

Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff, by Ash Sakula Architects

A CHAPTER REDISCOVERED

With careful reorganisation and the salvaging of details hidden in the building fabric, Ash Sakula Architects has given Chapter Arts Centre the home it deserves, says *Rory Olcayto*. Photography by *Andy Haslam*





One of the best things about Ash Sakula Architects' refurbishment of Chapter, a municipal arts centre in a converted Edwardian school in Cardiff, is that you can enter through one end of the building and leave from the other. No doubling back, no dead ends; just lots of space to eat and drink, to talk and read, and to see or make art.

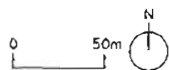
I've always liked 'walk-through' buildings. Places like this seem friendlier, more useful, more part of a city. Whenever there is an opportunity to cut through a building, I take it, and there's something about a busy ground floor that just feels right.

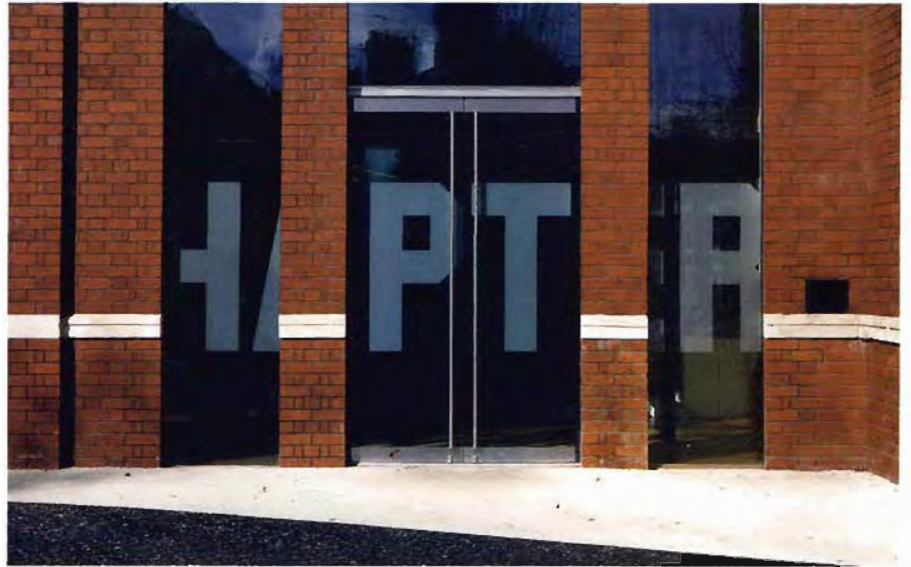
This rule is especially true for civic buildings, and it underpins Ash Sakula's £3.8 million refurbishment and new-build work at Chapter. If you want to visit the centre's gallery, it's right there, through some double doors in the west wall of the cafe-restaurant that occupies most of the ground floor. There are a couple of cinemas tucked into the plan too, which share a foyer and have retro-style lighting and film posters on the walls. When I visit Chapter with practice partner Robert Sakula, this 'broad >>



