

# Heard on the Beach

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## Escape Velocity

August 18, 2021



Green Street

### Executive Summary

The sharp upward trajectory observed in commercial property pricing is expected to continue. Though any snapshot of current pricing is blurred by the speed at which prices are moving, a comparison of real estate pricing with corporate bond yields suggests a fair value for property that is substantially above prevailing levels.

Capital continues to flow into real estate, particularly private equity funds. ROE-focused buyers also have access to ample amounts of debt, and at interest rates that have never been lower.

REIT share prices foretell a rise in pricing, though a more modest one. With pricing that is, in aggregate, 10% higher than the private market, REITs should be aggressive bidders for now. They may eventually get priced out of auction tents and become prime acquisition targets themselves.

With further rises in property pricing on the way, buyers are advised to make haste and transact before cap rates chase bond yields to unprecedented low levels.

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RMZ: **1423** | DJIA: **35,343** | 10-Year T-Note: **1.26%** | Baa Yield: **3.24%**

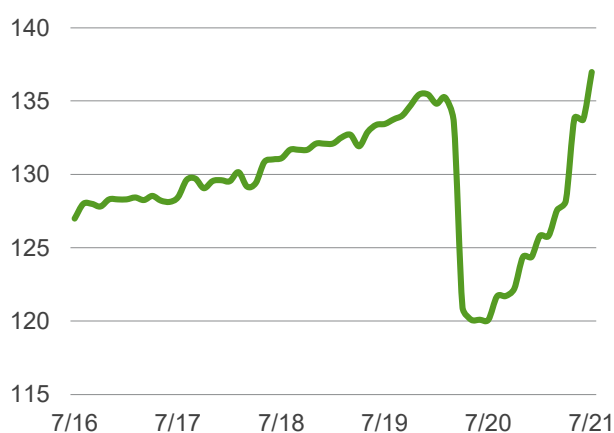
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## *Heard on the Beach* August 18, 2021

**Escape Velocity:** Whether in the physical sense, or merely metaphorically, gravity-defying stunts are becoming commonplace. Sir Richard Branson and Jeff Bezos recently enjoyed a few minutes of weightlessness. Bitcoin and the shares of AMC are evidence that the force of gravity can be overcome, at least temporarily, in financial markets. And commercial real estate's 14% gain over the past year represents the largest year-over-year increase in a decade. A short on space, crypto, and meme stocks is understandable, but commercial property warrants the opposite. Real estate valuations are compelling relative to bond yields, investors are as flush with capital as they've ever been, and debt markets are wide open for business. Commercial property prices are poised to continue their rapid ascent.

Pricing benchmarks in fixed-income markets—particularly corporate bond yields—provide the best tools for assessing property valuations. DCF-type underwriting (4% NOI yield after an appropriate reserve for cap ex combined with solid growth the next several years before trending to a little below inflation into perpetuity) suggests property will deliver a long-term return of 6.2%. Compared to pricing in the investment grade bond market—long duration Baa-rated corporate bonds at 3.2% (65 bp lower than yields were at the end of '19)—that expected return is fantastic. Real estate values would need to increase by 25% to bring the current spread between real estate and Baa back to its average level of the past thirty-five years. The spread between real estate and high-yield bonds is even more out of line with long-term norms, but the duration mismatch (real estate long vs. high-yield short) makes it less reliable when the yield curve is unusually steep, like it is now.

**Green Street CPPI®**



The catalysts for the recovery in property pricing were renewed confidence in the financial system, and then a Covid vaccine. Low borrowing costs and record-breaking fund flows into real estate private equity—already sitting on war chests pre-Covid—will drive pricing going forward. Blackstone and Brookfield remain the dominant players, but there is a breadth to capital raising that hasn't been seen in some time. Lone Star, Carlyle, and Oaktree have all recently closed funds in the \$5-10 billion range. As for Blackstone, its non-traded REIT (BREIT) alone takes in \$2 billion per month. Competition among PE shops will lead to higher prices.

