

The Weekly Take

Build Me Up: Insights on build-to-rent's growing popularity

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Spencer Levy

Home ownership has long been considered a cornerstone of the American dream. But some real estate developers believe they have the keys to another way in – through purpose-built rental housing, an emerging asset class that some even see as a solution to larger issues like residential shortages and affordability. On this episode, two leaders at the forefront of this rapidly growing sector – single family homes and communities that are specifically built-to-rent.

Jay Byce

Our definition is completely indistinguishable from for-sale housing. It has all the same amenities, all the same features.

Spencer Levy

That's Jay Byce, a co-founder and senior vice president of ResiBuilt Homes, an Atlanta-based general contractor and developer dedicated to the built-to-rent space. In the past five years, the company has built roughly 1500 rental homes, mainly in the Southeast, and is actively expanding its portfolio.

Michael Paul

Our mission is to bring the institutional approach to build-to-rent, and that's been so effective on our multifamily practice.

Spencer Levy

And that's Michael Paul, a vice president at CBRE Capital Markets Group, who helped start the company's practice covering build-to-rent, which is also known as BTR or sometimes BFR, as in build-for-rent. Coming up, an open house in this emerging asset class. We'll find out how and why build-to-rent seems to be on-the-move. I'm Spencer Levy and that's right now on The Weekly Take.

Spencer Levy

Welcome to The Weekly Take, and this week, we are going to be talking about a very, very hot area within investing, and to help us with today's topic, we have Jay Byce, Senior Vice President of ResiBuilt Homes. Jay, thanks for joining us.

Jay Byce

Thank you very much, Spencer. Good to be here.

Spencer Levy

Great to have you. And then our own Michael Paul, Vice President at CBRE who focuses on this sector. Michael, thanks for joining the show.

Michael Paul

Absolutely. Thanks for having me and excited to have this conversation with Jay, as well.

Spencer Levy

Great. So let's define build-to-rent. I think when most people see these single family house developments, the vast majority of them are for sale individually. But these are large housing developments that are designed and built not to be sold individually, but to be rented, not dissimilar to, perhaps, a horizontal multifamily project. Jay, please define the sector in your own words.

Jay Byce

First thing everyone needs to understand is this is nothing new. In 2011, Warren Buffett famously said, "If I could buy 100,000 homes right now, I would". The very next week, three titans of industry happen to be having a breakfast. Wayne Hughes of Public Storage, Jon Gray of Blackstone and Tom Barrack of Colony. From that, the three largest aggregators of rental products of single family housing were born. At the time, roughly 35% of all homes were already rental and 100% of those homes were owned by what we call mom and pop investors. That is, investors that own less than ten homes and are not making a full time job out of managing homes for a living. So when the three large companies entered the space, we really put a floor in the falling housing values that had been happening from 2008 through 2012 and the single family rental institutionalization had begun. Fast forward a little bit. Foreclosure started to dry up by 2016, and all of these new companies needed a way to continue aggregating. That's when I started raising capital to have dedicated build-to-rent funds. And so now I'm going to actually answer your question. What is the definition of build-to-rent? It could be simply buying new homes from homebuilders and turning them into rental homes. That's a relatively small percentage of the total segment. For folks out west, it tends to be more horizontal apartments where they are still trying to maximize their density and give people a smaller yard. For me, in the southeast, it means developing what we call dedicated rental communities. That is large, masterplan-style communities, anywhere from 100 to 300 lots, oftentimes with amenities, and they are purpose built for rental purposes. So that's our definition. And our definition is completely indistinguishable from for-sale housing. It has all the same amenities, all the same features, with some upgrades to make maintenance cost a little bit more predictable in terms and long term CapEx for the future.

Spencer Levy

Michael, I'm going to turn to you for a moment because I want your definition of build-to-rent, see if it jives with Jay's or if there's any differences.

Michael Paul

I think, kind of, the simplest definition of build-to-rent in our world is essentially rental homes or rental units with no one living above or below you. There's really, kind of, two different buckets, I would say, in build-to-rent. There are what we call horizontal multifamily, which will more replicate unit mixes and so forth of a conventional multifamily deal being call it 40% ones, 40% twos and the remainder threes, or some something like that. And then there's kind of what I would say is traditional build-to-rent, which is kind of where Jay is focused, and what we see candidly, a lot more in the Southeast being two, three, four, sometimes five bedrooms, usually individually platted, most have garages and all have ground level direct entry.

