

# Rising from the ashes

By Reg Little

PLANS to replace an historic university boathouse with a modern £1.8m glass structure have been approved by Oxford city councillors.

The famous Victorian boathouse beyond Folly Bridge was gutted in a blaze six years ago.

But councillors have backed University College's decision to go for "an unashamedly contemporary" structure, rather than trying to recreate the grade II listed building.

The college's decision to go for a minimalist contemporary design, with glass walls and a roof in the shape of a hovering blade has come under criticism from traditionalists.

The Environment Agency also raised concerns about up to nine people residing in the new boathouse and being left isolated at times of serious flooding.

University College had initially thought about trying to rebuild the gutted boathouse, on the banks of the River Thames, close to its confluence with the River Cherwell. But it decided to hold an architectural competition after concluding that it was impractical to try to salvage the structure.

An officers' report to the central, south and west area committee described the new boathouse as "dramatic and honest to its age".

Under the terms of the agreement, University College will be required to make a £10,000 contribution to improving the surface of the Thames towpath.

Councillors, however, were unhappy about the college's plans to light the access road to the boathouse from Abingdon Road, which they feared would spoil the rural atmosphere of the area. Instead, the college has been asked to investigate the idea of installing low-level lighting that was vandal-proof. Committee chairman, Susanna Pressel, said: "We are pleased that the burnt-out boathouse, which has stood there for years, is to be replaced by a new building which looks quite beautiful, though uncompromisingly modern. We are also pleased that money is being provided to improve the Thames towpath."

The building, designed by Belsize Architects, will stand in the footprint of the existing remains, with the ground floor comprising three boat bays, a repair bay and gym. The first floor will house two warden flats and six student bedrooms with a club room in the centre of the riverside elevation. To mitigate the impact on the floodplain, the building will sit on stilts, allowing water to pass freely underneath at times of flood.



■ Future sight . . . what the new University College boathouse will look like. The building will be a contemporary glass structure and will cost in the region of £1.8m

## College boathouse plans approved

The architectural historian, David Clark, told the meeting that the original building should have been reinstated as much as possible.

He said afterwards: "The old boathouse is unique. There is no other surviving building of its kind anywhere else in the country. Like the cricket pavilion in the University Parks it has an iconic status. It is important because of its size, the way it dominated the river and as a structure of its time, relating to the rowing scene of the 19th century. It was listed because of its historic and architectural importance."

Frank Marshall, University College estates bursar, earlier said that the new building would be a "worthy successor" to the Victorian boathouse, and far better equipped to meet modern technical and health and safety requirements. The college hopes work will begin next year, with the boathouse opening in 2007. It will be used by a number of Oxford colleges.



■ Past and present . . . the University College boathouse in ruins after the fire of 1999, left, and in its prime, right