

REAL ESTATE

Meet the 30 rising stars of real estate, young visionaries who are shaking up how homes are sold and buildings are made

From left, four rising stars of real estate: Jona Flores, Naveed Tejany, Lina Khan, and Kyle Footman. Courtesy of Jona Flores, Naveed Tejany, Lina Khan, Kyle Footman; Insider

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Meet Insider's slate of up-and-coming talent in commercial and residential real estate.

We selected 30 young professionals 35 and under whose leadership spans a vast industry.

The list ranges from innovators at firms like Blackstone to startup founders with inspiring goals.

The COVID-19 pandemic turbocharged residential real-estate markets and threw commercial ones into a tizzy as Americans reassessed their home and work lives. This year, some of the most disruptive reactions — from Zoom-town booms to retail-store reimagining — became longer-term trends.

Companies, policymakers, and advocates have responded to the persistent demand for housing at the affordable and luxury levels. Winners and losers have emerged from the battle between office barons and work-from-home defenders. Real-estate investing has expanded to the meme-stock crowd, which believes anyone can become a landlord.

Propelling these developments through the morass is a slate of visionary young industry leaders. Insider has tried to capture the brightest of the bunch in our second-annual "Rising Stars of Real Estate" list.

Our inbox was flooded with nominations for brokers who blasted through sales records, thanks to increased mobility of homeowners and renters, as well as a second year of soaring prices. As technology plays an ever-growing role in transactions and property management, scores of young executives behind property-technology, or proptech, startups emerged as formidable contenders. You'll see some of the most ambitious and creative on the list below.

But real estate isn't all about making money. The acceleration of housing demand at a time of economic uncertainty has also put a spotlight on people disadvantaged by the trend, and some of our rising stars are fighting to fix what's wrong with the system.

We asked that nominees for the list be no older than 35 as of November, work in the US, and stand out from their peers. Out of the scores of outstanding young people leading the next generation, we've highlighted 30 to watch.

Presented in alphabetical order by first name, here are the rising stars of real estate for 2021.

Adam Pollack, Accept.inc

Adam Pollack

When Pollack was a senior in high school, he made two promises to his family: He would finish college on time, and he would never go into real estate.

Pollack's father was a mortgage attorney in New York, and Pollack grew up immersed in the industry. But when the housing market collapsed in 2008, he witnessed firsthand the financial havoc it wreaked on his family. They weathered the storm, but Pollack swore off the industry.

Pollack broke both his promises in 2016, when he and his friend Nick Friedman dropped out of Harvard to cofound the company that would become Accept.inc, a digital lender that enables homebuyers to make all-cash offers on homes.

Typical mortgages can take a month or more to close, which is why sellers often prefer the ease and speed of all-cash deals. In the view of Pollack, who is now 26, the ability to buy homes with cash isn't merely an advantage — it's a "superpower" for any homebuyer.

The Denver-based company buys homes on behalf of approved customers with cash, then sells the homes back to the customer for the same price, once their mortgage closes. It makes money off the mortgage as well as title services, which it says costs homebuyers no more than the traditional process.

Accept.inc has so far enabled nearly \$300 million worth of all-cash home purchases, said Pollack, who serves as CEO. In July, the company announced it raised \$90 million to help grow the team and expand into new markets.

Alex DiStefano, Avenue One

Alex DiStefano

DiStefano seems to have been hell-bent on a real-estate career since her earliest days at Pennsylvania State University.

Now a member of the acquisitions team at the single-family-rental proptech Avenue One, DiStefano cut her teeth in real-estate finance at Goldman Sachs. She specialized in the trading of US mortgage-backed securities, an \$11 trillion market of bonds backed by home loans and one of the most active in terms of daily volume.

How she landed the job at one of Wall Street's most prestigious banks lays bare a dogged determination: She said she cold-called Goldman employees until someone took her seriously.

But there was an even more attractive opportunity to come, and like in many walks of life, the pandemic played a role. Investments in rental properties were on the rise as Americans sought space outside urban areas or became ready to form new households.

At Avenue One — which puts private equity and other institutional money to work in single-family rentals — the 27-year-old DiStefano would be called upon to do more hands-on work, right down to the property-management level. That spoke to her at a time when the pandemic had her taking stock of her career and pondering a new direction.

"What brought me the most enjoyment over the years was that I was always someone that was heavily involved in activities in high school and college," she said. "I wanted to do that on a larger scale."

She credited Ryan Stroker, the founder of Avenue One, with guiding her through her transition from banking to the single-family-rental space and said her parents were responsible for her work ethic.

Ali Wolf, Zonda

Ali Wolf

Wolf, the chief economist for the housing-data and analytics company Zonda, said she fell in love with economics at Ohio State University after reading a line in her first economics textbook. "The definition of economics is the efficient use of resources," it read.

"I remember thinking, 'That's how I live my life,'" she said.

Over a decade later, she's using anecdotes to demystify housing data for audiences, including the White House. Bringing a human angle to the data has been her passion since she started with the company in 2015 after working at the UK Parliament and the Parliament of Canada.

