CHAPTER

The Early Years
CHAPTER – AN EARLY HISTORY

Chapter Arts Centre opened its doors in early 1971. It was the first arts centre to open in Wales and was enabled by the driving force of freelance writer Mik Flood, and Welsh artists Christine Kinsey and Bryan Jones.

Today, Chapter is a multifrom arts venue that has grown into one of the largest arts complexes in Europe. It hosts two cinemas, two theatres, a gallery, a large number of artists’ studios and creative industry offices, meeting places for the community and a very popular restaurant and bar. It produces and presents contemporary visual art and performance works, and shows independent, mainstream and international films.

In 2021 Chapter will celebrate its 50th Birthday and here, in an edited version of a longer text, Kerrie Reading describes the early years between 1968 and 1980, with contributions from founders Christine Kinsey and Mik Flood.

HOW CHAPTER BEGAN

The first meeting between Mik Flood, Christine Kinsey and Bryan Jones, to discuss the idea of opening an arts centre in Cardiff, took place in 1968.

Many artists in the late 1960s were concerned about the commodification of visual art, wanting to produce work that was not for sale — as a direct reaction against the commercial art world, which to them was ubiquitous and stifling of creativity.

The three founders desired a venue that could provide artists with the space to produce work that they wanted to create, free from commercial pressures. Experimental work was therefore seen as key to the identity of the arts centre. In an interview with Billy Adams, Drama Officer for the Welsh Arts Council in the 1970s and an advocate for Chapter’s work, Kinsey remembers that for visual arts in Cardiff there was only two small commercial galleries at that time: “the Howard Roberts Gallery and the Albany Gallery showed contemporary painting and drawing but there was no exhibition space for the diverse range of art that was developing through the 1960s. There was also an absence of affordable studio and performance space, so we planned a venue that could fulfill all these needs”. Jones, Flood and Kinsey imagined a space where artists could both produce and show work, and they began generating support for Wales’ first multi-platform arts centre.

ESTABLISHING THE SUPPORT AND FUNDING

The Arts Centre Project Group (ACPG) initially consisting of Christine Kinsey, Bryan Jones, Mik Flood and Elizabeth Weston, who left Cardiff during 1970, began to consider how to secure support for their venture. They worked with the graphic designer Steve Allinson to organise a Pop Concert in Sophia Gardens on 5 February 1970 featuring Pink Floyd and Black Sabbath with supporting events that included inflatable sculpture and performance artists. They also rented a disused shop on Queen St where they organised a series of art and performance events and began gathering information to assess people’s support for an art centre in Cardiff. After placing an advertisement in the International Times, the ACPG received a reply from Peter Jones, then Visual Arts Officer for the Welsh Arts Council, who was able to expand upon their initial ideas, and was also a potential source of money.

To further cement what was needed to set up a venue, they began to explore what an arts centre would require in order to establish itself. After meeting with the city’s planning committee, they were asked to produce a feasibility study for the project. They also sent out a questionnaire asking societies and individuals what they wanted to see in a city arts centre.

The findings of this were published in the initial art centre proposal in 1970. The following requirements for an arts centre were established in response:

1. area for showing films: raked seating to accommodate 150-200 people;
2. areas for experimental theatre, concerts, folk-songs, poetry readings, jazz and experimental music, a flat space accommodating a maximum of 300 people;
3. an exhibition and display area where work being done in the Centre could be shown and sold;
4. a permanent communications area where there would be a bookstall, information desk and a form of box-office;
5. large studio area for people working with inflatables and large structures;
6. workshops for people working in printing, metalwork, videotape, etc;
7. storage space;
8. refreshment area;
9. meeting or committee rooms.

As the list reveals, the arts centre would need to be a multi-purpose venue to house such works. It needed space for performance, for film, for visual arts, and so a building large enough to accommodate all of these simultaneously was needed.

Following the findings, the ACPG devised a proposal to the Welsh Arts Council. Peter Jones was very interested in the idea of an arts centre opening in Cardiff, and he encouraged ACPG to establish ‘Pavilions in the Park’, an outdoor festival that had originated in London and that Peter Jones was keen to transfer to Cardiff. Jones thought it would be a useful way to encourage people to come and see what was happening artistically in Wales, and to test the reception of contemporary works in Cardiff.

In 1970, the ACPG organised a six-week-long Pavilions in the Park event in Bute Park, one of Cardiff’s public parks. All events were free, which allowed the people of Cardiff to get a sense of what an arts centre might potentially make available. Pavilions was very successful, with people queuing up see to performances.

