

Asia Pacific Real Estate Strategic Outlook

Mid-Year 2023

IN A NUTSHELL

- The repricing of commercial real estate will likely continue this year, with cap rates also expected to peak, while future rental growth should help drive the recovery in capital values.
- Our Houseview overweight calls include Residential Built-to-Rent in Australia underpinned by urgent housing needs, and prime logistics in Australia, regional Japan and South Korea where vacancy remains very tight.
- Debt strategies in South Korea with opportunities for alternative capital to ease credit market constraints and regional value-add opportunities also offer increasingly attractive risk-adjusted returns.

1 / Economic Update

Economic Conditions

In the first half of 2023, Asia Pacific continues to face headwinds of elevated albeit slowing inflationary pressures and weakening global demand. Since early 2023, China's economic reopening has yielded a slower-than-expected growth recovery, with recent data showing declines in manufacturing activity and import demand, in turn a major drag on Asian exports. As such, regional economic growth in the second half of 2023 is likely to remain subdued, potentially until 2024 when lower inflationary pressures underpin growth recovery and more supportive monetary policies.¹

Financial Conditions

Monetary policies continue to diverge across the region – Japan retained its negative interest rate target of -0.1% while China lowered its key loan policy rate in June 2023. South Korea paused its rate hikes since January while Australia raised rates by a full percentage point in total in the first half of 2023. While the uncertainties of central bank policies continue to weigh on investors, positive news of easing inflation readings across the region in recent months should provide some relief that the rate hike cycle could be nearing its peak sooner than later.

Not surprisingly, real estate financing costs remain elevated, with senior loan rates in Australia and South Korea remaining at 5% to 6% levels. Based on anecdotal evidence, we have seen tighter financial conditions particularly for lower quality assets and development projects, while loan financing for high quality assets remain largely available for borrowers with good credit. The lack of development financing presents investment opportunities which we will elaborate further in subsequent sections.

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2 / Real Estate Outlook

Office

While the future of office and the level of impact flexible working patterns exert on long term office demand remains up for debate, the positive news for landlords in Asia Pacific is that the region remains relatively shielded compared to North America and Western Europe. Based on latest evidence², office re-entry rates in China and Seoul are already at pre-pandemic levels, with Singapore (85%) and Tokyo (80%) not far behind, followed by Australia (60%-80%). This compares favourably with major cities in the U.S. (45%-65%) and Europe (65%-85%) where employers face stronger resistance in getting workers back in the office.

To be clear, not everything looks rosy for APAC offices. Office leasing activity in the region seems to have slowed in the first half of 2023, due to a combination of macroeconomic uncertainty, near term supply waves and rising vacancies. Across major cities in China and Japan, landlords face strong rental competition from existing vacancies and significant incoming new supply, while macroeconomic headwinds have cut short the office rental recovery in Singapore. Office vacancy in Australia remains elevated in the low teens though incentives should have likely peaked, while Seoul is the notable exception where rental growth remains underpinned by strong leasing volumes and record low vacancies.

Nonetheless, we believe that long-term occupier demand in Asia Pacific remains underpinned by a stronger inclination towards office-based working compared to the U.S. and Europe, particularly in North Asia. In the meantime, tenants are increasingly focusing on cost rationalization and recalibrating their office space requirements, while larger occupiers prefer high-quality developments with green credentials, highly efficient floor layouts and upgraded building facilities, to attract younger generation workers in a post-COVID environment. While such flight-to-quality trends may not be uniform across the region (less so as in China and Japan with strong pressures from new builds), other APAC cities have witnessed the bifurcation in rental growth, with weaker rental demand for older commodity buildings with lower ESG standards.

Industrial

Over the past 12 to 18 months, prime logistics assets benefited from strong rental trends – up to double-digit growth in some locations, as resilient occupier demand from e-commerce firms, third-party logistics providers (3PLs) and omnichannel retailers supported take-up and occupancy levels, particularly in locations with good transport accessibility and low availability of prime assets.

