platforms offering mezzanine lending by well-capitalised institutional clients. According to one investor: “There is nonbank capital available for this type of investors. As a result, there is a market on both the demand and supply sides for nonbank lenders such as offshore banks, private-equity players, and credit funds to step in, providing anything from distress debt to mezzanine funding (with the latter “probably generating the best [debt] returns,” according to one investor). In Australia, regulators are compelling domestic banks to adopt more rigorous underwriting standards for both commercial and consumer borrowers. Capitalisation requirements were hiked further in July 2019. As a result, the Big Four domestic banks are unable to satisfy demand via the usual combination of bilateral or club loans. Nonbank financing therefore is increasingly filling the gap for construction and land-acquisition deals, and occasionally for core investment loans, too. Although domestic banks rarely provide loan tenures lasting more than five years, institutional funds are more willing to offer longer-tenure loans. A variety of new players are participating. In general, Australian superannuation funds have been slow to react, leaving more opportunities for foreign banks to pick up business. However, as rates fall, superannuation players are being pushed to look for higher-yielding investments, often using managers to provide a lending vehicle. In July 2019, for example, one major domestic developer obtained finance from an Australian superannuation fund for A$360 million in senior debt for redevelopment of a large office building in Brisbane anchored by a blue chip tenant. The transaction was described at the time as Australia’s single largest nonbank senior debt facility. Banks would normally have structured it as a club deal, but the borrower wanted a single financier, according to a consultant specialising in the field. “The reason it got done is that transaction risk was low because there was a single lender. That tells you there is nonbank capital [available] at a price for institutional assets.” More (and bigger) deals are now in the pipeline, with expected demand from Australian real estate borrowers for nonbank debt rising to an estimated A$50 billion by the end of 2023, according to an estimate from one such lender. While large and creditworthy Australian developers will have no trouble sourcing nonbank debt, there is a long-term trend militating against lending for riskier deals, such as with tier-2 developers, high-leverage plays, or transitional product with short weighted average lease expiries (WALEs), which continue to be affected by government guidelines. For example, nowadays “there’s almost no credit available for retail assets,” according to one Asia debt specialist.

Another problem in setting up Asia-based debt funds is that setting up a debt team is quite difficult. Usually, debt funds are set up by carving them out of existing equity fund teams, but the equity side will usually still be favoured because of the relative lack of return. According to one adviser: “There’s no upside in debt—if you have 6 per cent IRR from a debt deal, but get 12 per cent from an equity deal, your resources are going to be focused on the 12 per cent IR.” It’s not fair to say you can have people toggle between debt and equity in the same teams.” Debt’s lack of upside vis-à-vis equity deals is only worsening as interest rates begin to retrench. So, while cap rates in Asia are certainly low, they can still provide a good spread for private equity players over the cost of bank lending. In Australia, for example, debt funds will make a 3 per cent return on three-to-five-year loans. But “why would an equity fund pivot out of equity to a 3 per cent yield with no upside? They can get that through rental growth and yield compression. My prediction is that the next wave of debt funds will look for lower coupon where they can genuinely compete with the banks for the deals the banks don’t want to do.”
REITs on the Rise

Share prices in Asia Pacific REITs strengthened in 2019 as interest rates in the United States began to decline. Many REITs in the region, and especially in Singapore, are now on acquisition sprees to take advantage of the lower cost of capital for new purchases, as well as an anticipated upswing in investor interest in yield-bearing stocks. In particular, institutional investors are rumoured this year to be more interested in investing in regional REITs as opposed to direct asset purchases, because both REITs are by nature more liquid and because high-quality standalone properties are increasingly thin on the ground. Nikko Asset Management’s Singapore-listed exchange-traded fund tracking Asia ex-Japan REITs—basically a fund of funds for REITs outside Japan—was looking at a 14.6 per cent equity return for the first nine months of 2019, with an average 3.7 per cent dividend yield.

Singapore

The very success of the Singapore REIT industry has to a great extent defined its path going forward. With some 38 REITs and property trusts now listed in a city with such a relatively small stock of investable assets, competition between REITs is driving two major trends. First, consolidation among the smaller players becomes inevitable; larger REITs trade more often because they have a higher free float, attract more analyst coverage, and are more likely to be included in major indices. In addition, a merged REIT will be able to obtain more funding because it has a bigger asset base and will usually be seen by lenders as a better credit risk.

Second, REITs must move offshore in order to find assets to buy. Currently, about 40 per cent of all S-REITs’ holdings are located outside Singapore, a figure that can be expected to rise in the future. Buying offshore can be problematic, however, because REITs must generally buy assets that are accretive to their

Exhibit 2-11 Index Performance of REITs by Country

Source: DWS, Bloomberg, as of August 2019.

Japan REITs (J-REITs) also performed well, with the Tokyo Stock Exchange REIT index up 22.9 per cent for the first nine months of 2019. That brought J-REIT shares to their highest point since the 2007 crisis. An average yield of 3.8 per cent may not rival the roughly 5 to 6 per cent return offered by Singapore REITs, but negative yields of Japanese 10-year government bonds still provide a spread of 400 bps, a figure comparable with that in Singapore.

Japan

J-REITs continue to dominate transactions in Japan’s commercial property markets, accounting for about 38 per cent of all commercial real estate transactions in Tokyo for the year ending March 2019. J-REIT dominance is one reason that foreign buyers represented just 13 per cent of this year’s total transactions, according to Deutsche Bank, the lowest level of foreign participation of any Asia Pacific country apart from Hong Kong SAR and mainland China.

While the US$110 billion J-REIT market is huge, however, it is often equally inefficient, featuring numerous entities that are small, poorly managed, and trade well below net asset value. In principle, these REITs would make attractive takeover targets for larger investors looking to invest at the portfolio level, especially when the number of assets available to purchase on the Tokyo market is currently at a low ebb. However, while the market is badly in need of consolidation, until recently, such thinking was nothing but a pipe dream because unsolicited takeovers in Japan have rarely been successful.

The landscape may slowly be changing, however, following the hostile takeover in September 2019 of a US$570 million J-REIT with assets located mainly in and around Tokyo. According to one Tokyo-based fund manager, “It’s long overdue for someone to do an unsolicited takeover of a REIT that was basically going nowhere. I think we will start to see more of this now, so that these REITs that have no reason to live are going to be taken over, and they know they can’t sit there and say, ‘Sorry, we’re not interested.’” Hopefully, it will start to change the J-REIT market and start to change perspectives, so that they are managed for the unit holders and will start to pay out dividends.