As previously mentioned, the main ambition and driving force for opening an arts centre arose from the lack of affordable studios for artists in Cardiff and therefore the venue needed to be adequate to support local artists who were interested in renting space. In 1970 the ACPG described:

“[w]ithin this building we could provide a nucleus for creative activity in Cardiff. A nucleus that would be involved with, and play an active part in, the community as a whole. Through co-operation and managerial policy, facilities, equipment and services would be made available to artists who, for financial reasons, would never previously have obtained them. This centre would bridge the gap between the ‘established’ as sponsored by art galleries, museums and theatres, etc, and those active on the workshop or ‘grassroots’ level. We envisage a centre of creative/social interactivity encompassing all aspects of the audio-visual arts. A centre that would not be introspective in attitude or ambition but would go out in the community - into schools, pubs, clubs, and hospitals.”

Community involvement was integral to the centre’s development. Christine Kinsey’s experience as a teacher informed her interest in making the arts centre a place for the community; for example,
she was the driving force behind setting up a nursery, that also allowed parents and their children to witness and participate in art work. And the ACPG acknowledged the importance of connections with groups and individuals, forging community cohesion. The venue would be the host of incoming contemporary work, of locally made work, and of community focused groups. Through this the three directors felt that Chapter, as a venue, could have the potential to attract a range of occupants and audiences. The arts centre should act as a doorway into the world of contemporary art; to create connections to the wider artistic world.

**FINDING AND SECURING THE VENUE**

After considering different buildings, the group were provided with a list of council-owned empty properties. One of them was the former Canton High School, a building and extended site that had been empty for two years.

It would prove ideal. It had ample space for studios and enough footage to create a cinema, gallery and performance space. As Kinsey remembers: “We looked at three disused buildings and decided that the £1,000-square foot of space on two floors at the old Canton High School was the most suitable”. Indeed, the size of the building, rather than its location, was a crucial factor in the decision - it was large and adaptable enough for the team to transform the spaces accordingly.

Due to the poor state of the building, it was offered by the City Council to the ACPG for a peppercorn rent of £1,000 per year. In 1970, they also received a grant of £2,500 from the Welsh Arts Council. Bryan Jones lists the centre’s additional expenses in 1972:

‘…the rates being another £700 per year. The running costs this year are estimated to be £21,000. The Welsh Arts Council (£10,000) and Cardiff City Council (£4,000) are providing the bulk of this and Chapter is committed to finding the remaining third from subscriptions, rents and other revenues’. (Jones: 20 November 1973)

Kinsey explains: “Alan Saunders, a solicitor, who was a member of the amateur Everyman theatre group, had offered to advise us on how to form a management committee in order for the art centre to become a limited company with charitable trust status. Alan’s support was crucial to us and he worked tirelessly for many years on Chapter Board, as our solicitor, at an evening meeting in Alan’s office he said that to complete the legal forms we needed to choose a name, we hadn’t even thought about it. Bryan suggested Chapter, and with the urgency of the situation, Mik and I agreed, a decision I have never regretted”.

Once the ACPG team were in the building they began to convert it. This was happening whilst also trying to make Chapter function as an arts centre and to generate income. In converting the various classrooms and other spaces, the work undertaken included manually sanding floors, demolishing properties. One of them was the former Canton High School, a building and extended site that had been empty for two years. The venue’s initial period of set up was a demanding time for the founders who had been joined by Julie Flood in 1971, and volunteers. There was debris left in the building from it having been used by squatters, and the numerous rooms and spaces needed restoration in order to fully function. But giving up their respective jobs Kinsey, Jones and Flood persevered and were able to officially open Chapter in July 1971 with a temporary cinema, gallery and bar, and with former classrooms used as studios, workshops and offices.

**CHAPTER’S FIRST YEARS**

The venue’s initial period of set up was a demanding time for the founders who had been joined by Julie Flood in 1971, and volunteers. There was debris left in the building from it having been used by squatters, and the numerous rooms and spaces needed restoration in order to fully function. But giving up their respective jobs Kinsey, Jones and Flood persevered and were able to officially open Chapter in July 1971 with a temporary cinema, gallery and bar, and with former classrooms used as studios, workshops and offices.

It’s first tenants were visual artists working in a range of disciplines, community groups, Everyman Theatre Club (an amateur Cardiff group), the South Wales Arts Society, the Cardiff Cine Society, the Drama Association of Wales and Heresy Folk Club.

Peter Davies, writing in the The Western Mail, later confirmed: ‘…Within a month, it had 1,000 members…rents studio space to a dozen artists and over twenty local groups and societies’ (Davies: 1973). This highlights the initial and immediate impact that the venue had: attracting so many members clearly indicated that there was an artistic gap in Cardiff that the centre was beginning to fill.

