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Designing Women

By Chad Galts



When Sheila Bridges moved into her Harlem apartment five years ago, Spike Lee had just moved out. Or more accurately, Spike Lee's film crew had just moved out, leaving behind a space dressed up as a set for the movie *Jungle Fever*. As an aspiring interior designer in the most design-conscious city in America, Bridges cast a critical eye on what Lee's set designer had done. The walls in the main living room were covered in a patterned green wallpaper. The wainscoting was dark brown. Surrounding the windows were thick folds of green velvet, and on the floor was a deep shag of red-and-beige carpet. What Bridges saw, however, was potential. She signed a lease and got to work cleaning up the fake-blood stain left over from the scene where Samuel L. Jackson is shot at the end of *Jungle Fever*. Bridges had just started her own interior design company, and she figured that one of her first clients might as well be herself.

Over the last five years, Bridges's client list has grown dramatically. Her work has been showcased in nearly every taste-setting publication in the country. Her 1998 design of a home in Westport, Connecticut, was hailed in the *New York Times* as "easy-to-live-in, quasi-rural perfection...the kind of place Martha Stewart would love." (Stewart happens to own the house across the street.) Her work in the Trump Tower apartment of Eileen and Peter Norton, creator of the Norton Utilities software program, netted her an eight-page *House & Garden* love-in; the magazine compared her work to that of nineteenth-century painter James Whistler and twentieth-century architect Mies van der Rohe, paying particular attention to her treatment of the dining room: "The most interesting aspect of this room is the comprehensiveness with which the designer has orchestrated a harmonious unity from all its elements."

First, however, came the orchestration of harmonious unity in her Harlem apartment. The carpet was removed, the floor refinished, and Bridges placed a large sea-grass and sisal mat in the center of the living room. The carved-wood fireplace mantle and leaded-glass cabinets were painstakingly stripped and painted, along with the walls, wainscoting, and ceiling. Everything was treated in complementing shades of a creamy off-white to reflect the light streaming in from the room's large windows, which now had simple canvas roller shades over them. Next came the furniture. Bridges had her bulky, comfortable sofa and two chairs reupholstered in fabrics that matched the room's muted, light colors. A wood-frame armchair found in the trash was refinished, re-covered, and added to the mix along with a set of angular, custom-built marble-topped coffee and end tables. A bookcase, four antique chairs, and a long, thin table supporting two identical lamps were placed near the walls. With the addition of an alabaster light fixture, an antique clock, and two miniature decorative pillars over the fireplace, the room was complete. The effect is understated and minimal, elegant yet livable. "I don't want people to walk in here and say, 'Wow! Who designed this!'" Bridges says, summarizing her design philosophy. "I want them to feel comfortable, even if they don't know exactly what it is that makes them feel that way."

The living room is a border space between the two halves of Bridges's life: one end of the four-bedroom apartment is taken up by her office, the other - "in theory," she jokes - is her home. Bridges's design of her own apartment has been so successful it has become something of a showpiece. As she darts from one end of the apartment to the other on a day this

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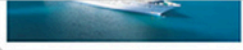
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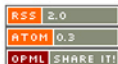


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The living room is a border space between the two halves of Bridges's life: one end of the four-bedroom apartment is taken up by her office, the other - "in theory," she jokes - is her home. Bridges's design of her own apartment has been so successful it has become something of a showpiece. As she darts from one end of the apartment to the other on a day this spring, rounding up samples, sketches, and papers for a day of visiting clients around the city, the doorbell rings and four people from Martha Stewart Living file in to scout out a future photo spread. They wander in a pack through her bedroom, bathroom, and office, snapping photos with a disposable camera, and oohing and aahing over the furniture choices, the "window treatments," and some of the apartment's smaller details. "Look at that beautiful towel rack!" one squeals to the group as they enter the bathroom. "It's so Martha!"