Not to be overly optimistic, there should be some level of moderation in logistics demand in the near-term as global supply chains gradually normalize post-COVID, while retailers may look to implement cost savings by switching away from the more costly 'just-in-case' stockpiling model. Still, vacancy rates generally remain low across the region, particularly in Australia and regional Japanese cities, which continues to favour landlords over tenants.

Over the long-term, the logistics sector remains underpinned by the structural undersupply of modern facilities in the region and long-term fundamentals of rising e-commerce spending and upgrading demand away from obsolete stock towards higher-quality warehousing with good transport connectivity. As such, we retain a constructive outlook on logistics with rental growth expectations at around 3% per annum and above across in our core location calls.

Retail

The recovery momentum in the APAC retail sector appears mixed despite the rebound in international tourism and retail sales across the region. Retailers in locations with limited new supply pressures, such as Seoul and Singapore have benefited from modest rental growth along with the recovery in leasing sentiment. However not all locations have benefited – in Australia, slowing growth in discretionary

² JLL, The Future of the Central Business District, May 2023

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spending have weighed on leasing with incentives remaining at record high levels, while retail rents in China remained on a downward trend as the recovery in domestic consumption remains uncertain.

We maintain our expectations for retail rents to stabilize in the second half of 2023, although longer-term rental growth trends should be modest at best and unspectacular due to structural challenges (e-commerce headwinds, shifting consumer expectations etc.). The ongoing retail bifurcation and evolving consumer preferences require experienced asset management strategies, raising the investment risks, particularly for discretionary retail assets. Investor sentiment towards the sector generally remains risk-averse and potential opportunities selectively alpha-driven rather than sector investing.

Residential

The multifamily sector in Asia Pacific remains a relatively small investable market, with Japan the only developed market which continues to attract the bulk of institutional capital inflows looking to benefit from the ongoing urbanization and household formation around major city centres. At the same time, rising record-high prices of for-sale condominiums continue to drive first-time home buyers towards house rentals, while larger units remain popular particularly for tenants on hybrid work arrangements seeking more space for home desks.

In Australia and New Zealand, while housing prices have corrected up to 10% from the recent peak, housing prices remain elevated at 20%-40% above pre-pandemic levels across major cities. High interest rates contributed to worsening housing affordability, driving unabated rental demand while rising construction costs have exacerbated the lack of new supply. In addition, fundamental growth drivers of increasing immigration numbers and relative rental affordability should help underpin rental growth over the coming years.

Hospitality

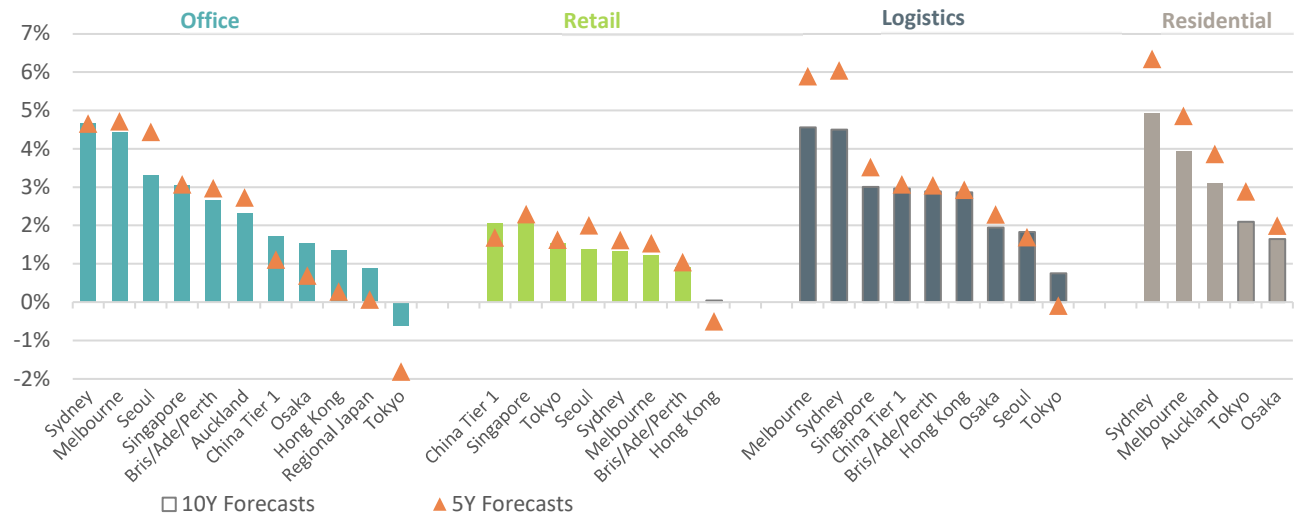
With limited Chinese tourist arrivals in the first four months of 2023, overseas tourist arrivals in Asia Pacific remain at c.60% of pre-COVID19 levels. According to the latest IATA forecasts, the number of air travel passengers in the region is expected to reach 80% of 2019 levels by the end of 2023, before surpassing in 2024, which should boost the hotel market recovery in the coming quarters. With Japan a major beneficiary of the tourism rebound, the upscale limited-service hotel in key Japanese regional markets could be highly sought after by investors given rising demand for upscale accommodation from travelers and higher profitability levels.