"Data is everywhere, and I think what brings the data to life is the people," she said.

In her determination to present data in terms of people, she wrote an essay in July for The New York Times headlined "Here's Who Will Be Left Behind in the Housing Boom." She's been called on by Bloomberg Television and the NPR radio show "Marketplace" and has spread the word on social media since the pandemic took hold.

She sparks conversations daily among her 8,000-plus followers on Twitter.

"That's changed my life," Wolf said.

Her feed features explanations of housing and economic data and how it affects people. On a personal level, she recently found herself counseling a friend on the influence of inflation, right down to the effects on the friend's grocery bill that she hadn't noticed before.

"Now she's realized that cereal is really expensive," she said. "To me, that's interesting, that's economics."

Allia Mohamed, Openigloo

Allia Mohamed

When Mohamed was working as a sales and trading analyst and renting an apartment in New York City, she became frustrated with recurring problems at home that went unsolved.

"The heat always broke like clockwork every winter," she said. "The big challenge for me was getting a hold of the landlord. We're paying a lot of money to live here. Why are we fighting so hard to get this most basic service?"

The next time Mohamed looked for an apartment, she did more research on the responsiveness of building management.

"I was standing outside of buildings talking to people walking in and out to ask them, 'How do you like living here?'" Mohamed, who started to envision a website that made this information easily accessible, said. "Could we crowdsource this data? Could we get people to share their experiences and combine it with city data to provide this background?"

She could and she did. Enter Openigloo, Mohamed's 16-month-old startup. It combines vetted reviews from residents and public records to give NYC apartment hunters vital intel, like how much rents went up in recent renewals and how many bedbug violations had been recorded.

While Openigloo has been dubbed "Yelp for renters," Mohamed said the platform was more carefully moderated and monitored. Every resident review is reviewed, and many are denied. The bar is high, Mohamed added: "Is it helpful? Is it balanced? Is it constructive? Is it polite?"

Leading a team of six people, Mohamed has increased Openigloo's offerings to 165,000 users and 20,000-plus reviews across 10,000 buildings in New York.

Mohamed — a Canadian Egyptian woman who has worked in capital markets on Wall Street and in venture capital and holds degrees from Columbia and the Canadian business university Dalhousie — said her nontraditional background was an asset.

"I have spent the past year talking to renters, property owners, property managers, agents, tenant advocates. So many of them have different perspectives," she said. "Try to find themes or commonalities in what they've shared with you but not necessarily get stuck in the way real estate has been done before."

Mohamed said the next step for the startup was addressing the other "pain points" of renting, including helping people apply for several units at once and sign leases online. She said she planned to expand Openigloo's offerings in NYC before expanding to other cities, like Boston, Los Angeles, or Chicago.

Ashley Zimmerman Marsh, Gammage & Burnham

Ashley Zimmerman Marsh

She watched Phoenix grow up. Now, she's helping shape the next wave of development in her hometown.

Marsh, who was born and raised in the Phoenix area, is a partner at the law firm Gammage & Burnham, where she specializes in advising clients — often developers or property owners — on zoning and land use across the booming metropolitan area.

That requires managing a host of different stakeholders, including municipalities, neighborhood groups, and, of course, her own clients. When developers are conceiving a project, a lawyer like Marsh is often one of the first people they call.

The need for more housing in the Phoenix metro area has kept Marsh busy as homebuilders and residential developers work to fill demand.

"It's exciting because we have people moving here and enjoying our weather, but we already were in a housing deficit over the last several years," said Marsh, who is 34.

Marsh started her career in litigation and worked on a number of construction-defect cases for national homebuilders. She soon gravitated toward zoning and land-use cases and has been focused exclusively on that practice for the better part of the past five years.

"You're really in the mindset of trying to work with everyone, trying to take everyone's interests and opinions, and craft something that makes as much sense as it can for everyone," Marsh said. "It's really fun to play that role because it's so collaborative."

Brandon Jenkins, Fundrise

Brandon Jenkins

When Jenkins joined Fundrise, a crowdfunding platform for real-estate equity, as its chief operating officer in 2011, he had to perform many roles as one of just four employees.

"I wasn't the CEO. I wasn't the CTO writing the code. I was doing everything else," Jenkins, who turned 36 two weeks ago, said.

He wasn't complaining about the duties, though. The hands-on approach is something he's never shied away from since starting his career in the middle of the last financial crisis. He was unsure of his career direction after graduating from Duke University, and some of the jobs he considered weren't even real-estate-related.

Something clicked for Jenkins when he landed an entry-level position with a large shopping-center company, thanks to a roommate working in the sector. He played a role in redeveloping a property and loved it and "the idea of building things," he said.

A fortunate meeting with the real-estate developer Benjamin Miller led to his big opportunity. He started by working on some projects in Washington, DC, including mixed-use retail buildings in "emerging" neighborhoods.

At Fundrise, where Miller is CEO, Jenkins has helped oversee billions of dollars in real-estate funding. The company also launched the first online real-estate investment trust, Jenkins said.