Jay Byce

When we began aggregating in 2011 and 2012, most of us, even if we called it a business, we really treated it like a trade. And what grew out of that trade is an actual business. Renters sort of went through the same change, if you will. Initially, renters were renters out of necessity. What we find now, especially with build-to-rent, we are absolutely catering to renters by choice. That's really been an evolution. And what it's proving out is that the market is much, much larger than we thought, and the desire to rent is much larger than we thought.

Michael Paul

Jay just nailed it. The fundamentals are there. The consumer demand is so prevalent. We continue to see strong rent growth. Last year in kind of any sector it was off the charts 18 to 22%, depending on who you ask. I think I just read as of last month, we're still about 5% rent growth here in Atlanta, call it somewhere between four and 6% kind of throughout the southeast. At the end of the day, smart money, smart capital is going to follow fundamentals. The space was institutionalized in, call it, the last 15 years. I'd probably argue it's really in the last few years. I'd also argue that we're not there yet. Compared to multifamily that became institutionalized two or three decades ago, we are just starting to scratch the surface. And candidly, when we talk internally about what is our mission, our mission is to bring the institutional approach to build-to-rent, that's been so effective on our multifamily practice. So what that means is we're trying to understand what our clients are trying to accomplish in solving for our clients across geographies from start to finish. That includes land sourcing, as I said earlier, and includes financing, equity raising, investment sales, forward takeouts and recaps are all the things that we've done and hopefully we've got the torchbearers being Jay Byce and co., and we want other people to have that same success.

Spencer Levy

Whether it's the last couple of years or the last decade we'd agree it's a relatively recent phenomena that's just becoming institutionalized. But I think the key to becoming institutionalized are many of the things that you just mentioned, Michael, in terms of the understanding of the institutional demand, how are you going to finance it, where the land availability is, all the nuts and bolts of building and buying the stuff. But I think there is the one key last mile of institutionalization, which is operating. Because I think the fundamental difference reason why single family or build-to-rent rental versus multifamily took a while to become institutionalized is that the operating cost was so much higher in this sector than it was in traditional multifamily, But because it's become institutionalized, those costs have come in and now it's quite similar to multifamily. Jay, what's your point of view?

Jay Byce

I look at it more from the single-family rental perspective, right? When you're aggregating homes and you're building a platform to manage homes that are scattered throughout the city, and then you shift and you actually build 100 to 300 homes in one spot, management seems awfully easy. But I feel like the multifamily guys did not go build-to-rent because what they were doing was working. And sometimes it takes a different perspective to offer something different. Maybe this is somewhat similar to Elon Musk taking the chance with Tesla, right? Nobody built EVs, at least with any significant scale, until he did, and he proved that there was a market for it. In a similar way, we started building homes specifically for rent, and what we found is the demand was well north of two times what we thought it was. And that higher demand is really what's fueled the rent growth that Michael was alluding to a few minutes ago. Now what we're seeing is a lot of multifamily folks entering the space just in the last 12 to 18 months. Some of the largest multi guys are now either buying stabilized dedicated rentals communities or they're getting in in the

beginning. They're buying the land and using us or others to build it out and handling the lease on their own.

Spencer Levy

You mentioned, Jay, a moment ago and Michael, I'll turn to you on this one, two basic strategies that people follow in this segment. One is the build-to-rent. You build the community yourself, and the other is you buy individual homes scattered and you run a business that way. Michael, what's your point of view?

Michael Paul [00:10:58] As Jay said, when they were setting the floor for the housing market, that was a, I hate to be cliché here, but it was the following night after the GFC, what they found is, they were able to go aggregate these homes and operate them. And I don't even want to say institutionally, but even operate them in a manner that might be a little bit better than the mom and pop would do it. They would make sure that the residents were taken care of. They found that these renters were sticky and proved the demand they wanted to be there. And so build-to-rent as we think of it, being used for fully contiguous communities really was born from the strong demand that we were seeing from the consumers in the scattered home portfolios. Your comment was, the last mile of institutionalization is operating in these communities. I agree 100%. And what they found was it's incredibly inefficient and incredibly hard to go operate scattered portfolios. And so there is a way to capture the same demand that we're getting in a single family, scattered portfolios and operate them more efficiently to contiguous community, it was a win-win for both sides. And by the way, the resident and the consumer has that much better of an experience because of all the lessons learned. Operating multifamily with folks on site. And we found that consumers are going to be happy, and at the end of the day if consumers are happy, consumers are going to stay.

