



**What Minerva Built**  
**Episode 3: Specialization**  
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[BIRDS CHIRPING]

Molly Lester: Stand on the grounds of Cranaleith Spiritual Center today, and you'd never know you were still in the City of Philadelphia. This retreat center is based in a house that is ensconced in broad lawns, with a stand of mature trees separating the property from the suburban neighborhoods that surround it. Porches stretch across the front and back of the house, shading the stonework at the first story and reaching up to meet the shingles that flare out at the second story of the house. Bay windows project from the southeast side of the house, outdone only by the decorative three-part windows in the eaves at the third story.

All is quiet, except for the birds, and the house sits peacefully at the center of its domain. It all feels at such a remove from the hustle and bustle of downtown Philadelphia, although Center City Philadelphia is just a train ride away. It is all as it should be.

Indeed, it's only fitting that this place is a retreat center today, since it was always intended to be a breath of fresh air, a respite from city life.

But don't mistake this for an idle place, now or then.

Some of the most powerful women in the national suffrage movement met here on a regular basis. Susan B. Anthony had her own guest room on the second floor. Neighborhood children were welcomed in, as a proto-kindergarten when such services were still rare in the United States.

And Minerva Parker Nichols designed it all.

*Minerva Voiceover: Minerva Parker, architect, 14 S. Broad Street, Philadelphia, has on boards plans for a large stone house for Mrs. Rachel Foster Avery, at Somerton, Pennsylvania, slate roof, three stories high, hot air, hard wood finish, electric work, light and bells, a conservatory will be one of the features, opening from library, open fire-places;...to have all the conveniences. (Minerva voiceover, 4:40 – 5:05)*

Molly: Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders Guide. November 5, 1890.

Minerva was just two years into her independent practice by this time. Landing a project for Rachel Foster Avery was a real coup: Rachel was a wealthy woman, a matriarch, and a nationally-known suffragist, widely acknowledged as the protegee of Susan B. Anthony. And *she* had chosen *Minerva* to design her house. It was a complicated directive that she gave Minerva, tasking her with designing a private family home, a neighborhood kindergarten, and a public meeting space for suffragists all under one roof, a home that would be known as Mill-Rae.

For Minerva, this meant that her plans would have to reconcile Rachel's needs as manager of a household, a mother, an activist, and a community organizer.

[THEME MUSIC BEGINS]

It was a tall order. But it was also one of her best opportunities to date, a chance to test out all her ideas about residential design and prove that she knew what she was doing.

This is "What Minerva Built," a podcast about the story of architect Minerva Parker Nichols, and a conversation about what she can teach us about the work of architecture, history, and preservation today. I'm your host, Molly Lester, and this is Episode 3: Specialization.

[THEME MUSIC ENDS]

Molly: Over the course of her career, Minerva designed over 60 projects around the country, at least half of which were private homes. This did not happen by accident. From her earliest years as an architect, she settled on domestic architecture as her specialty. If a doctor chooses a specialization, she reasoned, why shouldn't an architect?

*Minerva V/O: Specialists in architecture, as in medicine, are most assured of success.*

Molly: She considered this her clearest path to success, ensuring her a steady stream of clients to woo, and projects at a manageable scale so that she could fully supervise the construction.

Her tactic worked. From practically the moment she advertised her practice, she was busy, she was respected, and she was renowned.

Symbolically, residential architecture was a logical choice for a woman breaking into architectural practice, for many of the reasons we heard about in Episodes 1 and 2, including the popular association between women and taste and the studies of domestic efficiency by the Beecher sisters. Indeed, many contemporary publications

made disparaging comments on this link between domestic science and Minerva's specialization in domestic architecture, characterizing her work as a small professional leap from organizing the home to designing it. They brushed aside the scale of her specialization, writing it off as small potatoes when other architects—mostly male architects—were designing bigger, grander projects like hotels or early skyscrapers.

But that interpretation would underestimate her imprint on the houses that she designed and saw to completion.

In adopting residential architecture as her specialization, Minerva was issuing an implicit—and at times, much more explicit—critique of the homes designed by men. She wrote many editorials in women's magazines with names like *The Home-Maker* and *Housekeeper's Weekly*, dispensing with the male authors and architects who traditionally dictated how a house should look, and function, and relate to its neighbors. Instead, she wrote directly to (and often worked directly with) a female audience, affirming their authority as managers of the house and encouraging her readers and clients to cultivate their own particular, personal design sensibilities for their homes.

Not everyone had this kind of trust in women as knowledgeable clients. Compare Minerva's approach to that of contemporary architect John Root (of the famous Chicago firm Burnham and Root). In a speech that he gave for a banquet of architects around 1890 (the same time Minerva was designing Rachel Foster Avery's house), he mocked the authority of women in knowing their own design needs:

*John Root:* "Today the architect of a dwelling-house meets a problem rendered more complex by the voice of the lady of the house."

