



**What Minerva Built**  
**Episode 5: Scaffolding**  
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Molly Lester: In 1891, as her wedding to William Nichols approached, Minerva Parker wrote a letter to a friend, looking forward.

Minerva V/O: *I am to continue my work, having arranged for a lecture at the School of Design the day before the fearful leap, and a business engagement the day after.*

Molly: You heard that right: her wedding with 1,500 invited guests was sandwiched between molding young minds and seeing to the construction of another kind of moulding.

Minerva V/O: *I cannot tell you that I propose working a revolution in matrimony, or emancipating all women through my own married example. But I do hope to arrange my domestic life so that it need not absorb the architect, for my work was never so interesting to me as it is at present.*

Molly: Never so interesting, indeed. By January 1892, right around the time she was supposed to be on her honeymoon but was instead supervising construction on the New Century Clubhouse in Philadelphia, Minerva could claim at least 42 buildings that were either partially or completely built. She was 30 years old, 5 years into her solo career, and several months into a teaching position at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women that extended her influence to the next generation of designers and draftswomen. She'd already published several essays and plans in popular magazines, and been featured in trade publications.

[THEME MUSIC BEGINS]

So, where did she get all this confidence? Simple. She knew her schist.

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 5: Scaffolding.

[THEME MUSIC ENDS]

Molly: Despite everything she did to advance the status of women in architecture, Minerva was not by nature an activist. She certainly supported woman's suffrage, and many of her close friends and colleagues were outspoken advocates for some cause or another. But she herself didn't make a point of agitating (perhaps because she sensed that her choice of profession was agitation enough). Most of the time, when it came to supporting other women, she was content to be the one up on scaffolding, not a speaker's podium.

Except when those two platforms overlapped.

I've mentioned that Minerva Parker Nichols supervised construction on all of her own projects—a notable achievement that we'll dig into in a bit. But first, when I say that she was on site, supervising laborers, let's dwell for a minute about what she would have been wearing. At the time, the norm for women's fashion included high necklines, corsets with inflexible stays, and yards and yards of fabric that weighed things down. By one estimate, the typical corset reduced a woman's lung capacity by *half*, which meant that it would have been twice as difficult for Minerva to navigate the construction site's hurdles and obstacles. No wonder she made a point of saying in one interview, "I don't mind walking over scaffolding a bit. But I draw the line on ladders."

This is why it's notable that the one example we have of her protesting a social issue was at a rally for dress reform in 1893. In general, she made it clear that she preferred to be known for her work rather than what she called "notoriety," but when the fashion of the day affected her work, she insisted on speaking out for dress reform.

This is because Minerva considered her presence on the construction site to be one of her primary responsibilities and greatest qualifications as an architect, as she differentiated herself from the facelessness of popular patternbooks and held builders to her high standards for materials and construction. Being on site throughout the project meant that she knew her buildings inside and out.

There are no shortcuts to that kind of experience—then or now. I asked several architects about the time that they spend on site for their projects. Take architect Fon Wang, for instance.

*Fon Wang: Too much. Like, I really sometimes wish I could farm that out. But at the end of the day, I think you have to do it yourself, like, you have to get down and dirty and walk through asbestos and lead and dust and encounter rabid squirrels and really, to understand the building.*

Molly: Minerva, too, got down and dirty on-site—at least, as much as her 19<sup>th</sup> century fashion would allow. And based on that familiarity with the site, Minerva wrote the

specifications for her own projects, spelling out in great detail how the building should actually be assembled, how the brickwork should be laid, how the joists should be arranged, and on and on.

Nicole Dress is a registered architect today, and she's written lots of specifications in her career.

*Nicole Dress: It's one of those things you never learn in school. So specifications are our last line of defense and getting what we want on a building. At the very basic, it covers warranty periods. But not only that, it ensures that we get the quality product that we want.*

Molly: Take a building's roof, for example.

*Nicole: There's a zillion different roofing products. And you have to know which one am I using, or which ones are right in this application. Which one's right for this client? Or which one's right in this climate? Or which one's right that's not gonna, you know, if we're near the ocean, the sea shore, metal gets disintegrated in the salt air. Well, you have to use a certain marine grade of everything. So, where do you go for that? How do you know that? Well, it's in the specs. And the specs tell that we have to have this. We have to have that, frequently, and then you're always checking to make sure that the contractors installed what you said.*

Molly: So there's Minerva, designing for buildings from coast to coast, which means that she really *did* need to take into account what the specifics of roofing a building in Philadelphia, versus Avon-by-the-Sea in New Jersey, versus Ohio, or Texas, or coastal California. It was all in the specs. The specifications were the bridge between her design vision and the reality of the constructed building—so long as she could get her builders to buy into that vision, and install what she said.