Consolidation of the J-REIT market, whether by hostile takeovers or otherwise, would be healthy not just from a corporate governance perspective, but also because it will create a bigger group of REITs that qualify to join the government’s asset-purchasing scheme. As part of its quantitative easing policy, the Japanese central bank pledged to buy as much as 90 billion yen (US$840 million) worth of J-REIT shares annually, depending on market conditions, because of minimum capitalisation and liquidity requirements, less than half of Japan’s 60-odd REITs qualify to join the programme, meaning that the buying is concentrated in a limited number of REITs.

As a result, since the programme began in 2010, persistent buying has left the Bank of Japan holding more than 5 per cent of a dozen large J-REITs, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of upwardly mobile share prices. Consolidation of the market would potentially expand the number of qualifying REITs significantly and therefore reduce the distorting effect of the government’s asset purchase programme.

Exhibit 2-12 Major Asia Pacific REIT Market Capitalisation by Country/Territory

Source: DWS Investments.

Japan REITs make up more than 60 per cent of the Asia Pacific REIT market capitalisation and are concentrated in a limited number of REITs.

Singapore

Over the last five years, Australia has more than tripled the number of listings from 49 down to 40 in the last five years, Australia has almost the same number (39) of listed A-REITs as Singapore. The REIT sector is significantly larger in Australia, however, with a combined market capitalisation of US$61.9 billion in Singapore versus the US$62.3 billion down under.

Given the scarcity of investable assets on Australian markets, buying an A-REIT is an appealing way for international investors to get instant exposure to Australian property. One large office REIT was purchased by a Canadian investor in 2018, and more merger activity involving both foreign and Australian buyers seems likely.

Although the sector has been dwindling in size, Australia’s REITs should be particularly attractive to investors looking for exposure to niche segments of the real estate market. At a time when investors are looking for specialty-sector exposure, listed funds make a lot of sense as vehicles that can offer a broad portfolio managed by experts in any given niche asset class.

India

India took five years to make it to market, amid many a false start, but India has finally introduced its first REIT. Comprising a portfolio featuring seven office parks and four office buildings, and offering an initial distribution yield of around 6.25 per cent, the Embassy Office Park REIT’s share price shot up some 34 per cent in its first six months, shrinking the implied yield to less than 6 per cent—a remarkably low level for a market where risk is perceived to be high. One interviewee suggested that, given higher taxes and volatility, Indian REITs ought to trade at a yield of some 12 per cent to 13 per cent to be comparable on a risk/return basis to the region’s major REIT markets.
“Logically, it shouldn’t be priced there,” observed one locally based consultant, who offered two reasons why the shares had been bid up. First, the REIT passed an initial hurdle when it was able to provide investors a first-quarter dividend, providing confidence to a sceptical market that the story was actually solid. In addition, ongoing capital appreciation in the Indian office sector (partly, it has to be said, caused by the Embassy listing in itself) has further boosted sentiment.

“The analyst community is what’s driving the share price, not the retail buyer,” continued the adviser. “The general view is that if you start discounting the value of this portfolio using cap rates at the same levels of other recent transactions, then clearly the market deserves to give these guys a higher price. Whether you think those cap rates are justifiable is another matter.”

At the end of the day, therefore, and unlike REITs in most other markets, “it’s really not a yield story, because the larger IT occupier community in India wants to stick to a US$1 per square foot per month rent, and the weighted average rentals for the Embassy portfolio are not too far from that. So it’s not about rent appreciation, it’s the cap rate compression story that’s driving the value appreciation.”

Unsurprisingly, the Embassy REIT experience is seen as a positive omen for future Indian REIT listings. Other domestic developers, including several in South India and in Mumbai, are now looking at listing portfolios of their own, with two or three new REITs likely to come to the market in 2020.
Chapter 3: Markets and Sectors to Watch

"I tell investors, you should come to Asia for medium- to long-term growth and diversification, not for a premium to your home market; it is not sustainable to expect that through the cycle."

As the end of the current real estate cycle approaches, investors in Asia Pacific real estate are doubling down on large, liquid, defensive markets. Emerging economies—with one notable exception—are on the wane.

This year, Singapore, Tokyo, Sydney, and Melbourne—all liquid and transparent markets—are at the top of the five cities ranked by investment prospects. All also appeared among the top five cities in our 2019 report, when concerns about an approaching downturn were first aired. The rest of the top cities for investment are similarly large and liquid.

The outlier among 2020’s favoured markets is Ho Chi Minh City. A destination that has been rising up the investment rankings for the past five years, it is now rated the region’s top city for development and ranks by investment prospects. All also

Vietnam offers strong economic growth, a positive demographic profile, and, — perhaps most important—is seen as the biggest beneficiary of the slow migration of manufacturing capacities from China. Transparency remains a weak point, although it is improving.

Nonetheless, the problem for real estate investors is that Ho Chi Minh City remains a market with relatively few investable assets and where risks are high. Indeed, a number of interviewees commented that too much capital was already being funnelled into the wrong places. As one investment manager said: “Vietnam needs truly affordable middle-income housing, but people are building too high-end.”

Investor interest in Asia’s other growth markets is muted: Jakarta and Manila remain marooned in the bottom quarter of the investment table, while—aside from Ho Chi Minh City—only Mumbai and Bangkok among emerging-market cities make it into the top 10 for development. With fears of recession looming in the United States, investors will always be wary of emerging markets—experience proves that when economic strife arrives, their liquidity and currency volatility make them especially unsafe.

That said, investors continue to warm towards India as a long-term investment destination. “It is moving from, ‘I’ll never do it again,’ towards, ‘I have to be there,’” as one investor put it. Although positive sentiment is not reflected in the city rankings, this is probably because India is heavily favoured by a few larger players rather than a large cross-section of the investment community.

