WRITING A GOOD SPECIFICATION

A specification document is a key element in any construction project, yet writing a good one is not as simple as you might think.

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Some builders lament the demise of the good specification, saying they have become vague, irrelevant or entirely inadequate for the job at hand. At the same time, greater compliance requirements and cautious building consent authorities (BCAs) have forced designers to reshape the humble specification into something verging on a full legal defence.

But specifications, as they say, should be specific. So how do you write a specification with the right amount of practical detail to guide the builder but enough scope to ensure full compliance with the Building Code?

Smoothing the process

The Building Act states that a specification defines how a building is to be constructed, altered, demolished or removed. For a new project, it must define the intended use of the building, detail all the systems and materials used and provide procedures for installation, inspection and maintenance during and after construction.

It aims to ensure that each stage of the project proceeds smoothly without time delays, inaccurate costings or legal issues and enables parties involved in the construction to communicate effectively.

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However, the various parties each use the specification in a slightly different way. The designer uses it to accurately describe the components and expected standard of the build, the BCA uses it to demonstrate Building Code compliance, the builder uses it to carry out the construction and the owner uses it as part of their agreement with the builder.

Must be specific

The specification, therefore, needs to clearly describe each aspect of the construction project. It must be specific and not simply present a range of options or generic statements. It is unacceptable to simply reference a standard or Acceptable Solution or cite the manufacturer's recommendations in a non-specific way, as all these sources contain options for construction. The specification should define:

- the extent of work to be carried out
- quality of the materials
- how materials should be placed and fixed
- details about particular products required for compliance
- acceptable standards for each trade or aspect of the construction
- complete schedules for windows, linings and finishes.

For instance, a timber specification should clearly define the size, species, finish, treatment, grade and moisture content of each type of timber to be used in the project. If individual pieces of timber are required for specific purposes, such as figuring or colouring, they must also be included.

The specifier, therefore, requires knowledge of regulatory requirements and construction techniques to create a good specification.

What makes a great specification?

A great specification not only accurately describes the work to be done, the materials and products to be used – by product name and manufacturer identification number or reference – and the acceptable standards of workmanship, it also provides enough detail for the main contractor or subtrades to complete the construction without having to guess what is actually required.

This is where the quality of the information and its delivery become critical. Like any good technical document, a specification should be clear, concise, correct and complete.

It should present information in an easy to follow and logical sequence, free from repetition or irrelevant information.

Importantly, information should also be consistent and coordinated, both between sections of the specification and with the accompanying drawings.

If supporting material from other sources, such as manufacturers' literature or producer statements is included, make absolutely certain that the material and your specification agree, the material is relevant to the project and drawings from different sources work together.

A good specification helps maintain the quality of detailing and workmanship and saves time, money and hassles later on. It can also decrease the time it takes to process consent applications, improve the accuracy of quotes, reduce the number of changes or rework on the building site and prevent disputes between the builder, designer and owner.

Problems to avoid

A poorly prepared specification, on the other hand, can cause construction problems, time delays and inaccurate pricing.

Some specifications present the easy, straightforward aspects of the construction, but fail to include the complicated or non-standard parts of the build or provide enough detail. Others may contain information not relevant to the project.

Where a particular construction detail is required, it must be described in full in the specification and shown in the associated drawings in enough detail for the builder (or BCA) to clearly understand what is intended.

Aids to help with the task

Writing a specification may sound like an onerous task, but there are several tools and guidance documents available to help.

Additive software tools, for instance, can help the specifier build up a specification from a library of pre-prepared clauses and product profiles, while subtractive tools can help the user delete unneeded clauses from a series of prewritten sections. Both tools require the specifier to add information specific to the project. Two proprietary online specification writing systems are Masterspec and Productspec.

The Department of Building and Housing also offers several free resources, including the *New Zealand Building Code Handbook*, and several books on the market deal with writing specifications in New Zealand.

None of these resources do all the work for you, but they can help you write a high-quality specification that meets the needs of designers, BCAs, builders and owners alike.