

Heritage mural to be included in new airport, but not in terminal



140617 News Photo. SIMON O'CONNOR/Fairfax NZ Don Driver's artwork at the airport.

SIMON O'CONNOR/Fairfax NZ

New Plymouth Airport's historic Kingsford Smith mural will be on show when the site's \$25 million redevelopment opens - but not in the main terminal.

New Plymouth Airport bosses said there would be no room in the new building for the late Don Driver's aluminium relief sculpture depicting the landing of Charles Kingsford Smith at Bell Block in 1933 - prompting a backlash from the community and criticism from the artist's widow.

The airport, owned by New Plymouth District Council but operated as a separate company, is working with Puketapu hapū on a "modern and cultural design", chief executive Wayne Wootton said.

However, New Plymouth mayor Neil Holdom said they will make sure the 50-year-old artwork is included somewhere in the new precinct, with the final details to be confirmed.

A year ago he had designs sitting on his desk that included the mural, so he was surprised to hear of its exclusion, he said.

The artwork had "huge cultural and historic significance" to the people of Taranaki, he said.

"It is integral to the airport story.

"The mural will be part of the future of the airport and we will be including it in part of the wider airport precinct.

"We want to make sure that it's preserved."

He said the reason it wasn't included within the terminal was because the redevelopment plan was based on designs by renowned sculptor Rangi Kipa and Puketapu hapū, the historic owners of the land.

Including the hapū cultural narrative was part of the original agreement when council voted to create the council-controlled airport company, he said.

"This is a solution that will ensure that we've met our commitments to Puketapu hapū and celebrate their history and tell their stories through the terminal building, and ensuring that this much-loved piece of community art is preserved."

The mural, which hangs above the check-in area, was created by Driver in 1966 for the opening of the then-new airport, commemorating the first passenger-carrying crossing of the Tasman Sea.

The company's decision to leave the mural out of the new terminal had prompted a public outcry, with letters to the Taranaki Daily News and posts on social media.

Driver's widow, Joyce Driver, said she was disappointed the council had "such little regard for its history".

Many others spoke of being "disgusted" and "appalled" at the council decision.

On Facebook, Kay Stachurski said her grandfather and uncle were part of the welcoming party when the flight landed.

"This is part of the airport's history. We should remember these pioneers."

David Musker said he was about 11 years old when Smith's Southern Cross plane landed at the then-Bell Block aerodrome in 1933.

"It was a pleasant day," he said. "It was quite a crowd; it was an anticipatory crowd."

The local aeroplane club went out and escorted Smith in, he said.

"I remember seeing Smith himself out of his plane...He was a pretty accomplished aviator.

"It was quite a landmark, a really historic occasion connecting Australia and New Zealand. That was something in those days."

- Stuff