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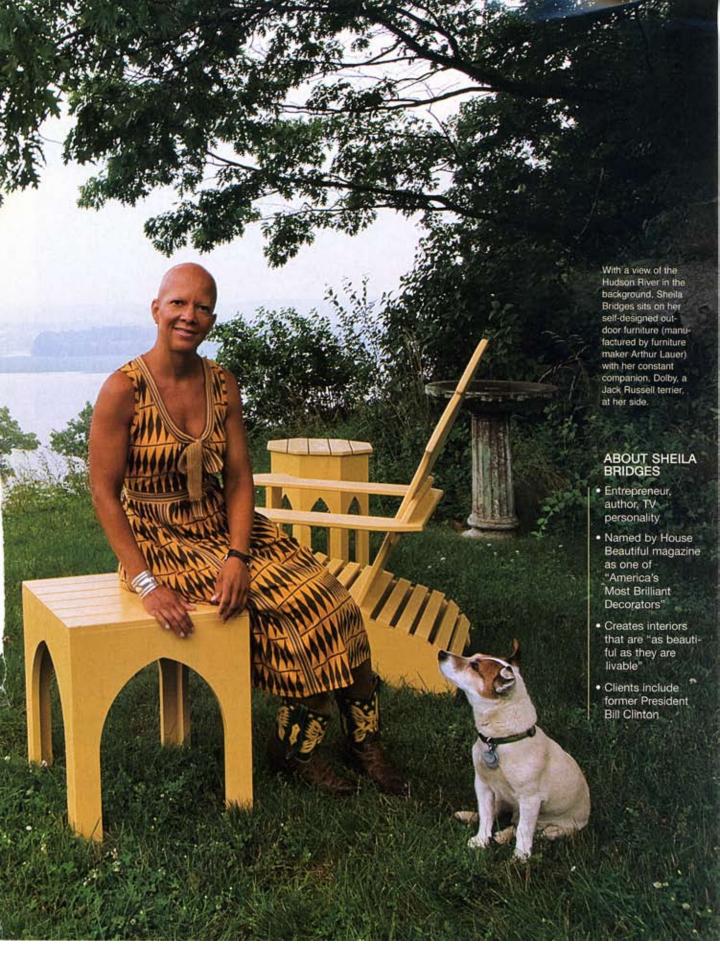
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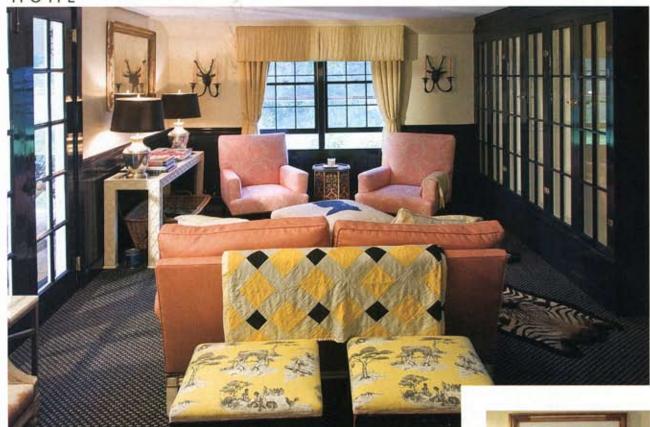
# SHEILA-BRIDGES transforms SPACES

BY GEORGE ALEXANDER VII PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN LEI

Award-winning interior designer puts her signature on clients' personal surroundings

It's an overcast, drizzly yet peaceful day in the Hudson River Valley of New York. The sacredness of the land, the stillness, make it no surprise that generations of artists have found inspiration in this upstate New York region, draped by a broad expanse of the Catskill Mountains. It's also the place where leading interior designer Sheila Bridges escapes the clamor of a busy Manhattan life to her 13-acre property and 19th century home overlooking the river. Here, Bridges—perhaps best known for her show, Sheila Bridges: Designer Living (which ran for four seasons on the Fine Living Network), designing former President Bill Clinton's Harlem office and being named "America's Best Designer" by Time magazine in 2001—finds her muse in this rustic oasis of evergreens, wild flowers and water. "I'm inspired by New York City," Bridges





Bridges' cottage living room showcases toile she designed, pink club chairs by Bridges and black bookcases installed by the designer. At right, photograph of Bridges with her horse hangs over white and tan pony chair.

says, "but I'm equally inspired by nature, the river."

A native of Philadelphia, Bridges, 43, who has had her own firm, Sheila Bridges Design, Inc. since 1994, is approaching the end of a busy, albeit, exciting year. Late last year she introduced her own toile patterns. This year she launched an e-newsletter, inked a deal for an outdoor furniture line, and refurbished her weekend guest cottage, while still serving numerous clients. With such a schedule, her getaway provides the perfect respite from the demands born of arriving at the top of your game.