Reflecting on how Fundrise has grown, Jenkins recalled how his boss would repeat a famous quote from Microsoft cofounder Bill Gates: "Most people overestimate what they can do in one year and underestimate what they can do in 10 years."

"I remember it from when we started the company, and it's been something that I think about" still, Jenkins said.

Brendan McIntee, Blackstone

Brendan McIntee Brendan McIntee

Blackstone has built one of the largest portfolios of warehouse space in the country, but last year when it purchased a large industrial property outside Seattle, it represented a promising shift for the investment giant.

The 54-acre site can accommodate nearly a million square feet of newly built warehouse space. The firm has pushed into new industrial development, thanks to McIntee, a 30-year-old principal on Blackstone's real-estate team who focuses on industrial investments.

While existing warehouse spaces are in high demand — due to a surge in online shopping, storage needs, and logistics infrastructure brought on by the pandemic — newly built, state-of-the-art spaces have drawn particular interest, along with premium rents. With that trend in mind, about a third of the roughly 40 deals McIntee is juggling are ground-up construction projects, he said.

At the property outside of Seattle, which has been dubbed Pacific Gateway Business Park, McIntee said the results are already in.

"We're around 30% to 40% leased," said McIntee, noting that construction is underway on several of the buildings at the property.

McIntee was born in Toronto, but grew up in Ridgefield, Connecticut. He attended Harvard and joined Blackstone after interning at the company, and soon began to focus on industrial properties because he sensed their growing importance in the US economy. He's managed more than \$15 billion of industrial developments in the US and Canada over the past year.

"It was the area where I was most excited about the fundamentals," McIntee said. "As I looked to my future, I wanted to put myself in a position to do large-scale deals."

Christine Wendell, Pronto Housing

Christine Wendell

Wendell, the CEO and cofounder of Pronto, said she'd been in real estate long enough to realize that the affordable-housing movement was broken in this country. She worked with developers and asset managers like RXR Realty and Megalith Capital Management, as well as the lender Wells Fargo, before founding Pronto in early 2020.

"I reflected on what I could do with my career, something impactful and meaningful, something to give back to the world," Wendell, who is 32, told Insider.

She, along with her cofounder, is trying to solve a wonky problem: the opaque and overwhelming affordable-housing-compliance process. Landlords and developers often build affordable housing in return for grants or tax breaks, but the application process requires reams of paperwork that tax property managers and prospective tenants alike.

Wendell said her Pronto team built a Turbo Tax-like program that allows tenants to complete applications on a computer or cellphone. She said that one of her proudest accomplishments was that a prospective tenant who had never been on the internet before successfully filled out an application on Pronto.

Wendell knows that Pronto isn't a panacea for affordable housing, but she hopes that it will help affordable units get leased much faster so they don't sit vacant. Right now, in NYC, it takes 430 days to completely fill affordable units in a building because of the lottery and regulatory processes. That keeps inventory off the market and people out of affordable homes.

Colleen O'Connor, BioMed Realty

Colleen O'Connor

When O'Connor started her career as an accountant 13 years ago, she had no idea number crunching would lead her to real estate.

Now O'Connor, 35, oversees leasing on 6 million square feet of life-sciences space as BioMed Realty's vice president for leasing for the East Coast and the United Kingdom, says that her analytical background has been a key to her success.

"Make sure that you find a way to differentiate yourself," she said. "I think it's really important, especially for people just entering into the field, to make sure they pick something that they really excel at. That's a way to really maximize your value."

O'Connor was working for Fidelity Investments in 2014 when she was approached by a recruiter. BioMed's tenant base had specific needs for their space and sometimes had to move immediately, so it needed someone that could analyze spatial needs on an accelerated schedule.

"They're working on mission-critical lifesaving research, so you really do have to be able to solve problems for them," she said. "The analytical background lends itself well to having a focus that really drives the most efficient build-outs and spaces that can be reused."

It was a risk for O'Connor to leave finance, but she has no regrets.

"I absolutely love it," she said. "It's so interactive, no day is ever the same and you're constantly meeting unbelievable people. I have the opportunity to get on the phone with scientists from some of these leading companies and learn from them and understand what they need."

Desmond Johnson, Middle Street Partners

Desmond Johnson

In 2016, when he was 25 years old, Johnson became the youngest in Georgia to pass the Architect Registration Exam. Now 31, he is a design manager at Middle Street Partners in Atlanta and has served as the chair of the city's Urban Design Commission since 2018.

Originally from Columbia, South Carolina, Johnson was fascinated by buildings as a child. That interest led him to focus on design and development while pursuing a bachelor's degree at Florida A&M University and a master's in architecture at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

Now he's interested in more than just the buildings themselves. As the chair of Atlanta's Urban Design Commission, he dedicates his time to enriching the communities in which those buildings are constructed. Johnson wants to ensure that all new construction or renovation projects in Atlanta not only fit into the context of their neighborhoods, but "preserve the historic fabric of the city."

