In 1980, VSBA was retained by Princeton University to conduct the school’s transformation from a dormitory to residential college system. This historic and fundamental alteration in the University’s structure (initially proposed but never implemented by Woodrow Wilson) was the result of a lengthy University-wide reappraisal of the institution’s mission and goals.

The system-wide architectural changes resulting from this reappraisal encompassed new building, rehabilitation, adaptation, re-landscaping, and ornamentation involving ten buildings and complexes. VSBA’s task was to sensitively accomplish such sweeping changes endemic to Princeton’s evolving educational policy amid the school’s famous English Collegiate Gothic context, whose beauty and traditions were tied to the hearts and minds of alumni around the world.

GORDON WU HALL, BUTLER COLLEGE

Gordon Wu Hall provides a new focus for Butler College, one of Princeton’s three new undergraduate colleges, and houses its dining hall, lounge, library, study areas, and administrative offices. Our design problem was to create a building providing an identity for the new college and serving as a social focal point that would also connect with neighboring facilities in two stylistically disparate buildings. Furthermore, the building’s site was irregular, sloping, and narrow, and the facility was to share an existing kitchen with adjacent Wilson College.
Wu Hall’s interior creates spaces accommodating social and dining activities for 500 students while also providing opportunities for informal interaction. For example, the tall bay window at the long dining room’s end provides a sense of grandeur and recalls Princeton’s neo-Gothic dining halls; but its low ceilings, large windows, and natural wood furnishings create a comfortable scale that allows the large room to become a pleasing cross between a cafe and a dining commons. At the entry lobby, a stairway leads past another large bay window to a lounge, administrative offices, and a library on the upper floor. The first flight of these stairs extends to one side to form bleacher-like risers, suggesting a grand stair sweeping upward while serving informally as a spontaneous waiting and gathering place. On special occasions it becomes an indoor amphitheater.

Red brick outer walls, limestone window trim, and large bay windows link Wu Hall to older Gothic campus buildings. Slid between other buildings, Wu Hall brings form and coherence to a once undefined portion of campus.

Gordon Wu Hall, Butler College
Princeton University
ROCKEFELLER AND MATHEY COLLEGES

This project involved the creation of two new undergraduate residential colleges within the fabric of the existing dormitory commons. The Commons complex, designed by Philadelphia architects Day and Klauder in 1916, is one of America’s best examples of New-Gothic architecture. It originally consisted of five large dining halls, a central kitchen, various social spaces, and student dormitories built around two quads directly connected to the dining facility. VSBA’s alterations accommodate a separate dining hall, social facilities and administrative offices for each college, a shared library and coffee house, and a new kitchen and mechanical system.

Our primary challenge was to incorporate modern code prescriptions and mechanical systems into the building without violating the “hallowed hall” atmosphere of the original design. The removal of 65 years of paint, grime and electrical and mechanical installations, and the removal and reinstallation of carved wood paneling, leaded glass windows, and hand-crafted limestone -- all done with respect to the original architecture’s intent -- restored the former character of these beautiful spaces.

Strategic reorientation for new functions through the insertion of discrete doorways, stairs, fixtures, and inscriptions, combined with the careful selection of interior finishes, new furniture, and fabrics, leaves the first-time visitor with the impression that “nothing has been done.”

BLAIR HALL AND LITTLE HALL

For these separate but adjacent 1896 Cope and Stewardson buildings, VSBA’s work included the addition of bed spaces to previously unused attic space, the incorporation of satellite social rooms, changes to meet modern code requirements, and updating mechanical systems for two existing dormitory buildings. Little Hall and Blair Hall now serve as dormitories for upper classmen and Mathey College freshmen respectively. The Blair Hall alteration received a special grant from the Kresge Foundation in support of its conversion and is intended to serve as a prototype for alterations under consideration by colleges nationwide.
Originally Princeton Inn, a commercial hotel from about 1925 to about 1970, and then Princeton Inn College, Malcolm S. Forbes Jr. College retained much of the Inn’s original architecture. VSBA’s challenge was also to change the fabric of the building as little as possible in order to maintain the Inn’s charm while enhancing the layout of the public spaces, refinishing and restoring parts of these spaces that had suffered wear, and renovating kitchen and serving areas. We did this by working with what was there -- by using cheerful but still institutional colors and by using furniture that had character but was tough at the same time.
LANDSCAPING

Landscaping was an important element in reorienting the residential section of the campus from dormitories to colleges. The dormitory quads and the surroundings of Rockefeller, Mathey, and Butler Colleges were relandscaped, and new pathways and benches were added. Where portions of a college were separated, visual linkages were established through planting, pathways, vistas, and the siting of seats and sculpture.

For Rockefeller College, a new bench marks the entrance and Rockefeller Walk leads to the College’s Witherspoon Hall. A seat and sculpture accent the end of the path. For Butler College, Butler Walk now leads from the main campus to form a gateway to the College. It gives access to Wu Hall, linking this social and dining facility to its dormitories beside and beyond it, while also providing opportunities to sit. Where Butler Walk meets College Walk, and the latter widens to give access to the New Quad dormitories and accommodate Butler Memorial, a small piazza has been designed. This arrangement, in conjunction with the siting of Wu Hall, gives identity to College Walk’s western end.
NEW CAMPUS ENTRANCE

VSBA also completed a new primary automobile entrance for the campus in 1986. In addition to improving campus access from the town’s major street, the new drive opens onto a new plaza that appropriately frames the Alexander Hall, a late 19th century auditorium building.