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THE MOST FABULOUS JEWELS IN THE WORLD



David Patrick Columbia's NEW YORK SOCIAL DIARY

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Decorator Series.

SHEILA BRIDGES



Sheila faces west in her living room.

The Way They Live: Week 1 - Carolyn Roehm; Week 2 - Joy Ingham.

Sheila Bridges' apartment in Harlem is spacious, airy and elegant, so it is easy to see why this area is becoming so sought after (the north end of the Park was only a couple of blocks away). Irritable signs on the doorways of apartment buildings shoo away potential stoop sitters, as the wealthy protect their own, but Sheila has lived in Harlem for more than 14 years and is not part of the new wave of gentrification. She is smart, very articulate and professional ... And yet ... although she answered everything thoughtfully, she somehow didn't really give that much away. She knows how to give just enough to deflect you from any real probing. Nevertheless, she was honest about being at a point in her life where she is re-assessing her priorities and ambitions. She has scaled back her business considerably and is exploring other avenues, including opening up a new website: thenestmaker.com, but we were still left with an impression of a highly motivated, conscientious worker who might find cutting back harder than being extremely busy.

Prior to this interview you asked us for a list of questions (which we don't do), but I had some sympathy with it because I too dislike being unprepared for things. How good are you at taking chances?

Oh, you know, I'm fine with that. It's more in the essence, for me, of always being efficient and saving time. So, I think I'm respectful generally of people's time and I like for them to be respectful of mine.

When I was doing my research, I did love some of the things you said about your hair loss, about how you do not derive your identity from your hair.

It's pretty common knowledge that I have lost my hair in the last two years. I have alopecia, which I was diagnosed with, I guess, like at 40. It was really out of the blue. I started getting treated for it but at some point it was clear that it was just going to go. There were a lot of things that were difficult about it but at that time I was still taping my final season of my television show, so I was in front of the camera every day and everybody was whispering. No one really wanted to talk about it in a public way. I always tell everybody, going bald is much harder than being bald. For me, when I shaved what was left of my hair, it was empowering. Wigs are awful. For me, it was just like wearing this scratchy, itchy, hot thing on my head. I just felt that there was something, for me, and I don't mean this to anyone who has to wear a wig for whatever reason, but for me there was something that just always felt inauthentic and fraudulent, like somehow I was trying to hide something.



The club chair covered in Holland & Cherry fabric was custom designed by Sheila Bridges Design, Inc. A vintage T.H. Robsjohn Gibbins coffee table is from Lost City Arts.

Sheila used Farrow and Ball Oval Room Blue to create a soft background for her collection of Swedish country furniture. The Empire marble-top mahogany side table in the foreground was purchased in Hudson, New York.



The Ming dogs were a purchase from the famed 26th Street flea market; the vase is from Aero.





In the corner stands a Swedish Gustavian clock from Evergreen Antiques. The alabaster ceiling fixture is from Eileen Lane Antiques; the Tibetan carpet is from Odegard.

Another view of the living room. 'North Parterre, Versailles', a 1997 photograph by Kelly Grider, hangs on the wall between the living room windows. The drapery fabric is 'Orlean' from Nancy Corzine.



A closer look at the fireplace and mantle in the south end of the living room.



The original 1901 wainscot and cabinetry was left intact when Sheila found the apartment.

Are you a natural in front of the camera?

No, no, not at all. For me that was always very difficult because I think by nature I am actually very shy. I really had to step out of that.

Are you still shy?

Yeah! I mean I think ...I still am on a certain level. I tend to be a little more introverted than extroverted. I guess it's not surprising that I ended up in the 'home' kind of business because on a certain level, I'm sort of a homebody. I mean I really do love my environment and that's really important to me in the work that I do.

I do sometimes wonder why it is more important to some people than to other people.

That ... I don't know. Life is too difficult, for all the reasons that we're talking about. Everybody has twists in the road that they don't expect every week, and I think it's important to come back to a place that makes you feel centered and grounded and rejuvenated to go back out to the world.

Are you able to identify the process from inspiration through to actual design?

Not really ...there's just things that you see ... I don't know. I love color and playing around with different combinations. I'm in the process right now of moving into product design. One of the things I'm doing is table top, cloths, napkins and runners. There are a lot of florals and I'm doing some sort of global things and I'm designing a table cloth that really is a map of the world ...

Peeking into the dining room. The 1901 glass fronted cabinets are original to the building.





A chunk of western light illuminates the living room.



