

SUN LIFE CENTRE

A PLACE OF MOVEMENT AND LIGHT



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Sitting on top of one of the busiest transit nodes in the downtown core, the Sun Life Centre was always designed to be a focal point of the local business community. Over its now nearly 50 years of operation, however, it has transformed from a traditional, static office space to a hub of activity among not only some of the more notable companies in the world, but also thousands of daily workers and commuters.

The complex, which spans the block between Bank and O'Connor streets to the west and east, and Queen and Albert streets to the north and south, is made up of two towers joined by a central atrium. Combined, the buildings offer roughly 950,000 square feet of Class-A office, retail, and amenity space.

The smaller of the two structures, a 15-storey, 376,000-square-foot tower at 99 Bank Street, was the first to open – in 1977. Its larger, 17-storey, 552,000-square-foot companion tower at 50 O'Connor Street followed roughly a decade later, completed in 1984. A central atrium was later added to connect the two buildings, and to offer tenants and downtown passers-by the opportunity to relax in a contained natural space that was highlighted by palm trees, subtropical plants, a waterfall and a large podium seating area.

In the years that followed, the property came to be known as one of the marquee addresses in the downtown core. This was the place where business came to work during the day, employees relaxed in their leisure time, and where the city's after-hours business was conducted in the stately Rideau Club, which topped the Bank Street building.

Change, however, was inevitable. As plans were drawn up for the construction of the Confederation Light Rail line through the downtown core, the Sun Life Centre was an obvious stop along the underground route. The atrium in particular was planned to serve as one of the primary points of entry to the Parliament Station. At peak weekday volume, that connection was projected to handle as many as 10,000 transit riders, making it one of the single busiest LRT connections anywhere in the city.

The atrium aesthetic, although charming, would have been nothing short of a liability.

In anticipation, the property's owners commissioned a sweeping, \$30-million renovation of the property. The first phase of work began in 2015, and included work on the lobby of the building at 99 Bank Street. A \$6.5-million renovation of the main atrium followed, and was completed in 2017.

The Rideau Club

The 99 Bank Street tower carries an especially storied tenant on its top floor.

Since 1979, the building's fifteenth floor has been home to the Rideau Club, one of Canada's oldest and most distinguished private social clubs. The club was founded by Sir John A. Macdonald and Sir George-Étienne Cartier in September 1865 as a gentlemen's club, and is rumoured to have been an early forum in which the Fathers of Confederation met to draw up the earliest blueprints of Canada itself.

The club's history had already passed through several chapters before it arrived at Sun Life. Its original clubhouse, built in 1876 directly across from the Parliament Buildings on Wellington Street, served as its home for over a century until it burned to the ground in October 1979. The loss was curiously timed. At the moment of the fire, the federal government had been attempting to expropriate the property to make way for a future United States embassy.

The club relocated permanently to its current penthouse space at 99 Bank Street immediately afterward, and has occupied that same top-floor space ever since.

That work saw most of the jungle greenery and the signature waterfall removed to open a clearer, more efficient path for commuters. The design retained some water features and a green wall specifically to preserve the complex's LEED Gold environmental standing.

The third phase of renovations, which concluded in December 2018, added a 9,000-square-foot, European-style food hall known as Queen St. Fare (some of which now occupies the space that was home for almost 50 years to Hy's Steakhouse – another of several forums in which Ottawa's business and political deals were brokered). A structural annex was built to connect the atrium directly to the Parliament Station – and to maximize the space. With the complex's office tenants in mind, the developers designed the roof of the annex to feature an outdoor rooftop patio.

Ownership of the complex has long been split evenly between two major stakeholders. Sun Life Assurance Company has held a 50-percent ownership interest in the property that bears its name for many years. In September 2019, a fund managed by BentallGreenOak acquired the remaining 50-percent stake, which had previously been held by the Alberta Investment Management Corporation. The acquisition was valued at approximately \$207.5 million at the time, making it among the largest commercial real-estate deals in Ottawa that year. BentallGreenOak, later rebranded simply as BGO, continues to serve as the property's manager.

A further renovation of the Bank Street entrance and the Albert Street atrium was undertaken around 2022 to again refresh the space's decor once to better accommodate the steady flow of LRT commuters now passing through daily.

A Hive of Activity

Sun Life Centre is known to be a figurative hive for office workers and commuters, but did you know it is also home to literal bee hives? In 2019, the facility managers partnered with bee-keeping experts Alvéole to install two bee hives on the roof of the complex in an effort to put the space to good use and to help preserve Ottawa's urban bee population. A portion of the honey produced on site is donated to local charitable organizations.



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Today the Sun Life Centre operates as a LEED Platinum and BOMA Best Platinum certified Class-A office and retail complex. Its tenant roster over the years has included professional services firm PwC, the Canada Deposit Insurance Corporation, the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority, offices tied to the House of Commons, law firms Dentons Canada and Nelligan O'Brien Payne, and the Business Council of Canada. Such a mix is fitting, given the building's historical identity as both a private commercial address and a genuine extension of the capital's civic and political life.

Although the Sun Life Centre does not hold an official heritage designation, its role as one of only a handful of downtown buildings with direct integration into the O-Train network gives it a distinctly modern kind of civic significance – one that is measured less in brick and mortar and more in movement and light.