- 1. Police station
- 2. Library
- 3. Home for the elderly
- 4. Church

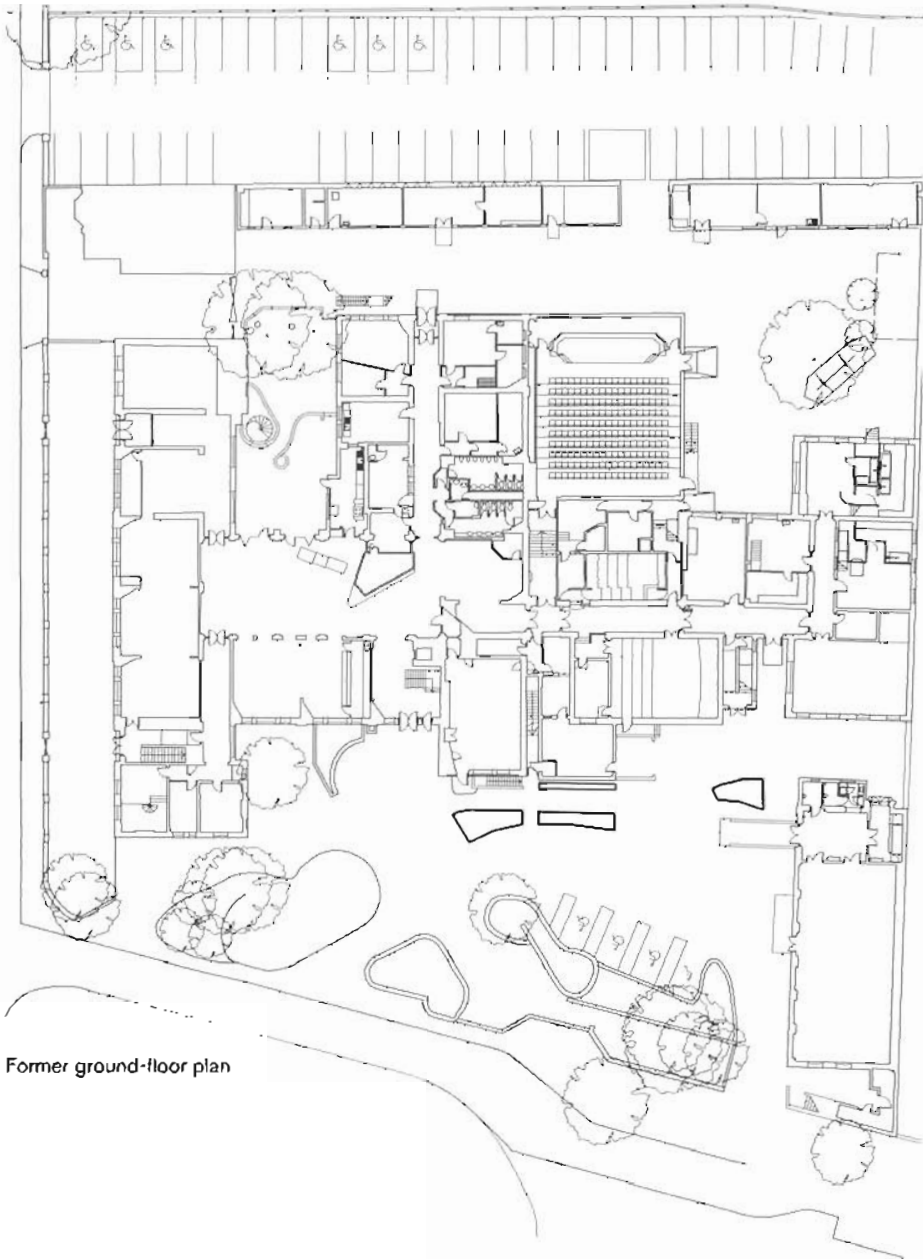
Site plan





Left and top Three doors provide access to an enlarged lobby
Above left The new

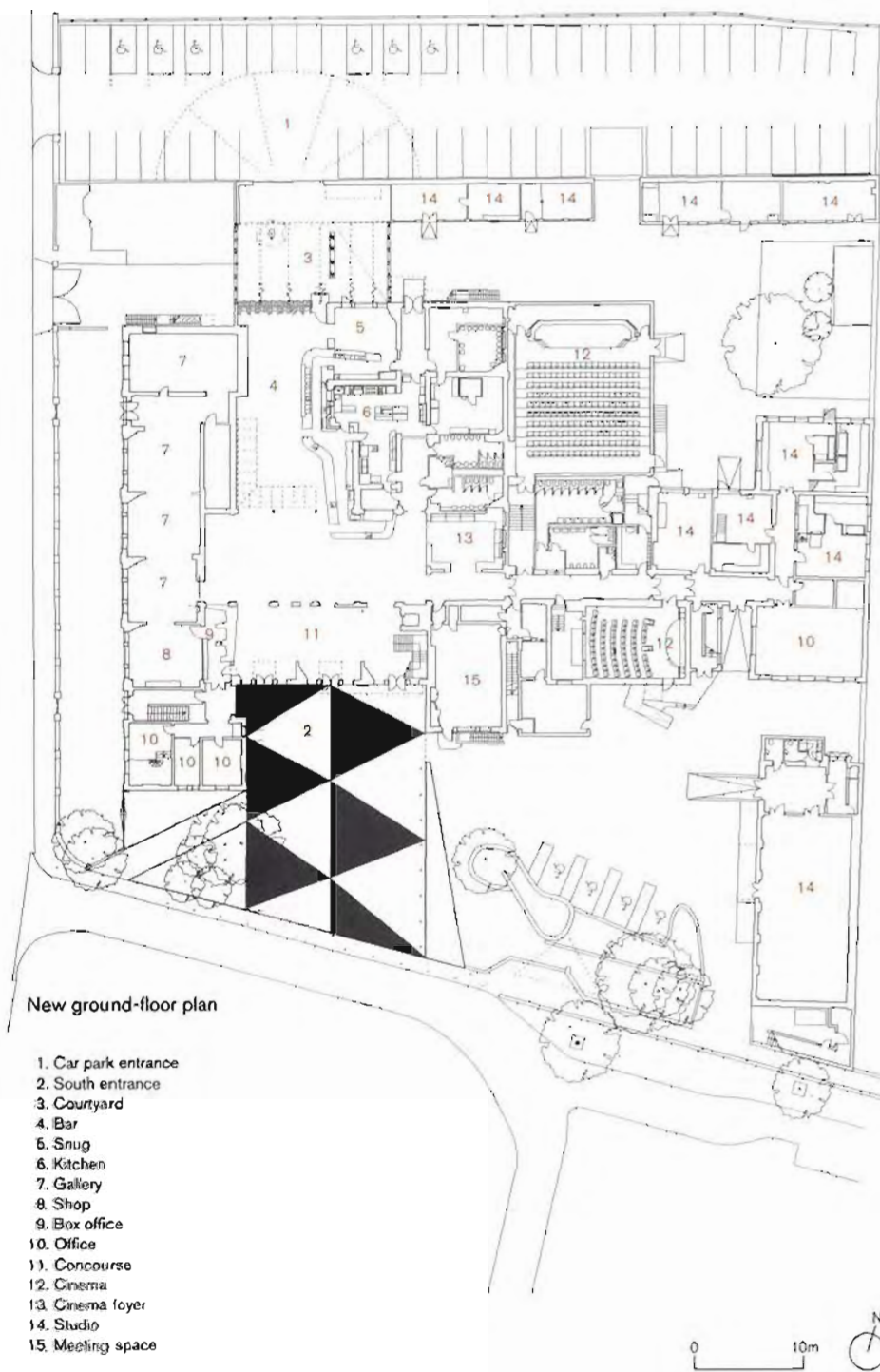
reception desk
Above right The threshold of the main public space



Former ground-floor plan



Everything is still where it has always been in Chapter – it's just easier to find now, and it looks better too



shaft of public space', as he calls it, is busy. Parents with prams, students with laptops, elderly people, small groups, residents of Canton, Cardiff and beyond – they're all here.

Seated in the café, you can see up some stairs leading to one of three theatres, and you can see into a sunny courtyard. All around you is incidental detail. One corner of the ground floor is made out like a snug from a 1970s pub, and there is a 'milk bar' made from Corian, iroko and steel – the longest bar in Wales, apparently, at 34m. Parts of the ceiling and some of the walls are mirrored. An L-shaped rooflight snakes overhead, reminding regulars that where they sit now was once an external patio. Just two columns stand in the entire space. Everything is still where it has always been in Chapter – it's just easier to find now, and it looks better too.