Chapter Gallery offered space to individuals and groups who were interested in using large open spaces for new developments in the visual arts including multimedia work that had not been previously seen in Cardiff. The gallery programme included performance artists Roland Miller and Shirley Cameron, who were based in Swansea, and presented an exhibition called Flowers and Flesh which included performance, the Zoo Group also included performance art and sculpture which had grown out of the Time-Based course initiated by John Gingell in Cardiff College of Art in the 1960s and the Chapter based artist Charles Byrd exhibited paintings and sculptures. In March 1972 Chapter commissioned the first installation by sculptor Peter Dockley and the performance artist John Hart which included full-size wax figures in an eight-foot high wooden room constructed in the centre of the downstairs hall. Other exhibitions in the early years included painter-sculptor Ian Mckeever, photographer David Bailey, painters Osi Rhy Rhys Osmund and John Selway and visual artist and American artist Robert Metherell, a documentary exhibition ‘A Working Class Life’, kinetic sculpture by Lilian Lijn and an exhibition of visual art by women which included an appliqué wall hanging by Tracey Emin and a large oil painting called ‘God giving Birth’ by Monica Sjöö.

A major advance for Chapter was when the dance company, Moving Being moved from London to set up base in Wales in 1972. It signalled that Chapter had become, or had the potential to be, a venue that was able to offer the space and time that other venues at the time could not. Kinsey notes that: “Geoff Moore and Moving Being moved into Chapter in the summer of 1972 and immediately this creative input of professional actors, dancers, artists and designers became the driving force in establishing a proper theatre”.

A few years after they had made a base at Chapter, Peter Davies described Moving Being as being able to claim “to be Britain’s most inventive multimedia drama group”. In 1973 Moving Being created ‘Angels’, a mixed-media production using cutting-edge technology and pushing the boundaries of what contemporary theatre could then offer. This production was a positive step for Chapter demonstrating that they were beginning to become part of the ecology of experimental and site-specific theatre work that was happening in the UK at the time and reflecting Chapter’s adaptability and the openness of its ethos.

This pattern of experimental work continued throughout Chapter’s first decade, with work from visiting companies Bett and Braces, 7th Theatre Company, The People Show, Welfare State. As well as the a highly influential performance of “Siwe Bansi is Dead” by John Kari and Wriston Ntsiona in collaboration with Athol Fugard from South Africa, and ‘Terraces’ by the Welsh writer and artist Alan Osborne. Other companies took up residence in the centre, including Cardiff Laboratory for Theatrical Research (later Cardiff Lab), Keith Wood Productions (later Highway Shoes), and Paupers Carnival many of whom experimented with multimedia, audience interaction and content – often addressing political or social issues. Having this experimental theatre at the venue provided the platform for other groups, as Kinsey explains: “the enhancement of the theatre space made it possible for Chapter to receive most of the important small-scale theatre companies who were touring Britain at that time, so that Chapter was a real focus for both theatre artists and audiences”.

Chapter also hosted concerts in the theatre which were organised by the musician and musicologist Judith Sorota who gave her time to promote a range of concerts with music that had not been available to audiences in Cardiff. They included Alvin Lucier, Carlos Bonell, Trevor Pinnock, Colin Tilney and Spheres of Music. Poetry also formed part of Chapter’s theatre programme with memorable readings by Basil Bunting and Yevgeny Yevtushenko.
Film played a crucial role in Chapter’s development in establishing an audience as well as an important cash flow. The cinema showed a mixture of commercial successes as well as avant-garde Continental and New Wave films, with the former supporting less popular work. The success of the cinema led to the setting up of the film production workshop which was the only one of its kind in Wales. Karl Francis’ documentary/fiction films such as ‘Above Us The Earth’ (1971) was filmed at the Ogilvy Colliery and exposed the injustice of the pit closures in the Rhymney valley during the 1970s.
The film workshop offered opportunities to women film makers and, through the Red Flannel cooperative, they supported women in the valleys to film their own experiences. Younger innovating film-makers with professional ambitions and personal creative objectives, as well as other social groups found themselves able to record their campaigns. Joanna Quinn, Chris Monger, Marc Evans are among those whose international reputations began in Chapter.

It was not just alternative theatre, music, film and visual art that was being produced in Chapter; the community-driven focus was also brought to fruition. As Kinsey confirms, “…our concerns were two-fold; to encourage artists from all disciplines to move into the building to produce art and to ensure that the local community was encouraged to use the building as much as possible”. The venue was to become a host for a myriad of initiatives, developing both artistic and community-driven projects, as well as playing host to social and political groups including, amongst others, the Workers Education Association and providing space for organisations from the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE) to the Labour Party to meet. The centre was quickly establishing itself as an interdisciplinary place – where professional artists, amateur groups, and community groups could meet and be housed under one roof. This is also indicative of the left political alignment of Kinsey, Jones and Flood. They were able to use the building as a host for left-leaning pursuits, which informed Chapter’s reputation.