Rental Outlook

Our updated long-term rental growth forecasts are presented below. We believe that the residential markets (multi-family, built-to-rent) in certain locations such as Australia provide strong rental growth opportunities, particularly over the next few years. Key logistics hubs in Australia, Singapore and regional cities on North Asia are also expected to benefit from strong rents, along with select office markets in Asia Pacific.

Exhibit 1: Prime Rental Growth Forecasts (2023-2032F)

(% per annum)



Note: Rents shown are on net effective basis after incentives. There is no guarantee the forecasts shown will materialize.
 Source: DWS. As of July 2023.

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3 / Investment Trends

Capital Flows

Real estate investment activity in Asia Pacific continued to slow since the second half of 2022. According to MSCI data, transaction volume for income-producing assets in Asia Pacific fell by 40% year-on-year to US\$31 billion during the first quarter of 2023 (rolling 12-month: -28%), as investors continue to adopt a wait-and-see approach amid rising financing costs and limited fire-sale opportunities. In addition, deal activity has fallen to the lowest level in over a decade, particularly in South Korea and Australia.

Over the 12-month period to March 2023, investment activity remains concentrated in the core markets of China, Japan Australia, and South Korea. Interestingly, Singapore have maintained its lead over Hong Kong which historically has seen much higher transaction volumes. While domestic investors remain the dominant source of capital, the proportion of cross-border investors have climbed from the pandemic lows of 25% to just below 30%, driven by investors from Singapore and Hong Kong. Notably cross-regional investors from U.S and Europe have remained largely on the sidelines.

