



COMMUNICATING THE IDEA

Precise information is essential for the accurate realisation of a designer's vision. Specification documents can help contractors to achieve this. Duncan Heather explains the role of this crucial communication tool

Most designers find specification writing a necessary evil. Is it even required? In a limited number of cases a formal specification document is probably unnecessary provided the essential information is given to the contractor in some other written form.

WHAT MAKES A SPECIFICATION?

The written information traditionally included in a specification is divided into two main categories — the contractual obligations commonly known as the 'preliminaries', and the quality of workmanship. Essential content of the preliminaries that are vital to most projects are the start and finish dates, insurance, and health and safety requirements. There are other points which may need to be agreed, such as the protection of existing trees, the arrangement of stage payments for work completed, or the limitation of working hours, but these matters are often partly covered in a standard form of contract such as those issued by the Joint Council for Landscape Industries (JCLI), Joint Contracts Tribunal (JCT) and the British Association of Landscape Industries (BALI).

The problem is that none of these standard forms of contract is entirely appropriate for small garden projects. Even when they are used, they are usually completed after negotiations have taken place and a price agreed. Vital information such as the examples given above is needed before the contractor can tender a firm price. The

designer is therefore left with the need to confirm such matters in writing at the beginning of the tendering process.

OPTIONS FOR DEFINING QUALITY

Let us first consider the question of quality. Unlike contractual and administrative matters, quality is very much more difficult to define. One way is to specify a brand name, but this may financially restrict the contractor unnecessarily.

Another method is to refer to *Standards*, published by the British Standards Institute, or to other standards such as the National Plant Specification. Incorporating another standard by reference is often the most comprehensive and foolproof method. However, this requires a degree of knowledge about the content of those standards, both by the designer and the contractor, and this is not always available.

Thirdly, designers may write a description of quality themselves. To do so requires practice and the development of a concise and an unambiguous style of writing, requiring a depth of knowledge and skill that only the most accomplished practitioners should attempt.

In a limited number of cases, the most direct method of controlling quality is a reference to an agreed sample. This approach can be particularly appropriate for the appearance of hard

Above: For particularly intricate work, a specification document is invaluable. This eclectic floorscape is part of a garden in Woodford, Essex, by Earth Designs.

Right: Construction drawings with explanatory notes may be all that are required for successful construction on smaller projects. Far right: Referencing to an agreed sample can be a useful method of ensuring high quality workmanship.

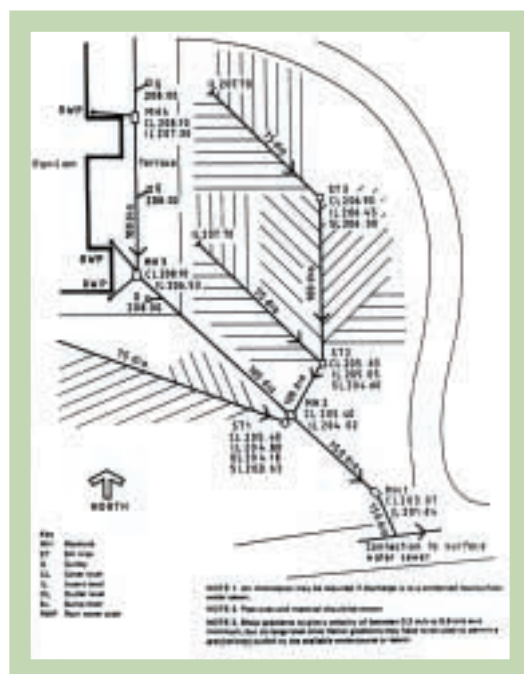


IMAGE: EARTH DESIGNS



landscape features like paving or walls. The sample may be one that is constructed on site by the contractor prior to the start of the main work, or a previously constructed project preferably by the same craftsman. The advantage of a sample is that the client can be fully involved and can understand exactly what they are getting right from the start of the contract.

The use of samples allows the contractor and his craftsmen to contribute to the creative process and gives them a positive involvement, which not only draws on the contractors' expertise, but raises the craftsmen's commitment and morale. Monitoring the performance of the contractor is also simplified by making a direct comparison between what is built and the agreed sample. So not every specification for quality depends solely on a long written description but, given that there are several possible approaches to specifying quality, all of them in the end will require a degree of written clarification

DRAWN AND WRITTEN INFORMATION

Construction drawings show the detail, dimensions and materials. These drawings can contain further explanatory notes, which are, in effect, a rudimentary form of specification. This information may be in the form of annotated notes or as information contained in the title block. On the smallest of schemes, annotated details may be all that is necessary and putting specification and drawing together may also assist the contractor. On larger projects, however, there is a danger that the specification will become dispersed onto several drawings, with repetition and contradictions creeping in. To avoid this, it is

recommended that all the specification is found in one place. The drawn details can then be linked to the appropriate specification description by systematic cross-referencing, using the specification's own clause numbers.