Low bond yields are an important reason why capital is flowing into private equity, but they also play a direct role in property pricing. Though Green Street follows the unlevered approach espoused by Miller & Modigliani, private equity firms target return on equity (ROE), and today's interest rates—debt has never been cheaper—make achieving return hurdles possible at low cap rates. While 10-year money may be the conservative play (and 65% LTV at around 3.0% is not exactly expensive), most funds opt for a shorter term and lower rate. That choice may have more to do with the expected holding period than the slope of the yield curve, but either way, when one-month LIBOR is only 0.09% it juices the return (on equity). REIT CFOs have noticed, and shorter maturity unsecured issuances are becoming more common.

The pricing of REIT equities suggests that commercial property is attractively priced, but not altogether cheap. Pricing varies by the type of property a REIT owns, but in aggregate, REITs trade 10% above the private market.<sup>1</sup> That is modest next to the corporate bond signal (+25%), but nonetheless material. And it allows REITs in most sectors to be aggressive in bidding tents, providing another source of pressure on cap rates.

Property appreciation is likely to be strongest for industrial properties, portfolios of single-family homes, and cell towers. Those sectors sit squarely in the PE bullseye, for good reason. DCF-type long-term expected returns are compelling (industrial less so) and public-market pricing is particularly bullish.

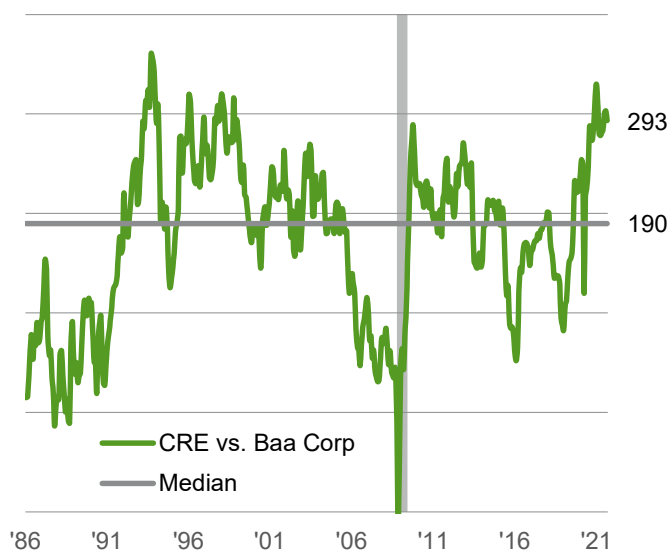
Higher property prices, when the cause is lower cap rates (i.e., not higher NOI), is great for sellers of real estate, not for buyers. With many REITs positioned as the latter, it is not obvious that the upcoming surge in private pricing will do much for share prices. Perhaps the stock market will finally come to appreciate that REITs are a hybrid bond/equity security, and price REITs accordingly. If not, REITs may go from trading at sizable premiums to private pricing to sizable discounts (office REITs are already there). That would take the shine off growth via acquisition, though many external growth stories predicated on development would remain highly profitable.

The silver lining for REIT investors is NAV discounts cause funds to flow into REITs. Smart investors will shift allocations away from private vehicles and towards public ones. And even those that refuse to acknowledge that “REITs are real estate” will inadvertently take part. Private equity funds are likely to make the trade for them. Privatizations by PE firms have totaled \$17 billion of U.S. REIT equity cap so far this year vs. \$7 billion/year from '15-'19. In each deal, a premium of circa 20% was paid.

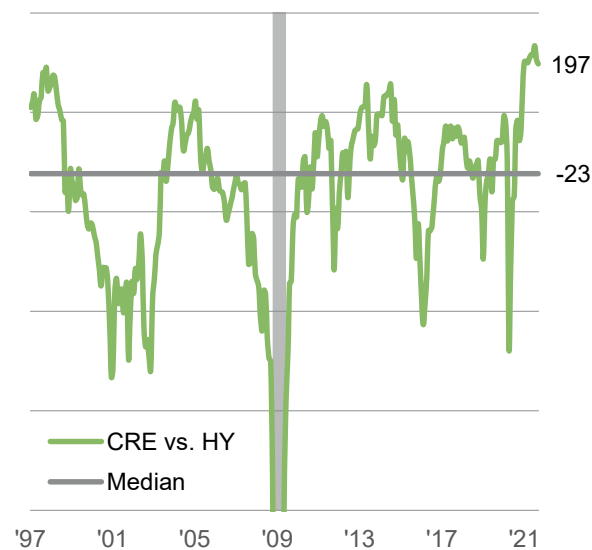
<sup>1</sup> The 10% premium is on the high side of real-time pricing. Recent transactions will cause Green Street's CPPI to increase even in the absence of further appreciation.