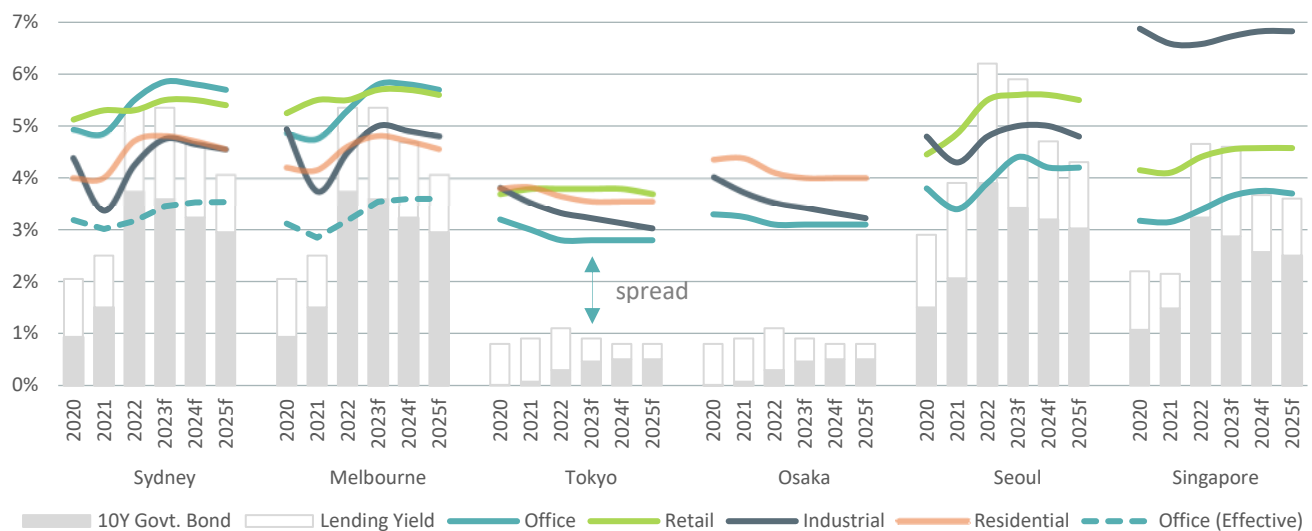
Pricing Trends

The high interest rate environment continues to weigh on investors’ underwriting capabilities, with higher financing costs leading to negative carry for investors reliant on external financing.

Based on available market data and transactional evidence, we estimate that cap rates across Australia, South Korea and Singapore have moved up by 50 to 80 basis points over the past 18 months and could increase further by another 15 to 30 basis points before peaking in the second half of 2023. Based on current market expectations of interest rates remaining high at least for the foreseeable future before inflation fears subside, we anticipate that any reversal of the rising cap rate cycle might be delayed until mid to late 2024, with investment risk appetite picking up again as interest rate headwinds subside.

In Japan, cap rates are projected to remain stable in the base case scenario of interest rates remaining low, however there is a growing risk of a directional shift in the Bank of Japan’s policies.

Exhibit 2: NOI Yields vs Bond Yields



f = forecast. Source: DWS, Colliers, Miki Shoji, Oxford Economics. As of July 2023.

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The disparity between reported asset valuations and transacted pricing remains wide, though this has started to narrow, as demonstrated by recent portfolio appraisal devaluations undertaken by Australia REITs ranging from negative 4% to 8%. Nonetheless, drawing inference from recent buyer bidding patterns and market observations, we believe that actual transacted pricing for prime assets in Australia and South Korea may have already corrected by circa 10% (from end-2021 levels). We expect further correction in office pricing for the remainder of 2023, bringing the cumulative depreciation to circa 10%-15%, with the decline led by assets in Australia and Seoul. Meanwhile, though Japan continued to benefit from capital inflows and cap rate compression, a price divergence trend could occur as Tokyo offices undergo a mild price correction due to weakening rents, while asset prices in regional cities hold firm due to stronger demand-supply balances.

On the other hand, the industrial sector has shown more resilience in this cycle, driven by strong rental growth which helped offset rising yields. We are looking for logistics prices to stabilize during the second half of 2023, with potential for pricing upside next year onwards. The institutional residential sector is also likely to benefit from potential pricing upside due to strong demand drivers and continued rental growth, particularly for Australia where the urgency for more rental housing stock and favourable tax changes (see Section 5) is expected to drive the institutionalization of the BTR sector.

At the same time, given the rising focus by investors on quality assets with ESG trends in mind, we believe owners of non-prime, lower-quality assets with high capital expenditure requirements will increasingly look towards divestment and recycle capital into the prime space. This should continue to drive the divergence in pricing trends with weaker performance in lower quality assets against prime assets.

