

welcome home

interior designer sheila bridges merges elegance with the comfort we all crave. just look at her own harlem apartment. by samuel young



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELISA BERGAMO STYLING BY MARIA SANTORO

At a time when the nesting instinct is the strongest it has ever been in America, Sheila Bridges, the rising star of interior design, has advice to give us all for adding comfort, beauty, and efficiency to our living spaces. Since opening her own New York design firm in 1994 at the age of 30, Bridges has drawn the attention of the nest-making media, from Martha Stewart Living to House Beautiful, which called her one of America's "most

brilliant decorators." Last year she was named America's best interior designer by *Time* magazine and CNN. Her notable clients include cyber-magnate and art collector Peter Norton, R&B music impresario Andre Harell, and, not least, former President Clinton, whose Harlem office is just blocks from where Bridges lives and works.

Living in her workplace keeps Bridges attuned to the groundswell of interest across America in spending more time at home. These days, she says, "Instead of taking an overseas trip, people are thinking, 'Let's redo the family room,' even though they may not be sure where to start. Your home doesn't protect you from all we deal with every day, whatever it is—sexism, racism, terrorism—but there's a certain level of comfort that everyone should be able to find there. Home should be your refuge, your special place where you can shed your armor and renew ties with your friends, your family, your interests, your passions—whatever you think you need to do in order to go back out into the world again."

Bridges' Harlem home is a roomy apartment in an imposing residence built for the Astor family in 1901, during New York's Gilded Age. I spoke with her in her big light-filled living room that faces west toward Columbia University and the Hudson River. In another designer's hands, these stately surroundings might have become oppressively formal, but Bridges had elevated the mood with light colors on the walls and furnishings that were more about comfort than cachet. Sophisticated, personal details pop up in unexpected places. Above the fireplace, for example, she had made a perfect composition by flanking a mantel clock and a circular mirror with two decorative gilt-wood columns. And in the dining room, a bust of an African in Roman attire looks stately, yet at home, on a marble-topped sideboard. "I like classic forms and shapes," Bridges said, "which gives me lots of room to mix periods and styles."

Bridges herself has stylish good looks and an athletic frame honed by horseback riding in the warm months and snowboarding in winter. Proofs of her first book, *Furnishing Forward: A Practical Guide to Furnishing For a Lifetime*, were on the coffee table in front of her.

"Up to now," she said, "design has been accessible only to a privileged few. I've written this book for a new generation that wants to live comfortably, stylishly, and functionally without feeling intimidated by

designers' agendas or attitudes. Many in this generation got their start with the smart, practical furnishings developed by companies like Ikea and Conran's, and now they're ready to take the next step."

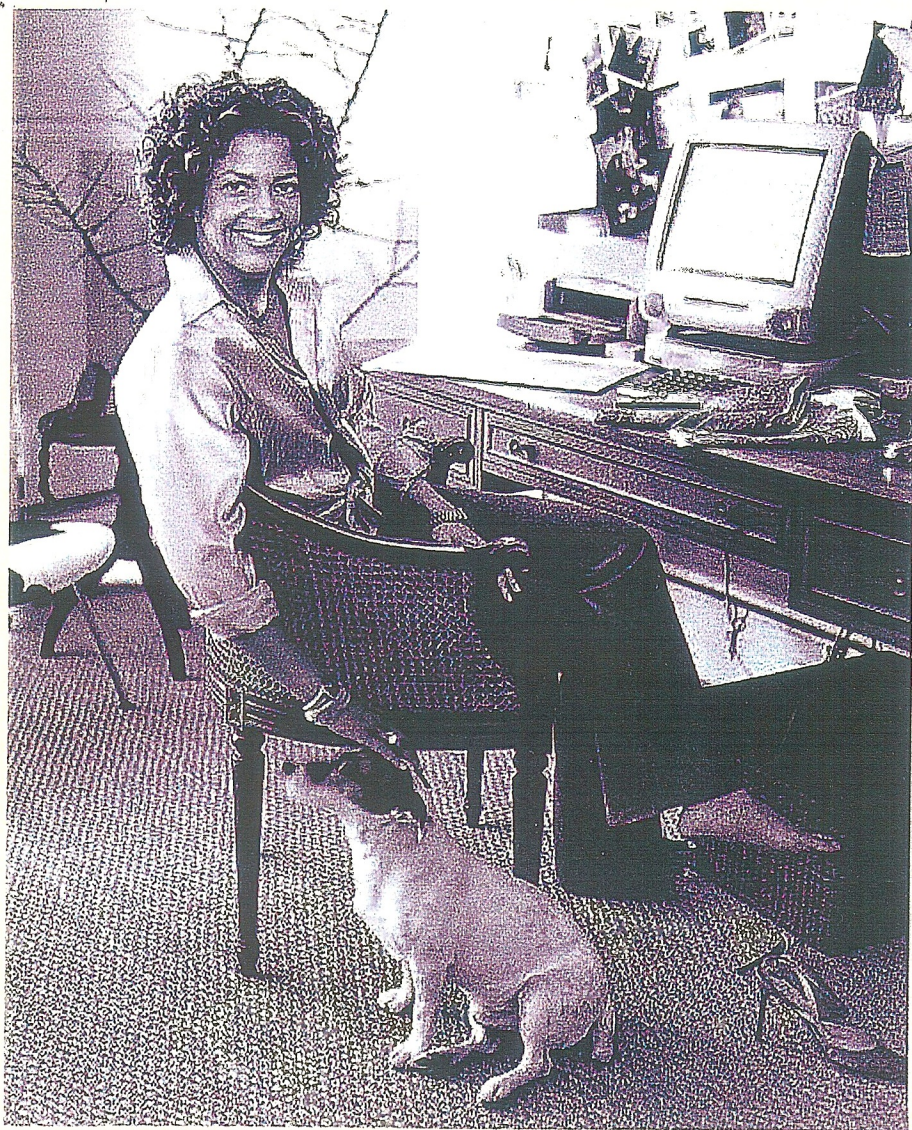
Rather than dictating a style, Bridges encourages her clients and readers to express their own personalities: "My work is all about a space representing the person who lives there. I have no intention of giving my clients that 'decorator' stamp—'Sheila Bridges was here.' My aim is that when the process is over and I'm out of your life, your place looks great and it looks like you."