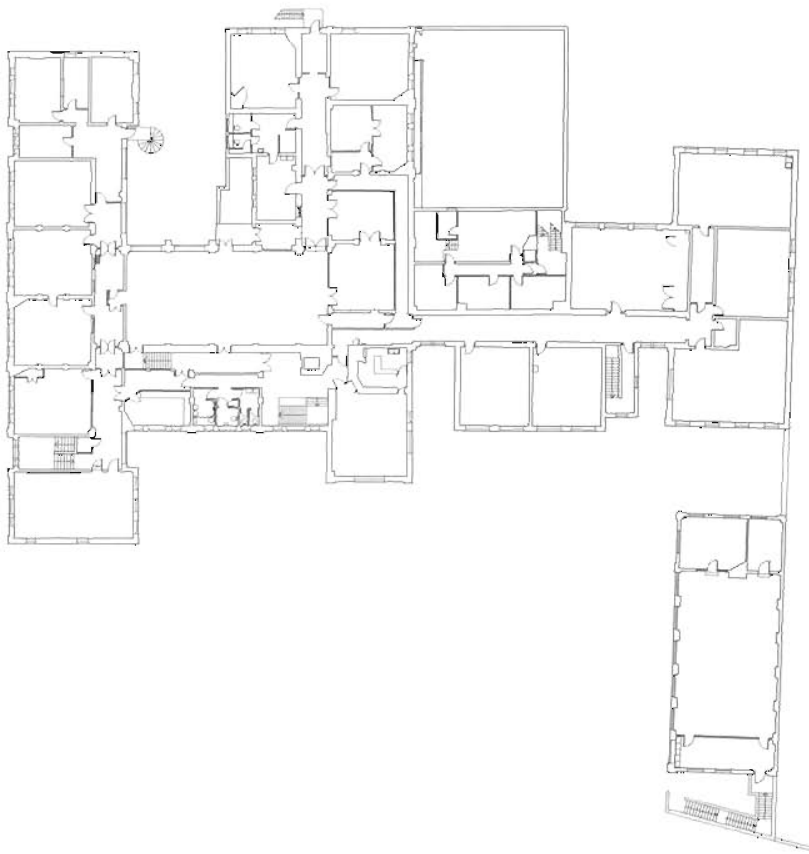
Chapter, the self-titled 'flagship for contemporary arts in Wales', has been based in the former Canton High School since its inception in 1971. The school, a 15-minute walk west of central Cardiff, was built in 1905 and still has many original features, though its pitched roof was replaced by a flat concrete one before Ash Sakula's refurbishment.

Alongside its gallery, theatres and cinemas, Chapter provides studio space and other facilities for 60 artists. The centre has played a significant role in the development of the arts in Wales over the past four decades. Following its relaunch last autumn, it has already doubled its visitor numbers, and much of that is down to Ash Sakula's friendly, incisive and appropriate design.

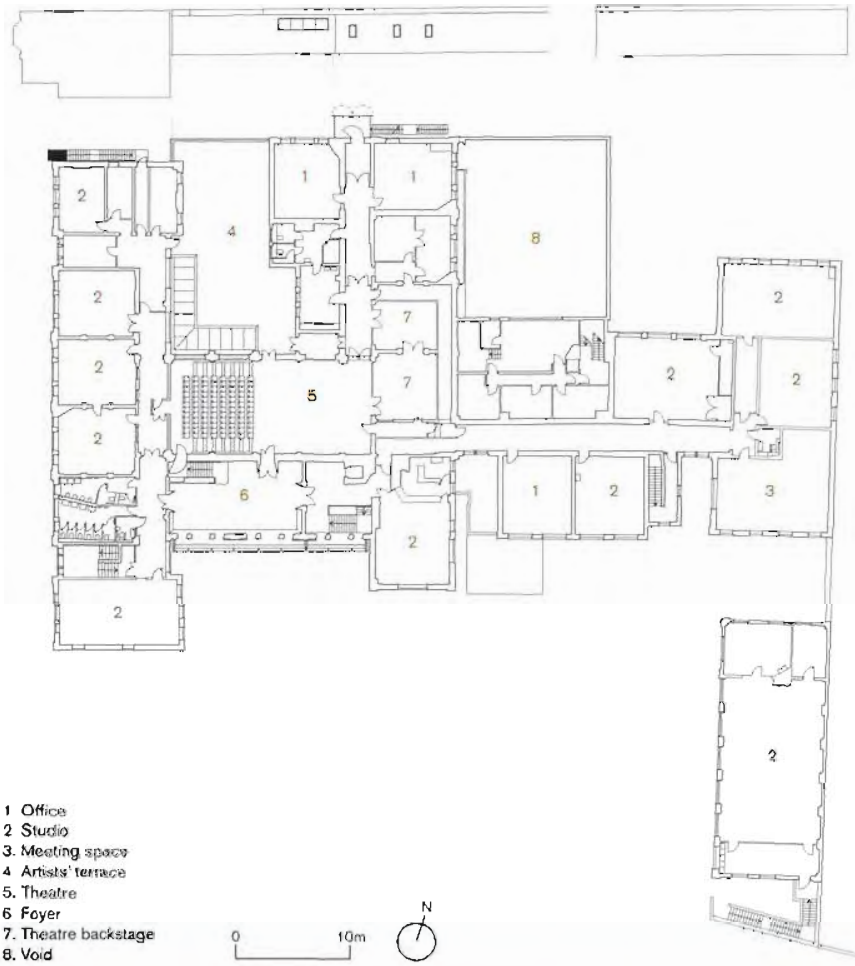
Chapter appointed the practice in January 2006 to prepare a renovation masterplan and explore opportunities for expansion. This project, funded by donations and a lottery grant, represents the first phase. When arts organisations spend lottery money on construction, a kind of corporate-lite interior design with white render and timber floors is often the result. Elder and Cannon Architects' Trongate 103, which unites a few of Glasgow's art groups in one building, is a recent example. That wouldn't have worked at Chapter. Very few of the art groups that emerged at the end of the 1960s resemble >>