Exhibit 3: Estimated Prime Capital Value Change from Q4 2021



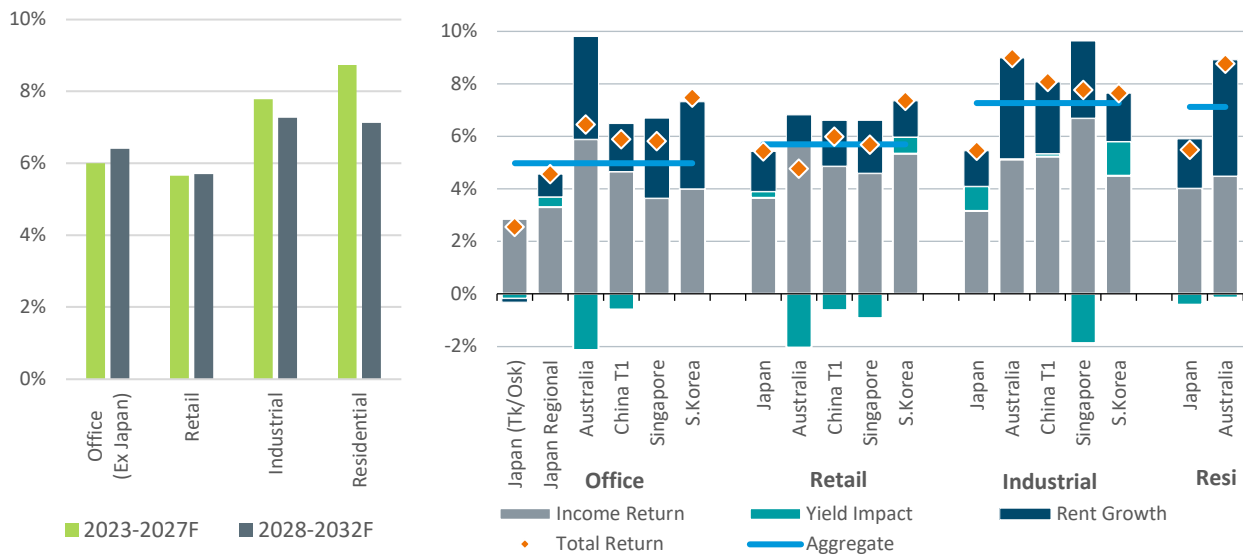
F = forecast. There is no guarantee the forecasts shown will materialize.
Source: DWS. As of July 2023.

4 / Returns Outlook

Combining our house view rental growth and yield forecasts over a ten-year time horizon from 2023, we believe that the residential sector (Australia BTR) will be among the top performers, with unlevered property-level total returns frontloaded in the next few years.

Prime logistics assets are also expected to outperform, delivering total returns of between 7.5% to 9% per annum. Regional cities in Japan and South Korea (not included in the forecasts below) and office assets in gateway cities outside Japan should also perform well in the long run with a recovery in asset values potentially over the next 12 months or so, though submarket differentiation and asset selection will be increasingly critical.

Exhibit 4: APAC Total Return Forecasts, 2023-2032F, p.a.



e = estimate, f = forecast. Projected returns are based on compounded basis There is no guarantee the forecasts shown will materialize. Source: DWS. As of July 2023.

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5 / Investment Strategy

Overview

Combining our house view forecasts and strategic investment themes, we believe that investors should focus on the following key themes:

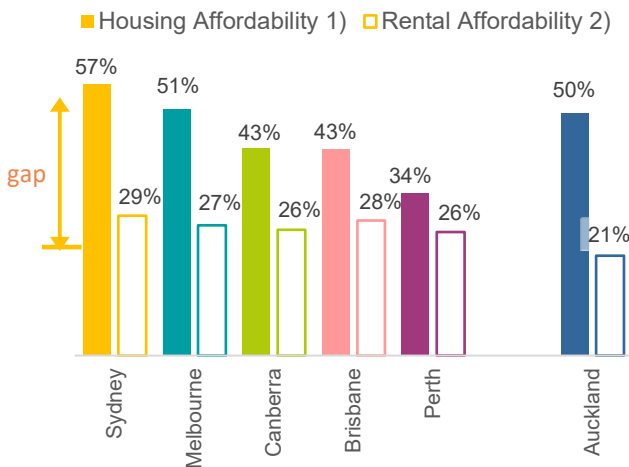
Multi-family / Built-To-Rent (BTR):

The majority of residential assets in Asia Pacific (excluding Japan) are owned by individual strata-titled landlords with the level of institutionalisation still nascent. Australia is a notable exception, where the Build-to-Rent (BTR) housing model has in recent years gained traction among institutional investors looking for first-mover opportunities. From a fundamental perspective, there are underlying demand drivers – 1) Forecast annual net overseas migration inflows of 300,000 to 400,000 people over the coming two financial years³ 2) Current housing shortage with limited new housing supply and 3) Affordability calculations (Exhibit 5) showing the economics of renting being more attractive than home ownership, as mortgage affordability remains stretched by both elevated prices and high interest rates. Another tailwind for the BTR sector is the revision in legislation introducing tax concessions for new residential BTR projects from July 2024 onwards, which is expected to further open up the sector for foreign investors.