A view of the moss green dining room. Two demi-lune tables from Kenny Ball Antiques in Charlottesville, form the dining table. A Venetian glass chandelier from Hudson hangs from the ceiling.



Another view of the dining room. The chairs are from Alain Pioton Antiques in Hudson.



From the soft green of the dining room to the baby blue of the living room.



A Neoclassical bust was a flea market find. The French settee under the window is from Tepper Galleries.



Atop the mantel are découpage plates of faces from John Derian.



A collection of yellow and white plates from Hermès hangs above a faux marble painted cabinet.

Atop the 1960's table lamp from Robert Altman stands a sculpture of the head of a diver from Hudson Supermarket in Hudson, N.Y.





A pair of black gilt Italian neoclassical chairs from Sotheby's in front of the original fireplace.

Do you ever get the designer's equivalent of writer's block? Do you ever fear that the ideas won't ever come again?

Oh sure, absolutely. Of course I have moments. But it doesn't last long. And then I see something, pass something on the street, go to an exhibit at a museum. And I try. I went to MOMA last week. I try to take little field trips for an hour in the afternoon, to just look, just kind of look.

What is the distinction between someone who is 'real' professional designer and someone who claims to be one?

Not shopping at the D&D building with a baby carriage and a dog in a Louis Vuitton dog case or something ... I don't know. I've watched that climate change, you know from people coming there clearly working, hustle bustle ... to this leisurely shopping like you're shopping on Madison Avenue.

I suppose a lot of people don't realize how much humdrum, dull, detailed work there is in being an interior designer.

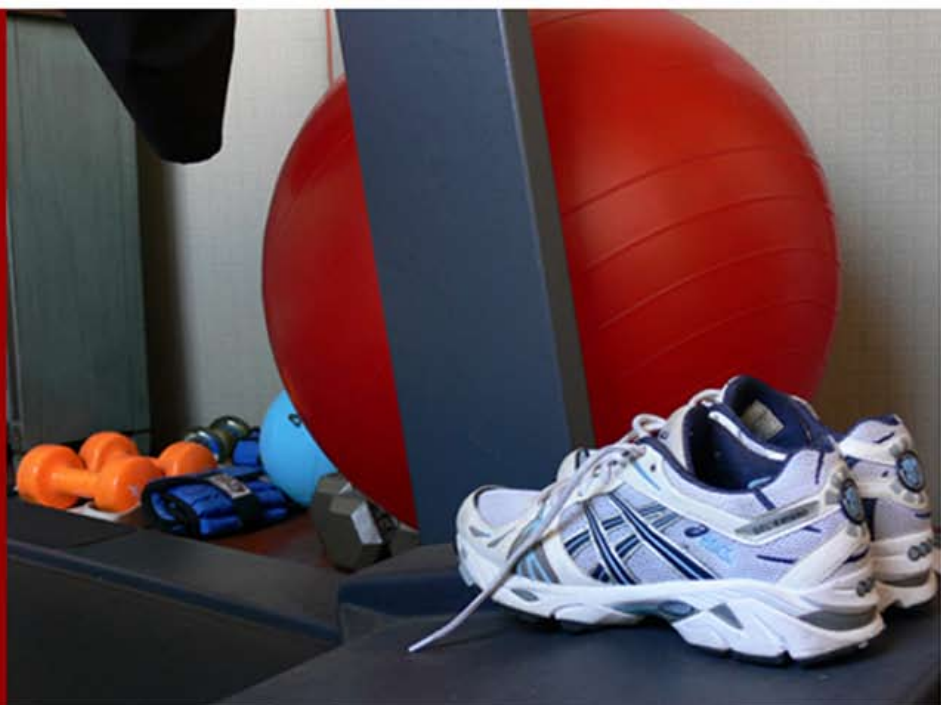
I cut back. Part of my whole shift [after the onset of alopecia] in my life that was *extremely* busy was to cut back on, not just work but the type of work I was doing. I used to have an office on 81st and Madison and I also had another office which was for my production company, which had a staff of 80 or something [which I closed]. So I actually moved back into working from home so I have two offices here. Most of the people who work for me really work freelance, which I find works better. So I really don't take on a lot of projects.





Sheila had Pintura Studio paint the walls of her study with quotes from her favorite books. The loveseat is custom made; A Swedish leather chair is from Evergreen Antiques; the pink toss pillows are from ABC Home; the marble table is from 20th Century Gallery in Hudson, N.Y. The pair of watercolors of dogs hanging on the library walls were painted by a monk and purchased on a trip to Vietnam.

Keeping fit in her study.