Molly: He said, to a room full of almost certainly all male architects.

*John Root:* "Unless all of the ancients...were dreadful liars, Madame, the wife, had little to say in the planning of the ancient house. Today, she has...Do you not all remember that little plan on scented note-paper she had studied at home?"

Molly: What a radical idea, then, that Minerva would bring women into the architectural discourse of the time through her writings. No matter how many times they had been written off previously in the design process, she encouraged them to familiarize themselves with the technical aspects of architecture in order to claim their own place and space as clients.

*Minerva V/O:* *Women often seem so helpless when they come to design their own houses that the mere thought of a specification to read or an inspection of the plans is enough to deprive the poor architect of their society for days.*

Molly: She wrote in *Housekeeper's Weekly* in 1893.

Minerva V/O: *I assure you, French novels will seem dull compared with the delight of threading your way through the translation of plans, when you have once mastered the mechanical part of the drawing.*

Molly: Her writings in popular magazines helped to demystify the design process for residential clients, illuminating her design principles for them so that they could demand those same qualities and features of their own architects.

So, what were those design principles? Well, first and foremost, they valued a personalized design for each individual client. Remember: Minerva and other architects were up against pattern books at this time, which had the effect of democratizing design but also—as Minerva argued—diminished design to the lowest common denominator, bypassing any consideration of the homeowner's particular needs and wants.

In contrast, Minerva designed for two things: 1) the *style* of each client, positing that the form of one's home was an extension of one's character (this was a popular idea at the time, and let's be honest, we still subscribe to it today); and 2) the *lifestyle* of each person, with particular care for the ways that women were tasked with managing, cleaning, and caring for families in American homes.

In practice, these principles looked like a series of features that took into account the rhythms of daily life, where the home could be both a private retreat and a venue for public gatherings—there was no illusion of “separate spheres” here. In most of her designs, for example, the living spaces (parlors, dining rooms, dens) were linked by massive pocket doors, so that a room could be a small and intimate study or a large, open-plan space where one room flowed into the next. The result was a flexible interior, ready for daily living or special occasions.

Minerva's designs also recognized the full scope of women's work in these spaces, beginning with the relationship between the women running the house and those serving it. Her plans distinguished those roles in subtle and perceptive ways, reinforcing the difference between living spaces and service spaces. In each of her homes, the kitchen and dining room were separated by a small hallway, and the pantry doors had hinges that enabled them to swing in both directions. This internal logic was an intentional choice, as she wrote in *The Home-Maker* in 1891:

Minerva V/O: *The pantry-doors have double-acting hinges; it forms a passage from the kitchen to the dining room and main hall. One door always being closed, the odor of the cooking does not reach the living rooms.*

Molly: Meanwhile, in practically all of her homes, the rear stair intentionally emerged from the basement in a rear hallway—not the kitchen itself—to discourage dawdling among servants. She justified this in a second column for *The Home-Maker*:

*Minerva V/O: The cellar-way coming up in the rear hall...allowed a free passage without going through the kitchen, and the temptation for stopping for a cup of tea, which seems an inherent weakness on wash-day.*

Molly: But Minerva wasn't just looking out for the household manager who needed to keep her servants in line. Her designs also found ways to make other women's lives easier—an extension of the domestic efficiencies laid out in *The American Woman's Home* by the Beecher sisters. While some other contemporary architects (including Louis Sullivan, and others) were finding new ways to make architectural ornament more refined and elaborate, Minerva deliberately pared down the profiles of millwork and ironwork with the housecleaner in mind:

*Minerva V/O: I think it is advisable to have few members in the mouldings, and that the newels and balusters shall be plain and graceful in shape....There may be some beauty in minute mouldings that have to be cleaned with an especial care for each turn, but it is a great waste of labor.*

Molly: One has to wonder if this wasn't just Minerva Parker, the architect, speaking, but Minnie Parker, the servant from the 1880 Census, looking out for her fellow laborers. Here was someone with specific experience and pointed opinions to offer on the typical features of residential architecture, as designed by architects who gave little to no consideration for their ongoing maintenance. In short, she had notes for John Root and other contemporary architects—and yes, her notes may have been on scented paper, for all we know.

The influences of her other job in that 1880 Census—when she doubled as a governess—also show up in her work for family homes, long before she herself had any lived experience as a mother. In fact, her house for Rachel Foster Avery is a good example of the ways in which Minerva's designs anticipated the ideal arrangement of a home with growing children.

The acceptable height of steps for young legs? 6 5/8".

The best way to encourage young readers? Accessible, unlocked bookshelves.

The most important part of the home for play? Playrooms that were neither "so dainty, or so fine, that there is no place for the children."