**Never Cheaper:** Real estate is priced to deliver long-term returns averaging 6.2% across property sectors, roughly in line with how it has been priced over the last decade. Meanwhile, bond yields—corporates are highlighted below—are near all-time lows. As a result, real estate looks cheaper than it ever has versus bonds, and, holding rates constant, a reversion to the historic norm would translate into a 25%+ increase in prices.

**CRE vs. Baa-Rated Corporates (20Y+)**



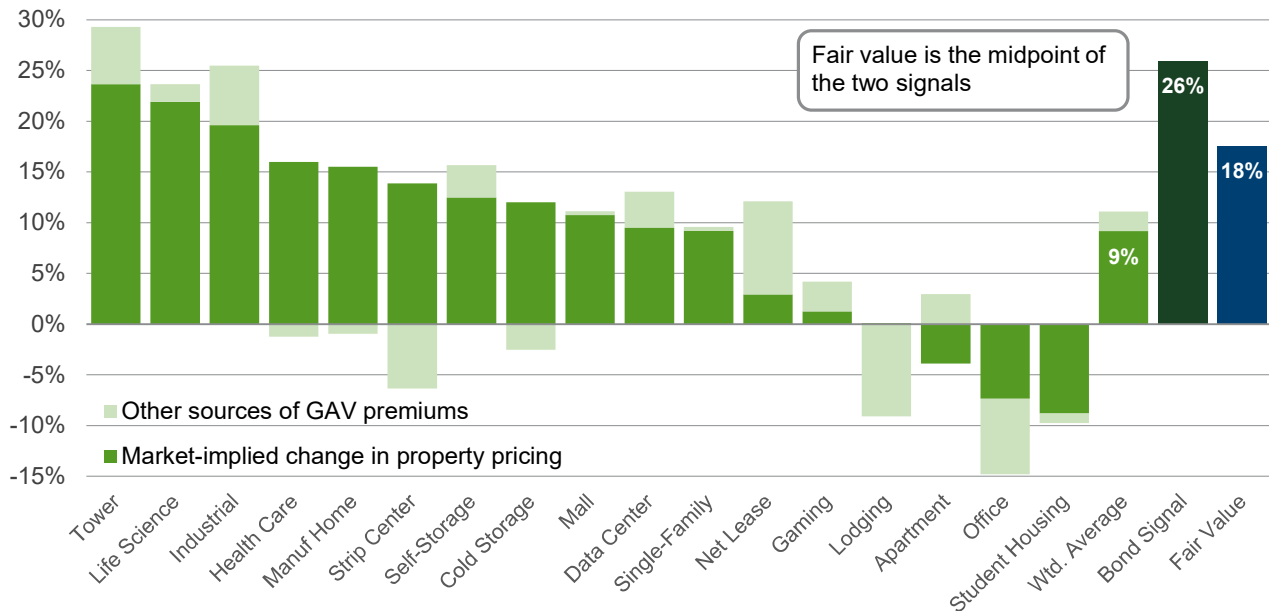
**CRE vs. High-Yield Bonds (circa 5Y)**



CRE expected return prior to Sep '19 based on core sectors & adjusted up 25 bp to make comparable with all property series in use now. Bond yields: Moody's Seasoned Baa Corporate Bond; ICE BofA US High Yield Index. Shading is GFC.

**Implied by REIT Prices:** Most REITs currently trade at sizable premiums to asset value, also an unusually bullish signal for property prices. The strength of this signal—an upward move in prices of 9%—is not as strong as that from the corporate bond market, but a blending of the two suggests that the robust property price increases that characterized the first half of '21 will continue unabated in the second half of the year.