A Reflection of the study.



Looking into the bedroom from the living room.



Family photographs atop the bedside table.

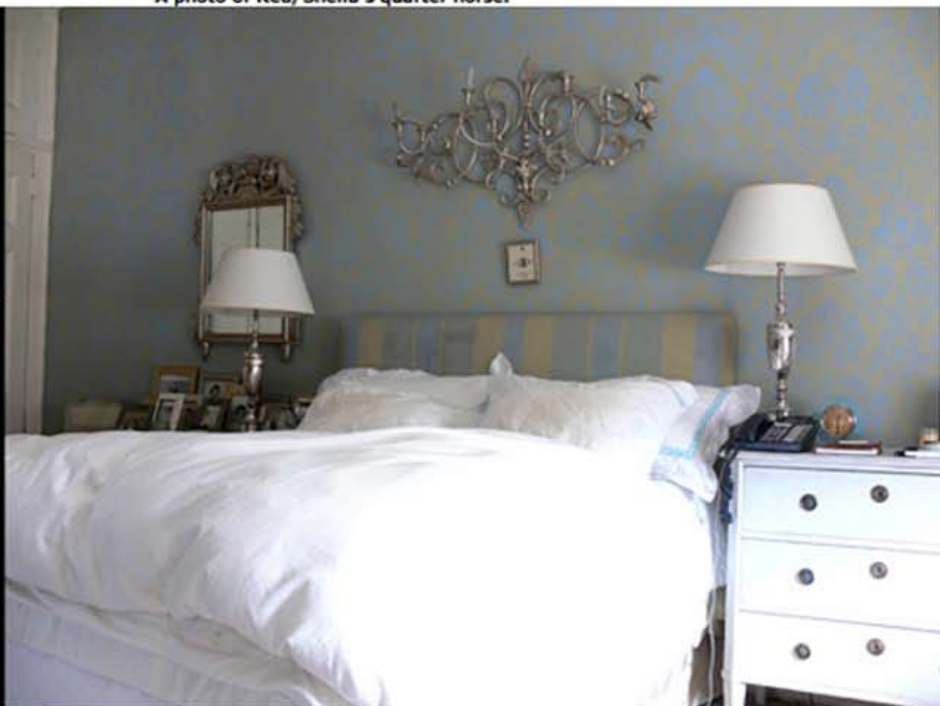


A loveseat is from Decorators Walk provides comfortable seating in the master bedroom. The curtains are of Brunswick & Fils fabric.



A photo of Red, Sheila's quarter horse.

The damask-patterned walls in the bedroom were hand-painted by Pintura Studio; the bedding is by Frette. The bedside chest from Lief Antiques is Gustavian.





More family photos including Dolby, Sheila's Jack Russell terrier.

Do you think that kind of extreme 'busy-ness' is almost a form of vanity?

I guess for me, I've never had any desire to have a bigger and bigger life, to have a bigger and bigger firm. I've always been particular about the kind of work I've done and there have been other things that I've wanted to do under the umbrella of design. A few years ago I wrote my book *Furnishing Forward*, which is in paperback now. I love to write. That was something that was really important for me to do, to reach another audience of people that can't necessarily afford my design services but can afford a \$35 book. And then doing a television show on design ...there's 56 episodes on the air ...I'd rather work in design in all these different capacities. It's not about being bigger, a kind of machine.

We love your home here. But I saw something odd in *Elle Décor*, where they described your apartment as being located in 'upper Manhattan'. I thought 'why say that?'

Did they say that? I don't even remember that but that is a little strange. They must have at some point said that it was Harlem ... [pulls a face] ...I don't know, whatever ... it doesn't matter to me.



In the office a series of hand-painted engravings hang against a striped wall by Pintura Studio. The desk was purchased from an auction at Doyle; the desk chair was designed by Sheila Bridges, Inc. The black-and-white window treatment fabric is from Hines & Co.