He is quick to note that he is among the 2% of all licensed architects in the country who are Black – so he also works to make sure his projects reflect the people they serve. He designed a \$73 million development that includes mixed-income housing in a predominantly Black neighborhood, as well as a multi-use living and learning community for the medical school at Morehouse, a historically Black college.

Johnson has received multiple awards from the American Institute of Architects, including its Emerging Professional of the Year award in 2017 and its Young Architects Award in 2021.

But the most rewarding part of his career? "Knowing that my work will outlive me," he said. "I feel a deep sense of pride and honor knowing I'll be able to leave a physical footprint on this world."

Enes Yilmazer, content creator

Enes Yilmazer

Yilmazer, 31, has the inside track on the most expensive homes — and he's not a real-estate agent. He's a YouTuber in Los Angeles.

Originally from Turkey, Yilmazer was a professional windsurfer in his college years and used his winnings to get into house flipping. He later became a luxury-real-estate agent with Compass before spinning his passion into a lucrative content-creation career.

Now, his day-to-day consists of taking 1.54 million subscribers inside the homes of the rich and famous.

Ad revenue from his YouTube videos alone bring in between \$50,000 and \$100,000 each month. That income doesn't account for paydays from additional sponsors he may work with — those can include companies trying to sell a product and real-estate firms looking to find client leads.

Yilmazer's content highlights changes in the way people interact with luxury real estate.

In the age of COVID-19, being able to offer a high-definition virtual way to see a home provides prospective high-end buyers with an honest look at the property from someone who isn't necessarily trying to sell it to them. Yilmazer gave up his real-estate license earlier this year.

He said being an agent tied to a brokerage was limiting his access to the biggest and best listings. At this point, he's toured and posted videos of some of the most expensive penthouses in New York City and some of the priciest properties in up-and-coming secondary markets like Lake Tahoe, making luxury real estate accessible to the masses in the process.

Evie Gross, Brixmor

Evie Gross. Evie Gross

Gross was arranging to renew a package of retail-store leases held by the hair-and-nail salon Sally Beauty when she pressed the broker representing the retailer in the deal: What else could they work on together?

"I'm a fearless networker," said Gross, who is a director of national accounts at the large national-shopping-center owner, Brixmor Property Group.

The broker, it turned out, was trying to find locations for the fast-growing e-commerce grocery chain, DashMart, which is owned by the delivery service DoorDash. This year, Gross, who handles leasing across Brixmor's national portfolio of nearly 400 centers, arranged eight deals with DashMart in the Midwest and Southeast.

Malls and urban retail were flattened during COVID, but shopping centers got a boost as the suburbs became the location of choice for much of America to hunker down. Gross, who is 31 and based in St. Petersburg, Florida, has been Brixmor's most active leasing dealmaker. This year, she's on track to sign 50 leases, more than her pre-pandemic tally, in 2019, of 34.

Tenant requirements have also become more fluid during the pandemic, opening an opportunity for Gross to pitch new clients, including Bath & Body Works, which used to favor malls. Since 2019, she's signed nine deals with the brand and expanded it to five other locations.

"I realized they were pursuing strip centers and stuck with it until they were ready, which has paid off, and there's still a lot more runway for deals with them," Gross said.

More recently, she has been pitching Tesla to potentially open service centers for its vehicles in Brixmor shopping centers, though a deal hasn't yet been reached.

Francis Davidson, Sonder

Francis Davidson

When Davidson was a 19-year-old freshman at McGill University, he began marketing empty apartments vacated by students in the summer months to tourists in Montreal.

"I was trying to solve a problem," he said. "At some point, just looking at this little business operation that spun up and that we had a good amount of places that we were renting, I was asking myself, 'Why is there no brand that does this?'"

Davidson, now 29, decided to create that brand. His company, Sonder, valued at \$1.3 billion, offers short-term apartment rentals with hospitality qualities similar to those of a hotel. Customers pay a nightly or monthly rate for stays of days or months.

With a growing portfolio, Davidson said Sonder increased its revenue 155% year over year in the third quarter of this year.

He attributes the company's growth to its ability to pivot with the market. When the pandemic hit, it targeted traveling healthcare workers, roommates who were looking to get out of cramped apartments, and "digital nomads," or knowledge workers who were working from home off a laptop in various locations, he said.

"March of 2020 was very, very difficult," he said. "But we took it as an opportunity to reflect on what we could do to differentiate ourselves."

It paid off. Nearly a decade after Davidson started the business on his laptop, Sonder is en route to going public via a merger with a special-purpose acquisition company.

Galiano Tiramani, Boxabl

Galiano Tiramani

Tiramani has made a career out of capitalizing on emerging industries — first with a cryptocurrency business and then with a cannabis startup.

For his latest venture, he's tackling a more established sector: homebuilding.

In 2017, Tiramani and his father cofounded Boxabl, a company that hopes to manufacture prefabricated homes en masse.

Assembly lines have proved they dramatically reduce production costs for everything from cars to laptops to sneakers, the 34-year-old Tiramani said. His goal now is to apply those same methodologies to housing.

