

# St. John Hall

## *A Student Center Reimagined*



The terms “Tuck Shop,” “study room,” “SAC dance,” “Dean’s Office,” and “college counseling” evoke several different buildings located across the Choate campus. Now, students will experience all of these and more in one building once they step inside St. John Hall, Choate’s new student center, opening today. Headmaster Dr. Alex Curtis said, “This is a significant statement about student life and its centrality.” Choate is one of the only high schools that has a building purely dedicated to student life.

The philosophy behind the entire building can be summed up in one simple word: “yes.” “We don’t want anything that says, ‘You can’t do this, You can’t do that.’ You can bring food anywhere in the building. We’ve tried to pick furniture and create spaces where you can be comfortable, put your feet up. We want it to be a home-like environment where everything is accessible,” said Dr. Curtis.

St. John Hall was also built on ideas relevant to current student needs. Unlike older buildings such as Hill House and Humanities, most of the walls that make up the inside space are not structural walls, which means St. John Hall can be easily renovated or otherwise changed in the future. Dr. Curtis explained, “In 15 years, while teaching has changed, classroom space and social space has also changed; as needs change we can come in and close it down, level the whole thing, and start again. We couldn’t do that with any of the other buildings.”

Overall, the building was built to represent Choate. “We’ve got one foot in our glorious past, but also a foot looking forward to an amazing future,” said Dr. Curtis. “And we don’t want to lose sight of either one of them.”

St. John Hall was created through the ideas and collaborations of a design group made up of architects; Mr. James Yanelli, the Director of Student Activities; Ms. Alison Cady, the Director of Strategic Planning and Communications; Mr. Rick Saltz, the Chief Financial Officer; and Dr. Curtis. While Dr. Curtis made final architectural decisions, every member of the team was

deeply involved in the effort. The extent of the collaboration on St. John Hall went even further than that group. “There was an extraordinary amount of student input that wasn’t always as formal as people realize,” said Dr. Curtis about the team’s process in coming up with new ideas. “We spent a lot of time observing students, and how places all over campus, like Lanphier, or the Humanities Rotunda, were being used.”

As soon as a student or faculty member walks into the building from the main entrance, he or she can see three floors above the open lobby. Immediately visible is a gas brick fireplace, a seating area, a work room at the far wall, and new day student lockers located on the second and third floors. A brick wall extending from the first floor all the way up is left blank purposefully to make way for student and faculty driven projects which will populate the building over time.

The floor of the main entrance hall appears as wood but is actually a hard tile built to withstand active students. “We deliberately put the conference room right across the front when you walk in, so if you’ve reserved those, people are hopefully going to walk by and say, ‘What’s that group over there?’ or ‘One of my friends is there’ or ‘What was that club you were in?’” explained Dr. Curtis.

The first floor of St. John Hall embodies two essential elements of the building: cohesion and entertainment. Because of its distinct three-part floor plan, students will be able to enjoy SAC dances, hang out in the game room, and eat in the Tuck Shop — all on the same floor. The game room and dance area in the new student center are at opposite ends of the building, unlike before, when they were combined in the old SAC. This game room includes brand-new ping-pong tables, pool tables, foosball tables, and plenty of room

to relax. On the opposite end of the building, you have an area for SAC dances. The atmosphere of the dance area is intentionally the darkest and most enclosed: “In a dance space, you want it to be more like a club atmosphere,” explained Dr. Curtis.

The third section of the first floor is the Tuck Shop. On the way to the Tuck Shop, you cross the threshold between the dance area and seating area: “As you come through the dance area, with what feels like the lowest ceiling, it then explodes up into this two-story space. The Tuck Shop seating area feels distinctly different from that,” Dr. Curtis said. Like the game and dance area, there are some notable changes to the Tuck Shop as well. Students will be able to order food from screens or an iOS app and enjoy an extensive list of new offerings. The hours of the Tuck Shop have also been greatly extended. Dividing the whole area into three sections will make the space more functional for everyone — dancers, gamers, and eaters alike.

