Progressive Architecture, Architectural Forum, the AIA Journal, Architectural Record and now ARCHITECT, are names of magazines that over the years have documented the progress of American architecture. But before most of these started coming off the presses there was Pencil Points. (Architectural Record has been in publication since 1891 and Architectural Forum began in 1892 under a different title.) Founded in 1920, Pencil Points arrived at a critical point in the history of American architecture as we transitioned from a historical based design, typified by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts School, to what was then called Modern architecture. The debates on the merits of one design approach or the other were chronicled in the magazine’s pages. But even more interesting are the articles on architectural practice, on topics like architectural fees, architectural education, the value of architects in society, and advertising by architects, topics that are still relevant today. These articles are a pretty good history of pre-WWII architecture in America.

The Pencil Points Reader is a compilation of 162 articles from the 23 years of the magazine's existence before it ceased publication in 1943 and became "Progressive Architecture". (The book's Introduction was written by John Morris Dixon, the last Executive Editor of Progressive Architecture before it folded in 1996.) Pencil Points began as a drafting room view of architectural practice, written for draftsmen, (there is no mention of women anywhere), who both assisted in the design of buildings and developed their construction details. In this period the drafting rooms were filled with mostly non-architects, "draftsmen," who had an interest in architecture but had little or no formal architectural education or training. The subject matter of Pencil Points was intended to provide professional development to this audience who had ambitions to become architects in function, if not by title. This was an important group since, as some of you will recall, in many states up to the 1980s, it was possible to take the architect license exam as a "broadly experienced candidate" without a degree from an architectural school.

In its early years the magazine focused on practical matters in the office. Articles in the "Notes on Drafting" column each month described techniques for such things as pen and ink drafting, poche, control of line weight, and a series of articles described how to make perspective drawings. It also provided social news from the architectural clubs that existed in cities like New York City and Chicago.

In 1923 a new monthly article titled "The Specifications Desk" was added to address the increasing complexity of modern building materials. By 1925 articles began to appear reporting on the merits of European buildings in the Bauhaus style.

By the 1930s Pencil Points had evolved into a magazine for architects with articles more focused on design. This shift in emphasis is first apparent on the magazine covers. The 1920 covers were in a very traditional symmetrical design, an ornate picture frame-like layout with a hint of the Doric order in a filigreed border. By 1933 the covers were dominated by an architectural rendering of a facade in the Modern design and in 1936 the cover design had evolved again to the extent it would be considered contemporary even today. It contained a hand drawn headshot of Eliel Saarinen in white ink on a solid black background. Articles began to focus on Modern buildings, those that had a "clear directness of expression" as the basis for their design. Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue's Nebraska State Capitol building is cited as a good example in a May 1931 article describing its "amazing simplicity" in the "Modern spirit" and this was designed by an architect who heretofore had been firmly grounded in the historical tradition. Articles followed on the Modern architecture of
Rockefeller Center in New York City and the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society building. Albert Kahn's long essay on the value of Modernism makes the point that the design for a factory should be different from that for an office building, or a school, or a hospital but that each of these building types can be accommodated by using the principles of Modern design. He was also very critical of Le Corbusier's designs and argued against architecture that is "startlingly new or different."

H. van Buren Magonigle, FAIA, wrote a series of seven articles in 1934 describing the work and social atmosphere in architects' offices during the course of his 50 years as an architect beginning in the last quarter of the 19th Century. These included McKim Mead and White's office and the office of H.H. Richardson among others. This era began before the blue printing process had been developed so copies of drawings for field use had to be hand traced. Before typewriters were invented, specs had to be hand written, hence the need for architects to take lettering classes.

In a 1937 article on the future of American design, projects by the very influential Supervising Architect of the Department of the Treasury are described. Designs were created under his direction for Federal Government buildings including post offices and courthouses constructed across the country, many of which are still in use today. These buildings bridge the chasm between historical styles and Modernism through their carefully composed symmetrical facades, often almost Classical in proportion, and their modest use of ornament on bold, column free, stone-clad facades. Other articles in 1939 praised the buildings, dams, offices, and housing designed and constructed by the Tennessee Valley Authority that, at the time, had the largest construction program in the world. Beyond describing the "consistently admirable architecture" of TVA buildings, other articles included detailed descriptions of TVA-developed prefabricated buildings for use at remote sites where dams were being constructed. Prefabrication, along with articles on new materials for construction, continued to be frequent topics until Pencil Points ceased publication in 1943. Other topics that were featured frequently to the end were town planning and the design of whole suburban residential developments. These articles included some of Richard Neutra's projects in Southern California.

Pencil Points Reader, edited by George E. Hartman & Jan Cigliano, was published by Princeton Architectural Press in 2004. It includes 654 oversize pages and a wealth of renderings, other drawings, and photographs in addition to the facsimile pages of text from the original publications.

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Aug. 22, 2018

You can read more on the history of architecture magazines in a 2006 article by Witold Rybczyinski, "The Glossies: The decline of architecture magazines." at this link: http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/architecture/2006/11/the_glossies.html

Here's a short chronology:

Architectural Record, 1891 to present
Architectural Forum, began as The Brickbuilder in 1892 and continued to 1974
Pencil Points, 1920 to 1943, then morphed into Progressive Architecture
Progressive Architecture, 1945 to 1996
Architecture Magazine, 1996 to 2007
ARCHITECT Magazine, 2007 to present
AIA Journal, (in one version or another of this title), 1944 to 1976.