Bridges' ascendancy to the elusive—and nearly impenetrable—zenith of interior design began with a lifelong appreciation for the arts. A graduate of Brown University and Parsons School of Design, Bridges' admiration for the arts was bolstered by study in Florence, Italy—known for its captivating art and architecture—while at both Brown and Parsons. It is arguably her understanding of design in a historical context that has been one of the biggest assets for her rise to the pinnacle of her field.

"She flawlessly incorporates various styles—modern, classic—all together in such a way that when you walk into a Sheila Bridges-designed room, it's very calming, very relaxing," says television producer Roger Williams, who was the producer of Bridges' TV show. "It's beautiful, but you don't feel you can't touch anything."

It was such nurtured reverence for the classic, luxurious, yet user-friendly that caught the eye of entertainment executive Andre Harrell, the person who gave Bridges her first big break. "Sheila understands your vision," says Harrell, a music, film and television producer who was president and CEO of Uptown Records when Bridges designed his 1,800-squarefoot apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side. "I wanted to communicate a quality of life that was classic, comfortable and purposeful," says Harrell, best known for jump-starting the careers of singers like Mary J. Blige. "Sheila

brought me pieces that I would never have thought about." Bridges would go on to design several more of Harrell's residences and offices.

Designing the homes of a record impresario with his exclusive circles of the well-heeled glitterati, who have the disposable income for high-end design, would open more doors for Bridges, eventually placing her in demand by an ethnically diverse group of the rich, powerful and famous.

### Harlem on Her Mind

An astute businesswoman, Bridges, who works out of her swank, self-designed Harlem apartment, has sharp antennae for burgeoning opportunities in the marketplace and new ways to express her creativity. Her toile pattern is a manifestation of her keen sense of cultural awareness and identity while maintaining the tenets of tradition. "I've always loved toile, and I've always worked with it," says Bridges, "but I never found a toile that spoke to me personally."

A type of decorating pattern that became popular in France in the 17th century, toile de Jouy (its formal name) typically depicts bucolic scenery sometimes with people—usually non-Blacks—resting on hillsides and enjoying the good life. Bridges' toile, which she calls "Harlem Toile de Jouy," comes in wallpaper and bedding. It portrays African-Americans in urban and rural settings with basketball, double Dutch, dance and hair themes. "It's a play on Black stereotypes," asserts Bridges.

"Sheila uses Old World dimensions in her toile, but includes

Potholders and apron from Sheila Bridges Home Collection for Milli Home, available at Bed Bath & Beyond. Remodeled kitchen showcases stainless steel appliances, Bridges' toile on the walls and British-imported wall art.



African-Americans in settings during a time in which we were actually enslaved," notes *Drumline* film director Charles Stone III, who has known Bridges since their childhood in Philadelphia. "It gives Blacks a sense of value in this period. It's subtle and subliminal," says Stone.

### Guest House Transformation

As equally impressive as Bridges' neo toile is the rebirth of her guest cottage at her weekend retreat. She has refashioned the cottage, which formerly housed a tenant, into functional guest quarters and a studio workspace. "The house was dark and depressing," she says. "I wanted to open it up to make it feel light and airy."

In the bungalow—which actually has the feeling of an upscale bed-and-breakfast—it is as if the designer has unleashed an explosion of her artistic gifts. Yet, it retains the underpinnings of her signature self-described "New American classic" style. "I really like working on my own homes because I get to think more out of the box," she admits.

The cottage bursts with the designer's own creations, including the toile and her new linen home collection juxtaposed with photography by noted African-American photographer Lorna Simpson. And there are other treasures: a Basquiat print, Italian chairs, hand-painted drawings, vintage patio furniture and flea market finds. "I think when you authentically mix things, they work," suggests Bridges, whose spaces often reflect her travels.

## Bringing Design to the Masses

While Bridges will not disclose how much her clients pay for her talents, it suffices to say that upscale interior design does not come cheaply. Recognizing the prohibitive nature of her busi-





Guest house bedroom (above) features toile pillowcases and comforter from Maui, Hawaii, flea market. Dining room table (right) displays graphite and aquamarine linen tablecloth from Sheila Bridges Home Collection for Milli Home. (All table linens and toile available at The Studio Museum store and N Harlem in New York.)

I started my career with a palette that was creamy, light and safe.

Now with color I say,

Bring it on!

ness, Bridges has sought to provide some level of accessibility through methods like her book Furnishing Forward: A Practical Guide to Furnishings for a Lifetime, her former television show and now the Web. Earlier this year, she introduced "thenestmaker" (www.thenestmaker.com), an online newsletter that allows her to connect with her fans. "People write in with questions on everything from paint color to lighting," says Bridges.

