227. SQUARE METERS AS THE MAIN LIQUID ASSET OF THE NEW ERA

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This article examines the transformation of commercial real estate driven by e-commerce, technology, and supply chain shifts, arguing that warehouse facilities are transitioning from operational costs to strategic liquid assets. Analyzing trends such as robotization, retail conversion, and changing investment preferences, it concludes that control over square footage has become a critical competitiveness factor. Liquidity is now determined by a combination of technological, logistical, and macroeconomic factors, positioning warehouse real estate as a complex asset beyond mere storage space.

For a long time, the traditional hierarchy of liquid assets looked quite predictable: at the top were cash and its equivalents, followed by securities and precious metals, and only then real estate. However, the structural shifts caused by the 2020 pandemic, geopolitical turbulence, and the rapid development of information technology have forced a reconsideration of this verity. Today, analysts at major investment funds are increasingly coming to a seemingly paradoxical conclusion: the concrete boxes of warehouse complexes are beginning to demonstrate liquidity similar to financial instruments, and in some aspects even exceeding them.

A survey was conducted among 78 students majoring in economics and management to understand their view of warehouse real estate as an investment asset. The key question was: “Do you agree that warehouse facilities are currently turning into a highly liquid asset, comparable to financial instruments?”

The results showed that 58 % of respondents agreed with this statement, 24 % expressed doubt, and 18% disagreed. In addition, 52 % of students identified the growth of e-commerce as the main driver of this transformation, and 45 % noted that after reviewing the materials, they changed their perception – they no longer see warehouses only as storage spaces but recognize them as high-tech investment assets. At the same time, 60 % of respondents expressed concern about risks related to high tenant concentration and possible market overheating [1].

The survey shows that most students generally agree with the main idea of the article about warehouse real estate becoming a new type of liquid asset. At the same time, a significant number of those who expressed doubt or concern about risks suggests that future professionals are approaching this new asset class with a balanced view, which fully supports the article's conclusion about the need to consider systemic risks when working with such assets.

The phenomenon of warehouse capacity turning into “new oil’ requires careful economic consideration. If previously a warehouse was perceived as an inevitable but burdensome link in the value chain, today it is becoming a central element of the economic model.

Factors in the Transformation of Warehouse Real Estate:

The first and most significant factor is the exponential growth of e-commerce. If in 2010 the share of online sales in the total retail trade of developed countries did not exceed 5-7 %, then by 2025 this figure averages 20-25 %, and in certain segments it reaches 40 % or more. Each percentage point of growth in online trade requires development of warehouse space by 2–3 million square meters on the scale of a single large country. At the same time, the structure of demand itself is changing: whereas previously retailers rented Class “B” and “C” warehouses on the outskirts, today only modern Class “A” fulfillment centers with high ceilings (from 12 meters), flat floors, and the ability to operate around the clock are in demand [2].

The second factor is technological in nature. The development of Warehouse Management Systems (WMS) and the introduction of robotics have turned the warehouse from a passive storage facility into an active production center. A modern fulfillment center is a high-tech enterprise where each square meter generates a cash flow comparable to a square meter of retail space in a city center. Automation makes it possible to increase storage density by 3–5 times, reduce order processing time from hours to 15-20 minutes, and, what is especially important for investors, make the cash flow from the warehouse completely transparent and predictable.

The third factor is related to the shift in the investment paradigm. Classic office centers, long considered the “gold standard” of commercial real estate, are experiencing a deep crisis. The transition to remote and hybrid working formats has led to office vacancy rates in large cities reaching 15-20%, with rental rates stagnating. High-street retail, in turn, is suffering from the outflow of shoppers to online channels. Against that backdrop, warehouse real estate is seeing vacancy rates hit record lows – less than 1-2 % in certain areas – while rental growth remains stable and above inflation.

Traditionally, real estate was considered an illiquid asset due to the long time required to sell it. However, the warehouse real estate market has recently shown unusual features. The time it takes to sell a quality Class “A” warehouse facility in locations with well-developed transport infrastructure has been reduced to 2–4 months, which is comparable to the time required to sell large blocks of shares on the stock exchange.

Three key factors contribute to the formation of high liquidity:

Firstly, the standardization of tenant requirements. While office or retail spaces require individual finishing for a specific tenant, a modern warehouse complex is a standardized product. Ceiling height, column spacing, floor load capacity – these parameters are standardized and suitable for 90 % of e-commerce operators and logistics companies.

Secondly, the development of the built-to-suit format and the subsequent capitalization of properties. Major developers have shifted to the model of “build – lease long-term (10-15 years) – bring to the capital market”, which turns warehouse real estate into a fixed-income instrument, close in its characteristics to investment-grade bonds.

Thirdly, the emergence of specialized investment vehicles – REITs focused exclusively on industrial and warehouse real estate. Between 2020 and 2025, the industrial REIT index rose by an average of 140 %, while the office REIT index fell by 15 %. This indicates a flow of institutional capital into a segment that the market has recognized as more reliable and liquid [3].

Geopolitical Context and Transformation of Supply Chains also means a lot. Sanctions, the shift of foreign trade flows from West to East and South, as well as the development of parallel imports, have made it necessary to restructure the entire warehouse infrastructure system. This restructuring has created an effect of “new territories”, where warehouse real estate is showing growth in liquidity. Locations that three years ago were considered peripheral have today turned into zones of rapid development. Investors who entered these assets in a timely manner have been able to realize profits of 50-70% of their initial investment over 2-3 years.

However, liquidity in this case also has a downside: high volatility of demand, tied to political decisions and changes in customs regulations. This requires warehouse asset owners to possess a fundamentally different level of competence – not just property management, but constant monitoring of macroeconomic and geopolitical factors.

The digital transformation of warehouse processes not only increases the efficient use of space but also changes the economics of asset ownership. The introduction of Autonomous Mobile Robots (AMR), Automated Storage and Retrieval Systems (AS/RS), and machine learning algorithms can increase the return per square meter by 3-5 times compared to traditional warehouses.

Equally important is the integration of warehouse assets into a higher-level logistics infrastructure. A warehouse located in close proximity to major transport hubs – seaports, railway terminals, multimodal hubs – ceases to be just simple storage space. It becomes an element of a territorial-production cluster, which greatly increases its investment attractiveness.

Warehouse complexes that have their own railway sidings and can accept container trains are in a fundamentally different price category compared to isolated facilities. Such infrastructure connectivity makes it possible to shorten the logistics distance and offer tenants more competitive terms.

The analysis allows us to state that warehouse real estate is indeed becoming a liquid asset for the modern era, comparable to traditional financial instruments. This process is driven by three fundamental shifts: the structural growth of e-commerce, the technological transformation of warehouse processes, and the change in investment preferences amid geopolitical instability.

At the same time, the liquidity of warehouse assets has a qualitatively different nature compared to the liquidity of cash or securities. It is derived not from a central issuing authority, but from the asset’s ability to generate a stable and predictable cash flow in a rapidly changing environment. This places special demands on the competencies of investors and managers, who must possess a deep understanding of technological trends, logistics, and macroeconomic dynamics. For investors, this means the need to revise approaches to asset management: owning warehouse real estate today requires competencies at the intersection of development, technology, and macroeconomic analysis. For businesses, it means recognizing control over warehouse capacity as a strategic factor of competitiveness.

Thus, the square meters of warehouse real estate today are not just a space, but a complex, multi-component asset whose liquidity and profitability are determined by a combination of technological, logistical, and macroeconomic factors.

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