How to organize the floor plan on the upper floors? Communicating bedrooms, like those family hotel suites that we see today.

*Minerva V/O: If a look is taken at the location of the beds and doors, you will see what a small amount of space is travelled from the mother's room, in the center, to each child.*

Molly: What paints to choose for homes with young children? Warm, dark colors, because "it is not worth sacrificing the time and patience it requires to preserve [light colors] in the midst of a full-fledged nest of young Americans."

Mill-Rae had all of these things, and more. Minerva's design acknowledged that as a wife, mother, and suffragist, Rachel Foster Avery was many things to many people, and that her home must make space for a woman's work—in all its forms. We'll hear more in Episode 4 about the ways in which Minerva's design for Mill-Rae made space for women's other work as activists and organizers.

Minerva's residential designs also took into account the welfare of her clients: the interconnecting themes of light, air, and health show up several times in her writings about architecture.

*Minerva V/O: Don't be afraid of light and air.*

Molly: She wrote in *The Home-Maker* in 1891.

*Minerva V/O: They are the things that do most to beautify our homes.*

Molly: In real terms, this means that her windows are oversized and abundant, and in some cases, operable, opening a portal between interior rooms and the exterior porches. She also found ways to introduce windows in unexpected ways, with neat, subversive tricks such as the window that she designed over the *mantel* in Mill-Rae—where in most houses, a flue would be. In some darker corners of her designs, such as under the roof of a covered porch, she inserted jewel-box stained-glass to make the most of what light was available and add beauty as a gift to the homeowner.

But, windows aside, how successful was Minerva in putting her design principles into practice? After the break, we'll hear from the people who know her buildings best—the people who live in them and use them today.

BREAK

Molly: So, if residential design was Minerva Parker Nichols' specialization from the very start, were her homes actually...special? In other words, how well did she put her words into practice? Well, ask the people who own her buildings today about their favorite parts of these buildings, and you'll start to notice some patterns pattern, whether it's Ruth Picozzi, who is a volunteer at the Mill-Rae house at Cranaleith Spiritual Center in Northeast Philadelphia:

*Ruth Picozzi: When we go into the house, I just love the way the foyer is so filled with light, and the way she designed like the glass windows and the doors. But also the pocket doors and then the curved stairway with the glass. Like, it's so inviting.*

Molly: Or Sister Mary, who has lived in Mill-Rae since her childhood days, and is a leader for the retreat center. When I asked her about her favorite places in the house, she didn't hesitate:

*Sister Mary Trainer: For me, the light: when the light comes in, I love, I mean, it's different spaces. I love in the morning to pray at this end and see the morning star and the moon, and the sunrise is at this side, and on the other side to the sunset. And the windows give you that view.*

*She really brings the outside inside.*

Molly: Or when I asked the same question of Linda and Angie Furber Bickell, two sisters who grew up in a house that Minerva designed in the town of Narberth that Linda now owns with her husband, Tom.

*Linda Bickell: It has an open floor plan. It really does. There's really no need to open anything up, like you would in so many houses in Narberth. Now to make them feel like—the trend, the open floor plan. With the pocket doors and the big archways, it pretty much is an open floor plan, just as it is.*

Molly: Or her grandson, Patrick Baker, who remembered Minerva's house that he once lived in.

*Patrick Baker: It was a beautiful, well, just a very efficient house.*

*It was beautiful woodwork, but it was not a fancy ornate house.*

Molly: Or Christine Witkowski, who lives in a house in the Germantown neighborhood and is about to have her first child with her partner, Dan.

*Christine Witkowski: When we first came in, and we had, we had just decided that we were going to have children. We went up to the third floor, which is where the previous owners' two kids mainly spent a lot of time, and the third floor room has a turret with a really low ceiling. But it's sort of a perfect spot for a hideaway for a kid. And it's really adorable and has this sort of built-in bookshelf.*

Molly: Or Minerva's great-granddaughter, Carrie Baker, who used to play in a house that Minerva designed.

*Carrie Baker: It had wormy oak all around and bookcases everywhere, and, these doorways that connected rooms to other rooms.*

Molly: Or Heather Bodenstab, who lived with her husband Derek in a Minerva-designed house on W. Hortter Street in Germantown.

*Heather Bodenstab: This house has 32 or 36 windows in it.*

*There's so much light that comes into this home, and that leads from one room to another, that you do have this massive house, but it is very open, at least, to the outdoors.*

Molly: Or TJ Scully and Judy Lustig, who live in a house that Minerva designed in Oak Lane in Philadelphia.