"This is an opportunity to transition one of the last preindustrial, pre-factory product categories," Tiramani said. "There's really nothing else out there, for the most part, that is not manufactured on an assembly line."

Boxabl's 375-square-foot tiny homes are priced at \$50,000. The wait list for its offering has grown to more than 60,000 customers, Tiramani told Insider.

Ian Wong, Opendoor

Ian Wong

Wong is the chief technology officer at Opendoor, a company that makes fast online offers to home sellers. As an instant buyer, or iBuyer, Opendoor then fixes up and resells the homes, charging a fee in lieu of a broker's commission.

More than a decade ago, Wong started out as a Stanford-educated electrical engineer with a problem. He wasn't great at circuits. In graduate school, he took on statistics, though he questioned how he'd apply that knowledge in the real world.

"I was writing these great, awesome math papers, which would never be applicable or helpful to people," Wong, 35, said.

So he decided he'd pivot from his first career aspirations, which included being a college professor. And his job search happened to coincide with the growing influence of consumer-finance fintechs that were seeking to disrupt the way people conducted their everyday business.

Wong's networking through Quora took him to a user party, and that's where he met Keith Rabois, the entrepreneur who was building out the small-business-banking platform Square. In early 2011, he became the first data scientist at Square and worked on fraud protection.

He skipped over to Prismatic to build analytics infrastructure until 2014, when he saw a chance to expand his horizons by joining Opendoor.

And larger those horizons were. Focused on its strategy to help homeowners deal with the rigmarole of selling a home, Opendoor scaled up to more than 40 markets in the past year.

Real-estate deals are "the largest transactions in people's lives," he said. "The transaction experience is so outdated" relative to modern e-commerce, he added.

Jona Flores, Re/Max

Jona Flores

Flores, 29, manages the Re/Max Realty team A Good Life Group in Maple Grove, Minnesota, which has closed \$60 million in home sales this year.

"The reason why real estate works so well for me is because I wanted to be involved in such a big part of someone's life and to help them through something that was extremely stressful," she said of homebuying.

When Flores was 7, she immigrated to the US from the Philippines. She carried with her memories of people struggling with homelessness, with some living in makeshift shacks along the road just blocks from her home.

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd in the nearby city of Minneapolis, as the city and the country faced a racial reckoning, Flores turned her focus to the roles that shelter and homeownership play in public health. She was awarded the Ann Brockhouse Future Leader Scholarship last summer and plans to go to Washington, DC, to learn how she can make a difference in social justice and affordable housing.

Josh Woodward, Lima One Capital

Josh Woodward. Josh Woodward

Woodward said his rise to chief financial officer of the residential and commercial lender Lima One Capital started with a call out of the blue eight years ago, from someone he met by chance at a restaurant several years before that.

That someone was John Warren, a decorated US Marine and Iraq War veteran who was looking to expand his company that specialized in short-term loans for real-estate investors. The fix-and-flip industry was recovering from effects of the last financial crisis, and financing from companies like Lima One would play an increasingly bigger role.

Woodward — then in Bank of America's corporate-finance group in Charlotte, North Carolina — jumped at Warren's job offer, which was for someone to take on treasury duties and be an analyst.

"I really see myself as a builder," Woodward, 33, said. "What gets me excited is when I see a set of problems and approach them in a way that is entrepreneurial and that gives me autonomy to partner with the right people."

Under Woodward and the team led by CEO Jeff Tennyson, the lender's loan originations accelerated. Cumulative volume topped \$3 billion earlier this year, making the company an attractive acquisition target for MFA Financial, a real-estate investment trust focused on mortgages.

"We still have a mentality that we are continuing to build an even bigger business," Woodward, who is in Greenville, South Carolina, said. "That's the type of energy that I really feed off of."

Kai Frolich, Landing Locals

Kai Frolich

In 2018, Frolich, 33, and her husband, Colin, took a trip to house-sit for a couple friends in Truckee, California. The small resort town sits on the Nevada border near Lake Tahoe.

The couple decided they wanted to start a family there in the mountains after enjoying the change of pace it offered from their lives in San Francisco. But they struggled to find long-term living arrangements. Most of the housing in the area served as vacation rental properties that sat vacant for much of the year.

So she and her husband founded Landing Locals to connect homeowners and property managers with those seeking more affordable and permanent housing, like seasonal workers.

Today, the startup serves markets beyond the Lake Tahoe area. It also has outposts in Big Sky, Montana, and Telluride, Colorado, with more on the way. Frolich serves as the chief impact officer, focusing on community development.

Her goal is to give back to the resort towns they operate in. In many cases, seasonal employees cannot afford to live in their seasonal towns. Frolich has helped build a grant program that financially incentivizes people with second homes in Truckee to rent their properties specifically to local workers.

Before dedicating herself to affordable housing in tony mountain towns, Frolich worked in fundraising for Peer Health Exchange, an organization that teaches health-education topics in low-income communities.

Kyle Footman, Majestic Realty Homes

Kyle Footman

Footman grew up working for his father's concrete business each summer, laying slabs for new homes under the hot Florida sun. He hated the work but paid close attention to the real-estate agents who would occasionally show up to the sites. That, he thought, was the job he wanted one day.