Chapter Arts Centre, by Ash Sakula Architects

Former first-floor plan



New first-floor plan



There are some alluring details. The glazed caramel-brown dado tilework, for years smothered with a gloss of white paint, now seems almost numinous



The 'broad shaft of public space' is busy throughout the day



Courtyard beneath timber canopy roof



'Milk bar'



The courtyard fulfils a number of functions. It allows Chapter's café to open to the outdoors through foldaway sliding doors; it provides a transitional zone between the car park and Chapter's rear entrance; and it creates a space in its own right, partly open to the sky and partly covered, which can be used all year round and is popular with smokers. The surface of the courtyard is power-floated concrete, and it is lined all round with a rough timber screen formed from tanalised roofing battens. *Robert Sakula*



The 34m-long 'milk bar' winds its way through three interlinked spaces, changing in spirit from café to restaurant to pub along the way. I'm told that it's the longest bar in Wales, and it can comfortably handle even Chapter's Friday night standing-room-only crowds. The bar is a mix of the straightforward and luxurious: its matt-black-painted ply front glows with concealed under-counter lights and contrasts with the iroko and Corian bar surfaces. *Robert Sakula*

SKETCHES BY SARAH BRUNNING

their initial form today, if indeed they still exist, but Chapter does. Indeed, at the centre's relaunch last year, the Welsh first minister at the time, Rhodri Morgan, spoke fondly of sanding its floors 'back in 1970'. Chapter is an institution built from the ground up and it has touched all members of Welsh society.

Ash Sakula, in planning its strategy, had to maximise the sense of improvement and change (without comprising Chapter's homegrown, organic aesthetic) and minimise disruption to its facilities. Its phased programme has done that. The practice

prioritised general maintenance and repair and the remodelling of public areas, including its foyers, box office, concourse and café spaces, cinemas, gallery and first-floor theatre.

This has involved bold moves as well as subtle tweaks. At the south entrance, a complicated, multi-level approach bedevilled by groves of shrubbery has been replaced with a two-tone tarmac forecourt. This leads to three new entrance doors formed from cut-through window openings in the school-building facade. Above these is a storey-high lightbox that, as well as lighting the interior, serves as an

artistic billboard, while behind is the first-floor foyer, itself carved from a multitude of smaller rooms. Beyond the enlarged ground-floor foyer below, a specially designed reception desk replaces the old enclosed box office. The detailing is good; the sense of enlarged space impressive. And while the visual identity of the building's exterior has utterly changed, it feels evolutionary, not seismic.