While cap rates in the range of 4% to 4.5% may not appear overly attractive, we expect strong rental growth to underpin investment returns. The BTR stock in Australia currently represents about only 0.1% of total housing stock, highlighting the development potential of the sector, similar to trends taking place in the United States, Europe and Japan. The biggest challenge for investors is gaining access to institutional quality stock, most likely involving development risk. Nonetheless, careful market selection and partnering with experienced local partners should be able to mitigate most of this risk.

Japan: For-sale condominiums in Greater Tokyo continued to reach record high prices for two consecutive years, underpinned by wealthy retirees and working professional couples living in inner city areas. This has driven the strong rental growth of larger family units with multiple bedrooms which cater to working couples and professionals adopting work-from-home arrangements, while smaller units also have seen healthy rental growth (Exhibit 6). With for-sale condo prices expected to remain elevated in Tokyo, demand for rental houses should stay resilient.

Exhibit 5: Housing / Rental Affordability in Australia/NZ

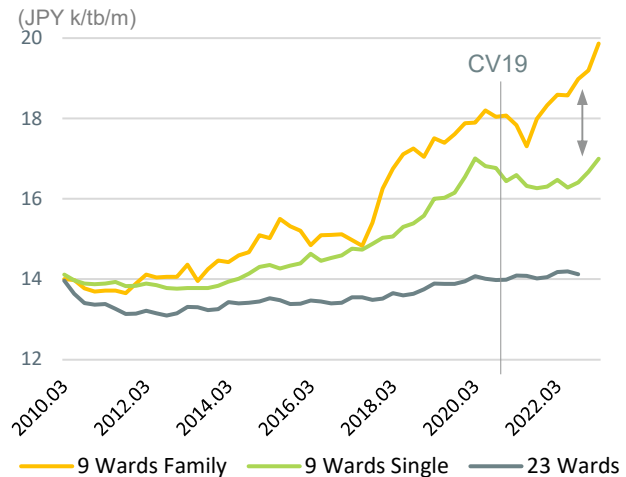


1) Based on % of gross household income required to service an 80% LVR mortgage for a term of 30 years.

2) Rental affordability = median weekly rent / gross household income. Source: DWS, SQM Research, Australia Bureau of Statistics, LMC, REINS. As of July 2023.

³ Australia Treasury, May 2023

Exhibit 6: Residential Rents in Tokyo



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Regional Logistics

The logistics sector remains on the radar of most investors, with unsurprising reasons – long-term e-commerce tailwinds driving leasing demand and structural undersupply of modern warehouses across many cities in the Asia Pacific region.

In Australia, notwithstanding concerns over the sharp capital value growth in mid-2022 as prime logistics yields compressed to sub 4% levels, yields have now rebounded to the mid 4% level against the backdrop of the higher borrowing cost. Though the near-term supply pipeline is higher, most space has been pre-committed while longer-term supply beyond 2 to 3 years remains hampered by land availability issues and/or construction approvals, which should support the current record low national vacancy rate of 0.5%. Similarly in Singapore, logistics benefited from strong rental growth in recent quarters, driven by healthy demand from technology, biomedical, manufacturing and e-commerce/3PL logistics. Prime vacancy remains extremely tight while the supply pipeline remains well below historical averages.

Circa 60% of South Korea’s future logistics supply planned beyond 2023 had reportedly been postponed or cancelled because of rising construction costs and tightening financial conditions, which should accelerate the rental growth of existing or soon-to-be-completed assets. However, pockets of oversupply remain, particularly cold storage assets in Seoul. In Japan, tightening regulations limiting truck driver overtime hours are set to take effect in 2024, driving concerns over driver shortages and reduced deliveries which could spur demand for quality warehouses in regional locations where supply is more limited.

