

Our super loos show how much we care

By MATT LAWREY - The Nelson Mail Last updated 13:00 20/02/2010

OPINION: If there is one thing I'd like to be good at, it's reciting poetry. It's not that I'm especially into poetry – I just think that people who can quote poets sound really clever. John Campbell and Jim Mora sometimes drop lines of poetry into conversation, and they always sound damn smart.

Of course, if I ever get around to memorising a few poems, I like the idea of referencing local writers. No Yeats, Wordsworth or Dickinson for me. Instead, I'd be splicing off lines from Fell, Raffills and Le Bas. Or perhaps a quote or two from J Taylor of Stoke.

If you've never heard of J Taylor of Stoke, don't worry. I only recently learnt of him or her through listening to Saturday Mornings with Kim Hill. J Taylor texted the programme a haiku, which Kim read out on air.

It was a typically stunning summer's day in Nelson, and the poem went like this: "Nelson. Branford Park. Cicadas singing."

The cicadas at Branford Park are outdoing themselves this summer. In fact, they are so loud that people with sensitive hearing should probably avoid the place.

Since the Nelson City Council all but got rid of boy racers from the area with those barrier posts, I've become a much bigger fan of the park, mainly because of its proximity to Black Hole. So far this summer, Black Hole has been the spot for the Maitai's other swimming holes to beat. That part of the river has been surprisingly clear, it's deep, it gets the late sun, and it's one of the last spots that still welcomes dogs.

Just next to Black Hole is where you will find the region's coolest new loo. The earthy orange and red concrete block structure was designed by Nelson's own Arthouse Architecture, a company that seems to specialise in public loos, having previously designed amenities for Motueka, Murchison and Takaka.

Many of you probably think I'm scraping the barrel (or should that be the bowl?) going on about a public loo in a newspaper column, but the truth is, I think they say a lot about us – especially to visitors. A shortage of public toilets tells people that the town they are in is stingy and possibly so over-run by lawlessness that building any kind of public facility is just asking for trouble. Dirty, run-down loos suggest a community that doesn't take hygiene seriously, and ones covered in graffiti imply that the place is in decline and no-one cares. Well-designed, clean and interesting toilets, on the other hand, make an excellent impression with visitors and make locals feel good about where they live. Just ask the residents of Kawakawa, home of the world-famous Hundertwasser toilet block.

For these reasons, I'm pleased that the council has recently invested in new loos for Branford Park and Anzac Park. I'm also thrilled that they've razed those creepy and stinky old brick loos from the latter. Not only does their removal mean a much nicer view into the park from Rutherford St, it also means that never again will I have to stand at that old urinal in the dark, waiting for someone to attack me from behind. You laugh? Clearly, you never used that urinal.

Not like the light, spacious, airy new loos in Branford Park, with their stylish wooden touches, stainless steel change tables, modern, ergonomically designed taps and eye-catching art by Janet Bathgate.

I asked half a dozen strangers what they thought of them for a piece in The Leader last week, and most gave them a big thumbs-up. However, there was some confusion about the meaning of the wheelchair symbols on the doors. To me, they mean the facilities are wheelchair-accessible, but to others, they mean disabled people only. In fact, one guy I spoke with said his father, who recently visited from Britain, refused to use them in case someone in a wheelchair came along. Is it just me or is that classic?

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