The design team that has been working on this building since the idea’s conception five years ago cannot wait for the opening. “We’ve lived this building, and we know every inch of it,” said Dr. Curtis. He continued, “And the building is beautiful in that it’s poised and ready, but it’s not really alive yet. And within an hour of students walking in, it will change. And that’s when you remember it’s not about buildings, it’s about students and faculty. And we’re just trying to provide the backdrop for all the amazing things Choate students do.” The student body is prepared to bring this building to life — at 10:45 a.m. today.

— Grace Zhang '20

“We’ve got one foot in our glorious past, but also a foot looking forward to an amazing future.”

*Dr. Alex Curtis*  
Headmaster

*From Wrecking Ball to New St. John Hall*

*Deans’ Row, Tuck Shop, Kitchen, and More*

*A Student Activities Veteran’s Perspective*



# 512 Days of Construction



The old St. John Hall, which housed Choate's Math and Computer Science Department, was torn down in July 2015.

“My roommate and I woke up every morning at 6:20 a.m. all of fall term because that’s when the trucks would start reversing into construction. It made us get up and write college apps though!”

*Zoe Reid '17*

“I loved chatting with the construction workers right outside my window every morning. They’re a true pleasure to be around.”

*Wesley Fang '19*



Throughout the fall of 2015, the construction site seemed little more than a dirt crater — what students nicknamed The Pit.

**1,000**  
GALLONS OF PAINT



In October 2015, Board of Trustees Chairman Mr. Michael Carr '76 and Headmaster Dr. Alex Curtis ceremoniously broke ground on the new student center.

“I’m excited that the entire dean’s office group is going to be in one place. It should help facilitate the communication between the deans, as well as the communication between the deans and the students.”

*Mr. Will Morris*  
Director of Residential Life

**120,000**  
BRICKS USED



Ten months after the old building’s demolition, a new skeleton took shape.



In May 2016, seniors signed a steel beam that became a part of the building.

“I think that the combination of a place for students to hang out and a place for clubs and groups to meet will lead to a really happy and productive atmosphere.”

*William Robertson '20*



In late March, as construction approached its end, Gabe Liu '19, Clay Zachery '19, and Dr. Curtis shared a laugh in front of the new center's main entrance.

# Inside St. John Hall

## Bay Room:

The Bay Room embodies the tradition of Choate. As the name suggests, the room features a large multi-paned bay window, as well as furniture that reflects the Hill House-Library style. “We really wanted one place that feels like it’s been at Choate forever,” said Dr. Curtis.



## Informal Nooks:

Throughout the entire new center, students will come upon various informal “nooks” — pods of furniture for any student or group to gather. The furniture was cherry-picked for student use: comfortable sofa-like chairs with wheels that retract when someone sits down, couches made up of mobile chair units, with backs that are actually meant to be sat on top of, a common behavior the planners observed in Lanphier. “Students are totally meant to move the furniture around. That’s meant to be part of the flexibility of the building, to be yours,” Dr. Curtis said.

## Work and Conference Rooms:

There are eight rooms in the building that are designated for studying, club meetings, conference meetings, or anything else that involves collaborative work. Each space has a monitor built into the wall by the door, which lists a schedule of reservations. They vary in size (the largest can hold about 15-20 people) and each includes a screen and an easily-foldable table that can be utilized or pushed to the side based on the group’s preferences. “In Lanphier it’s very set. In this, we wanted much more flexibility,” explained Dr. Curtis.

## Media Room:

The Media Room is dedicated to any media-oriented student activities that are better done socially than alone, like watching movies or gaming. This room caters to student filmmakers and screenings of their films. It features two large TVs and many easily-movable comfy chairs. “I’m excited for the media room,” said Dr. Curtis. “I just really hope students make it their own, because that room is the most undefined, so that’s where the most fun is.”

## Video Conference Room:

The Video Conference Room has many purposes, such as classes meeting with outside Choate groups, international video communication, and face-to-face conversation with speakers. It is a fully interactive space with cameras on the walls and speakers and microphones built in. The room perfectly suits the needs of Choate’s international students.

## Wet Room:

The Wet Room mimics the Lanphier i.d.Lab, but is a student space rather than an academic space. A retractable glass door opens right into the project area, where a student can come at any time if they wish to work on a creative project.