By the time he was 19, Footman had become a licensed real-estate agent and launched his career while attending Tallahassee Community College. At the time, he was the youngest Realtor in the area, a representative of the Tallahassee Board of Realtors told the school's newspaper, The Talon.

Footman recently graduated with a bachelor's degree from Florida A&M University, becoming the first man in his family to graduate from college. In addition to managing his growing real-estate business — he estimated he'd close more than 20 transactions this year — the 24-year-old has also started a car dealership, Footman Motorsports.

"Everything that I do is not about me," Footman said. "I'm helping people become first-time homebuyers. I'm helping people become first-time real-estate investors. That's not about me. That's about them."

Next year, Footman hopes to double his number of closings and expand his car-dealership business, perhaps with a new location in another city, he said. He's interested in commercial real estate as well and sees a future in real-estate development.

Lauren Achtemeier, Prologis

Lauren Achtemeier

Prologis is one of the world's largest real-estate firms with a market cap of nearly \$120 billion and interests in almost a billion square feet of warehouse real estate across the globe, yet Achtemeier has found a way to stand out at the gargantuan company as a young dealmaker with promise.

Achtemeier, a 28-year-old director at the firm focused on acquisitions, recently sourced and managed its purchase of a nearly \$20 million trucking terminal in Sunnyvale, California. While that may sound modest, logistics infrastructure has become red-hot and difficult to find, especially in affluent areas like Silicon Valley. These terminals are key hubs in last-mile deliveries that have boomed as e-commerce grew during the pandemic.

"We think we can as much as triple the rent," said Achtemeier, noting that the property sits on three acres and offers future redevelopment opportunities.

Achtemeier, who grew up in Pasadena, recently relocated to Los Angeles from San Francisco. With the nation's largest container-shipping port, the Los Angeles industrial market is the largest in the country, and Achtemeier has set her sights on bigger transactions.

"I would say that a \$50 million deal for me is the next target," she said.

Achtemeier, who majored in business with a minor in real estate at USC, began working for Prologis in 2017. Joining such a large company wasn't intimidating, she said.

"My mentality was it was learning from the biggest and best," Achtemeier said. "You won't stand out on day one. It's about putting your head down and showing your value."

Lina Khan, Gensler

Lina Khan

As a senior sustainability specialist at Gensler, Khan often needs to break tough news about energy emissions to clients constructing new buildings or retrofitting new ones. She'll recommend designers, architects, and engineers select materials that reduce fossil-fuel consumption or embark on an ambitious project to produce on-site renewable energy.

But during a recent evaluation of a modular hotel, she was pleasantly surprised.

"I remember vetting the environmental impacts of the wall art in a room. It was such a small, little detail that was being tracked, making sure that whatever rinse-and-repeat wall art they were using for the room was environmentally sound," Khan said. "It was detailed of them to be making sure that was sustainable."

Khan, 30, didn't expect to go into real estate. She had planned to be a scientist after studying environmental systems at the University of California, San Diego and environmental management from Duke. But one of her passions is making humans' energy use sustainable, and Gensler's interdisciplinary design practice offered her a way to leave a meaningful legacy.

"I wanted to try to make a difference for a brief time we are on this earth," Khan, a first-generation Pakistani American, said. "That's always been my war cry from the very beginning."

These days, Khan advises people across the US and the world on how to make their structures LEED-certified, which means in compliance with certain Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design standards. Her recommendations to clients like government agencies and Fortune 500 companies include adding on-site renewable-energy sources and investigating geothermal options to avoid reliance on the traditional electrical grid.

Gensler, which is responsible for 110 million square feet of LEED-certified projects, is the largest firm to commit to achieving net-zero carbon in every building in its portfolio by 2030. Khan herself has managed about 6 million square feet of LEED-certified projects.

She has created a complex, custom model that simulates a building's projected energy use. In an ideal world, though, she would work herself out of a job.

"Selfishly, I hope I make designers feel comfortable enough related to sustainability that they don't need me anymore," Khan said. "You can look at the different carbon metrics you're offsetting and helping not get put into the world. It's more than a paycheck."

Marcela Sapone, Alfred

Marcela Sapone, CEO of Alfred. Alfred

Sapone, the daughter of a chemist and a teacher, grew up around the world.

She developed a fascination with the different ways that the people in cities she inhabited — such as Paris and Copenhagen, Denmark — lived.

"A big theme of my life has been mobility," she said, "seeing the world and how it's evolving."

The business she helms reflects that.

Sapone founded the mobile-concierge platform Alfred in 2014 alongside her friend and Harvard Business School classmate Jess Beck. Named after Batman's heroic butler, the platform lets city dwellers request help with everyday tasks — from doing laundry and grocery shopping to organizing a closet. It operates in 44 cities and partners with some of the biggest residential landlords in urban areas, such as Related Cos., to provide the services in their buildings.