**REIT GAV Premiums**



Other sources of GAV premiums include low (high) G&A, external growth, and strong (weak) balance sheets

With most REITs trading at NAV premiums, investors should consider the private market for real estate exposure. That is especially true if funds can be allocated to investment pools where the mark-to-market does not appropriately reflect today's fast-changing pricing (open-end funds and non-traded REITs are good places to start). Diligence is required. Most funds probably carry industrial properties at a discount, but retail properties may be valued well above market.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to calculate that the combination of ultra-low bond yields, fund flows to private equity, and open debt markets is causing property prices to rise. What may catch observers off guard, is the speed and magnitude of the adjustment. Where possible, buyers should transact while cap rates are still relatively high. And if those acquisitions happen to be financed at higher LTV and with shorter-term debt than usual, it is doubtful that shareholders or fund investors will mind.

Peter Rothmund, CFA  
Dave Bragg

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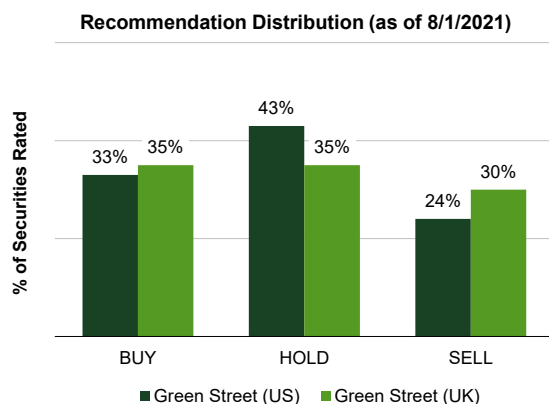
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Year <sup>3</sup>	Buy	Hold	Sell	Universe
2021 YTD	28.6%	29.8%	24.0%	28.1%
2020	3.3%	-13.0%	-22.5%	-10.7%
2019	31.6%	22.4%	17.8%	24.0%
2018	-5.1%	-6.6%	-9.2%	-7.0%
2017	6.4%	0.2%	2.1%	2.6%
2016	14.9%	14.7%	13.1%	14.4%
2015	8.3%	0.9%	-1.7%	2.4%
2014	41.6%	31.5%	27.3%	33.3%
2013	4.1%	0.6%	1.7%	2.2%
2012	24.5%	24.7%	18.9%	23.0%
2011	18.9%	7.6%	-4.7%	7.6%
2010	43.3%	32.8%	26.6%	33.8%
2009	59.0%	47.7%	6.0%	37.9%
2008	-28.1%	-30.9%	-52.6%	-37.3%
2007	-6.9%	-22.4%	-27.8%	-19.7%
2006	45.8%	29.6%	19.5%	31.6%
2005	26.3%	18.5%	-1.8%	15.9%
2004	42.8%	28.7%	16.4%	29.4%
2003	43.3%	37.4%	21.8%	34.8%
2002	17.3%	2.8%	2.6%	5.4%
2001	34.9%	19.1%	13.0%	21.1%
2000	53.4%	28.9%	5.9%	29.6%
1999	12.3%	-9.0%	-20.5%	-6.9%
1998	-1.6%	-15.1%	-15.5%	-12.1%
1997	36.7%	14.8%	7.2%	18.3%
1996	47.6%	30.7%	18.9%	32.1%
1995	22.9%	13.9%	0.5%	13.5%
1994	20.8%	-0.8%	-8.7%	3.1%
1993	27.3%	4.7%	8.1%	12.1%
<b>Cumulative Total Return</b>	<b>28103.1%</b>	<b>1541.4%</b>	<b>36.4%</b>	<b>1863.1%</b>
<b>Annualized</b>	<b>21.9%</b>	<b>10.3%</b>	<b>1.1%</b>	<b>11.0%</b>