Jay Byce

We get a lot of criticism both in the SFR space and the build-to-rent space from people that feel like we are preventing people from owning homes. That could not be further from the truth. The fact is we're giving access to homes that would not be there normally, and we're giving multiple options for people to access those homes. When we started back in 2011 and 2012, we were buying homes that were heavily distressed. They were going through foreclosure. Most of them needed 40, 50, \$60,000 of renovation capital, and we're talking about a \$100,000 home. So your average family could not afford and could not get a loan to buy, renovate and move in. So the SFR industry not just created a floor for pricing, but really rejuvenated entry level housing in a huge way across the country. And it also, we should note, the SFR funds that form that floor bought about 300,000 homes over a five year period, which sounds like a lot of homes, but that is nothing compared to the 15 million rental homes that were already owned by mom and pops. So this asset class is at its infancy. We believe that this is actually helping families live in better housing and not have to deal with a lot of the maintenance and other issues that comes from owning your first home. The number one reason that people leave us is to go buy a home, and we encourage that. And some companies even help them save for that. We believe the market is plenty big for both. And then you look at what we do in terms of developing old communities. We are still able to put product out at the same pace today that we were a year ago and two years ago. If you look at for-sale homebuilders, they've had to slow way down, because rates have gone up and they're concerned that people can't afford housing anymore. But we still have a 2-3 million dollar housing shortage in this country. So we are able to continue to feed the desire to live in a home even while rates are high. So we don't fight homeownership. We feel like we were a good option alongside homeownership, very

much the same as leasing a car is a good option as compared to buying a car, depending on your circumstance. It's the same car, it's just another option for you to use it.

Michael Paul

Spencer, if you don't mind, there's two parts of that that are super important. One, we all agree there's a housing shortage. So to be totally clear, especially in the build-to-rent space. We're adding homes to this inventory and these are rental homes today, and they're purpose-built rental homes, but that's not to say these are always going to be rental homes. In fact, most of the funds that come by properties, one of the perspectives they look at when they're talking about exiting or going to sell this asset is what does it look like if we go sell these one-off as retail homes? To be totally clear, what we found and the demographics on most of the deals that we work on, not even half of the residents there are renters by necessity. I would say maybe a third, or kind of your standard rental pool. We have incredibly affluent families who can go afford homes living in these communities for one reason or another, whether that's they're empty nesters or they're divorcees or they want to be transient or they want the flexibility. My parents rent. I'm one of six. We had enough home for all of us to live in. When they decided to go sell that home, my mom was so mad at me because I encouraged them to go rent. They've been there for three and a half years and she absolutely loves it.

Jay Byce

Spencer, I'll give you a fascinating little study that we were lucky enough to do. In 2018, very much before this, before build-to-rent was a household term, we bought 300 scattered lots. They were already developed. We did this so that we could start our construction business at the same time that we started our development business, because it takes roughly 12 months to develop a community. So we wanted to be ready rather than starting construction once development was complete. So we had 300 scattered homes and we decided to offer them for sale or for lease. What we found was almost everyone called our number inquiring about homes for sale because that was kind of the typical expectation. When we educated them and said, well, you don't have to get a loan. If you'd like, you can lease this home for a year, at this rate, which is pretty comparable to the price you would pay to buy the home. 92% of the people decided to rent. 92%, and anything in this day and age is amazing, right? That's overwhelming. We were surprised by that and what we found, the demographics held true then and they're still true today. It's about 40% of millennials starting a young family. That's what we expected to be more like 80%. The other large cohort was also 40% and it was young, empty nesters, people that were of the appropriate age to move into a 55 and older community, but they didn't feel like they were old, nor did they want to feel like they were old. They wanted to be around younger people, but they liked the flexibility of a lease and the fact that they don't have to do any maintenance, especially yard maintenance. That's when we realized the market was much, much deeper than we had even hoped for.

