



SEATTLE HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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Smith Tower, more than a century old, goes LEED Platinum

Renovations over the past few years have helped the landmark go super green

By [Sarah Anne Lloyd](#) | [@sarahannelloyd](#) | Jul 18, 2019, 12:04pm PDT



Smith Tower. | Courtesy of Unico Properties.

The [Smith Tower](#), one of Seattle's most iconic landmarks, just got a thoroughly modern green-building certification—even though it's 105 years old.

LEED certification (that's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) is a widely-used green building standard awarded by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) that grades projects on emissions, energy efficiency, and other environmentally-friendly standards. Additional merits can add up to higher grades of silver, gold, or platinum certification by adhering to stricter standards.

While it's not unheard of for older buildings to do a remodel and go for it—midcentury Fire Station 9 was recently awarded LEED Gold, the 1930-built Exchange Building was awarded LEED Platinum in 2016—it's something typically new-construction buildings strive for, like the brand-new [Hyatt Regency](#) downtown or [Sitka Apartments](#) in South Lake Union.

The Smith Tower was built between 1911 and 1914, but achieved a higher LEED status than most, new construction or no: platinum, or basically an A+. Out of the Seattle projects catalogued in USGBC's directory, around 12.5 percent were platinum-certified.

Unico Properties has owned and managed the building since 2015, and still has a stake in the building after it sold as part of a portfolio deal [with Goldman Sachs](#). The company still operates and manages the building, and has been doing a series of remodels to the building, including [switching its manual elevators to automatic](#).

A landmarked building this old presented a unique set of challenges, says Unico VP of Sustainable and Responsible Investments Brett Phillips. Modern technology can be installed, but only very carefully.

“The primary issue is that as a historic building, the look and feel of the era must be maintained, so fixtures must fit in aesthetically, and HVAC work needs to be hidden or camouflaged,” says Phillips. “There's an extra level of care required.”

In addition to preserving character, there are just some old building quirks (if you've ever flushed a toilet in an extremely old building, you have a sense of what challenges were presented here). Its age also means a bunch of work has been done on the building in the last century.

Plumbing constraints come with the territory, but so do years of remodels.



Building upgrades include LED lighting in the common areas. | Courtesy of Unico Properties

It takes much more effort—forensic analysis—in an old building to untangle layers of fixes and changes, identify what is working well and what is not working as well as it once did, and to determine the best optimization methods,” explains Phillips.

Changes implemented in the last couple of years include composting all paper towels in the restrooms, a new energy monitoring system that helped guide operators into a 15 percent reduction in energy use, and a waste-management program with ambitious recycling goals. Basic capital projects helped, too, like HVAC upgrades, a switch to LED lighting, and new boilers.

When it was originally built, the 38-story Smith Tower was the tallest building west of the Mississippi. It was replaced as the tallest building in the city by the [Space Needle](#) in 1962. (That honor currently goes to Columbia Center, [more than double Smith Tower’s height](#) at 76 stories.)

Other Unico renovations include a makeover of the 35th floor to [include a speakeasy-style bar](#).

This article has been updated to correct the nature of the Smith Tower deal with Goldman Sachs and Unico.