

PUBLIC LIVES

Presidential Designs (and Office Furniture)

By ROBIN FINN

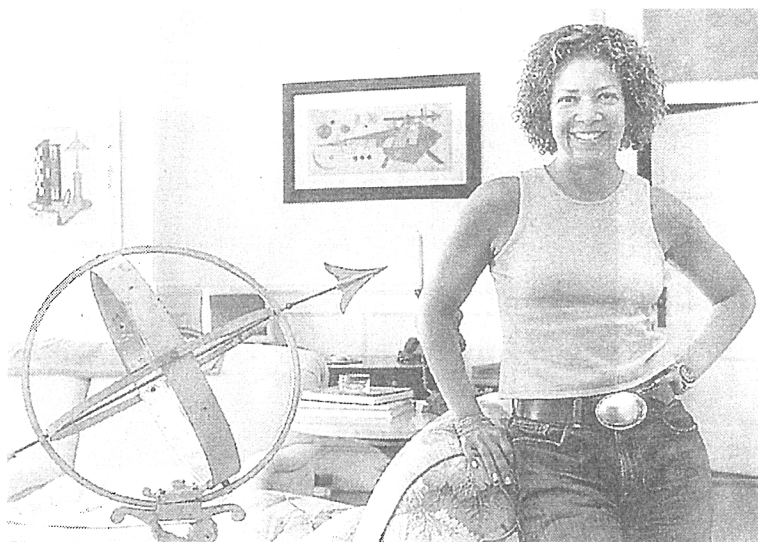
THE place is a blocklong landmark building wrapped around a shady stone courtyard in West Harlem. The space, a top floor apartment with the high-ceilinged hush of a mansion and the sea grass rugs of an informal refuge, doubles as the work/life headquarters of Sheila Bridges, a home-centric designer with a pronounced knack for prolonging her moment as Manhattan's interior decorator of the moment.

So what if her firm received the old heave-ho from Sean Combs after a spat over aesthetics: she felt disrespected by the rap mogul and after turning out a fabulous finished product at his East Hampton getaway didn't stick around to stitch the mandatory monograms on the towels at his Park Avenue abode. And it's true that the bestseller specialist Tom Clancy canned her for divulging his decor secrets (some clients guard color schemes like the family jewels). She has since learned not to crow after feathering an important nest unless, as was the case with the softwear magnate Peter Norton, she has permission.

But Ms. Bridges, 36 and single (who turns up wearing jeans, a cerulean tank top and nothing on her feet but a pedicure), has bounced back atop the metropolitan A-list with her latest celebrity assignment: decorating the office space former President Bill Clinton has leased over on 125th Street.

She did not, she notes huffily, land the contract — her first major office project — because she happens to know the presidential confidante, Vernon Jordan, "socially" (though it didn't hurt). She pursued it for a homier reason: her father called from her childhood home in Philadelphia and suggested (a parental first) that she get on the case. That if a neighborhood office was about to get famous, she might as well dictate its desks and doorknobs.

Now she's laying the ground rules for this living room tête-à-tête. As hers is a home where even the scamp of a Jack Russell terrier, Dolby, assiduously observes a no-jumping-on-the-furniture rule, it's evidently best to listen up: No. 1. No prying about the Clinton furniture (but it wasn't donated by Marc or Denise Rich). No. 2. No prying about the Clinton furniture (but here's a hint: "People are kind of surprised that it's so



Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

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SHEILA BRIDGES

non-presidential; you know, they expected dark and heavy, antiques and American flags, but it's contemporary with a light palette, lots of greens, grays, and beiges," she discloses. "It's very soothing.")

MR. CLINTON wants to move in by the end of July, and what he wants, she says, he will get. So the pressure's on. It's all part of the good and bad — his inaccessibility is a problem because, with interior design, the devil is in hammering out the nitpicking details — in catering to supercharged clients. "Although this has been more absurd than good or bad," Ms. Bridges says, abruptly dropping her guard.

The absurdity is traceable to a May 22 supermarket tabloid headline that blared "Clinton Chasing Sexy New 'Designing Woman.'" Ms. Bridges, who uses no résumé (when she began her business in 1994, this apartment was her résumé), now includes the tabloid article in what she calls her press packet (mostly fawning clips from shelter magazines). But the first time she encountered her face on the cover of the tabloid, The Globe, it felt more awful than absurd.

"The strangest part of this thing has been for me to go to the grocery store for some ice cream and see my picture right under a story about new evidence in the JonBenet Ramsey case," says Ms. Bridges, whose brush with tabloid scrutiny has, a month after the fact, become a story worth dining out on. "I literally saw the headline and started hyperventilating. There were three copies in the store, and I bought them all and ran home." So, just how smitten is the former president? "When that article was written, I hadn't met the man yet. He's still never been to this apartment."

Ms. Bridges says she hasn't met Martha Stewart either, but that hasn't stopped the status conscious from labeling her the black Martha Stewart. Must be those plans to concoct a little style empire of her own: her first book, "Furnishing Forward: A Practical Guide to Furnishing for a Lifetime" (Little, Brown) will be published next year; she opened a design shop in Hudson, N.Y., (her weekend house sits on 13 riverside acres nearby); and she intends to license a line of furniture, rugs and paint.

"I see it as a natural progression, but I don't want to be referred to as the black Martha Stewart, just like I don't think she'd want to be called the white Sheila Bridges. Besides, I'm an interior designer, and so far as I know, she's not. My life is not all about this: there is more to me than furniture, fabric, and paint colors. I don't spend my weekends obsessing over fringe and tassels." (Not that Martha does. But she's relatively sure Martha doesn't spend winter weekends teaching snowboarding, or hit the doubles court in Queens — with three men! — on Wednesday nights.)

She didn't set out to be an interior designer. At Brown University, she majored in sociology, took a semester in Florence to study Italian, and graduated in 1986 with an ideal job in mind: "I wanted to be an account executive at Ogilvie & Mather, but I couldn't find a job in advertising to save my life." She settled for Bloomingdale's, got bored, and ended up in 1989 as the only non-architect at Shelton, Mindel & Associates, a hip firm known for innovative interiors, then enrolled at Parsons. "I was like a sponge. That's how I became this thing I am."