

BUILDING ■

Belsize Architects' Oxford boathouse.

*Critique by Yuli Toh.
Photos by Nick Kane.*



Approaching on foot from Abingdon Road on an unsurfaced track across water meadows under a lowering sky, a lone building appears in profile between copses of mature trees. It is curious. It is of a substantial scale for this setting and one cannot immediately identify what it is for. It looks most like a temple: a single form with a low pitched roof over an elevated level of screens partly lit from within, which rests on a tall solid dark base.

This notion is not dispelled as the track ends at its south-east side. The dark plinth is a blue brick box which is itself elevated on short concrete stilts over a ground cover of pale limestone chippings. There are very few

signs of inhabitation. It is a strange, immaculate man-made oasis in a damp and beautiful landscape. There is not yet an obvious way in but there is a sense of anticipation. At the edges of one's field of vision is a roof plane hovering above and the riverbank below. Rounding the base, as if stepping out from theatre wings, one is instantly at the centre of an architectural stage.

University College, Oxford's oldest, lost its Victorian listed boathouse to arson in 1999. The head porter shows me around its successor, designed by Belsize Architects following a limited competition. The brief called for an elegant yet functional building that was

Site plan The £2.1m structure is built on the site of an older, listed boathouse that burned down in 1999. The site is within the green belt and on a flood plain.

Above The roof is lower than that of the boathouse previously on the site, and is intended to suggest the blade of an oar hovering over the building, unifying the disparate functional elements – residential accommodation, rowers' facilities and function rooms.

Top left The ground floor is clad in Staffordshire Blue brick; the first floor is clad in horizontal slatted cedar timber and the roof and soffit are clad in a bronze-copper alloy.

Bottom left View of the projecting Club Room from a first floor terrace.



This is the only boathouse on the west bank on this stretch of the river Isis. It is approached on foot or bicycle along the towpath from Folly Bridge, there being no vehicular access. Like David Chipperfield's River & Rowing Museum in downstream Henley, its raised footprint is a response to the Environment Agency's requirement that construction should entail no loss of flood plain. Belsize Architects' boathouse also appears to take some cues in its use of materials from the museum, and in its purpose and scale from the Henley Royal Regatta enclosure stands. The bronze copper alloy roof cantilevers eight metres, stretches the full frontage of 33 metres and floats nine metres above ground. This is not just a boathouse but a grandstand of the first order. An enigmatic glass box projects from the first floor. Below, gabion walls of the same light stone flank the edge of the wide ramp reaching up to roller shuttered boat bay openings set in sheer walls of Staffordshire Blue bricks with a glazed sheen (from anti-graffiti treatment). After the third opening is a wide gap. A crew is bustling through a small personnel section in a large galvanised steel gate, which references the college's cloistered entrance, and neatly completes the 'fortifications'.

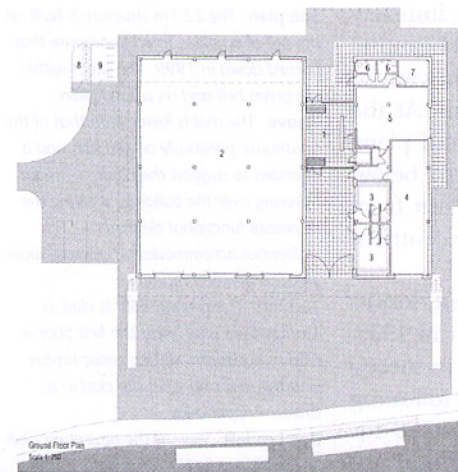


accessible, with low maintenance requirements and that is physically secure against break-in and vandalism. Oxford city council supported the inclusion of a residential element giving a 24-hour human presence on the site.

Above On event days, the gate folds back completely to allow crew and spectators to promenade below the great roof. The transparent lobby links the meadows to the rear with the river bank.

Above left Living accommodation.
Plans Ground and first floors.

Through the gate into a courtyard, we finally enter the building through a recessed, fully-glazed double-height foyer. This foyer, housing the staircase, lift and bridge landing, is finished in robust ceramic tiles, steel and glass with refined and controlled detailing on



- 1 Entry
- 2 Boat storage
- 3 Changing room
- 4 Boat repair
- 5 Gym
- 6 Disabled toilet
- 7 Plant room
- 8 Dustbin enclosure
- 9 Security bike parking



- 10 Clubroom
- 11 Communal kitchen (kitchen/lounge)
- 12 Student room
- 13 Key worker flat (living/dining)
- 14 Kitchen
- 15 Bedroom
- 16 Storage
- 17 Terrace

restrained modernist lines. The open tread stair, roof lights cut as 'holes' and glass balustrades all contribute to an abundance of direct and reflected light. This is the processional route from the river, culminating in the first floor Club Room, an elevated panorama-viewing box.

