

neutra Ground

**the Hair
Apparent on**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM STREET-PORTER
INTERVIEW BY STINSON CARTER

Vidal and Ronnie Sassoon met in the early '90s while she was designing a product from his "If you don't look good, we don't look good" line, and he has trusted her design eye ever since. Vidal Sassoon may not let his wife cut his hair, but she's the only one he'll let touch his houses. Ronnie Sassoon has a passion for redesigning mid-century moderns, but her latest undertaking may be her finest work yet: a major remodel of Richard Neutra's c. 1959 Singleton house, a benchmark of the architect's Southern California Regionalist style. It is now quietly back on the market for \$20 million, including a grandfathered-in, five-and-a-half-acre wooded lot and 360-degree views from its own private Mulholland Drive ridge. On an early February day, Ms. Sassoon met up with Room 100 on the terrazzo to talk about designing around a legendary architect—and life with the iconic hair guru.



OOH-LA-LA!
Vidal and Ronnie Sassoon,
Mulholland Drive, Los
Angeles, 2008.



AT WATER'S EDGE
The 1959 Singleton
house features stunning
360-degree views.



MINIMAL MASTERPIECE
“I didn’t over-furnish it,” says
Sassoon. “I wanted the
architecture to have the glory.”

ROOM 100: What were you looking for when you came across this house?

RONNIE SASSOON: I wasn’t looking at all. I saw it in the newspaper and I thought, Could it possibly be that the Singleton house is for sale, and it’s actually in the paper?

Why did they have to take out an ad in the paper to sell a Neutra house? The house had been on the market for quite a long time, and everybody in the world had looked at it. And I think they were afraid of it. They couldn’t live in it the way it was and they were afraid to change it. I wanted to save it; it was in a terrible state of disrepair—the roof was caving in. Mr. Singleton had donated it to MIT because that’s where he went to school. But MIT didn’t know what to do with it so they were renting it. I don’t really think they had put any money into it. It really was a sad house when I bought it, but I knew the bones were there. It needed to pull itself up into this century so that someone would want to live in it again.

Did you purchase the house as a passion project or as a new home? It was a passion project. I thought it wouldn’t be a bad choice [*laughs*]. I’ve been a fan of mid-century architecture for a long time. I love the period.

MIT held interviews with prospective buyers. Did you have to go through an interview? We got to circumvent the process. Crosby Doe, the estate agent on the property, knew what I did with our Hal Leavitt House in Beverly Hills, so he entrusted the house to me.

What didn’t you like about the place when you first saw it, aside from the structural damage? A lot of the materials weren’t very nice. The original kitchen was a pile of rotten plywood. I mean, what do you do with that? And the original garage at some point was turned into the maid’s quarters, and somebody used black-and-white and turquoise tile—it was like art deco meets Mexico!

How did you first approach the project? I went to the Getty Archives, and I bought every photograph of the house Julius Shulman had taken. Neutra had already set certain boundaries, and it was my choice as to how strictly I wanted to follow those. It’s always puzzling to me when historians say, “Oh my God, you can’t touch a Neutra house.” That’s not who Neutra was. He loved change. He was actually quoted as saying that a house should not last longer than its last mortgage payment.

What elements of his interior design did you retain? I used as many of the original built-ins as I could, and made all the new drawers and cabinets with his designs. All the bathrooms have the original fixtures, where at all possible. They’re from Sears from the 1950s, but they still make them. So the ones I wasn’t able to re-plate, I could replace. Also, keeping the formica in the bathrooms was necessary. I wasn’t going to use some slick

surface. And I used all the original cabinet handles in the kitchen. Out of respect for this house, I didn’t over-furnish it. I wanted the architecture to have the glory. I’ve only put a few pieces in the house, but the ones that I have put in are museum quality from that period.

Do you think Neutra would approve of your changes? The client was the most important thing for Neutra. He actually had questionnaires for them, and sometimes he would move in with them beforehand and watch their lifestyle, the way they lived. For this project, I treated it as if we were the client. So the first thing I did for us, since we require larger living quarters, was to open it up. Julius Shulman, who photographed all the Neutra houses in the ‘50s, came up here for lunch and said, “It’s a better house. We all wondered at the time why such a tiny house was being put on such a huge, beautiful piece of property.”

Did you and Vidal ever have any creative differences with the house? Vidal didn’t have anything to do with the design. Our relationship is about me doing something and then loving to surprise him. I did our flat in London completely. He hadn’t seen it since the day we bought it. That shows how much he trusts me, which... it’s amazing to have carte blanche, and I designed this really fun ‘60s pad for him. I mean, if you’re going to go back and live in London and you’re Vidal Sassoon, then you have to have a ‘60s pad, right?

How long has it been back on the market? We’ve been finished for about nine or ten months, and it’s been on the market since last spring. But it’s quietly on the market for now.

Is Vidal ready to sell the house? I think if that came up, Vidal and I would have to talk about it because he is very gung-ho to move in here. But Vidal just turned 80 this year, and he’s never been a good driver, so I could see him wiping out on the driveway before he got to the street... but that’s another story [*laughs*].

Now that this is finished, what’s your next project? I’m in limbo, I’m floating in space right now. I’m looking, I’m thinking, I’m always looking for something creative to do.

What is Vidal working on these days? He is the hair icon, he is their guru, so he is always involved in some project for the hair industry. And he does speeches—he is an incredible public speaker. He’s been bringing together the hair industry to raise money for houses in New Orleans with Habitat for Humanity. He’s pulling together material for a book he’s writing. And for the past year, he’s been involved with someone doing a documentary on his life. He’s got plenty on his plate, he’s a busy guy.

With your designing and his ‘hair guru’ duties, do the two of you get to be in the same place most of the time? Oh yeah, we’re buddies. We move around a lot, but we’re together almost all the time.

"Vidal just turned 80 this year, and he's never been a good driver, so I could see him wiping out on the driveway before he got to the street... but that's another story." —Ronnie Sassoon



BRICK BY BRICK
Sassoon selected
"museum quality"
'50s-era pieces for
the house.

