

# Homestyle

SEPTEMBER 2001

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# Design Lessons

**SHEILA BRIDGES**

At her Harlem apartment and upstate New York country house, the superstar decorator has mastered the mix.

BY NEWELL TURNER AND BARBARA KURGAN



**RURAL IDYLL**  
In Bridges' country home (above), classic shapes and unfussy fabrics set a tone of relaxed formality. Views of the Hudson River Valley inspired her color palette.

**NEWELL TURNER: I know that every client is different, but is there any formula you have for starting a job?**

**SHEILA BRIDGES:** I usually ask people to look at magazines and books, and mark or rip out pages of things that they like. But more important, I ask people to mark the things that they *don't* like, because people articulate things they don't like more clearly than things they do. They might say, "Oh, the table is too shiny; I don't like blue." It helps me know what to steer away from.

**NT: Do you like clients who are very involved?**

I like people who are pretty involved, but respectful, who can step back rather than micromanaging the process. People who realize that they have hired a professional,

and this is what I spend all day, every day, doing. While they're at work writing contracts or trading bonds, they don't have the time to focus on dining chairs the way I do. The best clients make decisions firmly and quickly. It's a relationship about trust, and there's this comfort zone that you have to reach with a client before the project can end well. There are very few other businesses where you're in such intimate places. I know what's in their bedside tables.

**NT: How would you characterize your style?**

I would say it's accessible. I don't think any of my projects look like they're overly decorated, or that you can really walk in and necessarily tell that a professional

designer-decorator has actually done the space. I don't want anyone's home to look as though I put my stamp across it, because they have to live there and it should be reflective of them, not reflective of me.

**NT: You have a very traditional hand in your work.**

Actually, it's more classic than traditional. I love more classic forms and shapes—from an eighteenth-century sideboard to a 1950s chair. I think that the range of classics spans a significant period of time, and those are the things that I love to incorporate into projects.

**NT: How do these things marry?**

If something has a beautiful shape or silhouette or line—those things are not going to change. You might get tired of the pink brocade fabric that you put on the first time around, but you're not going to get tired of the actual style or shape of it. So if you mix these kinds of pieces together,

no matter what period they're from, to me they always marry, they always work. It's got to be a healthy balance of all those things. If you have chairs with fringe and then a sofa that has a skirt, then maybe you have chairs where you can see the legs.

**NT: Tell us about balancing your city apartment and your country house.**

That's about having balance personally and spiritually. I have silks and things that are a bit more formal in the city. In the country I have more linens and cottons. Less expensive fabrics. It's just a more relaxed, casual version of my city apartment.

**NT: How did you get the commission to design Bill Clinton's offices in Harlem?**

The same way that I get commissioned to do most of our residential projects. It was in all the media that he was

**UPTOWN CHIC**  
Bridges' personal spin on classicism in her Harlem apartment (all views) is built with eclectic finds. By delicately balancing polished forms and adding a few funky pieces, she achieves refinement and avoids stiffness.

“I love more classic forms and shapes—from an 18th-century sideboard to a 1950s chair”





**A DELICATE BALANCE**  
In Bridges' city living room (above right), symmetrical pairings and furniture dressed in pure silks create a cultivated look. In the country (above left), linens and cottons set the mood for laid-back weekends.



"The best clients make their decisions firmly and quickly. It's a relationship about trust"

considering moving his offices uptown. I really hadn't thought much about it until my father called and asked me about it as well. It was the first time I can recall that one of my parents had suggested that I pursue a project. It seemed like an obvious fit to my father, since I live and work in Harlem. So I contacted as many people as I could think of who would be able to make sure that my portfolio would reach Mr. Clinton—exactly the same way I try to reach any potential client.

**NT: What style will the office be?**

It is going to be very contemporary, which is probably not what most people would expect. We are going to be using Knoll office systems for his staff as well as some Mies and Saarinen tables. Many of the bathroom fittings that we have specified are from Waterworks. The conference room rug is from Stark Carpet. I really hope to work with Mr. Clinton in his selection of art. I would love to use a local resource that is almost across the street—The Studio Museum in Harlem, the premier institution devoted to African-American art. I think that it would be feasible to get works on loan for Mr. Clinton's office.

**BARBARA KURGAN: I have always admired the way you use art in projects.**

I certainly encourage clients to buy art, whatever that means for them—whether it's black-and-white photographs, vintage photographs, things that are really significant, or things that they just love.

**BK: You're also writing a book, aren't you?**

Yes, it's called *Furnishing Forward: A Practical Guide to Furnishing for a Lifetime*. Little, Brown & Company is publishing it in April 2002. It's very anecdotal, very practical advice, with professional tips like: Jump up and down on the bed before you buy it. If it feels like it's going to break in five minutes, it probably is going to break.

**BK: Could you explain the book's title to me?**

My philosophy is furnishing with the future in mind. My book suggests starting a furniture fund. Put money aside the same way you would if you wanted to save for a new car. Take twenty-five dollars out of your paycheck, and put it aside for the things that relate to your home. Because it's really important to have a refuge and a place that you love to come back to at the end of the day. ♦