*Judy Lustig/TJ Scully: It was very bright because of the big windows, and we liked the bay windows. And I think we liked the fact that very few rooms were actually square.*

*Yeah, I thought the house actually from outside looks magical. I really, I, I literally would feel like I should pinch myself when I walk in the house and realize I own it, you know? It is a neat, neat house.*

Molly: Their favorite parts of their homes—the aspects that drew them to purchase the buildings in the first place, and have served them best—are the same features that Minerva built her designs, and her practice, around. With few modifications, these places are still balancing living space and service space, usability and beauty, light and air in 2020, much the same as when they were built 130 years ago.

That sounds like specialized expertise to me.

Coming up after the break: what did all this design for the client's *lifestyle* mean for the building's *style*?

BREAK

Molly: We've talked a lot about the internal logic guiding Minerva Parker Nichols' designs for residential architecture. So, what did this mean for the exterior of these homes? What did they look like, and what was Minerva seeking to accomplish on the outsides of these buildings?

I've purposefully left this question of style for the end, not just because of the architectural axiom (coined by Minerva's contemporary Louis Sullivan) that said that form follows function. But also because I want to avoid the trap that I mentioned in Episode 2—let's call it the Frank Lloyd Wright Test, as in, on a scale of 1 to Frank Lloyd Wright, how radical were the exteriors of her buildings? Was Minerva concerned about the outside of these places, or simply in what was going on inside?

Aaron Wunsch: *She is also interested in exteriors, as you say, and most especially in what she calls art.*

Molly: Aaron Wunsch is a professor in architectural history at the University of Pennsylvania.

Aaron: *She makes a rather impassioned case in the early 1890s for architecture as an art. And for that, again, she does not mean as a lone recluse going off and having inspiration that connects to nothing that came before it. She really does mean a kind of harmonization of the parts. So when she talks about aesthetics, it's often the language of restraint, of harmony, of what we would now call contextualism.*

Molly: In other words, it's the same issue we talked about in Episode 2: Minerva had no interest in being a Pioneer, in the way that we would frame her today. That is a modern lens applied to a 19<sup>th</sup> century architect who was much more interested in contributing to the architectural dialogue than in starting her own monologue. This is why we see her experimenting with a broad range of architectural styles that were popular at the time, including Queen Anne for W.R. Wright's house in Narberth, or Italianate Revival for the New Century Club of Philadelphia, or Moorish Revival for the proposed Queen Isabella Association Pavilion in Chicago, which we'll hear more about in the next episode.

She particularly favored a transitional hybrid of the Shingle Style and the Colonial Revival, saying of the latter that "there is much to recommend it," including "the simple dignity, honest construction, and beauty of design." The style's general asymmetry meant that she could organize the exterior around the programmatic needs of the interior, without conforming to some interior plan that didn't serve its users. She could incorporate recurring features—like the three-part window and flared shingles that show up on the Mill-Rae house at Cranaleith—when they contributed to the honesty and the beauty of the design.

But she was selective in her choices and rejected any kind of shallow and narrow-minded emphasis on the façade alone, spurning the excessive use of flimsy ornament and the embellishment of the front elevation above all others. (In other words, she would have something to say about our present-day habit of using the nice materials for the side of our houses that face the street, and simple stucco or siding on all other sides.)

This goes back to the question of character, both in terms of the house itself, and what the house says about its owner.

*Minerva V/O: However small the house may be, I would insist on its having four fronts.*

Molly: She wrote in 1891.

*Minerva V/O: People are as little likely to stand directly in front of your house to judge its architectural beauty as your friends are to judge character by those few fleeting angelic spells we all have..., forgetful of the long shadows of remembered faults and follies that play around us.*

Molly: For Minerva, the stakes of poor design were clear, and they threatened to cast a shadow not only on the owner herself, but on her neighbors and on the American landscape in general. It was this sense of responsibility that dictated her contextualism and led her to write the following in 1889, shortly after opening her practice:

*Minerva V/O: Architecture is not a thing that alone concerns the owner and the builder. The man or woman who erects a crude or fantastic building has wronged his neighbor and left a monument to his own folly.*

Molly: This meant that the best residential architecture demanded an architect capable of shaping the character of the home and demonstrating the integrity of the homeowner. These were the rules that Minerva assigned herself, and what she expected of all her colleagues, when she chose to specialize in residential architecture.

BREAK

Molly: Minerva's strategy to plant a specialized flag in the metaphorical sand paid off, as her residential projects earned her acclaim, clients, and higher-profile commissions in the years immediately following the opening of her firm in 1888. They also earned her coverage in national publications, where she published letters, plans, and essays that all advanced her interests and design ideals for the places in which women live and, yes, work.

[THEME MUSIC BEGINS]

Most importantly, though, her residential commissions caught the eye of a different sort of woman doing work: the clubwoman. By 1891, she'd landed her biggest house project of all: a clubhouse for the New Century Club of Philadelphia. But we'll get to that next time, in Episode 4.

CLOSING CREDITS