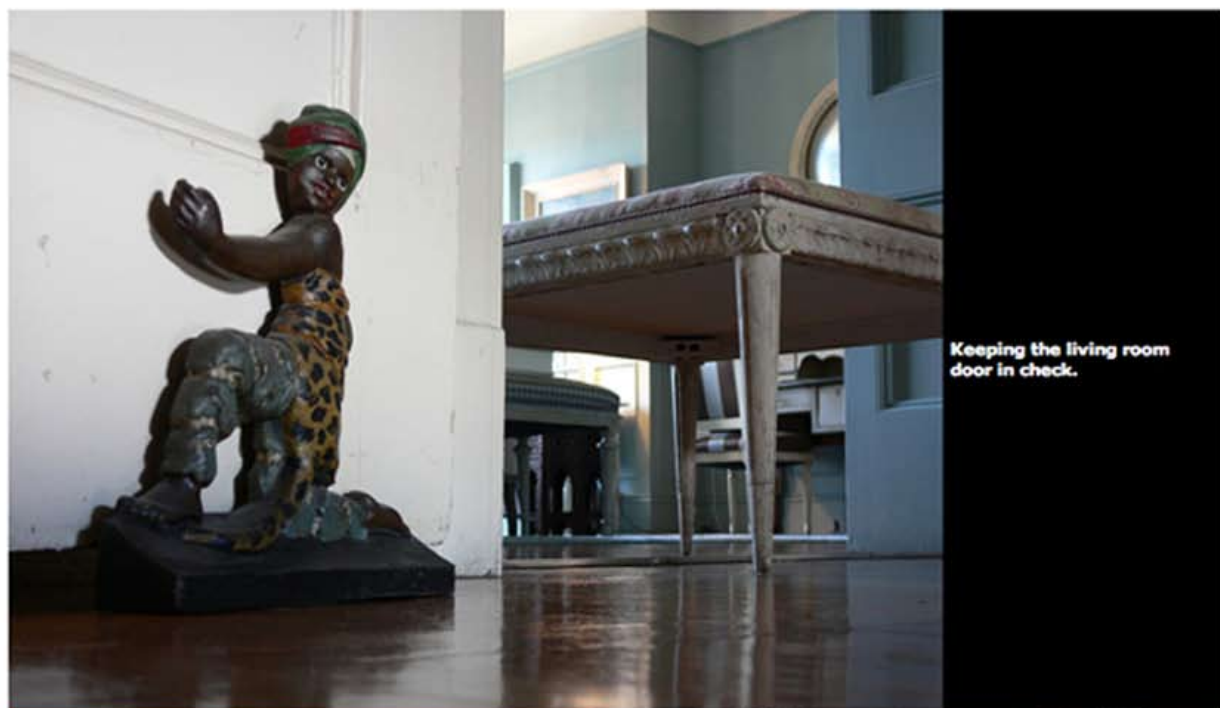
In a corner of the office, which doubles as a guestroom, stands a Korean blanket chest. A Moroccan rug is used as a bedspread.

I was deliberately going to avoid asking you about being an African-American designer because it seemed to be irrelevant, that you are just a designer and that is that. But I'm not so sure now. Am I wrong?

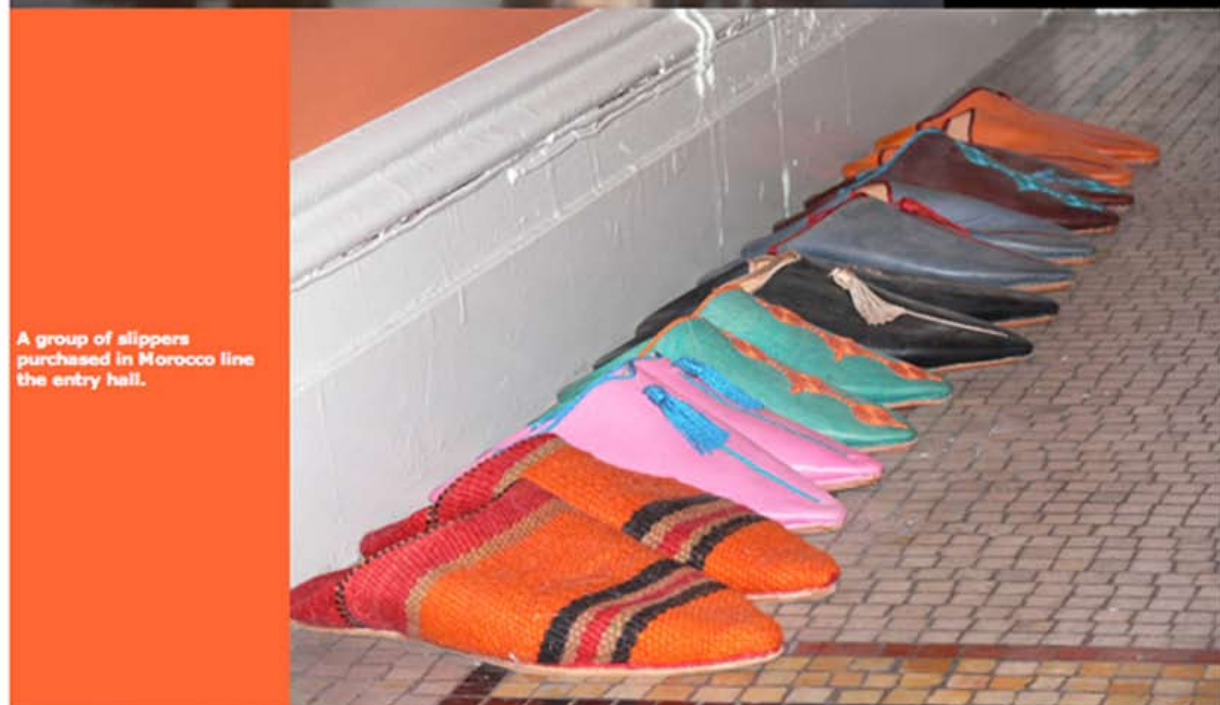
It's not irrelevant because it's not irrelevant, period, meaning that whenever you are African-American in a business that is not, it is one of those things that you are conscious of and aware of. It's pretty rare still that I go to any design function ... and maybe there's one other person in the group of a 100 plus people. It's a hard business to break into. There's a lot of designers who don't go to design school, set out a sign and start a business because they have the money or connections to do that and probably for most African-Americans, historically we haven't had the luxury to do that. It definitely has affected my experience in this business and it still does. There's still times when I go into stores on Madison Avenue or wherever and if I'm not really like dressed the way that I probably should be, they're quick to point out that I may not be able to afford that piece of furniture. It definitely happens.

