



April 2008

Pre-prepared: Wilkinson King's island scout huts
Marks Barfield's special needs school in Lambeth
Herzog & de Meuron in Madrid • Snøhetta's Oslo Opera House
Belsize Architects' Oxford boathouse • BIQ's Liverpool Bluecoat

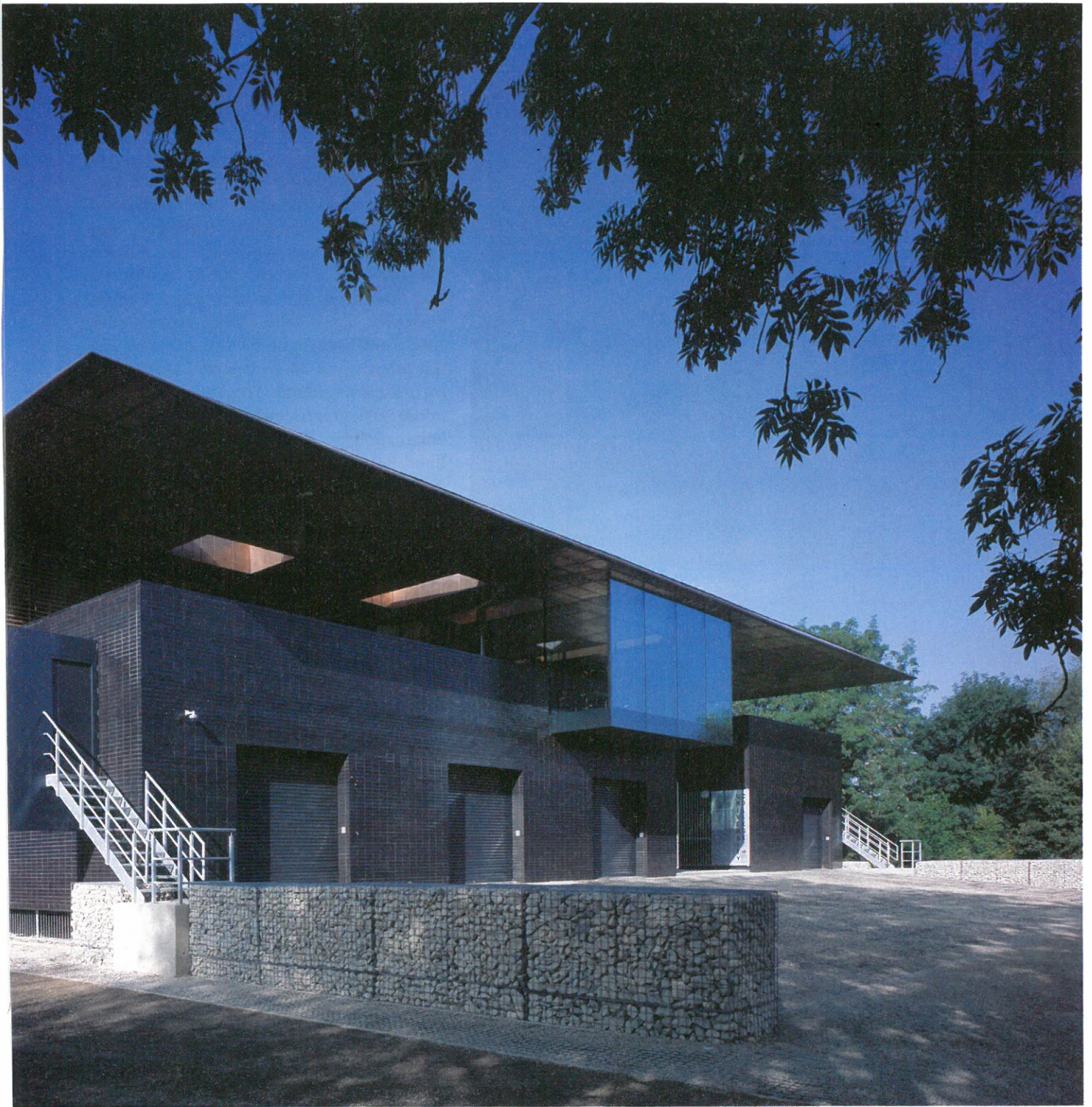


BUILDING ■

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