**CHANGING CHAPTER**

By 1976, Chapter was beginning to change quite dramatically; over a few years, it had grown significantly, demonstrating how firmly established the venue had become. Another significant change was the departure of both Christine Kinsey and Bryan Jones, who left to pursue their own artistic projects and also felt that Chapter needed to restructure in order to keep moving forward: “By about 1976 […] both Bryan and I realised that Chapter needed a different kind of business change was the departure of both Christine Kinsey and Bryan Jones, who left to pursue their own artistic projects and also felt that Chapter needed to restructure in order to keep moving forward. I remember deciding that, and Bryan and I needed to get back to our own work, painting and so on”.

Paul Chandler, an arts administrator, had worked for Birmingham Arts Lab and for Royal Court Theatre in London, and he had substantial experience of theatre administration, an area of expertise that Chapter lacked prior to his arrival. Paul Chandler was appointed as the Administrator for Chapter from 1975. ‘Paul Chandler had come to work in Chapter and it was his creative knowledge and empathy together with his financial expertise which rooted Chapter in the kind of financial systems which allowed it to become an ongoing success’.

**RESIDENCIES AT CHAPTER**

After the departure of Kinsey and Jones, Mik Flood was left as the sole Artistic Director of the arts centre with Paul Chandler as Administrator.

Despite Chapter receiving more funding overall, Flood was aware of a subsidy crisis for touring work at this time; he was also becoming disillusioned with companies coming in and leaving without forming a deeper relationship with the venue. And so, in order to get a sense of how other venues operated, Flood visited comparable venues in Europe in 1976. It was through a visit to the Mickery Theatre in Amsterdam, run by innovative director Bitaert Ten Cate, that Flood saw how venues could adopt a collaborative approach to working with theatre companies, and this inspired him to emulate the procedure at Chapter.

Flood saw how The Mickery’s relationship with visiting companies was different from what he had previously witnessed or established at Chapter. He saw that companies were invited through residency schemes to make and present work over a period of time and he wanted the same companies to visit Chapter to bring the most innovative theatre works to Chapter.

It was after this that saw a noticeable shift in theatre programming in Chapter. Flood wanted companies to spend time making work within the conditions of the venue and so the residency scheme began. What Chapter did for companies, like Pip Simmons, was give them the space and freedom to generate work of a scope and scale that they had previously been unable to do in Britain. In 1977 funding was secured from the Welsh Arts Council to invite Pip Simmons to stage a promenade version of Georg Büchner’s ‘Woyzeck’ that made full use of the gallery and performance spaces as well as the public areas of Chapter.

Consequently, the residencies began in 1977, the year that Flood produced new plans for Chapter; in a report for the coming year, he wrote: “When Chapter started in 1971 there was a conscious decision that theatre should not dominate us or the building as it did at so many other arts centres we had seen – places where all other activities became subordinate to a hegemonic theatre presence”. However, Flood goes on to explain how this was an overreaction and instead acknowledges what in turn, Chapter had not done. For example, “it hasn’t established a positive identity for itself’. He also writes about the relationship between artists and venue, which he felt at the time had not been properly established, and in order to rectify the situation, Flood suggests that the ‘commitment must be made beyond the show’. In hosting the companies, what Flood achieved, was a symbiotic relationship between venue and company, reaching far beyond the performance as a one-off event to ‘see a move away from product towards an emphasis on process’.

Flood further proposed that he wanted Chapter to be able to pay fees for work to be both produced and performed, introducing the notion of residencies. This marrying of process and product demonstrated how the venue became instrumental in being the instigator of the work.

The residencies, or ‘Theatre Pool’, were implemented as a way of working, rather than a stand-alone experiment and companies such as OU, Waste of Time and Welfare State were all part of the scheme. Flood felt strongly that a fused relationship between artist and venue was crucial in order for touring theatre at that time to be transformed; to support the understanding that artists were compromising their artistic qualities to make work quickly and cheaply. As Mik Flood described in his organisational plans 1978-79: “Chapter has embarked on a new course in housing and performing companies to visit Chapter to bring the most innovative theatre works to Chapter. Chapter became a host venue for what we would now call site-specific and immersive productions on a large-scale that helped cement its reputation for being a leading arts venue for innovative performance art of the 1970s and beyond.

CARDIFF ARTS CENTRE PROJECT

BENEFIT EVENT

Thursday 5th February 5.30 – 2 a.m.
Sophia Gardens Pavilion, Cardiff

PINK FLOYD
Quintessence, Daddy Long Legs
Gary Farr, Tea & Symphony
Heaven, Black Sabbath &

Ron Geesin

Tickets 25 shillings

Free afternoon for ticketholders – 2.30 p.m.
with TRADER HORNE, TONY CRERAR, POETRY
JAZZ, PUPPET THEATRE, MORE EVENTS

tickets from the box office, tel. 27657
and the university union, dumfries place;
from steve allison.