The 35-year-old Sapone, who worked with the secretary of labor under President Barack Obama, made headlines as COVID-19 was wreaking havoc on businesses. Instead of leaving employees to fend for themselves, she invested in them: She paid for their health benefits even if they didn't feel comfortable working.

Alfred raised \$42 million during its last funding series in October 2020. Sapone believes she owes part of her success to the widespread adoption of property technology in the past two years, she said.

"We saw during the pandemic that real estate became more open-minded about using technology and innovation," she said. "I'm so excited because I feel like when we started this company in 2015, the world wasn't ready for us."

Mikeala Arroyo, John Burns Consulting

Mikaela Arroyo

The nation's residential market boomed during the pandemic, and Arroyo, a director at the real-estate-data firm John Burns Consulting, is helping an onrush of developers, designers, and investors capitalize on it.

Arroyo leads a new division focused on consumer trends in housing. Her research has become essential reading for a real-estate industry that has been upended by shifting preferences among homebuyers.

"What are the blind spots that we're not paying attention to," Arroyo said. "Homes are getting denser but we're not creating privacy. Yards are getting smaller, but that's okay if you design them the right way."

Arroyo, who is 27, began working for John Burns as an intern while studying economics at UC Irvine in 2013. She joined the company, based in that California city, full time after graduating in 2016. In addition to her director role, she serves as chief of staff for the company's CEO, John Burns.

The firm is already well known for its housing-market research. Arroyo said that Burns noticed after the pandemic began that many of the firm's clients, which include major investment firms that are snapping up single-family homes and developers building them, didn't seem to grasp how home design might shift amid changing consumer desires.

"I feel like John and I are similar because he continually wants to get better," Arroyo said. "He's the kind of person who always has advice on how we can take what we're doing to the next level."

Monica Kukreja, SITE Centers

Monica Kukreja

Commercial bank lending, ground-up hotel construction, and writing loans to the specifications of the housing-finance giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac could make for a good background for just about any real-estate job.

For Kukreja — a 28-year-old capital-markets and investor-relations professional at SITE Centers, a retail-real-estate investment trust focused on open-air malls in wealthy suburbs — the variety in those earlier jobs helped her get where she is today. After wearing many hats, she saw that the world was her oyster because real estate was a business that "you can make it what you want," she said.

It was the pandemic that greased her way to her current job.

Kukreja was a commercial-credit analyst at People's United Bank when COVID-19 began to rattle the economy, which led her managers to ask more of employees. She got to put on her "portfolio-management hat" and performed many other ad-hoc tasks for senior management, she said.

"Your skills were put to the test at that time," she said.

As People's United Bank became an acquisition target, Kukreja saw another opportunity to carve out her perfect career. Her love for real-estate finance and desire to connect with people took her to SITE.

"I'm very much a people person, and my love for interacting with internal and external stakeholders" motivated her, she said, recalling her thoughts as she landed the SITE job.

Naveed Tejany, OJO Labs

Naveed Tejany

When Tejany started as the chief financial officer at OJO Labs in 2015, he learned that his job would have little to do with finance — at least at first.

As the real-estate-services platform's second employee, he was instead a jack of all trades. He taught himself how to code and consulted on product strategy. When the office bathroom broke, and they needed to find a plumber, he handled that call, too.

Today, there's plenty on the finance side for him to oversee. OJO, which guides users through every step of the homebuying and selling process, has raised \$180 million and grown to more than 700 employees across several countries. In August, the company was ranked No. 49 on the annual "Inc. 5000" list of fastest-growing private companies in America.

Tejany, who turned 36 last week, began his career as an investment banker. But after years of consulting with C-suite executives, he yearned to be on the other side of the table. In 2010, he joined the online-marketing firm Yodle, where he met John Berkowitz, soon-to-be founder of OJO Labs at the time.

Now, he's dedicated his career to simplifying the complexities of buying and selling homes.

"We're here to help you, as a consumer, make better decisions," Tejany said. "What ultimately drives success in this industry is to help the end consumer navigate this crazy industry."

Nicholas Gonzalves, Bridge Investment Group

Nicholas Gonzalves

Gonzalves was touring a century-old former manufacturing property in downtown Salt Lake City when he realized the creaky elevator he had just exited was being hoisted by an actual rope rather than a steel cable.

"I was like, 'Get me out of this thing,'" Gonzalves, the 33-year-old director at the real-estate-investment firm Bridge Investment Group, recalled.

Identifying diamonds in the rough, however, is Gonzalves' specialty. At Bridge, which is based in Salt Lake City, he helps oversee West Coast investments for a collection of funds, totaling about \$3 billion, focused on opportunity zones around the country. About 8,700 such zones were created around the country as part of former president Trump's 2017 tax-cut plan. The program allows developers to save on capital-gains taxes in exchange for investments in areas that have been identified by census data as low-income communities.

"These neighborhoods are often gritty, they're not at Main and Main," Gonzalves said. "You have to see where the puck is going, not where it is today."

Bridge has traditionally been a firm that invests in existing real-estate assets, not construction projects. Gonzalves has managed the shift into opportunity-zone-development deals by partnering with local builders.