Spencer Levy

Let's go back to this cost differential between renting and buying. Before we get to the incremental cost of home maintenance, leaky roofs, lawn maintenance. Let's just go. What's my rent? What's my mortgage? And I recognize that mortgage rates fluctuate like the wind, particularly in a rising rate environment today. But just give me a sense for, I'm coming to you today, Jay, to get a three bedroom house in a nice community. You just built it. I got a choice. I can buy this house for \$300,000 or I could rent it. Walk me through that process of what it might cost me.

Jay Byce

I would say on average, our home values would be around 350. So if someone were to lease a \$350,000 home, that's typically going to be around \$2500 a month. And in today's environment, your mortgage is going to be above that. I can't do the math quite that quickly in my head, but...

Spencer Levy

I'll do it for you. 7% mortgage, let's say it's, they put down a \$200,000 mortgage. The rest is cash. 200,000 times seven is a \$14,000 a year, plus amortization. And so the amortization, more or less, doesn't quite double it. Let's say it doubles it, we're at 28,000. Divide it by 12. 1224. So it is going to be about \$2700 a month, approximately, to get a mortgage today for that same house. If you get a mortgage.

Jay Byce

That's putting down a gigantic down payment.

Spencer Levy

Yes. And that's putting down \$140,000, \$150,000.

Jay Byce

Exactly, right. Which most people won't have today. If you move that up to 97% loan, your monthly payment is much, much higher. I'll tell you this, back in 2019, 2020, when rates were much lower, what we found is our monthly payment was \$200 to \$300 more than the mortgage had been. And people still were choosing to rent because they saw that, you know, hey, wait, these guys are paying for property taxes. These guys are paying for insurance, these guys are paying for maintenance, even when just the base P and I was compared to rent, everyone was smart enough to figure out that it was cheaper to rent. And the other thing, we used to talk about this a lot in the 2000s, but you've got to consider the five year rule. The five year rule is the concept of transaction cost, loan interest and everything else. And in brokerage fees to buy and sell a home, it takes about five years to make it profitable enough to be a decent investment. To be any kind of a good investment, you need to live in the home for five years. And what we find ourselves in today is an environment where both of the large cohorts that I mentioned, the millennials and those sort of young boomers, they aren't necessarily wanting to be in the same place in five years that they are today. They're entering transition types, or transition periods in life, and that makes renting even that much more appealing, not to mention just the general shift in mobility in our culture, in general.

Spencer Levy

Michael, let me turn to you now for a moment. I understand that the most attractive place, or certainly the places where we're seeing the greatest amount of new volume of build-to-rent is in the southeastern United States. Is that true and why?

Michael Paul

Let's start with Phoenix. Most people will agree the birthplace of build-to-rent is really out in Phoenix, but there's mostly horizontal multitis, I would say, with mostly one or two, and a sprinkle of threes. That started 2014, with probably next metro. As Jay was saying, there's some groups that were going out and doing it. American Homes for Rent or so forth, starting to build even bigger homes that felt more like the house you would go buy. We are seeing a massive amount of in-migration into the Southeast. Smart money follows fundamentals, right? So when you have that much growth in the South, specifically through COVID, when they're leaving, the what I would say, less business friendly states,

people realize that the growth was going to be in the Southeast. What's been interesting, and it's not just in the Southeast, you know I think most institutional buy boxes, if you will, today pretty much overlap with how they would look at multifamily deals — i.e., they want Main and Main, they want the good schools, they want the demographics there. What we found is actually, we can get a little bit more secondary and tertiary in these deals and they still perform extremely well. And so deals that are maybe 45 minutes to an hour outside of a kind of a major metro here in the Southeast. And Jay's got several of them here in Atlanta that have absolutely crushed it on a performance level. And it's again, because of that high growth. And so you see Atlanta, really Charlotte or Raleigh or Orlando, there used to be kind of a ring around any one metro. That 30 minutes was kind of that metro. And now, because of the massive growth that we've seen in the Southeast, we're seeing, it's really like an hour ring now. And so if you go to Atlanta, almost an hour drive any direction from the center of Atlanta, there's strong growth and there's job growth. There's income growth, schools are getting better, infrastructure is getting better. And so, again, capital is going to continue to follow that growth. So that's why we're seeing so much growth here in the southeast.