Once the group has finished its tour, one member gently grills Bridges about the projects she's working on. Bridges answers vaguely at first then pulls out some photos of a house she has recently purchased upstate. They begin talking about views, windows, and some ideas Bridges has for the exterior. A torrent of compliments follows, and Bridges gives them the photos to take with them. Picking up her bags on the way out the door, she stops to pat her dog, Dolby, a feisty Jack Russell terrier gnawing noisily on a rubber toy. Bridges stands, stares into space for a second, then says, "I really shouldn't have done that. I really don't want Martha Stewart designing something based on those pictures."

Bridges thinks of herself as a designer first, but her pride in being an entrepreneur runs a close second. It's easy to see why: interior design, especially in Manhattan, is a cutthroat business. Long considered a minor subspecialty at most architectural firms, the profession has come into its own in recent years. For architects in New York, where there is an extremely limited market in new construction, expanding into interior design has become a way for firms to increase and diversify without leaving the city. Bridges's competition is made up not only of her fellow entrepreneurs, but of these large, well-connected firms - not to mention the powerful do-it-yourself approach popularized by the Martha Stewart empire.

That her company has survived, and now thrives, is due almost as much to Bridges's marketing and business skills as to her design talent. Her clients have ranged from Eileen and Peter Norton to Bad Boy Entertainment CEO Sean "Puffy" Combs and former MTV host Bill Bellamy. Despite the amount of exposure her work has received, though, she chooses new clients carefully. In each of the last two years she has taken on only three major projects and four or five smaller jobs. In 1998 she supervised \$2.5 million worth of work, a \$1 million increase over 1997. (Bridges's fees are based on a percentage of a client's total costs.)

A self-described upscale designer, Bridges makes no apologies for working with clients who are willing to spend a lot of money. "Whether you have \$10,000 or \$10 million, we have to provide the same service - you have to be just as happy," she says. "If I take a job with a client who has more to spend, I won't have to spend as much of my time on weekends at flea markets looking for that great deal on a lamp. I'll just pick up the phone and have someone find it for me."

A sociology concentrator at Brown, Bridges, who was born in Philadelphia, had her eye on New York City and the advertising business after graduation. Her senior thesis had been on race and gender in advertising, a subject that did not immediately open doors in the field. She moved to New York anyway and took a job in the training program for retail buyers at Bloomingdale's. She tired of the fashion world quickly and on a whim replied to a newspaper ad placed by the prestigious architecture firm Shelton, Mindel & Associates. There, she says, she discovered "all of these bright, exceptional people doing something I'd never even dreamed of."

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She enrolled at the Parsons School of Design and, after finishing a degree in interior design, set about starting her own company. Bridges, who is African American, had noticed that her fellow interior designers were all Caucasian. Her decision to go off on her own, she says, was motivated "partly because I wanted to provide a service to African Americans." At the same time, she does not want to be seen as an African-American designer for African-American clients. "Good design is good design," she says. "I don't want to be pigeonholed because of race."

While establishing Sheila Bridges Design, she continued to work for a number of architectural and design firms, using her breaks, lunch hours, and weekends to solicit clients. Through the grapevine she had heard that Andre Harrell, who was then president of Uptown Records, was having difficulty finding a new apartment. She called him repeatedly for four months. For four months he refused to take her calls. "Finally," she says, "he gave me fifteen minutes." Harrell listened to Bridges's pitch and told her that if she found him an apartment he liked, he would let her design it. He took the first place she showed him.

Bridges's strength is in imagining combinations and in establishing a strong bond of trust and understanding with her clients. "I bring a sense of scale, space, perspective, and color to my clients," she says, "and I really try to educate them on what they're spending their money on." Through experience, Bridges has found that getting people to tell you what they like is much harder than finding out what they don't like. "People don't know what they like. It's tied to so many things - what your grandmother liked, what society likes, what you already have, that sort of thing." When people see things they dislike, however, "that response is very immediate and apparent," she says. Bridges builds upon that knowledge, eventually picking everything from towel racks to bed sheets. "The best projects evolve over time," she says. "I want the result to be a space that comes together effortlessly. It becomes someone's home."