This is why the relationship between the architect and the builder is a delicate one, requiring careful negotiation.

*Nicole: It's a frustrating role in some ways.*

Molly: This is Nicole Dress again.

*Nicole: The trick is to become a partner with your contractor. It can become adversarial really quick, really fast. And you need to become a partner with your owner and you need to become a partner with the contractor. It's problematic when the contractor comes on site and then immediately starts questioning every decision you've made.*

Molly: This would be a challenging relationship for any architect to establish, but when you add in the dimension of gender, the thorniness becomes magnified. Nan Gutterman

is also a practicing architect, and she shared her own experiences navigating these dynamics in her decades of practice:

*Nan Gutterman: When I go out to do construction administration—so, when I’m telling a man that he’s done something wrong, and I’m a female, who might be at least probably half his age (at least when I started doing it), there’s a lot of resentment and pushback.*

*Molly: Here again, it’s worth hearing from a current’s architect and reflecting back 125 years to the parallels that Minerva must have experienced. Each time she insisted on being on-site for the duration of construction, Minerva’s presence was more than just a curiosity. She was the architect, superintending the builders: doing her job meant upending the traditional, gendered power dynamics in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, subverting what it meant to be a “lady architect.”*

Nan Gutterman coped by deliberately reining in her demeanor.

*Nan: I was told when I did construction in administration in Virginia, by a guy, that no matter how angry I got, I was always to be a lady. I was not to cuss.*

*I think it was very helpful advice. I mean, I still do. I try not to cuss someone out. I may raise my voice. I may yell. But I always put on this persona that I am a lady and I’m a professional.*

*Molly: I don’t actually know if Minerva responded in the same way. (In her stories to her grandchildren late in life, she did claim that she inherited her grandfather’s explosive swearing.) But journalists often commented on her attractive looks and how ladylike she was, as they clearly struggled to reconcile her appearance as a woman with her authority as an architect.*

With authority comes isolation, Minerva must have experienced that as well. I think of the current example of Angela Cacace, who owns her own construction business and spoke with me about what it’s like to be on the construction site. Corsets weren’t involved, but nevertheless, her experiences echo Nan’s, and make me think about what Minerva must have encountered in similar situations 125 years ago:

*Angela: I’m just gonna keep recruiting women as I like to do work for them because, um, yeah, I just think that male contractors have kind of gotten in the way of women feeling comfortable having a say or being a part of it. Yeah, I mean, I think just naturally being the minority is going to make you feel isolated at certain moments.*

However she navigated it, Minerva did manage to earn the respect—however begrudging—of contractors. As her buildings went up one after another, she kept a

close eye on things, drawing on her years of apprenticeship under E.W. Thorne and her extensive, *earned* knowledge of quality construction.

*Male V/O: She's the most particular and knowing person to work for that I ever struck.*

Molly: One builder declared to a journalist.

*Male V/O: She knows every brick and just where it ought to go. There's no cheating her by smuggling in knotty lumber and leaving the joists sticking out into the chimneys.*

Molly: A builder working on the New Century Club in Wilmington told a journalist that "he had never worked for an architect who better understood the business," while another project's building contractor went one step further, saying: "She knows not only her business, but mine too."

Minerva's expertise in building construction was hard-earned, and she commanded respect from builders who were unaccustomed to working with such a skilled architect—lady or otherwise. Over the course of her career, Minerva got over 60 buildings built, which means that she was able to establish dozens of working relationships with builders and tradespeople under conditions made more difficult by gender, power, and lest we forget—corsets.

BREAK

Molly: Throughout her career, as she got building after building constructed, Minerva made a point of insisting that everyone should have the same preparation that she had undertaken. She was adamant about the practical education and experience that was necessary for the architectural profession, dismissing those people (men or women) who called themselves architects without doing the necessary homework—and not just in a classroom.

You'll recall from earlier episodes that her career happened to coincide with a 19<sup>th</sup>-century fork in the road between architecture as a profession, and the building trades. Minerva had a foot on both paths—designing as a professional architect, but with the apprenticeship training of the building trades. For many historians, this has left her in no man's land (ironically), unrecognized by architectural historians and builders alike.

But for Minerva, the fact that she knew both worlds intimately meant that she was more qualified than *anyone* to speak to the kind of applied education that was necessary to work with a contractor and get a building off the ground. She even took the initiative to lead that kind of education, when she taught for three years at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women and published instructive essays in popular magazines. Having made what she called "a thorough study of the

business," she taught her students and directed her readership that architecture was "a business that has to be learned and thoroughly mastered like any other." And who better to speak with authority on the business of architecture than the woman who ran her own office and supervised dozens of projects—and men—to get the work done?