## Game Room and Dance Area:

The Game Room and the dance area in the new student center are at opposite ends of the building, unlike the way they were combined in the old SAC. This game room includes all the same things: two ping-pong tables, two pool tables, foosball tables, and plenty of room to sit — all intended for those who want to hang out with the peace and quiet of not having a dance a few feet away.



## Tuck Shop:

There are some notable changes to the new Tuck Shop, which will be open during dances. Students will now order off of screens, or on an iOS app if they prefer. There are restaurant-style booths with easily-reachable outlets with USB plug-ins, as well as high tables for just talking or passing through quickly, like in the Lanphier Café. Hours are greatly extended from the old Tuck Shop, into weekends and evenings. Food options include chicken nuggets, cheesesteak, tacos, pizza, wings, salads, soups, wraps, and more. Arguably the most exciting addition is the milkshake maker, which allows students to adjust the thickness of their milkshake to their liking. “It does feel like a destination, in a way, like you would feel going to a restaurant,” Dr. Curtis said.

## Publication Suite:

The Publication Suite is where Choate’s publications such as *The Choate News*, *The Brief*, and *The Lit* have space to work. There is a large main room that all publications are welcome to use, as well as specific rooms for *The Choate News* and *The Brief*. A feature that will open later than the rest of the building is the publications video room that the team is working on with consultants from ESPN. This room will be soundproof and include a green screen, perfect for interviews or other videos, as publications move toward using videos.



## Full Kitchen:

It was Director of Student Activities Mr. Jim Yanelli’s idea to have a full kitchen open to the Choate public, where any group with a faculty member can decide to cook together. Previously, this would only be possible when a faculty member opened his or her home to students. The kitchen includes everything: refrigerator, stove, microwave, dishwasher, even flatware.

## Day Student Lockers:

The new day student lockers feature easy-A locks and closets on the side, convenient in the case of an evening Special Program. Adjacent to the lockers is a large seating area comparable to the current Day Student Lounge. This new setup places day-student life in the middle of student activities.

# History of the Weathervane Atop St. John Hall

On Monday, March 13, 2017, a cupola was placed at the top of the St. John Hall. At the pinnacle of the cupola sits an arrow weathervane, which is a copper replica of that which once sat at the top of the old St. John Hall building. Now one of four historic weathervanes existing on campus, the arrow signifies a tribute to the school's history.

Currently residing in the Andrew Mellon Library, the six-foot tall Rosemary Girl weathervane once stood atop Rosemary Hall's main building that had to be reconstructed after it burned down in 1923. It was attached to the newly constructed main building in 1926 in honor of one family that had graciously agreed to house 7 students for the following school year. Eager to salvage historically significant pieces of the school, Rosemary Hall brought the weathervane with them when they returned to Wallingford in 1971. Another weathervane on campus is the boat that sits on top of the Seymour St. John Chapel. It has the following features that mimic that of a life-sized boat: two masts with rigging, spars and tackle, and two decks. One might question why a boat would be chosen as the weathervane for a chapel, but as stated in a *Choate News* article in 1924, the chapel is not purely used for religious purposes, as arts and dramatics

also take place within the building. Therefore, the boat was selected over a cross to represent the flexibility of the purpose that the chapel holds; it is used as a religious sanctuary as well as a space for speeches and productions. The last of the four weathervanes is decorated with the legend of "St. George and the Dragon," and it is located on top of Archbold. George St. John, the Headmaster of the school from 1908 to 1948, had a special interest with this tale. The legend is that a dragon once resided near a town, and in order to prevent it from destroying the town, the townspeople offered children every day to satisfy the beast's hunger. One day, the king was required to give his own daughter as an offering, and although he tried to refuse, the townspeople insisted. However, St. George came along just before the princess was eaten and saved her. He struck a deal with the townspeople that if they converted to Christianity, then he would slay the dragon.

"I always enjoy seeing history preserved in contemporary places, and I think the vane is a good example of that."

*Ms. Judy Donald  
Archivist*

Several examples of this legend exist on campus. It is portrayed in a painting in the Hatch Study Room of Memorial House and in a mosaic located in the JFK Study Room in the basement of the library. The new building was named after George St. John.

As many times as students pass these four weath-



*The former St. John Hall*

ervanes on their way to classes, clubs, or sports, they may not think much of them. However, each one represents the history of our school.