China’s second-tier cities continue to be unappealing, as does Beijing, despite its being a larger and more liquid market than both Shenzhen and Guangzhou, which ranked well ahead of the Chinese capital for investment and development. Both southern cities may be benefiting from the interests of the Greater Bay Area, which has seen massive infrastructure investment that is improving connectivity across the Pearl River Delta. Beijing, meanwhile, tends to be a difficult place for foreign funds to place capital given it remains dominated by well-heeled state-owned enterprises that buy at a premium and then hold indefinitely.

Hong Kong, meanwhile, has plunged to the bottom of both the investment and development rankings. Months of street protests in the city have been a huge drag on tourist arrivals, with serious knock-on consequences for local retail and hotel sectors. At the same time, however, brokers say that while office vacancies are slightly up from historical levels, few transactions have taken place in recent months that pricing on CBD properties has seen little to no movement.

Top Investment Cities

Singapore (first in investment, second in development). Until recently, the Lion City had experienced several subpar years across all property sectors in a slowdown that was out of kilter with the upward trajectory of the rest of the region, as economic woes and a glut of high-end supply saw vacancies surge and capital values and rents decline. As recently as our 2017 report, Singapore placed just 21st in our investment rankings, underperforming how quickly the tides can shift. Today, the office sector has largely absorbed the oversupply, and with vacancies at an all-time low limited supply in the pipeline, confidence in medium-term prospects has returned.

Singapore was one of the few markets regionally to see a surge in transactions in the first half of 2019, with most activity driven by cross-border capital. The US$4.9 billion in deals was an increase of 73 per cent year-on-year, according to Real Capital Analytics (RCA), although growth came from a low base. The only other country even close to being positive was Australia, where volume rose 3 per cent to US$11.9 billion. In particular, Singapore has benefitted from an uptick in interest from investors who are currently avoiding mainland China and Hong Kong SAR, both of which are seen as geopolitical flashpoints. Transaction volumes in the second half of the year are also expected to be strong.

Many of this year’s investments were big-ticket deals, with six acquisitions worth US$300 million or more in the first half of the year. Landlord willingness to sell into the stronger market also has helped liquidity. Office yields, at 3.6 per cent, are some of the lowest in the region, and prices remain high by global standards. Rentals, meanwhile, driven by takeup from coworking operators, have been strong.

Although most analysts see little prospect of Hong Kong suffering a large exodus of businesses as a result of recent street protests in the city, there has been a steady flow of Hong Kong capital migrating to Singapore in 2019 in search of a safe haven. This has benefitted the luxury housing market, and to a degree has also boosted office occupancy. “Private banking is a source of demand here in Hong Kong,” said one locally based fund manager. “Landlords and agents are looking like crazy for space as private banking accounts [in Singapore] have swollen.”
The city has always been the first choice as an offshore destination for capital from South East Asia. Investors from Thailand have recently joined Indonesians as active players, with Thai asset-management companies recently greenlighted to invest overseas.

“The city has always been the first choice as an offshore destination for capital from South East Asia. Investors from Thailand have recently joined Indonesians as active players, with Thai asset-management companies recently greenlighted to invest overseas.”


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A limited number of private-equity players have made platform investments in Vietnam, but most of the real estate capital going into Ho Chi Minh City has been on the development side, targeted in particular at property developers. In addition, after the latest oversupply problems arose in the residential sector, authorities intervened. According to one opportunistic investor active in Vietnam: “There have been no approvals out of Ho Chi Minh for, I think, at least 18 months, so the demand is just backing up and there’s no supply. We have a project that just launched, and they sold 200 units in one afternoon.” In Melbourne, “Cap rates are continuing to trend upwards over the next five years, according to investment bank Credic Suisse, providing scope to repossession some of the city’s older building stock. Construction of the Melbourne Airport rail link, which is set to begin in 2022, should also serve to open up new areas for both commercial and residential development. Logistics space is in high demand in and around Melbourne. Build-to-core and build-to-let development also is attracting interest, and with vacancies remaining so low these seem relatively low-risk strategies. By and large, Australian retailers have been slow to adapt to changes being forced on the industry by the evolution of online retailing, so investors are assessing the viability of retail assets carefully, favouring either large, dominant regional malls or very specific high street locations, and avoiding suburban malls.”

Melbourne (fifth in investment, fifth in development). Melbourne’s moment of outpacing rival Sydney in terms of potential, as it did in our rankings last year, was short-lived. However, the capital of the state of Victoria remains one of the first names on the list of the region’s institutional investors when they are looking to place capital. Cap rates continue to compress. They remain slightly behind Sydney, but not by much. Vacancies in retail in Melbourne are the lowest in Australia, although they are set to trend upwards over the next year as new supply comes onto the market. Capital values, meanwhile, are slightly more than half those in Sydney’s, making them especially appealing to Asian buyers who are generally more focused on price per square foot than on yield.

With favourable demographics and a diverse local economy, office rents should continue to trend upwards over the next five years, according to investment bank Credic Suisse, providing scope to repossession some of the city’s older building stock. Construction of the Melbourne Airport rail link, which is set to begin in 2022, should also serve to open up new areas for both commercial and residential development. Logistics space is in high demand in and around Melbourne. Build-to-core and build-to-let development also is attracting interest, and with vacancies remaining so low these seem relatively low-risk strategies. By and large, Australian retailers have been slow to adapt to changes being forced on the industry by the evolution of online retailing, so investors are assessing the viability of retail assets carefully, favouring either large, dominant regional malls or very specific high street locations, and avoiding suburban malls.
per cent in the middle of 2019, according to CBRE. Just 140,000 square metres of new office space was taken up, just 30 per cent of the amount absorbed in the same period in 2018. The shortage of available land in or near Shanghai’s city centre has created obstacles for new development. Rege-
neration—either of individual assets or on a neighbourhood level—has therefore become the name of the game. In addi-
tion, investors are increasingly willing to look to suburban parts of the city, where most new development projects are taking place.

Osaka (eighth in investment, eighth in development). Japan’s second city outshines Tokyo at the moment in terms of the appeal of its office market. In all, 39 per cent of respondents indicated a buy signal for Oska office, a level of popularity outdone only by Ho Chi Minh City and Singapore. Hotel space is also a buy for 36 per cent of respondents, which makes it the fifth-hottest city in Asia behind Ho Chi Minh City, Tokyo, Singapore, and Bangkok.