In short, Minerva had an architectural practice, and it was the *practice* part that she took seriously.

In the hundred or so years since she opened her office, the profession of architecture has continually confronted this balance between education in the classroom and education on site—and to hear it from its current practitioners, the field is still trying to get the balance right.

*Nicole Dress: Learning about Minerva and sort of the 1800s, I mean the late 1800s, you learned by—you didn't you to school, formal school, you went by interning, and then in the early 1900s, they switch to well, you should have a degree.*

Molly: This is architect Nicole Dress, who we heard from earlier.

*Nicole: And I don't think the architectural profession has ever really reconciled that aspect. And so we go to school, and we go for five to six to seven years. And you come out and what have you learned? I mean, my professional practice class was a joke. And the professor who's teaching it taught it like it was a joke, and we didn't learn anything about how to be good business people.*

Molly: Nicole acknowledges that this isn't universal, and other architects I spoke with had different experiences. But it's clear that this is a longstanding question of practice for the profession of architecture. And if it's still pertinent today, then it's all the more significant that Minerva had a clear-eyed, well-informed perspective on the issue in the 1890s. And we can certainly learn something about the business of architecture now by revisiting her experiences then.

So, did all that preparation pay off? How can we tell if she was good at her job, and practiced what she preached?

Well, she was an architect, so let's look at her architecture.

*Heather Bodenstab: This place is built like a fortress.*

Molly: Heather Bodenstab and her family lived until recently in a house on W. Hortter Street in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. I interviewed her before they moved out of town.

*Heather: We have had no leaks, the basement is totally fine.*

*I mean, we pay less monthly in the winter for electric and gas heat than we did in our home in Center City, which was 2000 square feet. And this one's 4900 square feet. (Heather Bodenstab, 13:52 – 14:05)*

Molly: Christine Witkowski hasn't been so lucky in terms of the heating bill for the house she owns with her partner Dan in Germantown. But they are confident in the structural integrity of the building.

*Christine Witkowski: We did have to have some sistering done for one of the giant beams in the basement when we moved in.*

*But the contractor was really quick to say, 'We'll add some supports. But keep in mind that beams this size just don't get made anymore. So this house is not going anywhere.' And that's what has been routinely told to us by anybody who's coming to look at the house. This is really well-built and will be here forever.*

Molly: Donna Swajeski echoed this experience, in terms of staging plays with the Delaware Children's Theatre in the clubhouse that Minerva designed.

*Donna Swajeski: It's so solid. We will be in there and doing a show, and you know, there'll be sirens, and you don't—barely hear anything. So for that, it's pretty, it's pretty amazing.*

Molly: TJ Scully and his wife Judy Lustig said the same thing about their house in the Oak Lane section of Philadelphia, as they remembered back to a conversation with their home inspector a few decades ago:

*TJ Scully: I remember we had some fears that it had structural problems, and he looked at it and he said that the house was so overbuilt, don't even worry about it.*

Molly: The fact is, TJ and Judy and other residents in Minerva's buildings didn't have to worry about their structure, because Minerva had already worried about it over a century ago.

BREAK

Molly: When she decided to go out on her own in 1888, Minerva made a conscious choice that her opportunities in practice outweighed her constraints—including her corset stays. In many ways, the decision paid off, as she proved her worth with client after client and contractor after contractor. The New Century Club of Wilmington, for instance, was practically terse in its annual report as it declared its satisfaction with her work on the clubhouse:

*Female V/O: "Rough sketches were submitted to several architects, who in turn, submitted their plans. It was decided to accept those of Mrs. Minerva Parker Nichols. We were*

more than pleased to find that we could employ a woman to do this work, and the wisdom of our choice is so apparent, it is not necessary to comment upon it.”

Molly: Such kudos were seemingly commonplace for Minerva, and speak to her confidence borne of training, skill, and practice on the worksite.

[THEME MUSIC BEGINS]

Minerva’s career is a study in scaffolding—the ways in which she laid the groundwork and built her way up on the basis of her competence and confidence. But she’s just one person, and it would be naïve or misguided to think that one person building something can counteract all the other destabilizing forces that drove women out of practice in the 1890s, and continue to do so today, in 2020. Sometimes, all the preparation in the world doesn’t counterbalance the existing structures—the invisible scaffolds, if you will—that result in persistent patterns of under-representation in architectural practice. We’ll talk more about that in the next episode.

CLOSING CREDITS