

Experience the magic



MAGIC



North Carolina

# One Enchanted Haven

SALVAGED MATERIALS MAKE MAGIC ON A HILLSIDE IN ASHEVILLE

Architecture by Douglas Ellington | Text by Steven M. L. Aronson | Photography by Gordon Beall



The rambling, romantic cottage—or is it an enchanted fairy-tale castle—that hugs the side of a forested mountain in Asheville, North Carolina, is the house that the noted wildlife artist Sallie Middleton was born to inhabit, literally as well as figuratively. “It in many ways stalked Mommie—she and the house were one,” says her daughter Sallie Parker. Indeed, Middleton, who died last year, had lived there as a child and young girl, and in the late 1980s she came back to stay for the duration. So much for “you can’t go home again” (speaking of which, the not-

edist Thomas Wolfe, an Asheville native, was a friend of Middleton’s father’s and a regular visitor to the house).

When her father bought the property in 1926, it had only a one-room log cabin on it. To build a family dwelling he turned to a family member—his brother, the celebrated regional architect Douglas Ellington, who was in the throes of designing, mostly in the Art Deco style, practically the whole of Asheville (the city hall, the Baptist church and the high school, not to mention a firehouse, a restaurant, a hospital and a funeral park office—later in his career he would design an entire feder-

ally sponsored model town in Maryland).

“I think Great-Uncle Douglas set out to have himself some fun,” Parker surmises. There were never any plans or drawings, and the seven-room house that he added on to the old cabin (which became Sallie Middleton’s childhood bedroom and, later in life, her library) looks “as if it just simply, and magically, happened.” Its charming haphazardness of impression notwithstanding, Ellington actually worked on it over the course of four years, incorporating leftovers from his other projects and from abandoned buildings around town. As Middleton herself re-

The longtime residence of the late wildlife artist Sallie Middleton in Asheville, South Carolina, was designed and built 1926–30 by her uncle Douglas Ellington, an architect most commonly associated with Art Deco work. Middleton’s watercolors are hung throughout the home. Above: The front of Ellington’s idiosyncratic creation, which was grafted onto an existing one-room log cabin. Opposite: The living room. Most of the materials—the stones, beams, planks and tiles—were reclaimed.

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called, “The house was built of scraps and whimsy, and it is a masterpiece example of what can be done with materials headed for the city dump.”

In addition to logs and stone, these materials—which the architect didn’t hesitate to mix so long as they made a pleasing pattern—included marble, slate, tile, Belgian block (slabs of Asheville’s sidewalks, which were being torn up), brick (from a demolished store) and wood (chestnut

cut from the property for the shingles on the cabin and kitchen roofs, and cypress for all the windows and doors). Surplus beams from Ellington’s Asheville City Building were used for the living room, their number and length dictating its cavernous size.

The builders were unskilled laborers—local mountain men whom the architect trained on the job. “No machinery was used—only shovels and picks,” Sallie Mid-

dleton stressed, “and they dug the land as little as possible so as not to disturb the structure of the mountain.” For the keystones over the doorways and casement windows and around the living room fireplace, however, Ellington took care to hire an Italian stonemason so that the house would reverberate with the synergy of artisanship and roughness.

The rooms all have quaint names. The tiny oval-windowed space on the third and

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topmost level that once served as Sallie Middleton's studio has always been called the "tower room of the crocodile." One level down is the so-called "room over the kitchen," a bedroom with casement windows on three sides and its own tiled terrace below the flowering apple and pear trees that cover the mountain. It is here that the architect spent his dying days in 1960, carving designs in wooden bell handles almost as assiduously as he once

used to polish the heavy beam handrail of the main stair, rubbing it over and over with his hand—"He said that there was no furniture oil as good as human sweat," Parker remembers.

