



Guastavino's Ghost

Is Alive and Well

By Peter Austin

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Surely it has happened more than once. A traveler driving in the South diverts from her path, and visits a small city she has heard of — Asheville, and in the early morning hours goes into town for a visit. She comes off of I-40 or the Blue Ridge Parkway, eager to see something other than fog and trees, and drives about looking vaguely for Wolfe's old Kentucky Home or maybe the Biltmore House.

As she travels through the downtown, she turns north on Haywood and as the street bears left, there in the morning sun is a building that seems quite out of place. It's right out of a city square in old Mexico — a brick church with towers and little domes and a bigger dome, and she suddenly wants to know two things — why is it here and why hadn't she heard about it before?

She goes in. The elliptical dome is not high above her head... she can clearly make out the tiles that make up the fabric of the structure. She asks "who built this," and is directed forward, to the left of





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the altar, where in a crypt rests the man who built this thing, and as she turns to gaze into the nave she recalls two epitaphs from the past, wondering which would be more appropriate: the one for English architect Sir Christopher Wren in St. Paul's Cathedral in London, which when translated from Latin, reads "*If you would see his monument, look around,*" or the words that Shelley put into the mouth of Ozymandias when the latter urged a visitor to "*look on my works ye mighty and despair.*"

Perhaps the choice is not clear, but the modern architect may well despair since this powerful and expressive way of building is no longer used in the United States. The encrypted builder, of course, is the Spanish born Rafael Guastavino, and it was not so long ago that he was not even a mystery — he was almost entirely forgotten.





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Many people now know the story of the two Guastavinos, father and son, both named Rafael. How the father lived out the immigrant dream, coming to America in 1881 and starting a construction business that introduced here his patented way of building with layers of thin tile and cement.

How he soon was helping build the structures that shaped America in the 20th century, among them Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Great Hall at Ellis Island, and the National Cathedral — in time working on over one thousand structures in the United States, many of them significant.

Sometimes he sought to honor the nation's past, as when Guastavino vaults helped shelter Plymouth Rock, and sometimes he helped restore that past, as when the wooden dome burned off Jefferson's Rotunda at the University of Virginia and was replaced by a Guastavino dome.

Not only did the Guastavinos offer a look that no other builder could match, sometimes they would build where no one else could at all.





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After the senior Rafael died in 1908, his son was asked to help with a problem that seemed insolvable.

The Cathedral of St. John the Divine stood unfinished in Manhattan, with a huge opening to the sky where a giant spire was to have topped the church. But now there was little money to close that gap, let alone build a grand steeple. Just putting up the scaffolding would cost a great amount, since it must rise ten stories just to reach the level where the work would begin.

But the younger Guastavino said he could build a crossing dome to enclose that space above the altar and he could build it from above, without scaffolding, with a method he or his father had probably never used before or would use again.

This “temporary dome” is still in place. The younger Guastavino also experimented with glazed tiles to add a decorative layer to their structural vaults, and worked with Prof. Wallace Sabine at Har-





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vard, the founder of acoustics, to make the first modern acoustic tiles.

These improvements, along with the company's basic vaulting, would keep the company going until 1962, when it closed due to lack of business.

Peter Austin is a librarian at Salem Academy and College in Winston-Salem. An Asheville native, he has been interested in local architectural history for over twenty years, with a special interest in the works of Rafael Guastavino.

*For more information on the Guastavinos and St. Lawrence Basilica, pickup a copy of the book, *The Basilica of St. Lawrence D.M.*, now available at the church giftshop on Haywood Street in Asheville.*





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