

WHAT'S THE DIFFICULTY?

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We ask--What's so difficult about talking about, understanding, and "selling" specifications for construction projects?

Why is there such disparity among even astute design professionals, over specifications, that they try to ignore them; dis them; pooh-pooh them; treat them off-handedly; and otherwise give them little respect?

Is there outright fear of specifications? Have "war stories" from various practice, personnel and lawsuits jaded the impressions about specifications to the point that there is a sincere desire to eliminate them? Why are some large corporate clients inkling that they wish to eliminate specifications in favor of their own "engineering standards"?

Are we losing our grip on specifications much in the manner that architects have slowly lost their grip on their traditional professional position and status and in individual practices, as evidenced by the last several decades?

What, exactly, is going on?

In large measure the watering down of the status of architects has been going on since perhaps the 1950s, when the hey-day of masterful architects and projects seemingly ran its course. Practice has been attacked on several issues-- residential work was lost because of fees that were too high; master planning and urban planning took away the far-sightedness and restricted work to mostly singular projects; faulty estimates and the lack of interest in estimating caused clients to question both the intentions of architects and their ability to give fairly accurate costing data; seeing more problems and liability exposure in the construction phase of work, architects chose to withdraw from such work; and projects that produced far too many claims and disputes (including too many that were, indeed, frivolous) caused professional insurance to become so costly as to be so prohibitive that architects sought other, less exposed methods of practicing.

Within that sad scenario, professional education followed a commensurate path. The Beaux Arts died, and were followed by individualistic curricula, often created by in-place faculty (and including non-practicing architects) that were diverted from comprehensive teaching of the profession as a whole--as a business venture with many, many facets and considerations. Design was given even more emphasis than before, squeezing out more and more instruction about the realities and practicalities of practice. From then, and until today, the imbalance in the academic sequence is so marked as to be almost destructive, professionally. One-dimension graduates now must negotiate an intern period in which they must fight individually to force their employers to assist them to perform tasks to meet the internship requirements. Regrettably, employers all too often see no educational function in their tasks or professional responsibilities.

As instruction moved away from practical, less and less time was made available for such instruction (even at an orientation level, of simply mentioning and briefly discussing) as contract documents, regulatory considerations, organization of a professional office, etc. Students in upper elementary grades began to become not only computer literate, but computer wizards, and followed this path into secondary education. Here the manipulations found a "ripe" field called CAD, where buildings could be created with a few clicks, and some electronic magic. Problem was, there was no context for this, and the CAD operator remained clueless as to what was being done, why, how, and with what. They could "build" via the electronics, but they did not know what they were building, or how to convey their thoughts, and requirements to others. Knowing little to nothing about construction methods and materials, we have

come to staffers who produce working drawings quite rapidly, but quite often very flawed (being generous here).

Well, even back "in the good old days" the student professional had to draw--ink on opaque drafting paper; ink on linen, illustration board, etc.; construct perspectives; paint to convey the concept; construct shades and shadows to add realism. Some but not the overwhelming majority also had opportunity to learn and develop skill in "hard-line", manual drafting, or the architectural vernacular, "working drawings". Floor plans, elevations, sections, and best of all, details!

And yes, what you didn't learn in school, your employer weaned you on, starting with ogee gutter details, while you were tucked away in the corner of the drafting room, behind a six-foot, four-legged drafting table with task light, T-square, drafting tools, etc. Your mentor and chief nemesis was the Chief Draftsman, God of the Drafting Room, who demanded (!!!) excellence in line and lettering, and yet was able to teach, develop, and extract professional skills and attributes that stood you well.

But, hey! Where were the specifications? Even then they were not mainstream documents, and their task was one removed from the drafting effort (or it seemed so) and seated in that mysterious alcove occupied by the *"spec writer"*!

There was an unintended mystique created that is the root of the current situation with specifications. They were simply, "done"! Few people really knew how, none were instructed how, and a very few actually engaged them. Usually a principal in the firm, or a senior staffer was in the position, and worked sporadically within the document production process. There were times when information was requested by the spec writers, or came from the writer to the drafting corps or the project Architect. But for the most part, bound booklets of specifications just appeared (magically?) at the very time when the drawings were being sent out to be reproduced and made ready for bidding.

It was not until one became a Job Captain, Lead, or Project Architect, that one came to understand the interface; the necessity for it; and a little of how the process worked. Even then it was more an exchange of information between drawings and specifications and not an in-depth function.

Basically, the spec writer performed multiple tasks--talked with product reps who came into the office "pitching" their wares, or were called to the office for consultation; gathered and developed the product literature library and saw to its updating; research of products and systems to assist and support the drafting effort; and the actual writing of the specifications. Often the "writing" was a cut and paste process (this being pre-computer) where an old spec was carved up and portions physically pasted together to create the new text for the project at hand.

And just importantly, it was the spec writer who was responsible for creating the legal boiler plate, or "front end" of the specifications, from Invitation To Bid, to bid and contract forms, Agreement forms, and General Conditions. Then the Division 1 (pre MF04) provisions which were, as now, the ground rules for the project overall.

There was another side to this situation and that was the lack of any instruction, discussion or passing along of information about the process of actual specification writing. There was no cadre of wannabes in the wings, and no one really knew enough to even aspire to the position. If the spec writer moved on, for whatever reason, the position was filled by another principal, or senior associate, or by a new hire, with little if any consideration given to in-house promotion (is spec writer an upward promotion?). And as now, there was precious little or no orientation or instruction in the academic world that would inspire one to seek work eventually as a specifications writer.

The big difference, then, was however, a level of respect for the spec writer, alluding fully to the depth and breadth of knowledge, the experience, the insight, the wealth of knowledge, and a good, reliable answer to almost everything (or at least the impetus to seek one out, willingly).

In all of the design professions, things did change and become different. Not all spec writers were registered professionals; some came equipped with the drive to produce, but with other skills and credentials. Technical knowledge varied, but the writing skill was such that a minimally searching mind could find and incorporate correct specifications language and information. There were, and still are no pre-requisites other than the capacity to produce sound and well crafted documents. Here the CSI effort since 1948 has elevated the process, the personnel and the documents.

But we still wallow in a mire that is predicated on individual drive, interest and skill. Far too many lie outside this cluster of people, but still vitally require good specifications. Yet the prevailing atmosphere remains highly skeptical, suspicious and stand-offish. Why? What can or more directly, SHOULD be done?

Organizations that include specifications writers need to "explode" and create a new message with pertinent and strong wording, accurately portraying what specs are; how they function; how they are needed even in such new efforts as BIM; how they are required for liability coverage; how they provide full value and equity in projects for owners; how they interface with the legal status of all parties; how they protect, provide for, explain, indicate, direct, and control all construction functions, in a fair, firm, enforceable manner in fairness and correct postures for all parties.

So what is so difficult about all this?

Simply, spec writers need to continue to write, but they need to have a new mindset, to expand their efforts through new directions, new literature, new explanations, new instruction, new exposure, new orientation, new openness, new assistance. The days of "interchoral chatting" (preaching to oneself or the choir) are over. The need is for new efforts in new directions seeking new and better results.

Specifications exist! And will continue to exist and be needed! So now what?

Well, really, it is an effort quite similar to trying to prove you were born when you don't have a birth certificate! You're here--but how did you get here?

Once we grasp that, then we go "win them one by one"!!!