Bridges is a few minutes late for an 11:30 appointment. Walking briskly up the stairs of the SoHo subway station, she unfurls her umbrella to keep off a light rain while simultaneously juggling heavy bags of catalogs and rug, tile, and fabric samples. She makes her way down Lafayette Street to Waterworks, a high-end bathroom- and household-supply store. She's due to meet with the people from Waterworks and the editor of Garden Design magazine to talk about her design for an outdoor shower that will be part of a June benefit at the Mecox Gardens in Southampton, Long Island. Unlike Bridges's other projects, the shower is not for a particular person, nor will it have functional plumbing. It's a display item that the magazine will photograph and in which Waterworks will display its wares. When the show is over, the shower will be demolished. Bridges is not being paid for her work, but a prominent mention in Garden Design will be worth the hours she has worked on the project.

At Waterworks, she enters a small basement conference room, where four women sit around a wooden table topped with stainless steel. Before joining them, Bridges passes around a series of Polaroids and a simple, measured drawing, which shows the basic outlines of the shower. There are adulatory noises as the material makes its way around the table. The meeting gets off to a positive start: "What everyone is so amazed about," says one of the Waterworks team, "is that it's such a stunningly small and beautiful and quaint structure." The discussion, which lasts an hour, remains loaded with superlatives: "This is absolutely fabulous! I'm loving it!" says the Garden Design editor. "This is something we'll want to publish - we really want to say something new."

Bridges, her hair pulled into a loose knot over the crown of her head, wears a gray silk shirt with matching colored bracelets, a calf-length charcoal-colored skirt, shiny black boots, and a snug-fitting silver necklace dotted with small black

bracelets, a calf-length charcoal-colored skirt, shiny black boots, and a snug-fitting silver necklace dotted with small black beads. Bridges's appearance, like her living room, is deliberate and simple. She speaks softly, in slow, measured tones, choosing her words carefully and inspiring confidence in the other women at the table. When the issue of a curtain for the shower comes up, they defer to Bridges for ideas. She suggests wrapping custom-designed fabric around the interior so that it works as a shower curtain and as a dressing partition if other people want to use the building as a changing room.

"This is what designers bring to the table," one of the women gushes.

The only sticking point in the meeting involves the laying of shower tile. Since the final look of even the best products depends on the skill and craftsmanship of their installers, the Waterworks people are anxious that such a person be on site when the contractor is laying the tile. "Tile has to be laid from your gut," one of them says. "I had the floor upstairs ripped out twice because the guy just couldn't get it right. He's coming back next week, and I'm going to tell him, 'Rip them all out and play with them until they're beautiful.'" The women turn to Bridges. Would she be willing to make a trip out to the Hamptons to keep an eye on the tile?

Bridges is reluctant to give up a day or two of her time to make sure a tile setter does his work properly, but she also knows that straightforward hard-headedness might not be the best approach in this setting. She suggests drawing up a color scheme for the tile setter to follow. The Waterworks team doesn't find much solace in her idea, so they discuss some other options. At the end of the meeting the issue remains, politely, unresolved.

With her load of samples lighter by several pieces of ceramic tile, Bridges hails a cab in front of Waterworks with just enough time to make her one-o'clock meeting in Greenwich Village. Andre Harrell, the recording executive, has just bought a five-story colonial townhouse in the Village. Since finally returning her phone call five years ago, he has hired Bridges for several projects. He has decided to completely gut the interior of his new townhouse, and he wants Bridges to help him rebuild it. The only problem, Bridges says, is that she was hired for the job the night before, after Harrell had started working with an architect and begun construction. Bridges was joining a project that an architect already considered his own.

Harrell is usually late, Bridges says, something that today she appreciates; it gives her a chance to take a look around and catch up with the project. The architect leads her on a floor-to-floor tour through what is now little more than a dirty construction site: "This will be the library," he says in a quick, pattering voice at the entrance to the shell of a room on the third floor. "It will open out onto the gym, where I think there will need to be some extra sound equipment. He told me he likes to listen to music - you know, demos and stuff - when he's working out." Stepping around tools, piles of lumber and drywall, and unopened pails of joint compound, Bridges asks a few questions. Mostly she just listens.

