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The Cutting Edge

Vidal Sassoon and his wife, Ronnie, reinvigorate an iconic Richard Neutra house in the hills of Bel Air

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The relationship between hair and architecture has perhaps not been properly appreciated. But a visit with legendary stylist Vidal Sassoon and his wife, Ronnie, rectifies that.

“My whole work, beginning in the late 1950s, came from the Bauhaus,” explains Vidal, whose geometric, easy-maintenance cuts sparked a revolution in hair. “It was all about studying the bone structure of the face, to bring out the character. I hated the prettiness that was in fashion at that time.

“My whole work, beginning in the late 1950s, came from the Bauhaus,” says Sassoon.

“Architects have always been my heroes,” he adds. “I could not have been more honored than when I met Marcel Breuer and he told me he knew my work. And Rem Koolhaas said he had one of my original cutting books in his library.”

Fittingly, this conversation is taking place inside the couple’s Los Angeles home, a seminal work by modernist master [Richard Neutra](#), which they recently restored. Known as the Singleton House, it was commissioned in the mid-’50s by industrialist Henry Singleton for a site on a spectacular peak atop Mulholland Drive. Views from the property take in the Pacific and the shiny skyscrapers of downtown, as well as the desert and San Gabriel Mountains.

When Ronnie, like her husband a passionate architecture buff, first saw the house it was in dire shape, though the Singleton family had done their best to maintain it. After relocating in 1969, they had rented it to a series of tenants, then put it on the market in 2002, three years after Henry’s death. The 4,700-square-foot house languished unoccupied—its systems too rudimentary (there was no air-conditioning, just Neutra’s ingeniously designed cross-

ventilating windows) and its bedrooms too small and dark for contemporary families—until the Sassoons purchased the sleeping beauty. They were living between London and Beverly Hills at the time and bought the home as an adventure, one they weren't completely sure would be positive. Indeed, just two weeks after the closing, in 2004, part of the roof collapsed, and a few months later a huge chunk of the property slid into a neighbor's yard. But Cincinnati-born Ronnie, who had worked as a fashion designer and an advertising executive before she married Vidal almost 20 years ago, was committed to the project and immersed herself in a study of Neutra's work. She pored over images of the Singleton House taken by Julius Shulman (1910–2009), the preeminent architectural photographer of Los Angeles. "They were my bible," she says.

Little did she know how much she'd need the visual documentation. The Sassoons discovered that, due to dry rot and modern code requirements, they would have to do extensive rebuilding. Working with contractor Scott Werker of [GW Associates](#) of L.A., they replaced damaged ceilings and poured new terrazzo floors, and they removed a number of walls in order to create larger, brighter interior spaces. They also added a master bedroom suite, which Ronnie designed with Werker and building planner [Tim Campbell](#).

Although the Sassoons made use of Neutra's original materials and vocabulary to an astonishing degree, the changes were considered sacrilege by some design purists. Ronnie, however, is unapologetic: "Unless the house is a museum, or you only spend a few weeks a year there, you just can't live this way today. And given how valuable the land is, the house would have been torn down."

When the renovations were complete, the couple turned to decorator [Martyn Lawrence-Bullard](#), a close friend, for advice on the interiors, particularly upholstered pieces and textiles. "Ronnie and Vidal both have such an amazing eye," says Lawrence-Bullard. "They bought great midcentury French and Italian furniture, including important pieces by Charlotte Perriand and Gio Ponti." The Sassoons happily decamped from Beverly Hills ("It's just a shopping mall now," scoffs Vidal) and moved up to Mulholland. "It's still the Wild, Wild West up here," he notes. "We have bobcats and mountain lions."

Though he just celebrated his 83rd birthday, Vidal radiates the energy and agility of a man decades younger. His extraordinary life is the subject of the recent feature documentary [Vidal Sassoon: The Movie](#), which tells the story of his rise from East London orphan to hair-care god. Remarkable footage, particularly from the '60s, illustrates the epic cultural changes of that decade.

"It was total euphoria," he recalls. "And Ronnie brought back some of that with this house." He glances her way, only to see her brush off the compliment. "It's true, darling," he insists.

[Click here to see Ronnie and Vidal Sassoon's stylish home.](#)

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