Still, the growing popularity of Japanese cities such as Osaka has also meant that investors are more willing to chase yields, so while they remain less expensive than Tokyo, the differential has narrowed. According to the same fund manager, “Osaka now is 3.5 per cent for both office and retail, sub-4 per cent for sure. Nagoya is probably around 4 per cent for both. Fukushima is the same, probably 4 per cent for office, sub-4 per cent for residential. So, if you’re thinking Tokyo is a 3 per cent, 3.5 per cent for office, you still end up with a 50 to 75 basis points and potentially a 100-bips differential, depending on the asset. So, cap rates have come down a bit from where they used to be, but the difference is still there.”

Whereas retail space is popular in Tokyo’s central wards, several interviewees expressed concern over retail assets outside the Japanese capital. On this front, Japanese demographics are unfavourable. Since one major department store normally anchors mall space in smaller cities, there is a risk of nonrenewal of leases; also, exit strategies for retail assets aren’t obvious.

Guangzhou (ninth in investment, 13th in development). With integration helped by new high-speed rail links to Hong Kong to the south and to Beijing and Shanghai to the north, Guangzhou is expected to be a major beneficiary of the buildup of the Greater Bay Area. “The improved connectivity within the GBA has already made a difference, so we are seeing the benefits of all that infrastructure investment,” one investment advisor said.

Concerns over U.S.-China trade friction seem to have hit Guangzhou real estate more quickly than other Chinese cities. However, new office supply was limited in 2019 and is expected to remain muted through 2023, which should be positive for income-producing assets. Meanwhile, both domestic and international investors are actively looking for properties with scope for value-add opportunities, seeking to leverage the city’s copious supply of older office space. In the words of another investor: “We closed a deal in Guangzhou recently and are looking at another couple of deals, too. Guangzhou is actually quite positive because vacancy rates are quite tight relative to Shenzhen.”

The key submarket over the next few years will be Pazhou, a new office district that offers more development opportunities for developers and lower rents for occupiers. The technology, media, and telecoms sector continues to be the major driver of the office market.

Seoul (10th in investment, 12th in development). Until 2015, transaction volumes in Seoul were less than US$5 billion annually, but have since doubled after a number of sizeable new buildings came onto the market. The South Korean capital was the third-most-active city for deal volume in the first half of 2019, behind Hong Kong and Tokyo. Deals worth US$12 billion are expected to have been completed for the whole of the year, according to Colliers.

Historically, the investment market has been dominated by large domestic corporate players, but foreign investor participation has been increasing steadily in recent years. In the first half of 2019, cross-border acquisitions accounted for 33 per cent of the dollar value of deals, double the rate of international participation in Tokyo and triple that of Hong Kong.

Office sector cap rates for grade A properties have been slowly compressing in line with falling interest rates and gro-

Political instability—despite its demonstrable failure to affect day-to-day living conditions—continues to put off some international investors, especially those reliant on the approval of investment committees in the United States or Europe. For real estate players based in the Asia Pacific, a lack of transparency and the difficulty of doing business in Thailand are more serious impediments to investing in Bangkok. According to one investor, “Thailand is a tricky place to do business. A lot of shifting sands, a lot of uncertainties—and we have ended up spending a huge amount on legal fees.”

Alternative currency options are also available in a market that suffers generally from a lack of diversity. One typical play has been to convert small or medium-sized offices in areas with strong retail demand into mixed-use facilities that bring higher-paying retail tenants into lower floors of buildings.

But the overall improvement in office and residential stock has now crossed a threshold, with more businesses now willing to consider it as a candidate for regional headquarters. Office vacancy rates have recently hit a low of 5.7 per cent, according to JLL, while rents rose 7.9 per cent year-on-year in mid-2019. Both rents and values are expected to continue to rise.
Bangkok suffers from a lack of affordable housing, poor construction quality, and inadequate management of its existing stock. This should provide an opportunity for overseas investors; however, market opacity and difficulties in gaining construction finance both act as barriers to entry for foreign players.

Mumbai (12th in investment, ninth in development). The commercial real estate story continues to go from strength to strength in Mumbai. Demand for office space continues to be very strong. In 2019, one foreign investor paid US$100 million per acre for a prime three-acre site in the Bandra-Kurla Complex, a planned business district in the north of Mumbai that is today the city’s prime financial district. This was an all-time high price for any land parcel in India and underscores confidence in market conditions.

According to one local consultant, “Real estate and large developers who have the backing of big foreign investors are continuing to go long and pick up aggressively priced assets where they feel there is active market demand and they can go into a repositioning story.” Authorities continue to build out transport infrastructure, improving connectivity to new areas such as Navi Mumbai, which houses many new IT parks. While a potential oversupply situation may be brewing over the coming three-year period, these new facilities have better access to manpower as well as lower cost of living. They are therefore well placed to pick up the slack as more traditional areas of the city run out of room to absorb new capacity.

Capital values continue to trend upwards, driven by rising rents, and both foreign and domestic players are actively bidding for good assets wherever they come to market. While cap rates are already at questionable levels, the current strength in the commercial markets suggests that they may still have room to run.

The residential sector, however, is as weak as the commercial side is strong, especially among the mid-tier development community, which is desperately short on capital. Further consolidation among developers therefore seems likely.

Beijing (13th in investment, 21st in development). A shortage of land, combined with a slowing economy and growing concern over the U.S.-China trade friction, has seen Beijing slide down the survey rankings for development prospects this year. For investment purposes it still places in mid-table, but the city remains the least favoured of China’s first-tier cities. Both rents and capital values have been in decline in 2019.

Although foreign investors completed a number of office acquisitions in the first half of 2019, the Beijing market has traditionally been dominated by domestic purchasers, unable to outbid foreign players, and the status quo seems unlikely to change.

According to one investor, “There isn’t a lot of supply within the 5th Ring Road, so if you can find an asset at the right pricing in Beijing within that 5th Ring Road, it’s fantastic. If you can find an asset in one of the business parks which are dominated by local technology companies, that’s O.K., too.”

Concerns have surfaced over an incoming wave of aging buildings to Shinyo District, Taipei’s CBD. Meanwhile, international coworking space operators have also aggressively occupied new space.