"Sheila wants to bring intelligent interior design to those people who may not be able to afford her services," says Williams, the television producer. "In the same way she did with her TV show, online she educates people and breaks design



down. She tells the consumer, 'You can do this. It's not just for the wealthy.'"

### Indoor Opulence Goes Outdoors

Seizing upon Americans' growing desire to bring extravagant interiors to their backyards, in the first quarter of 2008 Bridges will introduce a line of outdoor furniture. "Sheila provides a sophisticated and indoor sense of style for the outdoors," says Jeremy Smith, president of Arthur Lauer, a leading manufacturer of outdoor furniture with which Bridges has partnered for her products.



For outdoor dining, Bridges uses mid-century vintage fiberglass patio furniture; red and white china by Tord Boontje on place mats in Hudson Valley stripe by Sheila Bridges Home Collection for Milli Home.

It was once again Bridges' fusion of the modern and the classic that persuaded Smith. "We looked at a number of designers. Some were too postmodern, some were too country or conservative," he says, "but Sheila brought a modern classic look. She brings a simplicity combined with style to her work, a balance that's hard to achieve. This will be a big contributor in taking our company to the next level."

### Dealing With the Challenges of Life

A life of extraordinary success can oftentimes be met with extraordinary crisis. Bridges has had her share of life's difficulties. "A couple of years ago, I found myself experiencing what seemed like a dramatic, seismic shift. I was suddenly hit with a bunch of personal and professional challenges," laments Bridges, who went through a relationship breakup, the loss of her TV show, Lyme disease, the severing of her Achilles tendon, her mother's heart attack and her father's diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. It was the kind of year that could sideline anyone. And though she has endured and thrived, the most public challenge Bridges has had to face was the traumatic loss of her hair to the autoimmune disease alopecia areata, which causes hair loss on the head and body.

In a media and entertainment world where appearance is everything, Bridges' hair loss has halted her TV career for the

moment. "The only women on TV without hair are the aliens on Star Trek," she jokes. "I've had to dig deeply to redefine my feelings and ideas about beauty because, otherwise, if I had to base it on the feedback I get from people or society, my life would be horrible."

Addressing the obvious question that comes to mind, "Why don't you just wear a wig?" Bridges says: "I had to be able to heal from the inside out. I felt a wig was like a mask. I needed to be able to look myself squarely in the eye in the mirror every day and like what I saw." Plus, she says that her love for the outdoors-swimming, horseback riding and snowboarding-is not compatible with wigs.

Bridges is nevertheless optimistic that she will one day return to television without a wig. "TV is very conservative," she contends. "To return, I must market myself differently."

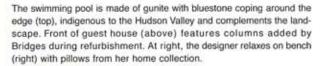
In coming to terms with her hair loss, Bridges credits the love and support of family and friends. "I wanted Sheila to know that she could talk to me about whatever apprehensions she might have had," says Sidney Bridges, the designer's older brother. "She needed to hear from me that absolutely nothing fundamentally about her had changed." Sidney, a teacher in Brooklyn, adds, "She needed reaffirmation that she had lost a superficial emblem of physical beauty and some of its social currency, but nothing essential-her health, support of family and friends, professional distinction, or beauty [though with a new expression] had changed."

With regard to the impact her hair loss has had on her personal life, Bridges is candid: "Initially, people made a lot of assumptions about me that were completely inaccurate," she









says. "Some people thought I was going through chemotherapy, trying to make some bold fashion statement ... That bothers me, but as with everything, you make the best of what you have, and you keep moving."

Bridges acknowledges that though she has not given up on Black men, the reaction she gets from Brothers is disheartening. "I've always thought that Black men walked on water and [I] never dated outside the race," she says. "But now I wish I had been more open to dating White men at an earlier age in terms of opening up the pool."

The Black community's hair issues are by no means a new phenomenon. "Sheila is beautiful," says Shannon Ayers, the proprietor of Harlem-based Turning Heads Salon & Day Spa. "But on average—not all—Black men are conservative when it comes to standards of beauty. They want long, straight



hair [on women]. It dates back to slavery."

In delving into the unexpected joys that life's trials can present, Sidney has encouragingly witnessed his sister's return to Quaker Meeting as a source of spiritual sustenance. Further, Sheila has seen for herself her own personal and spiritual growth. "As difficult as it all has been, it allowed the things and relationships that didn't matter to fall away only to be eventually replaced by the things that matter to me now," she says. "As my own priorities shifted, the balance—which had always eluded me—began to appear. I cut back on work and kept telling my friends that I was 'taking time to make peace with the universe.' Life is just far too short and too interesting not to be enjoyed."

George Alexander is the author of Why We Make Movies (Doubleday Harlem Moon) and Queens: Portraits of Black Women and Their Fabulous Hair (Doubleday).