Have you had clients who have specifically selected you because you are African-American?

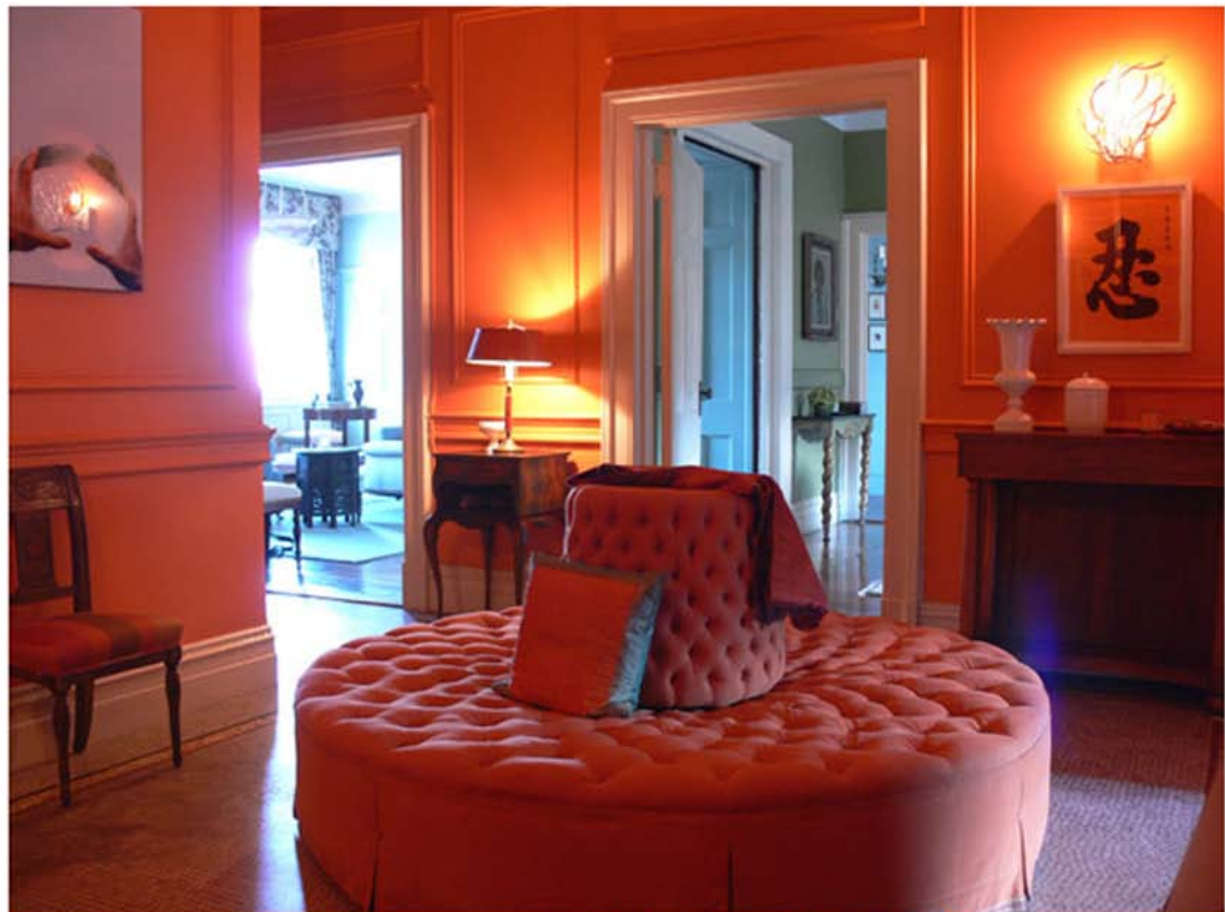
When I first started my business the majority of my clientele was probably African-American. And that was something I really embraced because I felt that there was this group of people who did well and traveled and loved beautiful homes and there was nobody servicing these people ... or maybe there was no one [with whom] they were comfortable, you know 'how do you act with a designer' because we sort of don't do it socially in the way that most other people do.