Her non-dogmatic approach may be a reason why many of Bridges' clients are men. "What I like about working with Sheila," explains Andre Harell, "is she takes the time to educate you. She'd come with books and we'd look at pictures."

"I find men very interested in design," Bridges said, "but unsure how to approach it. In the bedroom, for instance, I'm convinced men secretly love nice bed linens and lots of pillows, those deluxe things women feel comfortable buying and which married men can 'blame' their wives for choosing. It's more of a challenge for a single man to decorate, but he should realize that a lot of good design is gender neutral. He doesn't have to paint his walls burgundy or hunter green or have dark wood paneling everywhere to underline his masculinity."

Bridges avoided the obvious masculine symbols of power, such as seals and flags, when she designed an office for Bill Clinton. She let the space set the tone. "The office is on the fourteenth floor," she said, "with incredible views toward downtown Manhattan and a lot of light. We agreed to carry that feeling of light throughout the space and chose light colors. It's subtle, understated."

In view of her strong nesting instincts, it's not surprising that Bridges' favorite spaces are bedrooms and dining rooms. "I love to do them," she said, "because they're the most intimate spaces. The bedroom is the one area where I push my clients to be a little extravagant. I'll say, 'Know what? These sheets are expensive but they feel amazing and I think you should buy them.' As for dining rooms, I love dishes and silver and glassware. Why keep the best stuff for special occasions when you can use them to make every day special? I like anything that promotes conversation and intimacy at meals, like a round table. Some people feel safer with traditional oval or rectan-



gular tables where someone sits at the head, but at a round table you're more in contact with everyone and there's no hierarchy."

Naturally, Bridges applauds the current trend toward families spending more time at home. "I really think the dining room is making a comeback. People are more inclined to entertain at home now, rather than going out. Of course, the dining room gets competition from the kitchen. At a party, where's everyone? In the kitchen. When I grew up, we ate in the dining room only on holidays. And my parents didn't want my brother and me playing in the living room. My clients now want their living rooms more kid-friendly."

Bridges grew up in an old stone house in a park-filled district of West Philadelphia. "My parents still live there," she said, "and I can go back and sleep in my old bed. My room has the same décor that I probably insisted on in the seventh grade." Bridges' father, a dentist, and her mother, a kindergarten teacher, passed their artistic interests on to their children. "My father loves photography. In junior high and high school I often helped him in his darkroom, and through him I got to know the work-intensive part of the creative process."

She also learned to use her intuition, thanks to a pivotal moment

when she was choosing a college. "My dad drove me all over the Northeast," she remembers. "None of the schools we looked at felt right to me and when we arrived at Brown, the very last one, I was exhausted and discouraged. But when we drove up College Hill and into the campus, an amazing feeling came over me. I just knew that this was the place. And I was right. Brown had the diversity and the kind of independent program I needed. So I learned to trust my instincts, to know when something feels like a good fit. I would love other people to learn this, if there is any way to teach them, because so much of design is an intuitive process, recognizing when a color or a material or an object is speaking to you."

After Brown, Bridges moved to New York and found a job in the fashion business. However, the fit that time wasn't good. So she landed a job with an architectural firm and began taking design classes at night and on weekends. In the back of her mind was the idea of becoming a designer so she could offer her services to other African Americans. "Growing up," she said, "I knew many middle-class professional families with the means but not the opportunity to engage an interior designer."