In part, this new demand for space is due to the fact that Taiwan has been luring “reshoring” business back to the island and away from mainland China. The reshoring tends to be in capital-intensive, high-value, robotized manufacturing, and has already added 0.4 per cent to the island’s GDP. South East Asia is the top destination for Taiwanese companies expanding away from mainland China, but moving back home is the second choice. The Taiwanese government has initiated a three-year action plan to welcome returning businesses, and help them find land at concessionary rates. This has benefitted not only the industrial market, but also the high-end residential sector as reshoring business owners return to Taiwan.

As usual, domestic capital held by local institutions continues to dominate the market in Taiwan. Since it is not as price sensitive as foreign capital, the prospects for international investors are expected to remain limited.

New Delhi (15th in investment, 15th in development). New Delhi has traditionally been focused more on residential development, so the downturn in the residential market nationally is probably felt more keenly here than in other parts of the country. Oversupply in the sector has been growing since 2013, and conditions worsened following the government’s 2016 demonetisation campaign, together with tighter regulation of the industry. Now that both the banking and the nonbank finance sectors in India have dried up as a source of capital, many developers—especially in the mid-tier—are starving for cash.

Defaults have become commonplace and many more developers are likely to fail over the next 12 months, according to one interviewee.

At the same time, on the commercial side, the market can do no wrong. Takeup of new office space is rising by around 30 per cent annually, according to one Delhi-based advisor, and is especially strong in Noida, a satellite city to Delhi’s south east, where absorption of grades A office space shot up to some 3.5 million square feet in 2018 from a historical average of 1 million to 1.2 million square feet annually. Noida offers cheaper office facilities and has benefitted as rental costs elsewhere in Delhi have risen. “The primary driver was that in Gurgaon [another subdistrict of Delhi], office rental prices have gone up to as much as $1.50 or even $2 per square foot per month, which no longer makes sense for IT occupiers.”

Another sector that is booming in Delhi is logistics. According to one interviewee, “You’ve seen properties that are 100 acres in size being committed to the extent of 60 per cent even before the properties are ready for occupation— that’s how strong the underlying demand in North India is.”

While finding a good development partner in Northern India remains a challenge, the demand for logistics and warehousing facilities appears “endless” and buying land at reasonable prices is generally a problem.

Bangalore (16th in investment, 14th in development). While Bangalore has been undeservedly the big success story of India’s IT park and business process outsourcing (BPO) sector, growth in the city has been so strong for so long that many are wondering whether the peak has been reached. Surprisingly, however, the city’s commercial office sector continues to expand at a breakneck pace. Absorption grew some 30 to 35 per cent year-on-year in the first half of 2019, rentals have continued to rise, and large pools of capital are available for further investment.

According to one consultant, “Bangalore will this year again be one of the world’s largest commercial office and IT space markets.” Doubts as to the sustainability of this growth probably explain why it ranks lowest of the Indian cities in this year’s survey, despite there being little sign of a slowdown.

One consequence of the rapid expansion of Bangalore’s multitude of IT parks, which now employ more than 2 million IT workers, is that the city has outgrown available infrastructure. Traffic is even more chaotic than usual in India. Meanwhile, the metro is poorly planned, although in certain pockets where metro connectivity is available, things are not as bad as they once were. Provision of basic utilities, from internet to electricity to water, is also patchy, while pollution is a growing problem.
Emerging Trends in Real Estate®

44

Emerging Trends in Real Estate® Asia Pacific 2020

Manila (17th in investment, 11th in development). Despite apparently healthy real estate markets, Manila faces a number of challenges. To some extent, this reflects the reality that office-sector vacancies remain low, rents are rising, and capital values continue to grind upwards (climbing 1.8 percent quarter-on-quarter alone in the second quarter of the 2019, according to JLL).

Over the last several years, the main catalyst for Manila’s office sector has been demand from Philippine offshore gaming operators (POGOs), an industry providing online gambling services, mainly to gamblers in Mainland China. Demand from POGOs represents almost 40 per cent of new office takeup in the city. There have been complaints, both domestically and from the Chinese government, that the industry is growing too fast, but it remains too important to cut loose at this point. According to one locally based interviewee, “There are a lot of local people who are entrenched in both the real estate and the construction industries that don’t want to lose those big Chinese players— as long as that case, at least for the next year or so, I don’t see a significant change.”

The BPO sector remains the largest office sector tenant. It continues to grow, although at a slower pace. So far, it has been able to fend off the threat posed by the evolution of artificial intelligence–based solutions, and has recently received a boost from growing interest in “captive centres,” involving the offshoring of corporate in-house services such as human resources, finance, and IT.

Meanwhile, survey sentiment towards development plays was significantly stronger this year than that for investment. To some extent, this reflects the reality across most emerging markets, where stabilised assets are generally in short supply. Another reason is that Manila offices trade at cap rates (i.e., some 5.9 percent, according to Knight Frank) that are probably hard for international investors to justify on a risk/return basis.

That said, the Jakarta office market continues to be plagued by oversupply. With little relief in sight, rents look set to continue on a downward track as vacancy rates touch some 35 per cent in 2019. On the residential side, Jakarta continues to see too much supply aimed at the top end of the market, especially given the relatively small number of expat workers living in the country.

The recent announcement that the government intends to move its capital to Kalimantan has raised concerns that vacancy rates in the city may worsen. However, if authorities proceed with plans to demolish newly located government buildings and turn them into green spaces, the move may lead to interesting opportunities to regenerate parts of Jakarta’s chronically congested inner city.

Over the last several years, the main driver of business development has also been boosted by the government’s “Build Build Build” infrastructure construction programme, now in its third year. This is focused, amongst other things, on opening up satellite locations outside Jakarta as a way to relieve stress on a chronically overcrowded city centre.

Government projects dominate to the north, while to the south, according to one locally based planner, “a lot of private-sector players are quietly developing massive land banks, maybe 500 to 2,000 hectares in size, to build quasi-cities based on horizontal infrastructure and the creation of new broadband connections. You do see the private toll operators connecting roadways down south, and that’s going to open up a lot of new communities.” New tax policies may also encourage the translocation of BPO providers to these satellite locations.

Jakarta (18th in investment, 17th in development). Economic growth in Indonesia continued at a robust pace of 5.2 per cent in the first half of 2019. The recent re-election of President Joko Widodo has also created confidence that the overall environment will remain stable and that government infrastructure investment programmes will continue.

