



Risen From

WORDS MALCOLM SCHOLES
PHOTOGRAPHY BELSIZE ARCHITECTS

When fire destroyed Oxford's University College Boat Club boathouse, the architects looked forwards rather than back

I must disclose my enthusiasm. I believe that this modern gem of a boathouse on the banks of the Isis in Oxford, the UK, stands as a masterful architectural reply to the disastrous fire of 1999, which reduced the original boathouse to ashes. In the 1880s, architect John Oldrid Scott designed the boathouse for the Oxford University Boat Club in a style which encapsulated the aspiration and confidence of the British Empire. The boathouse was built on land owned and leased by University College, and when the lease expired in 1964, University College Boat Club (UCBC) took back ownership and moved in.

The Ashes

The initial design was typical of the style of sporting pavilion architecture during the period. The club-house pavilion was set atop four imposing walls which contained the boat storage at river level. Four large wide doors gave the crew and boats easy access to the river landing stage for training and competition. The entire facade had large tall windows down to terrace level and a central pair of imposing doors providing access to and from the terrace. Three tall flagpoles fixed to the front of the terrace, with one at each corner and a central flagpole of at least fifty feet in height, hinted at the superior sporting

power within the structure. These flagpoles were positioned to impress observers and intimidate the opposition and other college boathouses on the opposite bank of the Isis.

Like the British Empire, the boathouse did not last. One day in 1999 it burnt to the ground, and took eight long years to bring a new boathouse to life. During this intervening period, many meetings took place between the committee of the UCBC, the planners, the environment agency and competing architectural practices. Because the boathouse was a Grade II listed building, there was much discussion →

about the replacement building's appearance. UCBC's original brief was to reflect the original Grade II style in any new design. However, Belsize Architects, led by Shahriar Nasser, were the eventual winners and persuaded the UCBC and the planners to go for a modern 21st-century style, which was bold and different in concept. As the saying goes, "Fortune favours the brave", and Belsize Architects were awarded a prize for their design by the Royal Institute of British Architects, an accolade for which they can be justifiably proud.

UCBC's brief for the ground floor was that it should not look vulnerable; rather it should be strong and sturdy. This would seem a natural response to its destruction by fire. The brick chosen is robust, dark grey in colour and coated with clear anti graffiti paint. It mainly surrounds the ground floor and rises to include the terrace walls above. The two-storey glazed atrium cuts directly through the North and South walls in one straight thrust, allowing the water meadows and the Isis to be viewed without interruption. There are three doors through which one can access the boat storage area from the slipway and it is designed to hold 25 x 8s, 5 x 4s and 6 x 1s. The UCBC retain one and a half bays and let the other half out to the boat clubs of Somerville, St Peter's and Wolfson College. UCBC's own boats comprise of 8 x 8s, 3 x 4s, 1 x 2s and 4 x 1s. The fourth bay oc-

cupying the slipway is a boat maintenance repair bay. The gym can also be found on the ground floor and has eight Concept II rowing machines and extensive weight training equipment, with male and female changing rooms adjacent.

Stairs and a lift are located in the double storey atrium, which takes visitors to the first floor clubhouse and viewing terrace. This floor also accommodates living quarters for six graduates with a communal kitchen and lounge. There is also a large flat with two bedrooms, living area and kitchen for college staff. Both sets of accommodation enjoy their own south-facing terrace, with views over the water meadows. The atrium divides the large flat from the graduates' accommodation and clubhouse, probably appreciated by the college staff. The spectators' terrace looks directly onto the river and is backed by glazed windows and slatted timber shutters of the accommodation areas. The horizontal emphasis of the slatted timber shutters contrasts with the flat copper on the underside of the overhanging terrace roof. Inspiration for the wafer thin edge of the copper roof was drawn from the cutting edge of the blade of an oar. The entire roof externally and internally, excluding the clubhouse and accommodation, is made from copper panels, the copper blended with bronze during manufacture to prevent verdigris, a result of the natural oxidation of copper which can turn it green over →

Below left View from the riverside first floor terrace through the glass walled clubhouse

Below right The glazed entrance atrium showing the copper panels on the ceiling linking exterior to interior

Opposite Floor to ceiling glazing of the entrance atrium screen and the colourful open staircase



Below The Victorian boathouse designed by John Oldrid Scott in the 1880's. Burnt down in 1999. Rebuilt in 2006. Photo courtesy of AKSWard



time. The viewing terrace can be reached either directly through the clubhouse or by an external flight of stairs at each end, both incorporating a neatly designed security shield preventing unwarranted access on the external flight of stairs at each end.

The dominant feature of the riverside elevation is the first floor viewing-terrace by the all-glass end-wall of the clubhouse. The end wall of the clubhouse projects beyond the boat storage walls below and reaches out as if to escape but is restrained by the connection with the wafer-thin edge of the overhanging copper roof. The roof is a dominant and effective design feature; it can be viewed from any side of the building and provides a slightly oriental look to the overhang of the roof, which takes the form of a shallow inverted V. At various places above the terrace and in the atrium area, the roof is punched out to allow daylight to penetrate the interior of the building. An observer can see through these cut outs the slop-

ing cross section that reminds one of the shallow draught of an upturned boat providing shelter for the spectators. The use of glass and lighting in the atrium, clubhouse walls and walkway bridging the atrium provide the visitor with a dramatic viewing experience.

This modern boathouse is light years away from its predecessor and rightly so. Timidity has no place in architecture. The way this has been conceived and executed is a stunning reminder that a bold approach can often be the most effective architectural decision. What would have resulted if Shahriar Nasser had stuck with the UCBC's far more tradition brief? There would be no unusual, stunning building to see; probably just a play-safe, unimaginative design. The boathouse we have now is in the finest tradition of what architecture is supposed to achieve and the building is a magnificent demonstration of what can be delivered within a tight budget. Well done to Shahriar Nasser and his team at Belsize Architects. **ROW360**



Left UCBC men's and women's Vills on the Saturday of Summer Eights 2014. In front of an estimated crowd of 10,000 spectators.

Right UCBC's M8+ 1st crew, University Summer Eights 2014



Photos: Mischa Baczewicz

UCBC had a mixed 2013/2014 season. The women's side had a successful early season with great wins at Bedford Regatta and came a very credible 56th place at the Women's Head of the River Race, the highest position of any of Oxford or Cambridge Colleges. They had solid row-overs every day in Summer Eights, the main Oxford Colleges annual regatta, finishing eighth on the River.

The men's side, who had bumped up to fourth on the river in Summer Eights the year before,



had a tough year marred by injuries and illnesses. Despite this they finished the Summer Eights season sixth on the River, a solid platform to build from for the next season.

In the lower boats, the women's Second VIII won blades in Summer Eights, going up five places in four days and gaining a

solid footing in Division III. The men's Second VIII, having won blades the year before, had a few technical hiccups, but managed to stay in Division III as one of the top Second Vills on the River.

In total UCBC had nine boats on the River during the Summer Eights.