

Is the ‘Five-Year Rule’ Still Valid?

There are a million products out there competing for a place in an architect’s spec, from potentially game-changing smart home technologies, to integrated solar panels on roofs, to the very materials that make up a building envelope. It can be cumbersome to navigate a barrage of hypothetical solutions, all claiming to be the innovation of your dreams.

For many architects, the barometer for true innovation and reliability is time: Which products can prove their worth with a verifiable track record? Which products hold up under the unspoken “five-year rule”—a sort of “right-of-passage” for a new product?

In an AIA survey of 330 architects, 60 percent said they knew what materials they were going to use, which manufacturer they were going to turn to on any given project, from the very beginning. For them, the consistency of an established relationship influenced their specification more than a promise of innovation. But in the same survey, 40 percent of what *Architect Magazine* [1] called “professionally conservative” architects, cared most about honoring deadlines and completing a project on time.

Some newer products satisfy both needs: consistency and innovation, yet they’re often held back due to an overreliance on the Five Year Rule.

Let’s imagine a hypothetical situation in which you’ve been asked to build a wall in less than ideal conditions. It’s raining, it’s cold; in short, the weather is miserable and will only make it more difficult to complete your task. Even worse, you’re working against a tight schedule that would be tough to meet even if the weather was cooperating. In a dire situation like this, how would you describe the ideal building product?

Obviously, you’d want a product that’s reliable. Something that can withstand the wet weather installation, while providing protection against the elements for years to come. It would also have to be cost-effective, and easy to install. It doesn’t matter how useful a product is if it’s prohibitively expensive, or requires specialized training for safe handling and installation. Finally, and most importantly, you’d want a product that’s been proven effective, ideally from a supplier with years of industry experience and a long track record of success. In lieu of a wholly new product, you’d prefer an evolution of an existing, successful product, tweaked to improve versatility and enhance reliability well beyond competing options.

The good news is that your ideal product exists, and there’s probably an even better version in the works. The bad news is that overreliance on the Five Year Rule could prevent you from taking advantage of this new technology.

While the Five Year Rule was initially created to ensure that all building products have sufficient time to prove their value prior to use, the accelerating pace of technological advancements in our modern world has diminished the value of this waiting period. New products are constantly being introduced, reformulated, and evolved each day, and a full five-year span might see two or three product generations crop up before bowing to their successors.

This all leads to an important question that every architect must ask themselves: If the perfect product is released tomorrow, will I adopt it and utilize its benefits to the fullest, or will I adhere to tradition and spend the next half-decade using inferior products?

1] http://www.architectmagazine.com/aia-architect/aiafeature/the-truth-about-specification_o