Supergraphics are everywhere. A free-standing sculptural sign reading 'CHAPTER' marks the site perimeter to the south. The same is printed on the glazing of the main >>



First-floor theatre lobby



Cinema screen



The theatre foyer is formed from a warren of corridors and outdated lavatories. It is now a hinge point and connector between the east and west wings of the building, and gives much more generous access to the studio theatre. The original windows to the space have been removed and replaced by the giant lightbox outboard of the original wall line, curated by Chapter as a space for artists' interventions, which form a changing frontispiece above the centre's main south entrance. The foyer's three entrances have acoustic doors with oversized architraves, and its carpet flows up over a continuous bench into the lightbox space. *Robert Sakula*

SKETCHES BY SARAH BRUNNING



Chapter's Cinema 2 is our homage in miniature to Gunnar Asplund's 1923 Skandia Cinema in Stockholm, which we visited around the time our designs for Chapter were taking shape. Like the Skandia, it has red velvet seats and carpet interlocking with a luminous dark blue ceiling. We didn't have the space for Asplund's mysterious and evocative vault disappearing into the darkness, so instead we incorporated a starry sky using fibre-optic lighting. In place of the stepped floor of the original Cinema 2, the floor curves continuously upwards to become the back wall, which makes it more accessible for wheelchairs. *Robert Sakula*

The courtyard, with its slate roof canopy and timber beams, feels like a Mediterranean farmstead

south-entrance doorway. Each venue, the cinemas, the gallery and the theatres, is picked out with large-text signage. It is generally visually pleasing, and clearly part of Ash Sakula's integrated design approach.

There are many other great details in Chapter. A welded steel porch with yellow glass bolts on to the north facade, and a strip of blue engineering brick faces on to a neighbouring plot. Ventilation is hidden behind finely fenestrated wooden panels, while the courtyard, with its concrete deck, slate roof canopy and exposed timber beams, feels

curiously like a Mediterranean farmstead. It sounds like a riot, but it's not. The grandeur bestowed on the spaces by their Edwardian architects means that, at times, Ash Sakula's handiwork even feels understated.

The architect's selective demolition has made for great new spaces as well as some alluring details. The two painted columns in the ground-floor café, previously hidden by I-sections, and the glazed caramel-brown dado tilework, which for years was smothered with a gloss of white paint, now seem almost numinous. There is another salvaged treasure



Start on site August 2008
 Contract duration 15 months
 Gross internal floor area 3,991m²
 Form of contract JCT 2005 with quantities
 Total cost £2.24 million
 Cost per m² £562
 Client Chapter Arts Centre
 Architect Ash Sakula Architects
 Project architect Jess Lumley
 Project manager CFC
 Structural engineer Adams Kara Taylor
 M&E engineer Michael Popper Associates
 Acoustics Paul Gillieron Acoustic Design
 Access Emma McMullan
 Interior design Angela Gidden at attic 2
 Main contractor WRW
 Annual CO₂ emissions Not applicable

Left Smokers gather
 under the courtyard's
 slate roof canopy

that seems typically Ash Sakula: a newly exposed skewed arrangement of concrete beams picked out in white against the deeper-set black-painted ceiling. These free gifts uncovered by the architect from within the building's fabric are like iconic frozen moments. Together with intelligent space planning, unpretentious new-build elements and integrated signage, they represent a architectural project of viral interest by a practice beginning to prove just how good it is. Too often critics say Ash Sakula's work is whimsical and fun, but it seems more specific

– and sincere – to me. I have one criticism of this project: the lightbox, in appearance, lacks the charm and finesse found elsewhere and deep seating in the first-floor lobby neutralises its impact on the space.

Remarkably, many of the spaces as built resemble sketches drawn right at the project's inception. Ash Sakula is known for its meticulous drawing style and detailed, bespoke approach to specification, and this entire project has an ambience that speaks of an attuned and confident craftsmanship matched by few British architects.

As my day in Cardiff draws to a close, Sakula and I make an unplanned visit to Roger Stirk and Harbour + Partners' 2005 National Assembly for Wales. It's not easy to get into. The entrance is anonymous, and once we have climbed the steps, passed through a room of metal detectors and body scanners and walked into the main hall, we find it completely empty. We reach a dead end, double-back and leave. No 'walk-through' opportunities here. The experience only sharpens my appreciation of Ash Sakula's user-friendly design for Chapter. I want to go back already. ■

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