Once in business for herself, Bridges established a diverse, well-heeled clientele and, like many New Yorkers, began to feel the urge to have a getaway in the country. She remembered childhood trips to a family farm in Virginia, and her early ambition to own land and have a horse. At first, she went with

friends out to the Hamptons, but the scene was too much like the frenetic work-week in the city. Then a friend asked her to help him look for a house in Upstate New York. "We went up there every weekend," Bridges remembers. "I got so tired of the trip that I finally told the broker I wanted to look at some houses for myself. I ended up getting my place before he found his."

Once again, Bridges recognized the right fit.

Bridges' country retreat is a two-story clapboard house on 13 acres with spectacular views of the Hudson River and Catskill Mountains. Built in 1880, the house is smaller in square feet than Bridges' New York City apartment, yet feels spacious, from the high-front portico to the three-corner bedrooms upstairs, all with ample windows.

I visited Bridges there on a Sunday morning, worried that I might be spoiling her day off. A surprise storm had blanketed the region with snow and Bridges, an accomplished snowboarder who instructs beginners at a nearby resort, might have had a yen to be outside. But she had no plans for the slopes, she said: "On a day like this it's enough to stay by the fire and look out the window." We sat in her living room facing two tall windows that took in the view of a long,

snowy hillside sloping down to the broad river. The windows flanked an early nineteenth century Swedish tall-case clock that perfectly complemented the winter scene. A fire crackled in a fireplace framed by a carved wood mantel. "The house actually didn't have a fireplace," Bridges said, "so I built one because the chimney venting the furnace had to be replaced anyway. I found an old mantel with columns that look like the columns on the front porch."

She took me across the front hall to the dining room where two more tall windows looked out on the region that had inspired the painters of the Hudson River School. "The former owners lived here for thirty-five years," Bridges said. "The place was buried under layers of their life: very heavy wallpaper, wall-to-wall carpet. I wanted to get the house back to what I felt it was originally about, namely the incredible light and the view." She pointed to an old country sideboard, painted a yellow-green. "That color attracted me because it relates to the summer landscape. The sideboard, in turn, inspired the décor in the rest of the room—the green in the window treatment, the chair fabrics, and so on."

On a typical summer weekend, Bridges said, friends visit from New York or Boston or Washington. They might go antique shopping in a nearby town, where Bridges opened a small store, or just sit by the swimming pool, taking in the view. She also has gotten to know local residents and fellow weekenders from New York. "There are people here from the city who I never talk to during the week. We keep our work lives separate. We just get together up here for dinner or to go hiking." As though on cue, friends phoned to invite Bridges to a party later in the day. "That's nice," she said. "I like feeling connected up here. Part of my desire to open a store in the vil-

building your nest

Proceed carefully when purchasing the big, more expensive items. Make sure they're timeless. You can take risks with the small stuff.

Good design isn't about making everything in a room match. Classic pieces can go well together regardless of period or style.

Start your design project by considering the nature and function of a space and let that determine how to proceed.

Use all your living space. Don't keep some rooms as "museums" for those rare special occasions.

Mirrors can be magical. They enliven walls, they're usually less expensive than artwork, and they add light and space to a room.

Look through magazines and books to see what appeals to you and—just as important—what doesn't.

You need a refuge, a place that you love to come back to at the end of the work day. Put money aside for furniture the way you would save for a new car—even if it's only \$25 a paycheck.

Make all the world your furniture store, from auction houses to garage and estate sales and flea markets. And don't be too proud to check out what others have discarded curbside.

lage and to teach snowboarding was to connect by making a contribution. I want to feel a part of the place where I have a home."

Out on the winter-gray Hudson, a red tugboat was pushing a barge upriver. "This is a house for all seasons," Bridges said. "The river always changes. You can see the tide come in and out. You'll see whitecaps when there's a storm. The water can turn red when the sun sets over the mountains. It's humbling to be a part of something that's so much bigger than I am. I have made some changes here, but I know the place will change me as I grow with it. In *Furnishing Forward*, which I wrote up here, I've tried to communicate the value of having a personal place that grows with you, of thinking about the things that will endure."

Bridges shrugged. "I have friends who can't relate to what I've done. They don't understand why I've made such a commitment to a home as a single person. Why I haven't waited until I had a partner. My feeling is that, as far as I know, you only get one shot at this, so you've got to go ahead and live your life and live it well."

Samuel Young writes frequently about art, design, and architecture. He is president of the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia.



OPPOSITE PAGE: To the hard-working Bridges (here, with her Jack Russell terrier, Dolby), her showplace-home can feel at times like an office with a bedroom. But what an office it is (*this page*), from century-old moldings and a Swedish alabaster chandelier to a living room full of personal treasures from flea markets, auctions, and antique shops.