Spencer Levy

So you would agree with my characterization that maybe a disproportionate amount of the building is happening in the Southeast today, but that's because of demographic flows. But the space actually started in Phoenix. Is that a better way to put it?

Michael Paul

That's how I'd put it. I would say the Sun Belt in general is where we're seeing the lion's share of all development and that the southeast, kind of Texas-east, we're seeing the lion's share of the growth.

Jay Byce

Yeah, I would agree. Phoenix, we're seeing a lot in Vegas, a lot in Denver. Texas is a gigantic market for this. Florida is huge. Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee. Those are your main areas right now.

Michael Paul

I'll tell you, Spencer, on that question, I think most capital groups and sponsors, whether that's ResiBuilt or Greystar or High Point, Next Nitro, I would say that the appetite to grow in the Southeast is certainly, it feels like that's where the most attention is. That being said, we're hitting headwinds as far as new development from every angle, and I'll let Jay talk more about it. I know you're spearheading some initiatives, but entitlements are incredibly difficult. Municipalities are trying to figure out what this build-to-rent even means. And by the way, how does build-to-rent community even fit into the current zoning? There's a lot of controversy right now and a lot of this, it's becoming really hard. So we're seeing a lot of growth. Do most groups want to grow even more in the Southeast? I would say absolutely.

Spencer Levy

So, there are different types of housing communities. There's traditional for-sale communities. Then there are rental communities that the industry now terms build-to-rent. Then there is, of course, multifamily, where you go vertical. There's nuance between how you pick a site that might be best for multifamily, traditional for-sale and rental, that I think is important for listeners to understand. Jay, why don't you go into site selection and how it might differ here versus some of the other segments of housing?

Jay Byce [00:26:22] We look at our site selection much closer to for-sale housing than we do multi. You know, the reality is, we need much more acreage to produce a significant number of lots. So for a 100 acre community, we're more likely to need 20 acres if they're detached, and probably ten acres if it is a townhome. To get anything bigger than that, obviously, you're looking at some pretty significant acreage. So that tends to be out in the suburban areas for us to pick up, you know, 200 plus lots. There used to be an old saying, drive till you qualify, right? Around here we talk, drive until you're comfortable, because the truth is, people are aging out of multifamily. They're accustomed to living in 900 to 1200 square foot apartments, and they're willing to drive a little bit to get a 1800 to 2200 square foot home. And so really, our comps are for-sale product. We look around and we want to see for sale communities that are selling briskly. So call it 3 to 4 to 5 homes per month in a pretty tight area. Call it a two or three mile radius from our site. If people are willing to get a 30 year mortgage and put down a significant down payment, we feel that there's an equal, if not much larger, cohort that would be willing to rent from us.

Spencer Levy

Michael, you have a wide lens on site selection because you are covering not only the capital, but helping them buy and sell potential land sites. How do you look at site selection in BTR versus the other segments of housing?

Michael Paul

I think generally, as Jay said, drive until you're comfortable. People are willing to do that at pretty impressive rates. Even for "far out" versus kind of where the multifamily deals would go. So, what do we look for? We're obviously looking for growth, and that can come in the form of many different things. Is that closer to the Rivian plant out in Covington? Because that's going to bring a lot of growth there. People are willing to take that chance. Facebook is out there, so forth. Population growth. Gwinnett County's been a top growing county. I think it was 15 years here in Georgia. People want to be in Gwinnett County because of that. I found kind of anecdotally that these properties do extremely well around industrial nodes. We sit here in Atlanta, so we use Atlanta. The Southwest has been absolutely inundated with industrial jobs over the last ten years, call it, and there has been very limited rental housing stock built in those areas. So what happens? The people who go down to those areas and provide rental housing for all these new jobs are absolutely killing it.

Spencer Levy

So I want to make something clear here to our listeners that when you're looking at the different types and quality of housing, rental housing, starting at the highest quality, call it class A, you lose in class A multifamily 50 to 60% of your tenants on an annual basis, and then you start working your way down. You work your way down to workforce. Then you've got Capital A affordable and your tenancies get stickier and stickier and stickier. And believe it or not, manufactured homes have some of the stickiest of all tenants who stay basically forever. You have the stickiness of some of the highest stickiness or tenant retention of any sectors. And is that one of the things that makes the space so attractive today?