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## North American Team

Research		
<b>Leadership</b>	Mike Kirby, Co-Founder Cedrik Lachance, EVP, Director of Research	mkirby@greenstreet.com clachance@greenstreet.com
<b>Strategic Research</b>	Dave Bragg, Co-Head of Strategic Research Peter Rothmund, CFA, Co-Head of Strategic Research Jared Giles, CFA, Senior Associate	dbragg@greenstreet.com prothemund@greenstreet.com jgiles@greenstreet.com
<b>Company and Sector Research</b>	Michael Knott, Managing Director, Head of U.S. REIT Research	mknott@greenstreet.com
<b>Data Centers/Towers</b>	David Guarino, Analyst Michael Stroyeck, Senior Associate	dguarino@greenstreet.com mstroyeck@greenstreet.com
<b>Gaming/Net Lease/Self-Storage</b>	Spenser Allaway, Senior Analyst David Balaguer, Senior Associate Harsh Hemnani, Senior Associate	sallaway@greenstreet.com dbalaguer@greenstreet.com hhemnani@greenstreet.com
<b>Industrial/Retail</b>	Vince Tibone, CFA, Senior Analyst Paulina Rojas-Schmidt, Analyst Emily Arft, Senior Associate Tomi Cubrilo, Senior Associate Jessica Zheng, Senior Associate	vtibone@greenstreet.com projasschmidt@greenstreet.com earft@greenstreet.com tcubrilo@greenstreet.com jzheng@greenstreet.com
<b>Lodging/Health Care</b>	Lukas Hartwich, CFA, Managing Director Chris Darling, CFA, Analyst John Magee, CFA, Senior Associate Alaine Coffey, Associate	lhartwich@greenstreet.com cdarling@greenstreet.com jmagee@greenstreet.com acoffey@greenstreet.com
<b>Office</b>	Daniel Ismail, CFA, Senior Analyst Dylan Burzinski, Senior Associate Michael Manos, CFA, CPA, Senior Associate	dismail@greenstreet.com dburzinski@greenstreet.com mmanos@greenstreet.com
<b>Residential</b>	John Pawlowski, CFA, Senior Analyst Alan Peterson, Senior Associate Robyn Luu, CFA, Senior Associate	jpawlowski@greenstreet.com apeterson@greenstreet.com rluu@greenstreet.com
<b>Data &amp; Analytics</b>	Andrew McCulloch, CFA, EVP, Global Head of Data & Analytics	amcculloch@greenstreet.com
<b>Market Analytics</b>	Joi Mar, CFA, Managing Director Rob Filley, CFA, Analyst Ryan Miller, CFA, Analyst Weston Mui, CFA, Analyst Alexandra Boyle, Senior Associate Alexander McIntyre, Associate Chinar Rastogi, Associate Emily Meckler, Associate Kevin Neys, Associate Mitchell Briggs, Associate Tina Tsyshevska, Associate Sara Knippa, Associate * Sophie Piller, Associate * Cole Smith, Associate * Arthur Berlinger, Associate Naishal Shah, Associate	jmar@greenstreet.com rfilley@greenstreet.com rmiller@greenstreet.com wmui@greenstreet.com aboyle@greenstreet.com amcintyre@greenstreet.com crastogi@greenstreet.com emeckler@greenstreet.com kneys@greenstreet.com mbriggs@greenstreet.com tsyshevska@greenstreet.com sknippa@greenstreet.com spiller@greenstreet.com csmith@greenstreet.com aberlinger@greenstreet.com nshah@greenstreet.com
<b>Forecasting &amp; Data Science</b>	Daniel Wijaya, Lead Analyst Dmitry Nikalaichyk, Senior Quant Analyst Otto Aletter, Analyst	dwijaya@greenstreet.com dnikalaichyk@greenstreet.com oaletter@greenstreet.com
Executive		
Jeff Stuek, Chief Executive Officer		jstuek@greenstreet.com
Account Management		
Seth Laughlin, Managing Director Caroline McCrory, Senior Vice President		slaughlin@greenstreet.com cmccrory@greenstreet.com
Sales		
Kris Hoffman, EVP, Head of Revenue		khoffman@greenstreet.com
Advisory		
Dirk Aulabaugh, EVP, Global Head of Advisory Services Phillip Owens, CFA, Managing Director Justin Brown, Managing Director		daulabaugh@greenstreet.com powens@greenstreet.com jbrown@greenstreet.com
Marketing & Media Relations		
Katie Clemons, Vice President		kclemons@greenstreet.com

**Green Street**  
100 Bayview Circle, Suite 400  
Newport Beach, CA 92660  
T 949.640.8780

**Green Street (UK) Limited**  
6th Floor, 30 Pantons Street  
London SW1Y 4AJT  
T +44 (0)20.3793.7000

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