To a certain extent, this has already happened in some areas, thanks in particular to the ongoing buildout of the city’s Light Rail Transit (LRT) system. In particular, buildings on main roads with good LRT access enjoy strong occupancy. According to one interviewee, “The tactical urban renewal around the stations has taken a lot of people by surprise; they come back to a Jakarta they don’t recognise. Parts of it are walkable, and there are new downtown districts that are gleaming. Jakarta had always sat between Kuala Lumpur and Manila, maybe a little behind Bangkok, in people’s minds in terms of development quality. But maybe in these pockets, some industry watchers are saying it now exceeds Bangkok in certain quarters, though as a city it still struggles.”

Otherwise, opportunities exist for private-equity investors to exploit a multitude of local inefficiencies. Value-add plays are a definite prospect, with some local developers now prioritising introduction of smart building technologies as a way to cut running expenses. Beyond that, the many office buildings suffering chronically high vacancy rates, as well as some residential complexes, have become potential targets for conversion to hotels or co-living facilities.

In addition, several large private-equity investors have considered investing in outlying transit-oriented developments ( TODs) that have been earmarked for construction along the new LRT lines, though so far none has taken the plunge. Finally, the city’s Light Rail Transit (LRT) system. In particular, the station at Jatinegara is focused, amongst other things, on tactical urban renewal around the stations. In particular, buildings on main roads with good LRT access enjoy strong occupancy. According to one interviewee, “The tactical urban renewal around the stations has taken a lot of people by surprise; they come back to a Jakarta they don’t recognise. Parts of it are walkable, and there are new downtown districts that are gleaming. Jakarta had always sat between Kuala Lumpur and Manila, maybe a little behind Bangkok, in people’s minds in terms of development quality. But maybe in these pockets, some industry watchers are saying it now exceeds Bangkok in certain quarters, though as a city it still struggles.”

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Hangzhou, Chengdu, and Suzhou are the most popular secondary cities with investors due to their strong technology and education sectors. Meanwhile, smaller cities west of the Greater Bay Area are expected to see relatively greater benefits from the integration of that area. According to one investment manager, the GBA story is “all about the West Bank,” not about Shenzhen and Guangzhou— they are already big enough and there’s a lot of supply and activity. They don’t need help. But the smaller cities could see a lot of change. We are looking at residential and development that supports residential, such as education and health care.”
Hong Kong SAR (22nd in investment, 22nd in development). Its reputation as the priciest real estate market in the world has guaranteed Hong Kong a place in the lower half of our investment rankings survey almost every year since its inception—not only do grade A assets rarely trade, but capital values are so high and cap rates so low that many foreign investors see little prospect of further incremental gains. This year, however, the city has woes of a different kind to contend with. Months of street protests have seriously damaged the tourism and retail sectors and raised doubts about the city’s long-term investment prospects. As a result, the city finished dead last in our investment prospects survey, with the lowest score seen in years.

That said, much of the damage is more apparent than real. Although retail sales fell 23 per cent year-on-year in August 2019 (with some-store sales in some locations declining over 50 per cent) and hotel occupancy dropped to just half after tourist arrivals fell 40 per cent in August compared to the previous year, there has so far been little impact on property values—investors scouting for deals on a distress basis have been disappointed as owners opt to sit tight and wait out the storm. This is perhaps unsurprising given that Hong Kong has always been a highly leveraged market, and owners are generally not highly leveraged or short of capital.

In particular, the city’s CBD, which is located in a confined geographical area that guarantees prime space will always be in short supply, has seen relatively little negative impact. Retail sales fell 2.2 per cent quarter-on-quarter in the third quarter of 2019 since peaking in June, according to JLL, and while new lettings fell by 72 per cent month-on-month during August, CBD grade A vacancies stood at a mere 5.5 per cent—high for Hong Kong, but hardly exceptional by international standards. At the same time, however, few tenants signed CBD leases in October 2019, and those that did often benefited from significant rent-free periods that mask the true level of rental declines.

While the retail sector—especially at the high end—may be subject to longer-term negative repercussions, it has always been a volatile sector and seems likely to recover much of the ground it has lost once the situation stabilises. Most local investors see the threat from the U.S.-China trade friction to be a much more serious potential drag on the economy.

Residential values, meanwhile, have also started to experience declines, though prices at the end of October 2019 were still higher than they were at the beginning of the year. Given the extent of home price increases experienced in recent years, few owners are currently in negative equity and the supply/demand equation still militates in favour of sustained upward pressure on private home values.

Property Types in Perspective

OFFICE
The office sector continues to be the most popular amongst investors in the Asia Pacific region, and in most markets has continued to perform. Despite widespread concerns about pricing and a general consensus that yields may have bottomed, a number of markets continue to see yield compression.

Overall, however, the office sector has become marginally less popular with investors: 84 per cent are or plan to be invested in it, compared with 86 per cent in 2019. Investors rate its prospects marginally lower than in our 2019 report, and now expect the industrial/logistics sector to be the best-performing asset class.

The huge lot sizes in Asia Pacific markets mean that more properties are being sold to joint ventures or investment clubs. The abundance of institutional capital that continues to find its way into regional markets looking to buy core properties guarantees that office assets will remain in demand.

Demand for coworking space continues to be very strong in most Asia Pacific markets (in particular in China), while developers and landlords are often sceptical about the sustainability of the conventional coworking business model, the industry has become entrenched so quickly that there is no question that flexible space will remain in growth mode for the foreseeable future.

Expected best bets: Most city office markets are regarded in much the same light as they were a year ago, which is broadly positive; observers would usually buy or hold in most markets. However, a small number of them have seen dramatic changes in popularity, either upwards or downwards.

For example, Ho Chi Minh City and Singapore have seen their buy rating increase by more than 10 percentage points, while Osaka has seen its grow by five percentage points.

Singapore’s office market was one of the last in the region to recover from the global financial crisis, and prime rents there are still well below their 2006 peak. Since then, the city has expanded and upgraded its CBD office stock, as well as opening up a number of decentralised office districts. Rents are rising sharply.

Ho Chi Minh City continues to be extremely popular from a top-down perspective due to Vietnam’s excellent demographic and growth prospects and also because it has seen strong rental growth. However, overseas investment in the city’s office sector is minimal.