This then leaves the question of the more general information, such as the quality of topsoil or the strength of mortar. It is rarely adequate to leave such details to the expertise and discretion of the chosen contractor. In order to provide a professional service to your client, it often requires at least a few pages of specification separate from the drawings attached to the planting schedules, or the letter of invitation to tender.

AN IMPERFECT SOLUTION

Some of the obstacles which confront the designer and the contractor when faced with agreeing and achieving the desired standards on site have been touched on. These include:

- κ The need for reasonable financial certainty without being too restrictive.
- κ The huge amount of technical and contractual knowledge required.
- κ Time from the designer to tie up the more important loose ends.
- κ The absence of a simple appropriate standard form of contract.

Few projects are standard. Most are unique 'prototypes' designed from scratch. Using an identical specification on every project is therefore not only inappropriate, but may also be dangerous.

The concept of a model specification is rather different from a standard solution because the

model specification is designed to be edited by the designer to remove all extraneous information and to insert any additional information the particular project requires. The result is a tailor-made document which should help the contractor.

Producing a project specification takes time and eats into the fee but the time is reduced with practice. No specification can be totally comprehensive. The designer's decision on what to put in and what to leave out is a matter of judgment. That judgment will be made based on several factors such as the complexity of the project, the known competence of the contractor and whether the designer will be visiting the site during the construction phase. Specification writing tries to be exact but in practice is an imprecise art.

MODEL SPECIFICATIONS

Writing a specification from scratch is a very daunting task; using a model specification makes that task considerably easier. The essentials of a model specification are three-fold:

- κ It provides a familiar structure within which every subject has its logical place. Finding the appropriate instructions becomes quicker and easier because of this.
- κ It can provide a check list of subjects which may need the designer's attention. The designer can decide either to delete the subject as inappropriate or to include it with or without amendment.
- κ By offering the designer a model clause the designer has guidance on written style and technical content. Many designers will have heard of the *National Building Specification (NBS) Landscape* or the more modest publication *Specification Writing for Garden Design*. These model specifications can provide help and much needed technical guidance for the hard-pressed garden designer.

Even the best project specification and drawings will not produce high quality work from a poor contractor. Every designer's priority should be to assemble a list of good local contractors. Then, provide them with all that essential specification information in writing so that a proper price is tendered. Problems are unlikely to arise if the contractor has tendered a realistic price and is in possession of all the relevant information from the start. If the required quality is defined clearly and concisely, when things do go wrong, you and your client are better protected.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

- κ *Agreement for Landscape Works* by the JCLI.
- κ *Building Contract for a home owner/occupier who has appointed a consultant* by the JCT.
- κ *Conditions of Contract for Landscape Works in Consumer Contracts* issued by BALI.
- κ Heather, J, *Specification for Garden Design*, Packard Publishing, 2005. ISBN 1 85341 132 9 priced £19.99. A discount is available to members of the Society of Garden Designers and students at recognised design schools.

Below: Extracts from a model specification.
Top — Information taken from the preliminaries.
Bottom — Example of workmanship specification.

A4	Management of the works
A400	FOREMAN Whenever work is in progress, keep a competent foreman on site to supervise the Works and to take the designer's instructions.
A405	SITE MEETINGS Hold site meetings when required by the Designer.
A410	MATERIALS ON SITE which have been delivered for the Works become the property of the employer when paid for but must remain the responsibility of the contractor until Practical Completion.
A415	ORDERING Order goods and materials in good time so that the Works are not delayed. No extension of contract period will be allowed where delay could reasonably have been avoided by the contractor.

B7	Paving and steps
B700	LEVELS: make up levels as necessary with compacted gravel, hoggin, clean broken stone or brick to pass a 75mm ring.
B705	GRANULAR SUB-BASE to be Type 2 material to Clause 804 of The Highway Agency Specification for Highway Works.
B710	COMPACTION OF SUB-BASE: Compact with a mechanical roller maximum mass 100kg or equivalent mechanical rammer. Apply a blinding if necessary to achieve a smooth, closed surface.
B711	BLINDING to be sand, pea shingle or PFA or similar approved fine material.
B715	LIME MORTAR for bedding paving slabs shall use sharp sand and lime to BS 890.
B716	MORTAR for masonry to be to Clause B340 – B350.