Ms. Judy Donald, the School Archivist said, "Speaking from an archivist's viewpoint, I always enjoy seeing history preserved in contemporary places, and I think the vane is a good example of that." These weathervanes adorn our buildings, and their historical significance reminds us of generations of students that came before us and those that are destined to precede us.

— Samantha Stevenson '19



*St. John Hall was named in honor of George and Clara St. John, shown here in 1947 chatting with Choate students. George St. John was the School's Headmaster between 1908 and 1947.*

Photos courtesy of the Archives and Ross Mortensen

*The arrow weathervane, installed on March 13, 2017, is a copper replica of the weathervane that stood atop the former St. John Hall, one of four historic weathervanes on the Choate campus.*



## An Interview with Jim Yanelli

*Director of Student Activities*

*Self-described, "director of fun at Choate," Mr. Jim Yanelli is in charge of the Student Activities Center. On campus, he handles all of the logistics related to the SAC. This includes creating and sending out the WKND events, scheduling SAC dances, and bringing in entertainers. Mr. Yanelli is also the Head of COSA (Committee On Student Affairs) and the faculty adviser to Foodies.*

**So what are your favorite parts of the new building?** For me, the entire building will really be the setting for the program. I imagine that kids, clubs, and individuals will find opportunities to do things that they haven't before. There are many more meeting spaces, large and small. The Media Room will have much more gaming equipment and additional TVs for watching movies and TV shows. Lots will happen simultaneously. Everything is brighter and more efficient. From my point of view, what's also very important are the new connections that day students and boarders will be able to make. In the current Student Activities Center, day students once had lockers in the upper levels. When that was the case, there was a nice, symbiotic relationship between the two distinct populations. It made great sense then and will make great sense in the new building. Day students and boarders will share the same lounges together, access the Tuck Shop together, and use the entire building together.

**What features of the SAC will help reduce its impact on the environment?** The School Store will no longer sell plastic water bottles as there will be numerous filling stations throughout the building. All of the spaces have lights that will either brighten or darken depending on the level of activity in a particular area. There will be spaces that aren't lit when they don't have to be. The heating and cooling systems will be much more efficient as well.

**How did you and the SAC team come up with the building's wide variety of features?** As always, we sought input from students in that process. A few years ago, when the building was in its early planning stages, we had a design competition among students in Memorial House. Different groups of students constructed models of an ideal SAC. Dr. Curtis took a close look at all the designs and internalized many of the details because several of them are manifested in the building. For example, students requested there to be space between floors, vistas from one floor to another, a Media Room, and designated spaces to do certain things.

**How will the SAC dances change with the new building?** The space that will be used for dances will be more sophisticated. Some of the lighting will be permanently installed along with other infrastructure and mechanisms to make the dances as fun as they can possibly be.

**What other purposes will the new SAC have aside from student activities?** We have already fulfilled requests to have academic endeavors take place in the building. In addition, students and faculty will be able to meet with ease, and kids will be able to study in groups. There will also be easy access to deans and administrators. Because of its location, St. John Hall will be a much more vital part in the life of the community.



Photo courtesy of Choate Rosemary Hall

Mr. Yanelli at the 2015 Club Fair. The new SAC will be the home for many Choate clubs.

**What are the immediate plans for the old SAC?** For now, most of the building will be locked. However, the lower level of the SAC will be used in some configuration. The mailroom will operate for the remainder of the school year and throughout the summer. There will also be access to the pool. Most of the furnishing will be donated and distributed in any way that's useful.

**How will the new SAC ultimately affect student life at Choate?** One of Dr. Curtis's priorities since he arrived on campus has been to create a tighter, closer community. The opening of St. John Hall will be one of those pivotal moments when our community is drawn together in ways that it hasn't been in the past. For instance, connections between day students and boarders will improve significantly. Also, since there will be so many adults in the building, the will be more opportunities for students and adults to share the same spaces and interact. As many different clubs won't be scattered across campus anymore, they will be able to collaborate and communicate. Furthermore, the new building will be better suited for clubs to reach their missions than the current SAC could ever be. The current SAC is too one-dimensional. Student life is going to change profoundly.