We believe prime logistics assets in key Australian cities (Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane) and Singapore remain attractive underpinned by the strong rental growth outlook. At the same time, regional cities in South Korea (Busan, Daegu) and Japan (Nagoya, Fukuoka, Sapporo) present a compelling story for core investors. Apart from a mismatch from growing logistics demand and low levels of modern stock per capita, these logistics markets are undergoing rapid market modernization and institutionalization, providing first-mover investment opportunities, and adding future yield compression potential on top of the healthy leasing fundamentals and rental growth outlook.

Exhibit 7: Logistics Vacancy Rates

(As of 1Q 2023)

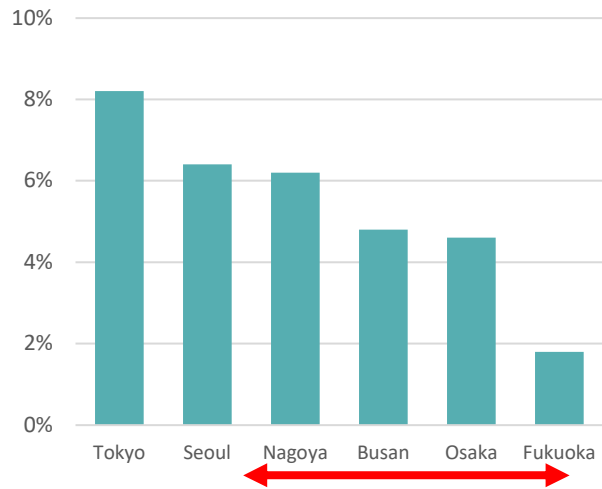
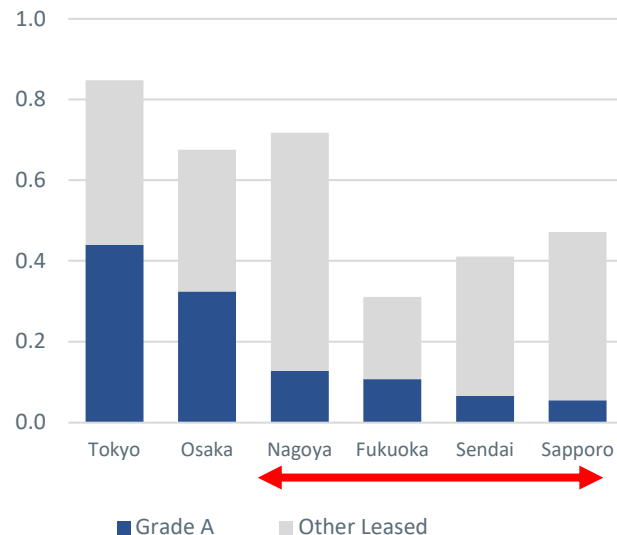


Exhibit 8: For-lease Logistics Stock per Capita in Japan

(sqm, as of 2022)



Source: DWS, CBRE, JLL, METI. As of July 2023.

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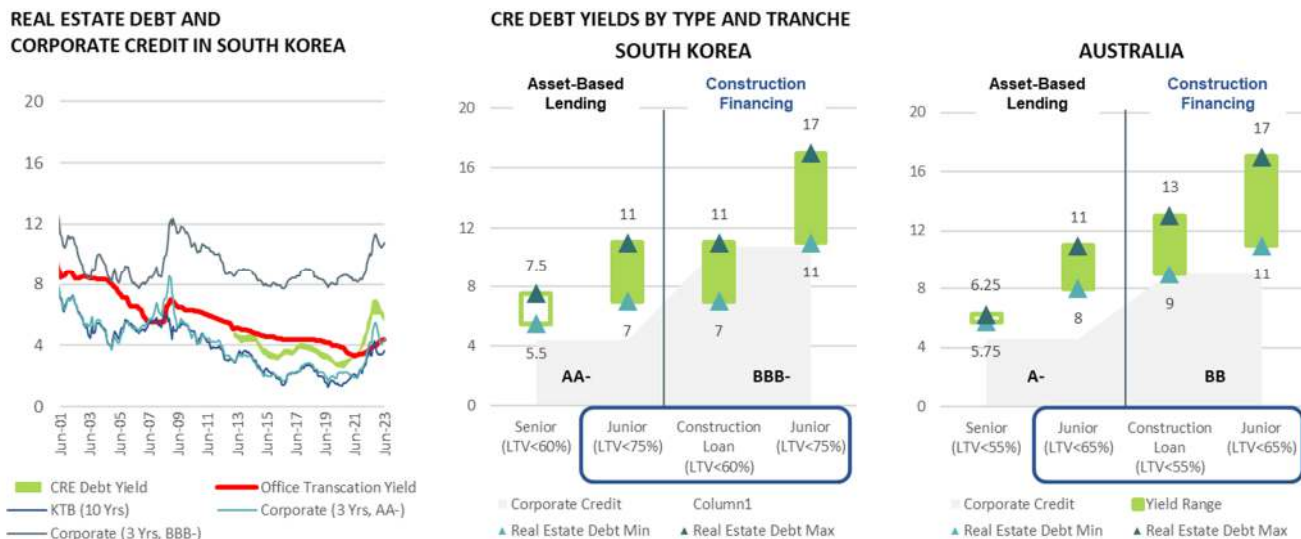
Debt Strategies