Keeping the living room door in check.



A group of slippers purchased in Morocco line the entry hall.

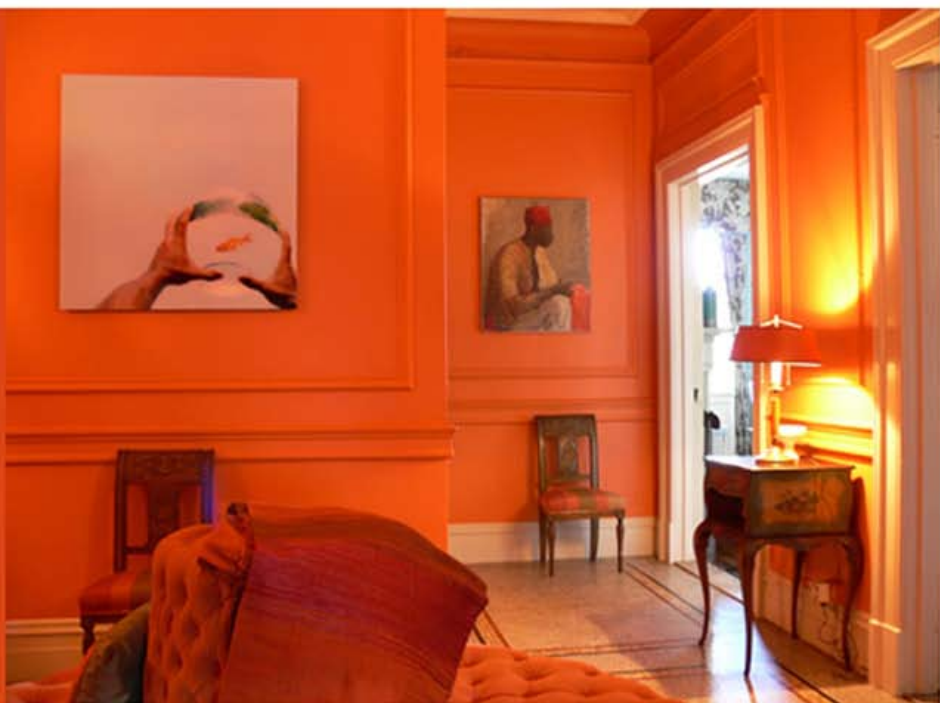


Above: A Borne d'hotel, the focal point of the entry was purchased at Alain Pilon in Hudson, N.Y.

Left: Sheila's entry was given a shot of intense tangerine paint: Benjamin Moore's Orange Blossom.



Another view of the entry. The striped fabric on the side chairs is from Claremont.



What was Bill Clinton [for whom Sheila designed the Harlem office space] like as a client?

One thing that is great about working with a former president is that he was extremely decisive. He was very clear. He went to look at a lot of things and we would have to go after they were closed in the evening, you know, with the secret service and everything but he really cared and he was very specific.

Are you social? When do you relax?

It depends who you ask! Strangely, I've become less social in New York City and more social upstate because now I have a house in the Hudson Valley, and I spend invariably, maybe four, sometimes five, days there and maybe three days here. In the summer, I'm usually there. My friends always joke that I have to come back to the city to get rest, which is funny but not really true.

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- by **Sian Ballen** and **Lesley Hauge**
 - photographs by **Jeffrey Hirsch**
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Breathtaking views of the Westside fill the front rooms of Sheila's top floor apartment.

