

# Saved from wrecker but maybe not from a new place in history

ONE SMALL VICTORY for people-power and respect for the aged. The central city Women's Restrooms, which have served and sheltered three generations of New Plymouth women and their children, have — thankfully — been spared the indignity of the demolition hammer. Built in 1936, the riverside art deco building, comprising the reportedly cleanest loos in the country, a lounge and baby-care room, has been saved by a quick 3500 signatures on a petition circulated by the New Plymouth Women's Centre — a separate but sympathetic organisation. The little blue building, with jaunty orange window frames and eaves and architectural highlights, has friends around the country and around the world — judging from letters supporting the petition. Visitors fondly recalled using its facilities as a meeting place and chat room (in a pre-cyberspace era) and even as a dining area for children's lunch packs. Ten years ago, the then tourism minister, John Banks, praised its style, maintenance and standard of hygiene, and his plaque of commendation shines proudly today — along with every other surface.

Deputy mayor and Huatoki redevelopment project manager Lynn Bublitz must sometimes feel very lonely in his efforts to get rid of it. The notion probably cost his mayoral bid in 1995, despite a last-minute backflip on demolition plans. Even today, Mr Bublitz is reluctant to concede defeat (again) to the petitioners, hinting that it might still be possible to shift the concrete building a little further away from the river. The trouble is, he argues, the restrooms are in the way of plans to open this section of the Huatoki. He and his fellow planners reckon the building, despite its charm, would tower incongruously above the proposed terracing planned for the riverbank between Ariki and Devon streets.

They will have to work hard to convince the Friends of the Restrooms that relocation is a viable option — not least in guaranteeing that the 69-year-old structure will not suffer in the shift. The public mood is clearly against losing not only the building but its pristine state, as a cherished relic of an age that somehow more easily managed to blend style with function. The developers are gently massaging the angle that the restrooms — as an issue, a service and a part of history — should nevertheless not be allowed to cast a shadow, literally and figuratively, over the whole \$8 million project, which will be for the benefit of all citizens and visitors. They are still hoping to convince the people and, especially, the petitioners that the rooms' gentle slide 10 metres to the east will be a fair compromise. Good luck. Assuming it pulls that off, the council can brace itself for another round of public opinion on a subject close to just about everybody's heart: art in public places, proposed for a site beside a freshly opened Huatoki Stream that has been callously buried for much of the past century. Don't anyone mention The Rambler.

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