Jay Byce

Absolutely. It's really the most important metric that we look at. We have to have our tenants happy. We have to have our tenants sticky. Because our units are larger, the cost of terms is much higher. And so making sure our residents stay happy and want to stay in the home is our number one priority.

Spencer Levy

Michael, you've been in this space now for a while and you're seeing greater institutional ownership. Right now, in institutional ownership, I'd use Jay's numbers, a very small percentage of the space. Kind of reminds me a little bit of where self-storage was ten years ago in terms of the relatively low disaggregated nature of the space. Michael, where do you see the space going in terms of institutional ownership?

Michael Paul

Well specifically the BTR, which again is a new product built purposely to rent, it's become quite institutional very quickly. We continue to hear that this is very similar to how multifamily went years ago. I can't tell you how many times a week I'm talking to some capital group, highly institutional capital group, trying to get in the space. There's a lot of conviction. There's near-term headwinds, and I think that can be, you know, because of cost plus contract, for instance, that, you know, essentially creates an uncapped liability for a lot of these institutions. It's extremely hard right now to, in a scalable way, deploy capital, although there's a lot of interest and, again, conviction, to make it happen. You know, there's so much focus that we need, and all of us need, to be building and thinking long term in this space. And so whether that's using durable materials to make sure the house is going to uphold here in five, ten years. You know, but then even from the capital side. I would say that because we're in such an unproven sector and there's so many buts, most of the business plans are somewhat long term holding, i.e. we don't see as many merchant builders on purpose as we would in, necessarily, multifamily. Everyone's got a 5 to 10 year horizon. Jay will tell you, sometimes the cap rates are almost too attractive, that they're de facto become merchant builders at times. But in an interesting way, and I know I'm chasing a little bit of a rabbit here, but we're kind of stalling for two things in parallel. Deal flow today, I think everyone expects some chop in the market. We can debate on where we are in the cycle and our recovery, but I think most people think a 12 to 24 months choppy market. Separately, we're solving for the long term in our space. So from a capital perspective, we're trying to solve and help the Jay Byces of the world go raise our capital and make sure that we're getting deals on the ground and we're meeting the tenant demand. But we're also trying to be strategic on, what does this look like, to your point, 10, 15, 25 years from now? And what are the things we can be doing today to make sure we're kind of prepping for a long runway here in the build-to-rent space?

Spencer Levy

So we only have a couple of minutes left, so let's just get final thoughts. Future of the space. Jay, starting with you.

Jay Byce

Well, look, everyone asks, what inning are we in? And I really feel like we're still in the first inning here. In 2018, literally no one knew what build-to-rent was. Raising capital at an institutional level was unheard of, and COVID accelerated the trend. COVID accelerated the movement of millennials from high density into more medium and low density housing, and that accelerated what build-to-rent really is. We think that we are an answer to the housing shortage, or at least a part of the answer. And if we are just a small fraction of the answer, then the institutionalization of this asset class is only the beginning.

Spencer Levy

Michael, final thoughts?

Michael Paul

Yeah, I think I agree with Jay. We're so early here. As long as the fundamentals are there, smart money will continue to follow it. And we're seeing an absolute massive inflow, a tsunami of capital, trying to make sure, and will make sure, that this sector is around for a long time. There's been a missing donut of underrepresented renters who want to be in the three, four, five bedroom units. And by the way, I think COVID helped accelerate the recognition that there is a deep demand from tenants to residents, who want to rent, give up the lifestyle that you might have if you go own a home. So all that to be said, I think we're very early here. It's been a lot of fun. We're excited. We're all motivated every day because we're in the very beginning of writing the playbook, and that's on the operational front. That's on the capital front. That's on the building front. We've got a long runway to go.

Spencer Levy

Well, on behalf of The Weekly Take, I want to thank Jay Byce, Senior Vice President of ResiBuilt Homes. Great job, Jay. Thanks for joining the show.

Jay Byce

Thanks, Spencer. It's been a great conversation.

Spencer Levy

And then I want to thank our friend and colleague, Michael Paul, Vice President, CBRE, who focuses on the build-to-rent sector. Great job, Michael.

Michael Paul

Spencer, Jay, I really appreciate it.

Spencer Levy

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