This room has structural glazing on three sides and projects towards the river. The sides are partly made up of full-height sliding doors such that, when opened, the room is seamlessly and amply supplemented on each side by six metre-deep terraces sheltered (in the event of rain) by the impressive and unifying flat plane of the copper roof soffit (sadly interrupted by a white ceiling inside the club room). According to Shahriar Nasser, director at Belsize Architects, the untreated copper will not turn green but will gradually darken to a warm bronze.

The double-glazed walls are north-facing or well shaded but the Club Room does have air conditioning for functions when it could get warm from the number of people attending. Although the building is very well insulated and the copper is fully recyclable, when the boathouse was designed just four years ago, sustainability was not a specific priority, admits Nasser.

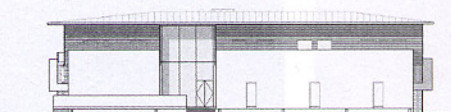
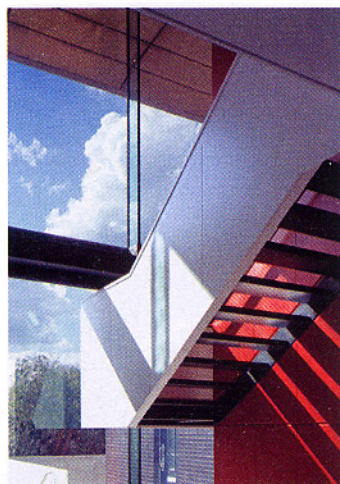
The structure, being fully concealed, is successful in making all the hard work seem effortless. Deep pile foundations support a concrete base and first floor, topped by a concrete ring beam on which the cantilever steel roof frame sits.

The clarity of layout and simplicity of form of this building (contained in a rectangular volume 33 by 24 by 10 metres high) belies the architect's achievement in integrating interwoven circulation routes that serve the different users. The through foyer is an effective device. The residents approach on the north-west side of the building along a discreet ramp that delivers them to an entryphone-controlled 'home' entrance on the meadows side of the foyer. Although they share the vertical circulation with club users who have

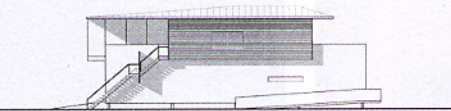


entered from the riverside, a feeling of separation is achieved. The postgraduate student residents – all oddly non-rowers – retreat through a private door to an apartment of six bright study bedrooms and a communal kitchen-cum-living-room. French windows

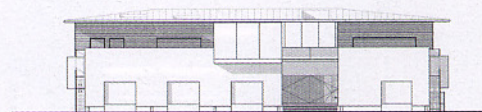
Above Interior and exterior views of the Club Room, from which there is a view of more modest boathouses on the opposite bank. Internally the lighting is on simple manual dimmers. Externally there is a subtle wash on the brick base and the roof soffit.



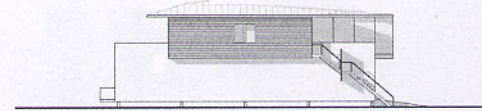
South West Elevation



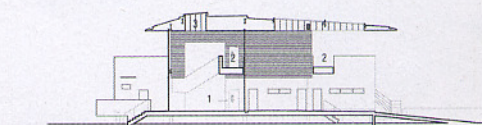
North West Elevation



North East Elevation



South East Elevation



Section AA

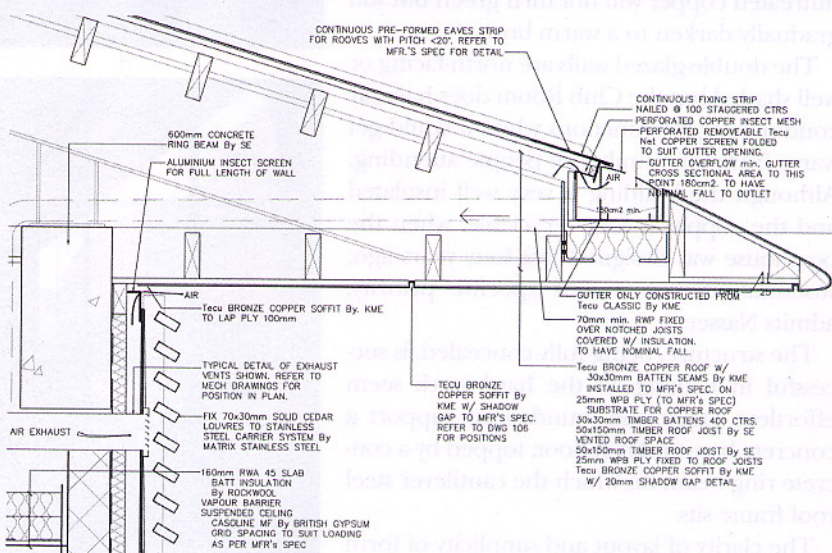
- 1 Entry
- 2 Bridges
- 3 Skylight
- 4 Roof opening

lead onto the terraces. Horizontal cedar slat external cladding and shutters wrap this entire level to give privacy but at the same time allow views to the landscape beyond: the river here, an upper reach of a Thames tributary, locked from Teddington, is calm. A self-contained two-bedroom flat for a keyworker is similarly cocooned.

