

# Design of a higher level: Heading uptown with designer Sheila Bridges

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Xanthos/News

Noted designer Sheila Bridges in the living room of her Harlem apartment. Below, same room from a different angle.

At a crowded intersection in Harlem where [Adam Clayton Powell Blvd.](#) meets [Saint Nicholas Ave.](#), on the top floor of a historic building, interior designer [Sheila Bridges](#) rents a classic six-room apartment. She has lived there since 1993, having decorated the space just once, more than a decade ago. Outside, you can see [Columbia University](#) and [St. John the Divine](#). Inside, a bright orange round entry foyer, a room with words for wallpaper, and a cream-colored antique Swedish Gustavian clock that looks tall even under 12-foot ceilings are views enough.



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After all this time, the design stands up like it was finished yesterday.

The walls are pale blue, green, orange, and black. The bathroom is black and white, using the same-colored original tile floor as the basis for the entire color scheme in the small space. Footstools, ottomans, chairs and custom-made furniture designed by Bridges are everywhere. Outsider art sits high on the walls next to traditional pewter candlesticks and modern sculpture. [Moroccan](#) tables scatter about the formal living room.

"I want my work to be timeless," says Bridges, who was one of the first interior designers to have a television show and was tapped by [Bill Clinton](#) to design his [Harlem](#) office.

"That's the idea. To present meaningful, inspiring spaces where people can live or work. I take cues from the architecture of the building. I wanted classic here, but I like to mix it up."

Mix it up she does. Desks and commodes of different color wood and periods accent every room. A round tufted orange couch greets visitors in the orange entryway. Leather stools and unique chairs rest against wide walls. The rooms are large, but Bridges doesn't use furniture to fill them up. Empty space accents the important parts of the home.

"I could have a 20-foot couch along the wall if I wanted, but that would make the room seem small," she says, pointing out the importance of scale. "I allowed the window treatments to go all the way to the ceiling to accentuate the height. There's a proliferation of design out there right now everywhere you look. Everyone is a closet decorator. People think they can do it themselves. There are things, like scale, that a non-professional cannot grasp."

Bridges is as opinionated and no-nonsense an interior designer as you'll find. Unafraid to speak her mind, she's fine with controversy. When an autoimmune disease threatened her health, she took control by shaving her head, figuring she'd take her hair before the ailment did. Right now, she has trouble understanding why some people think they can design without experience. She worries that the outlets to design diminish the profession's integrity and decrease the desire to hire a professional designer.

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"You can get any piece of furniture at any price," she says. "All this access has made people think they can be designers. Access doesn't mean skill. It's like me opening an E\*TRADE account. I don't know the first things about stocks. Just because I can doesn't mean I should."

Don't confuse candor with bitterness. Bridges speaks from experience. Educated at [Brown University](#) before getting a design degree from Parsons in [New York](#) and studying decorative arts at Polimoda in [Florence, Italy](#), Bridges is as classically trained as anyone in the industry. [Time magazine](#) and [CNN](#) named her "America's Best Interior Designer." "Sheila Bridges Designer Living" for the [Fine Living Network](#) debuted in 2002, lasting four seasons. She has appeared on [Oprah](#) and authored a book, "Furnishing Forward," published by Little Brown. She speaks from the heart.

"There's a reason why people should support our industry and hire designers," she says. "Besides the fact that you help support an entire industry of structural engineers, stone masons, steel fabricators, electricians, contractors, plumbers, painters, wallpaper hangers, carpenters, artists, cabinetmakers, upholsterers, antique dealers and artisans, we understand how to solve problems and edit out a lot of [rubbish]. Ultimately, we'll save you time and money."

Slightly disenchanted with the quality of home design, Bridges wants to be excited again.

"Rarely am I inspired by an innovative idea I haven't seen before," says Bridges. "Everything is very generic or neutral. It's as if we've been anesthetized to really exceptional design by all that access I mentioned. I am constantly looking for fresh color palettes. So much stuff has created mediocrity."

In this climate, Bridges, who has assistants but works on client projects alone, inspires herself. Designing her country house in [upstate New York](#), she wanted something edgy for the walls. A lover of toile, the antique French method of displaying pastoral scenes on fabrics, Bridges commissioned a local Harlem illustrator to bring to life something she had been thinking about that might look great on her walls or fabric.

"I wanted to lampoon the stereotypes associated with African-Americans," says Bridges. "I couldn't find anything that spoke to me. When it was done, the wallpaper guy who produced it said we should make this available widespread, that it was really beautiful. We did."

Since 2006, when Bridges started producing it, Harlem Toile has grown into a cottage industry, now a part of the [Cooper Hewitt-Museum's](#) wallpaper collection. The scenes are artistic and unique. In some ways, they are as pop culture-worthy as [Andy Warhol's](#) [Campbell's soup cans](#).

In one scene, African-Americans dressed in tattered Colonial clothing play basketball with a bucket hanging from a tree. In another, 17th-century black women get their hair braided. In a third, a couple does a jig to a boom box in a field under the [Washington Square Park](#) arch.

Available online at [sheilabridges.com](#) and select shops such as the Studio Museum Harlem, Harlem Toile comes in multiple colors as wallpaper (\$150 for five yards), fabrics (\$100 per yard), bedding (flat and fitted queen sheets, \$52) and, most recently, a set of six fine china plates (\$100).

Besides Harlem Toile, Bridges created other wall coverings and is seeking a business partner to help produce custom-made furnishings that can be manufactured quickly at low cost. She has a line of outdoor furniture due out this spring.

"I don't want to be pigeonholed as the Harlem Toile girl," she says, seriously. "It was funny, when I stopped my television show, people would come up to me on the street and say, 'Oh, too bad, what are you doing now?' I wasn't a TV star like everyone today who, then, became this other something like a rapper or started a fashion line. I'm a designer. I'm serious about that. It's what I do."

Bridges' clients are thankful for that. Legendary music executive [Andre Harrell](#), often credited with discovering [Diddy](#), [Heavy D](#) and [Mary J. Blige](#), worked with Bridges on three of his homes. After helping him find his true taste, she worked with him on building a British-styled country home in [Westport, Conn.](#), and a French Renaissance apartment on the upper West Side.

"Walking into my homes that Sheila designed is like walking into another country," says Harrell, ex-chairman of [Uptown Records](#) and Motown. "She can be elegant and cozy at the same time. There is no question Sheila is beyond professional. She's an artist. She doesn't just provide a service. She gives you an artistic living environment created based on your tastes."

To learn more about Sheila Bridges or purchase Harlem Toile, go to [sheilabridges.com](#)