When Harrell arrives, they repeat the tour, only this time the dynamic is different. Bridges now serves as a kind of filter for the architect's ideas. Having worked with Harrell so much already, she is familiar with his taste and can anticipate many of his concerns. They stop for an extended discussion of how best to divide the basement level of the house between the kitchen and dining room. The architect is lobbying for a larger kitchen, indicating where the stove, sink, and double dishwashers will go. Harrell isn't convinced. "I want this wall moved back," he says simply. Bridges listens quietly, turning her head back and forth between the two rooms. "It's definitely smaller than the dining room you have now," she says to Harrell. "You can seat as many people, it'll just be cozier." When Bridges speaks, Harrell is attentive and asks her a series of questions. After their exchange, the architect reiterates his ideas for the space. "Everyone likes a big kitchen," he says. "We all spend a lot of time in the kitchen."

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Harrell nods, turns to Bridges and says pointedly: "I'm asking you, Sheila, what you think about the kitchen."

There is a short pause. Bridges suggests they leave the wall where it is. She explains that doing so will allow him to get more use out of this floor of the house, which opens on a short run of steps up to a small garden. "You're right," Harrell nods toward her, "I do spend a lot of time in the kitchen."

Bridges is anxious to draw the meeting to a close. She has a 2:30 appointment with the Nortons on Columbus Circle, and the cab ride uptown will take some time. The group huddles over one of her catalogs and makes some decisions about plumbing fixtures. Harrell decides that he wants the same ones that he has in his current home, an old Bridges project. She gathers up her things, apologizes for having to leave, and walks as quickly as she can towards Broadway for a cab.

"Creatively, this is a tough job," she says in the cab, swatting drywall dust off her overcoat. "Andre's very happy with the house he has right now, but I don't just want to repeat what we did the last time. And everyone's in a big hurry with this stuff. It takes time for things to come together. You can't make creative decisions on the spot." Fortunately, Bridges's knowledge of Harrell's tastes and her long relationship with his homes should speed up the process. "There has to be a level of comfort there," she says. "People want to believe you have their aesthetic best interests at heart. Clients are not your friends, but because of the nature of the business - we're talking about people's homes - there has to be a level of trust. I may be at a dinner party at Andre's house on a Saturday night, and [the architect] just isn't privy to that level of contact."

When the doorman opens the door to the cab in front of Trump Tower, Bridges smiles brightly, tugs her bags out of the car, and dashes to the front door. She won't have time to eat lunch until she returns home later that evening.

"You never want to have a room where all the furniture has legs," Bridges explains later that evening as she sits with her feet tucked under her on one of the chairs in her living room. "Otherwise it looks...well, leggy. Add something with a skirt or a fringe, or maybe a pedestal table."

It has been a long day, but Bridges isn't tired. She still has to make a trip to the hospital to see a friend who was diagnosed with cancer a few days ago. Her dog, Dolby, is a little more subdued. He has abandoned the rubber toy in favor of chewing the fuzz off a tennis ball. Evenings are often the only time Bridges has to sketch out ideas, look at blueprints, and come up with the creative capital that keeps her business afloat. Part of the reason for buying the house upstate, she says, was to have a place where she could relax on weekends, away from the piles of work in her apartment.

Never married, Bridges says she goes on dates "once a quarter" and has difficulty working a social life into her schedule. "New York is a city where what you do for a living is more important than anything else in your life," she says. For an interior designer, this is an especially difficult situation. "When I go to a party, I'm always trapped in a corner for free professional advice from someone who just bought a new apartment," she says with a laugh, adding, "none of my friends ever wants me to come over because they think I'm looking at everything critically."

With many new ventures in the works, including a Web site and a book on furniture and decorating targeted to a younger audience than that served by Martha Stewart - "not everyone has time to organize their spring, summer, and winter blankets," she says - Bridges isn't sure when things will slow down. Not that she wants them to. Her work still doesn't seem much like a job, she says: "People who take a career path with the intention of putting off the things they're