The resurgence of Osaka, boosted by almost a decade without significant office supply, is part of a wider refocusing of investor interest to Japanese provincial cities. Tokyo’s ranking has slipped a little, but it is clearly still seen as a defensive play by investors: its sell rating dropped to 11 per cent from 14 per cent.

Only two cities or city groups saw a dramatic rise in their sell ratings, and for rather different reasons. China’s second-tier cities saw their sell rating rise to 43 per cent, from 32 per cent. These locations tend to be oversupplied with office space, something that will hit returns as China’s economy slows.

Hong Kong saw the sharpest rise in the percentage of investors who would sell its offices. More than half (52 per cent) are now sellers, spooked by ongoing political protests.

Kuala Lumpur (21st in investment, 20th in development). On the face of it, serially unloved Kuala Lumpur should be more attractive to international real estate investors. Malaysia’s GDP per capita is the second highest in South East Asia—four times higher than investors’ favourite, Vietnam—and its developed financial markets, including real estate investment trusts should provide appeal to institutional investors. In addition, Malaysia is seeing the arrival of significant amounts of investment from Chinese tech manufacturers as they move some operations offshore.

However, significant oversupply in the office and retail sectors has again cast a cloud over local markets. Office vacancy rates exceeded 18 per cent in mid-2019, according to JLL, and with more than 3 million square feet of new supply arriving in 2019, vacancies are expected to exceed 25 per cent by the end of the year. Unsurprisingly, capital values and rents are in retreat. The retail sector has seen the greatest involvement by foreign developers, and some have also been involved in residential-led mixed-use projects in Kuala Lumpur.

In recent years, foreign investment—mainly Chinese—has been focused on building residential projects in the islander region of southern Malaysia, although this has now dried up to a great extent due to Chinese capital export restrictions.
Chapter 3: Markets and Sectors to Watch

RETAIL

The retail sector continues to be out of favour with investors in the Asia Pacific, largely due to the growing threat from e-commerce sales. It was the only property type to see a fall in the percentage of investors who plan to invest in the sector.

That said, retail remains a core real estate asset class, and there is a growing conviction among investors that if existing facilities are well located and can be adapted in ways that satisfy consumer expectations in terms of 'experience' services, they will continue to thrive, albeit possibly at lower profit levels than in previous years. Investors rate its prospects lower than other core sectors, however, and worse than in 2019.

However, the retail sector seems to be relatively more popular in the Asia Pacific region than elsewhere in the world. According to CBRE, global retail transactions in the first half of 2019 were only slightly higher than in the industrial and logistics sector, while in the Asia Pacific, retail sales volumes were more than twice those of industrial and logistics assets. While retail property sales in the Asia Pacific fell 7 per cent year-on-year in the first half of 2019, globally they fell 35 per cent. This gives some support to the thesis that Asia Pacific retail is adapting more vigorously to new circumstances.

There is also optimism about retail in fast-growing emerging markets such as India and Manila. Opinion about the prospects for retail in China's second-tier cities is sharply divided, possibly a reflection of how different each city's prospects are, which is down to supply factors.

While some second-tier cities in China are relatively undersupplied with modern shopping centres, others have experienced a huge wave of supply, often ill-conceived and rarely well managed.

Thanks to the attractiveness of the Ginza shopping district in Tokyo, the Japanese capital's retail property sector remains relatively popular with investors. However, Osaka retail has not gained the same popularity with investors as its office sector has. Retail sales in Japan are under threat, however, from the prospect of declining tourist arrivals from South Korea and China in the wake of existing or potential disputes with those countries.

Sentiment towards retail in Hong Kong has improved significantly in the second half of 2019 that has seen tourist arrivals drop precipitously.

A number of interviewees expressed an interest in the multifamily residential sector across the Asia Pacific, but also said that opportunities are limited since the sector is underdeveloped compared with the United States and Europe. Japan remains the only market with a large proportion of multifamily residential property, although the sector is growing in both Australia and China, with the latter expected to evolve into a major component of total residential assets.

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RESIDENTIAL

The residential sector remains broadly popular with investors in the Asia Pacific, with both multifamily residential and for-sale residential being higher rated this year than in our 2019 report.

However, there are clearly a few dissenting voices, with residential assets in some cities attracting relatively high sell ratings from investors due to historically high prices and the risk of government intervention. According to one investor, ‘I do think residential for sale is testing on the brink at the moment.’

In Hong Kong SAR and Australia in particular, house price growth has slowed ahead of income growth, which is not the case for mainland China and Singapore, even though prices have risen in all these markets.

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Again, investors have very mixed feelings about second-tier cities in China, many of which have strong growth prospects but also a big pipeline of new supply and localised cooling measures that reduce profitability. As China grows slower, overseas investors are increasingly focused on first-tier cities.

Hong Kong again propels up the bottom of the table. More investors (59 per cent) rate Hong Kong residential as a sell than any other city/sector combination. Several months of street protests have damaged sentiment in the city. However, price declines have been minimal as of the end of October, and the fundamental lack of supply in the city will probably be sufficient to prop prices up going forward.

Overall, in the Asia Pacific region, the retail sector attracts more sell ratings from investors than any other asset class, with 13 cities having a higher percentage of investors saying they would sell retail rather than buy it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exhibit 3-5</th>
<th>Retail Assets Buy–Hold–Sell Recommendations for 2020–by City</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ho Chi Minh City</td>
<td>Buy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manila</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guangzhou</td>
<td>60</td>
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<td>Shenzhen</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Delhi</td>
<td>57</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>57</td>
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<tr>
<td>China–second-tier cities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jakarta</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mumbai</td>
<td>56</td>
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<td>Bangalore</td>
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<td>Shanghai</td>
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<td>Seoul</td>
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<td>Singapore</td>
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<td>Taipei</td>
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<td>Auckland</td>
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Source: Emerging Trends in Real Estate Asia Pacific 2020 survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exhibit 3-6</th>
<th>Residential Assets Buy–Hold–Sell Recommendations for 2020–by City</th>
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</thead>
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<td>Ho Chi Minh City</td>
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<td>Bangkok</td>
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<td>Tokyo</td>
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<td>China–second-tier cities</td>
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<td>Seoul</td>
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</table>

Source: Emerging Trends in Real Estate Asia Pacific 2020 survey.
Chapter 3: Markets and Sectors to Watch

INDUSTRIAL/LOGISTICS

Although industrial, warehouse, and logistics space would logically be the sector hardest hit by the slowdown in trade due to higher tariffs and slowing economic growth, the asset class remains a favourite play amongst institutional investors, who rate it the top sector for investment prospects in this year’s report.

