

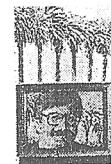
## ArtsEtc.

# Diplomatic traits help TV host's design career

Sheila Bridges furnishes without prejudice, lands interior design show

**HOLLYWOOD:** When Sheila Bridges talks about being an interior designer, she makes it sound a lot like diplomacy.

Oh, she has plenty of ideas about how to make homes look their best — enough that Time magazine called her the best decorator in America in 2001. She premieres in her own TV show Jan. 28 on Fine Living, a 9-



Heldenfels  
in  
California

month-old digital cable and satellite service dealing with lifestyle issues. And the 38-year-old Philadelphia native, whose clients have included entertainment-industry executive Andre Harrell and former President Bill Clinton (whose Harlem offices she designed), knows what she likes for herself.

"My own style is probably more toward the eclectic," she said. "I love old things, and a lot of antiques, and I incorporate those into lots of my designs. But I also have an appreciation for newer things, too. I try to mix the two together in a way I feel comfortable with."

Still, she said, "My job is to listen to what it is that you want and help you achieve that. You may have a general sense of what you like but not know how to go about getting it."

In her book *Furnishing Forward: A Practical Guide for Furnishing for a Lifetime*, Bridges says: "While I don't think anyone would like to be described as having a 'bad' style, I would think that 'no style' would be far worse."

Talking during and after a Fine Living press conference at the Television Critics Association January press tour, she conceded that clients sometimes have bad ideas (without naming names) and said, "I try really hard to encourage them to at least be open to other ideas." But she does not insist they accept her suggestions.

"For me, it's really not that important," she said. "I don't live in their home, and I'm never going to live in their home. They have to love their home, and they have to feel comfortable there. . . . I think people do have style," she said. "I just think most people aren't cued into what their style is."

"Most people are very comfortable expressing a sense of style when it comes to their clothing," she said. "But most people aren't really confident with the choices they make when it comes to their homes."

On her TV show, *Sheila Bridges: Designer Living*, she said, "The goal is really to encourage people to develop their own sense of personal style, whatever that style is — whether you like furnishings that are traditional or things that are contemporary."

That applies to men as well as

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women.

Bridges recalled an ex-boyfriend who was still using her things 10 years after they had broken up. But when asked if men are more willing than women to accept whatever furniture is around, she said, "That's probably going to change. A lot of the audience watching the home shows on television . . . are men."

Clinton, for one, "had a very clear sense of what he wanted." Harrell — whose recognition gave Bridges a big career boost — went through several phases, changing styles as he changed homes.

When Bridges did the first of four homes for Harrell, she said, "His style was a lot more classic. He really wanted a lot of antiques. . . . Now he's got this whole contemporary thing going on."

Bridges' book touches on traditional, modern, simple, country, classic and casual styles — sometimes using pictures from her own home — while also dealing with topics like "style schizophrenia," "fear of the budget" and "the color inferiority complex."

The advice is coming from someone who did not know she would be an interior designer, who as a child thought she might be a veterinarian or a marine biologist.

"I had some ideas of what I wanted to be when I grew up. Then in college, I started taking a different direction," she said. "I really wasn't sure. I think for me personally it became more about pursuing the things I enjoyed doing, and then trying to figure out a way to make money doing it."

"I was always very passionate about design and going to flea markets and learning about the history of furniture," she said. "Then I ended up getting a job at a very prestigious architectural firm (in New York City), which is really what opened the door. Because I actually saw that there were all these very bright and talented people who did this all day, every day."

Working with those people was "an intuitive fit," Bridges said. "I was

really influenced by the environment, which is important, because that's what I'm trying to do. People should pay more attention to the environments that we live in and spend time in. And those environments should be really comfortable and make us feel at ease."

Comfort also played a role in her decision to work with Today weatherman Al Roker's production company making her Fine Living show.

"I actually knew him socially from New York," she said. "We both have houses that are not far from one another. Because I knew him and was friends with him, and because this was a new venture for me . . . I wanted to work with someone I trusted and someone that I knew. And he was really excited about the show."

And how is Roker's style? "His house looks great," she said. "One of the things I talk about in my book is that furniture should have an afterlife. . . . I actually used to have a home furnishing store a few years ago — and the first time I walked into his house, he had a pair of chairs that were from my store!"

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Sheila  
Bridges