Bridge wound up buying that old manufacturing building with the rope-drawn elevator and is now refurbishing it into creative offices as part of a larger development on the block.

Nicholas Perez, Related Group

Nicholas Perez

Perez is a vice president of the Miami-based Related Group. The real-estate-development firm, founded in 1979, is known for its luxury condominiums, but it plans to prioritize more affordable developments, with units priced around \$300,000, to appeal to buyers who have been priced out of single-family homes in the area.

Perez, who is the 33-year-old son of famed "Condo King" and Related founder Jorge Perez, has been key in that expansion.

He helped bring in more than \$350 million in condo sales in the first half of 2021. He is also spearheading the development of Solemar, a new oceanfront condominium in Pompano Beach. The luxury building, Perez said, is one of the first on the market to be "informed by COVID-19," including a focus on features such as outdoor spaces and touch-free elevators. Over 80% of the 105 units are already sold, even though construction won't be completed until 2023. Solemar sold "twice as fast as we were expecting," Perez said.

He also served as the lead developer on Related Group's new headquarters in ritzy Coconut Grove, Florida. The office development was fully leased to tenants like D1 Capital Partners within two months of its completion earlier this year.

Perez views heading up such projects as a way to help cement South Florida as the "Silicon Valley of the South."

From 2013 to 2017, he worked with Related Companies in New York. He earned a bachelor's degree in business administration from Loyola Marymount University, and is pursuing an Executive MBA from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

Stephonn Alcorn, The White House

Stephonn Alcorn

Alcorn is an assistant director for racial justice and equity for President Joe Biden. That responsibility and one that he felt as a boy in Kansas City, Kansas, aren't too far apart.

The 26-year-old son of a Jamaican immigrant mother felt early on that he had an obligation to his community, with that sense of duty only strengthened by his being "the only person who looked like me in school." He also understood the inequities that surrounded him, most notably around the homeownership that wasn't afforded to his family, with the exception of his great-grandmother.

After high school, where his affinity for business grew under the wing of his entrepreneurship teacher, Laurie Warwick, and his finance studies at the University of Kansas, he landed at Blackstone. There, he assisted in Blackstone's strategy to invest in apartment buildings and keep them affordable, which also worked out for the company's bottom line, he said.

That work intensified as COVID-19 hit. Then, the White House called.

"I pivoted to the government because in 2020, we were facing four crises at once: racial justice, the economy, COVID, and climate," Alcorn, who lives in Washington, DC, said. "This was really a moment in time to take my skill set and what I've learned and join an administration where we just had to get things done."

Breaking down housing barriers is a top priority, he said. When that happens, everyone — not just those who've been discriminated against — benefits, he said.

"We all win when everyone has a fair shot at success," he said.

Tara Raghuvver, KC Tenants

Tara Raghuv eer

Raghuv eer, the director of KC Tenants and People's Action's National Homes Guarantee campaign, is more likely to face off against landlords and real-estate agents than to be featured in a "rising-stars" list with them.

Raghuv eer cofounded KC Tenants in early 2019 and had amassed enough power to win a local eviction moratorium as the pandemic was beginning, "within hours of the shut down," she said. The victory was short-lived, as public officials refused to extend the moratorium as it expired in May 2020.

"Eventually, we had to ask ourselves, "What is the goal here?" the 29-year-old Raghuv eer told Insider. "It is not to win an eviction moratorium. It is to end evictions by any means necessary."

By July 2020, the group was making national headlines for blocking courthouse entrances and delaying evictions. In January, it announced "Zero Eviction January" and upped the frequency of its actions that helped delay 911 evictions.

Raghuv eer is more philosophical in another role. As the director of the National Homes Guarantee, she advocates policies that would make housing a human right. The group helped influence progressive housing policy in the 2020 Democratic primaries and plans to unveil a tenant bill of rights next year.

KC Tenants has made headway more recently. According to a bill passed by the Kansas City Council, anyone in danger of eviction has the right to free counsel.

Housing isn't yet a human right by law, but that victory puts the world one step closer to Raghuv eer's vision.

Yonah Freemark, Urban Institute

Yonah Freemark

Freemark attended Yale University to pursue a degree in architecture. And while he graduated in 2008 with distinction, his passion did not necessarily lie in designing buildings — it was in the communities those buildings were in.

He went on to pursue a master's degree in city planning and then a doctorate in urban studies with a focus on city design and development, both from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Now 35, Freemark is a senior research associate at the Urban Institute, a Washington, DC, think tank. He primarily conducts research about land-use policy, urban design, and affordable housing.

He's an authority on the consequences of restrictive zoning in the US, particularly in terms of racial equity and how zoning policy can change communities for the better. His research also includes looking abroad for affordable-housing innovations in countries such as France, and he studies how to implement those ideas to improve housing for the most vulnerable people in the US.

Freemark frequently presents his findings to policymakers. His research has been published in a number of academic journals and cited by media outlets such as CNN, The New York Times, and Bloomberg's CityLab.

In a time when housing continues to get more expensive, it's research from experts like Freemark that may help guide change.