Compared to the U.S., APAC real estate debt markets remain dominated by traditional lenders such as banks and insurance companies. Since 2022 however, rapid interest rate hikes have pressured these lenders into tightening lending conditions and retreating from new loan approvals (particularly construction loans which lenders are increasingly cautious on). At the same time, equity investments have become less attractive to investors as higher financing costs created negative carry with spreads between income yields and senior loan borrowing rates rising to a record negative 200-300 basis points in Australia and South Korea.

On the other hand, asset-based lending yields have currently reached attractive levels, with junior debt yields for standing assets at 7%-11%, while construction financing debt yields have reached 7%-13% (senior tranche) and 11%-17% (junior) in South Korea and Australia.

With debt investments increasingly appealing to private investors seeking higher risk-adjusted returns, the current dearth of construction financing availability provides a window of opportunity over the next 6 to 12 months for investors to step in amid less competition. We see the most compelling opportunities in South Korea for junior debt lending (for standing assets) and construction financing (senior/junior debt) with an immediate need for new lenders to step in and ease constraints in the credit markets, while Australia looks interesting though debt opportunities may be more limited at present.

Exhibit 9: Real Estate Debt and Corporate Credit in South Korea, Australia



Source: DWS, Colliers, Oxford Economics, Reserve Bank of Australia, Bank of Korea, As of July 2023.

Value-Add Strategies

The evolving real estate landscape has witnessed structural shifts in stakeholders’ requirements – tenants, landlords, financiers, particularly in a post-COVID environment where a multitude of factors such as flexible working arrangements, ESG features, and portfolio de-risking takes centre stage.

Investors could seek older but well-located office buildings with upgrading potential to bring the development up to date though asset enhancement initiatives. Having next-generation office features such technological features, biophilic design and collaborative spaces appeal strongly to the millennial worker while re-leasing with the accompanying rental uplift typically provides double digit returns on the capital outlay if executed well, outperforming a buy-and-hold core strategy. Similarly, redevelopment strategies can be considered,

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particularly on stranded offices with low economic value or underutilised plot ratio, which can offer higher development margins though this comes attached with higher risks.

Given the current market volatility (declines in asset valuations, lower funding availability), some real estate owners could either face loan refinancing challenges or collateral calls due to significant appraisal devaluations (particularly on secondary assets) leading to a breach of LTV or interest coverage covenants. This would require recapitalization or loan refinancing at a time when bank lending availability is limited. Based on CBRE estimates⁴, a funding gap of US\$5.8 billion could emerge between 2023-2025 across Asia Pacific, led by Australia, Japan and South Korea.

As such, investors could seek out structured deal opportunities in bridging the funding gap, which could involve additional capital injection through preferred equity, mezzanine lending or a combination of both. The investment quantum for these types of structured deals would be relatively small, with a short investment period. However, investors could achieve higher risk-adjusted returns compared to common equity or senior lending.

⁴ CBRE: Analysing the Funding Gap report, May 2023

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