Rising consumer spending and the growth of e-commerce across Asia are driving the need for high-spec, tech-driven warehouse space, an asset class that is hugely undersupplied across the region, with the arguable exception of Australia. E-commerce also intensifies the need for well-located facilities that are far more than “sheds,” able to distribute goods at the lightning speeds now required. That dynamic is still very favourable in most developing Asian markets, where the size of the middle class is rapidly rising.

“Industrial warehouses at the low end have been affected by the trade war. But they haven’t been the major assets favoured by institutional investors,” the head of Asia research at a commercial brokerage said. If anything, tariffs and economic pressure may push the adoption of higher-end warehouses and also a spat with Japan over wartime reparations.

Yet even though South Korea is one of Asia’s most export-oriented nations, it still lacks high-grade logistics space to serve both exporters and the local market. That may justify greater attention to the market.

When emerging market and frontier cities top the survey responses in terms of interest, it is often the case that the markets that appear attractive at a macro level and in terms of demographics offer little opportunity for actual investment. It requires a strong local partner to penetrate those markets, mainly for investors willing to pony up long-term capital for years of development.

In China, there is an increasing stock of high-end space that may ultimately be sold by developers into the secondary market. Guangzhou (number 2) and Shenzhen (number 4) rate particularly highly in terms of buy interest in our survey, ahead of Tier 2 Chinese cities (number 8) as well as China’s biggest commercial markets, Shanghai (number 10) and Beijing (number 13).

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One asset manager said that he is seeing huge interest from clients in logistics space in South Korea. This is not reflected in the survey results, where Seoul ranks in the bottom five least attractive markets for a buy on distribution assets. Korean exports of cars and computer chips have been hurt by global trade tensions and also a spat with Japan over wartime reparations.

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“I’ve got great hopes for South Korea,” the asset manager said. “They’ve got a much bigger population than, say, Australia, and you’ve got freehold assets, which is our ambition, to wear ourselves off leasehold properties. They really haven’t had that much institutional trade of assets.”

The same manager said that you “can’t take your eyes off logistics in China. Major overseas players continue to build huge amounts of new space. They will ultimately need to monetize those assets, either through portfolio sales or securitisation.

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The same manager said that you “can’t take your eyes off logistics in China. Major overseas players continue to build huge amounts of new space. They will ultimately need to monetize those assets, either through portfolio sales or securitisation.

The industrial sector is a favourite target for investors in Japan. But it is not always easy for international investors to identify good deals. For the most part, Japan remains a developer play for modern warehouse space, rather than an asset class where a large fund or institution can buy stabilised properties.

Investing in industrial J-REITs is a way for investors to find easy liquidity and an entry to the industry. They trade at a 24 per cent premium to net asset value (NAV), demonstrating there is more money keen to get into the industry than there is free float of J-REIT shares. Likewise, the premium to NAV on office J-REITs is 29 per cent.

HOTEL

As they do with office space, investors favour Asia’s most developed markets for hospitality plays. As an asset class, hotels are of middling interest overall when our survey respondents identify sectors for growth in 2020. But hospitality tends to be a specialist sector, of great interest only to those with expertise and a track record in the field in Asia.

Bangkok (number 4 for buy interest in hotels) is the world’s most visited tourist destination. It has been the top city globally for international visitors for six of the last seven years, according to Mastercard’s Global Destination Cities Index.

Bangkok drew 22.8 million overnight international visitors in 2019, 19.3 per cent more than second-place Paris. In particular, it is the destination of choice for travellers from mainland China, who are now outgrowing globally only by Americans in terms of international-travel volume, Chinese tourists, who make up 37.3 per cent of overseas arrivals in Bangkok, also target Seoul and Tokyo, in that order.

Expected best bets: Singapore (number 3) also scores high in our survey as a market for hotel buys. It is the second-busiest city in Asia for international tourists, according to Mastercard, just ahead of Kuala Lumpur. Both Singapore and Kuala Lumpur drew more overseas visitors last year, at around 14 million, than
New York City, Singapore draws sizeable visitation not only from China but also from India, putting its hotel industry in a particularly sweet spot.

Kuala Lumpur’s low ranking in our survey (number 20; third from the bottom for hotel buy rating) is therefore shockingly low. Only 13 per cent of investors would be looking to buy Kuala Lumpur hotels, suggesting that bargain hunters may be able to find deals. Malaysia, like Vietnam, also is a beneficiary of trade tensions, which should boost the domestic economy. Kuala Lumpur gains from an increase in Chinese travellers, now a top source at 20.6 per cent of arrivals, and also from the significant growth in tourism out of South East Asia. Thais and Indonesians each account for just under 12 per cent of overseas arrivals in Kuala Lumpur.

Mastercard also projects particularly strong 9.9 per cent growth in tourist arrivals in the Malaysian capital. That is outstripped only by the 10.0 per cent advance in visitors to Tokyo.

The growth in Tokyo will boost the ranks of the Japanese capital in the last full year’s figures. Japan has been a prime target for hotel investors, buoyed by the rapid increase in tourist arrivals in recent years. The fast growth of the Japanese hotel sector may come back to haunt it, as it does with every other asset class, the issue being whether investors can find hotel stock that trades.

However, hospitality J-REITs show a minimal premium over their net asset value, suggesting that concerns over pricing are mounting. Unlike industrial and office J-REITs, which trade at significant premiums, there is a minimal 2 per cent premium on hotel REITs, and a –0.6 per cent discount on retail J-REITs.

“It’s quite a clear indication of investors’ preference,” the Tokyo-based head of research for an investment-bank asset manager said. “I don’t know if they are right, but this is a reflection of the market response.”

Once again, Ho Chi Minh City tops the list, as it does with every other asset class, the issue being whether investors can find hotel stock that trades.
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https://uli.org

John Fitzgerald
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https://asia.uli.org

ULI Center for Capital Markets and Real Estate
Anita Kramer
Senior Vice President
www.uli.org/capitalmarketscenter

Urban Land Institute
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Suite 200
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