We retrace our steps downstairs to enter spaces for what one might have thought would be the real *raison d'être* for a boathouse: quite uncelebrated are a series of doors within the external gated courtyard leading into what the architect describes as the functional facilities – the changing rooms, showers, toilets, a small gym and boiler room. These are in fairfaced blockwork with softwood doors, all painted white with vinyl floor finishes.

These spaces are neat and warm but bunker-like despite their clerestorey windows. It was difficult to see where the architecture has embraced the athletes' domain, which is in stark contrast to the 'elegant' piano nobile upstairs. Rowers' changing rooms have never been luxurious but there is a lot of banter and life in them that could have justified a social place-making approach. Also, gym training is a significant part of a rower's routine, and a session on an ergo can be mind-bogglingly boring; a view might have been welcome. In the quest to give the building a secure base, the architects have missed an opportunity to reveal and celebrate some of the sport's land-based activities – racing takes place on only a few days in the calendar.

The remaining utilitarian spaces are the workshop and boat storage bays. By setting this new boathouse further back from the bank than its predecessor, a larger foreground was created for manoeuvring boats during the main race events on the club's calendar, the Torpids and Eights. The black roller shutters to the bays are intentionally forbidding when closed; it is a hard aesthetic. Rightly banished is any hint of Victorian filigree to domesticate it. However, this building



Top View from the meadows.

Detail Typical gutter section.

Below Gym, workshop and boat storage bay with roller shutter (ph: Richard Pye).



needs the rowers' activities, of lifting boats and washing down, to humanise it and dispel an otherwise desolate feel to the place.

Inside, the storage bays are fitted out to Olympic standard with cantilevered racking for boats and oars. Cavernous and well-ordered, these are unheated spaces, in fairfaced block with a floated concrete floor. The boat bays are shared with Somerville, Wolfson and St Peter's colleges. On my visit a new boat





for the women's eight had just arrived, still in its wrapping on the top rack, but women have been rowing at University College since 1979.

As another undergraduate eight prepares to lift their boat, they tell us they would like to take their parents up to the clubroom for tea and bemoan that it is usually locked. Anyway, they say it is 'too rarefied for us to use'. The Club Room is designated for race days. At other times it is to be used for non-rowing meetings and conferences; it is not for traipsing through in wet clothes nor for putting one's feet up in.

This building does not need romantic rowing metaphors. It is confident, sophisticated and brave, with Belsize Architects showing an accomplished handling of an architectural palette that we normally associate with top galleries and museums. Here, it has arrived fully formed into the genteel Edwardian world of English boathouses. It is fresh in this context and inspires a second look at a sport that, pre-Redgrave, had little mass appeal.

Belsize Architects might not have given us a new typology for boathouses because of the unique brief and resultant iconic design. As a race day grandstand, it successfully supports the drama of the crowds and gaudy rowing blazers. As a boathouse, it is perhaps unnecessarily overt for what is already an elite, self-absorbed sport. Still, this building is going to be very good for rowing. It has strengthened the club's identity and is a boost to crew

morale and recruitment. For architecture, it is out there as a new design reference and standard of investment for subsequent boathouse commissions.

Today, oarsmen athletes are highly scientific about their training and the sport, still resolutely amateur, is attracting international media attention and with it serious sponsorship. This building is a worthy marker of this new age of rowing.

Yuli Toh is a partner in Toh Shimazaki Architecture whose recent projects include additions to the London Rowing Club's hq.

Project team

Architect: Belsize Architects; design team: Shahriar Nasser, Steven Burrows, Gaia Bianchi, Diana Zepf, Anthony Kwan, Shoji Murata; planning consultant: Barton Willmore; structural engineer: AKS Ward; qs: McBains Cooper Consulting; main contractor: Kingerlee; client: University College Oxford.

Selected suppliers and subcontractors

Copper roof: KME Tecu Bronze, installed by Cotswold Metal Roofing; Staffordshire Blue bricks: Ibstock; timber cladding: Boyland Joinery; ceramic tiles: Pickard Interiors; roller shutters: HVP; lift: Garte; gate and external staircases: L&L Mechanical & Steel Fabrication Services; insulation: Kingspan Kooltherm, Rockwool; glazing: Pilkington Suncool; handrail: Sapphire; concrete paviors: Brett; underfloor heating: Warmfloor; plasterboard: British Gypsum.

