

# Where have I heard that before?

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"It is probable that few members of the profession will disagree [that] the preparation of specifications receives less study and attention in proportion to its importance than any other phase of architectural or engineering practice. It is generally conceded that there is need for accurate, concise, yet comprehensive specifications in order to secure the best results from any set of plans. In our architectural schools ... instruction in specification writing has been neglected to such an extent that those to whom the task of specification writing has fallen have usually been forced to educate themselves. As a natural sequence of this condition we find too many inaccurate and incomplete documents accompanying drawings under the guise of specifications."



If you participate in or visit CSI groups on LinkedIn, or follow discussions on 4specs.com, or talk with just about any specifier, it's likely you have heard similar comments. Most of those who work with specifications appreciate their value, and believe that, to be effective, they must contain all the information needed by the contractor, they must not contain irrelevant information, and they must be easy to understand.

Following is more of the comment from which I took the opening quotation.

"IT is probable that few members of the profession will disagree with the statement that, considered broadly, the preparation of specifications receives less study and attention in proportion to its importance than any other phase of architectural or engineering practice. It is generally conceded that there is need for accurate, concise, yet comprehensive specifications in order to secure the best results from any set of plans. Yet to many architects and engineers the task of their preparation is onerous, and in order to produce a written document to accompany the drawings they sometimes even resort to the re-working of old specifications. It is usually discovered later that they do not accurately apply to the work in hand.

"In our architectural schools ... instruction in specification writing has been neglected to such an extent that those to whom the task of specification writing has fallen have usually been forced to educate themselves. As a natural sequence of this condition we find too many inaccurate and incomplete documents accompanying drawings under the guise of specifications.

"It is because of these conditions that THE AMERICAN ARCHITECT notes with the greatest satisfaction the initiation of a movement to organize The American Specification Institute along the lines of the National Professional Societies.

"It is obvious that The American Specification Institute should have as its fundamental purpose the education of its membership so as to assure better and more uniform specifications, the dissemination of information relating to the production of raw materials, their manufacture or fabrication into finished products, and how, when and where to use the different materials. When the specification writer has acquired a thorough understanding of the materials and equipment described and called for in his specifications he will be able to write more intelligently and produce a document that will furnish protection alike to the client, the architect, the builder and the manufacturer.

The above was printed in 1920, in *The American Architect*, published from 1876 through 1938, when it was absorbed by *Architectural Record*. In following issues, readers responded.

"The average architect beginning practice to-day knows very little about this most important phase of his work. He little knows how much stress a client will put on his knowledge of stone and concrete; the grades of lumber; the most efficient kinds of paint for various purposes; what constitutes the various

grades of glass; plumbing goods; hardware and electrical work. The architect to correctly specify must know these things intelligently and intimately so that he may not only be in a position to advise the client but to advise the builder if necessary. Architecture is the art of building thoroughly even as much as making buildings attractive." *Heacock & Hokanson*

"It occurs to me that architects in the past have paid altogether too little attention to this important phase of their work, and too little opportunity for development has been given to those men who are engaged in specification writing. The result of this has been that often our well-conceived projects have been poorly constructed, and proper provision has too often not been made to protect various materials in the proper manner." *H. Kenneth Franzheim, architect*

"I agree that the specification practice of most architects offices is the least creditable part of their work, due probably to several things: First, ... in an effort to hasten the work, old specifications for similar buildings are often rehashed and made over with a greater or lesser degree of success, mostly less. Secondly, specifications are to the majority of architects the least interesting part of their work, the very essential to the best interests of their client. " *An old subscriber*

"Most specification writers receive their training at the present time solely in the school of experience, which is, of course, excellent, but does not cover the entire ground, for the reason that these men are usually the product of training of one or two offices which have their individual methods." *Wm. O. Ludlow, architect*

Not everyone agreed. I recently heard an architect express an opinion similar to the following.

"We, of course, do not approve of any institution that would seek to standardize so important a document as a specification, because we believe that personality and creativeness enter as much into this branch of the architect's work as in matters of design and execution of drawings. We do not believe that you can make specification specialists because we believe the specification maker must be imbued with all the art and questions of accomplishing a building and it is a subject as intimate as the architect himself." *Edwards & Sayward*

Isn't it interesting that we're voicing the same concerns now as were expressed nearly a hundred years ago?

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Agree? Disagree? Leave your comments at <http://swconstructivethoughts.blogspot.com/>.