

Out with the old, in with...what exactly?

By the time you read this piece of instant wisdom, it's possible we'll all know what the inside of Taranaki's new airport will look like.

I hope so, because the alternatives are problematic. They include: nobody is going to show us until later, or closer to the opening, or when it opens. Those aren't good options, because we're already building towards a good, old-fashioned art-and-history fight, and one that's based on what won't be in the building rather than what might be.

What might be is open to conjecture, if a comment from Mayor Neil Holdom is anything to go by. He told us he was shown the interior design drawings about a year ago but has seen nothing since.

When he did see them, they included the Don Driver depiction of the 1933 arrival over Bell Block Airport of aviator Charles Kingsford Smith, a piece that has been in the terminal since it was built in 1966. Now it's not there.

How was the decision made to dispense with it? Who decided? It wasn't our elected councillors, who haven't seen any designs at all.

Was it the board of the so-called council controlled trade organisation (CCTO) created to manage the airport since we bought it, a body called Papa Rererangi i Puketapu Ltd? If so, what are its qualifications for making such a decision? A look through business data bases and human resources websites shows the four board members have admirable backgrounds in finance, but not a lot of prominence in matters of art.

Maybe that's irrelevant. Perhaps we're misguided to consider this about artistic appreciation or history or respect, or even that the Driver hanging is a work of art.

Is it possible Mr Driver can now be regarded merely as a paid contractor charged long ago with coming up with something, anything, relevant to aviation, and that half a century later his effort can be cast aside as unsuited to whatever modern design the board and its management people have in mind?

The sad thing about this debate is that while we can be confident the new culturally relevant design, whatever it might be, will be well executed and even memorable, why must it exclude such a relevant icon? Why not have both? That surely should have been the brief, rather than poke the public in the eye with a process that has been far from transparent.

I wonder about this local government invention, the CCTO. It's meant to keep money management decisions safely out of the reach and variable competence of democratically elected councillors, but at the end of the day those sitting round the council table cop the fallout if controversy arises.

Unlike councillors, none on the board live here or seem to have their phone numbers, private email addresses or home addresses listed on the internet so we can contact them. That might be wise in matters of money, but it seems less than accountable when it comes to things whose merits are much more open to debate.

That's assuming, of course, the board members have been shown the designs. If not, then we're back to the original question: who decided?

A supplementary question is – who *should* decide? Most (but not all) of our elected local reps have been wary about making public declarations on art since the 1970s, when Mayor Denny Sutherland got offside with the newly minted Govett Brewster Art Gallery for saying a Billy Apple piece looked like a Rugby Park dunny.

So that leaves the bureaucracy. Are they any better equipped? Perhaps a panel of them supplemented by art “experts” could do the job. The only other alternative I can think of is you and me... Uh oh.

FOOTNOTE: NPDC has provided the following response to my footpath column last week.

“Priority is based on a number of factors but the main criteria is the condition of the footpath. We prioritise old, cracked and damaged footpaths, particularly footpath sections that could be a trip hazard for people walking on them.

“Our engineers survey the condition of our district’s footpaths annually to identify sections of footpath that need replacing. We refurbish footpaths with concrete or asphalt. We are currently replacing all chip-seal and slurry-surface footpaths as they reach the end of their life.

“We spend approximately \$550,000 per annum replacing footpaths and about \$250,000 each year on general maintenance of existing footpaths.”