On this level, too, is the "gallery of originals," where Middleton hung her fresh paintings (and signed and numbered her limited-edition prints). And "Bluebeard's closet," where in bygone days her father, an authority on fairies and elves, secreted

gifts that he would parcel out to family members. "You would hear the door of Bluebeard's closet creaking open, and you knew that something beautiful and exciting was going to be coming out of it," says Parker, adding that the old homestead is going to be kept as a family house. "Mommie felt her spirit would live on here, and as for her body, she just said—she had such a sense of humor—"Throw my ashes in the poison ivy.'" □

A day like no other

HOUSE









# C o t t a g e







A s t a y l i k e n o o t h e r



C o t t a g e



# C o t t a g e





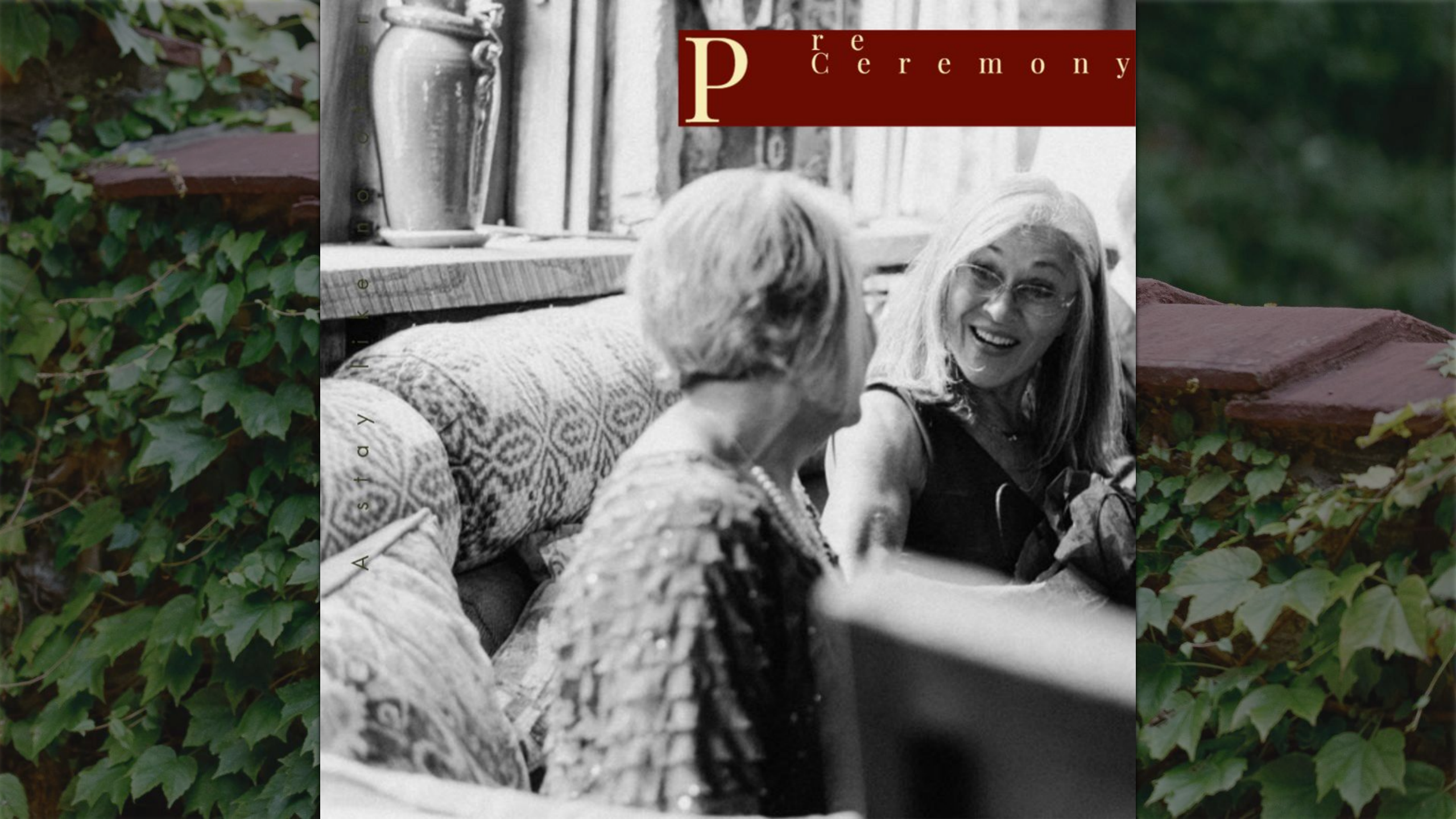


M e m o r i e s   l i k e   n o   o t h e r



P r e  
C e r e m o n y

A stay Mike







C e r e m o n y

















