

With a business based in Harlem, a shop in Hudson and Bill Clinton as a client, Sheila Bridges is rapidly making a name for herself

# A DESIGNER'S MOMENT

By Denise Flaim  
STAFF WRITER

**T**O ANYONE who knows her — or just knows of her — Sheila Bridges is synonymous with Harlem.

It's where she lives, in the top-floor apartment where Spike Lee filmed Samuel L. Jackson's murder scene in "Jungle Fever." With the faux blood stain now artfully camouflaged by a sisal rug, the seven-room apartment doubles as the headquarters of Sheila Bridges Design, the high-end residential design firm she founded in 1994. Harlem also is where Bridges made a name for herself, with a roster of prominent black clients that spurred some patronizing comparisons: "Harlem Renaissance meets Martha Stewart," declared The New York Times in a 1998 profile.

And Harlem is the epicenter of Bridges' biggest and highest-profile project yet: Bill Clinton's new office space on 125th Street, which the former president is slated to move into at month's end.

But a sweltering summer day recently found Bridges in another "H" place — the quaint, raggedly trendy upstate town of Hudson. She has a store there, Sheila Bridges Home, in a narrow space on Warren Street that is as skinny and sleek as the 37-year-old for whom it is named. For sale is a grab bag of eclectic accessories: Blue toile tote bags, twig-embroidered dog beds. A blue silk pillow stenciled with the outline of a cow, a Victorian lithograph of psychedelic-colored mushrooms. It's a jumble of the traditional and the modern, the classic and the whimsical, which about sums up Bridges' crisp but comfortable style.

"I have things from Sotheby's and Christie's, things from Hudson and Paris, and things I picked up from the curb on 118th Street," says Bridges, sinking back into a leather club chair. Garage and estate sales, flea markets from 26th Street in Manhattan to Brimfield in southern Massachusetts, the D&D Building — all are fair game for finds.

Indeed, a perfect piece for the Clinton project turned up just a few doors down from her Hudson outpost, at a neighboring shop called Neven & Neven. Amid the signed Eames chairs

and Danish modern dining sets, Bridges found a travertine-topped table, now destined for 125th Street.

Bridges glides through the furniture-flanked aisles at Neven & Neven, pointing out the works of modern-era designers such as Arne Jacobson and Hans Wegner. "If I special-ordered something like this, it might take 12 to 14 weeks," she says, gesturing to the Clinton table, which has a big red "HOLD" tag taped to it.

After lingering at the vintage bags — she has been eyeing a French-made sea-turtle purse with a \$225 price tag — Bridges pauses near a furniture grouping by the front door — a round Knoll table that is "very similar to the one in Clinton's office" and a mid-19th-century cupboard. "It's a classic combo — 1950s classic and 1840s classic," she says of the stylistically divergent pieces, heading out the door on a tour of her other Hudson shopping haunts.

Bridges' design style — make the big stuff timeless, take your risks with the little stuff — is the premise of her upcoming book, "Furnishing Forward: A Practical Guide to Furnishing for a Lifetime," due from Little, Brown in the spring. The "very anecdotal guide" is aimed at 20- and 30-somethings who are new to nesting and want to avoid costly mistakes.

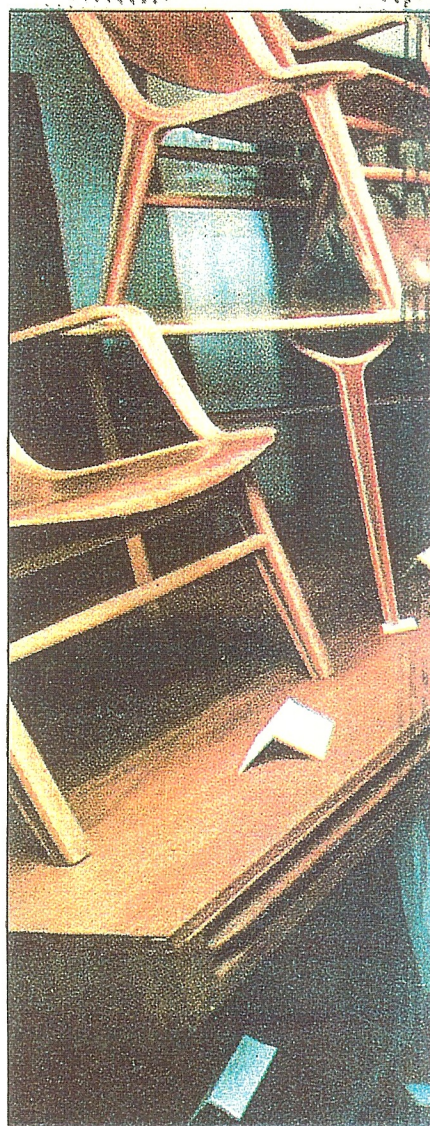
"You have to know your lifestyle and

be realistic about that. If you have three children under age 5, don't put a white taffeta sofa in the family room," says Bridges, who urges shoppers to come equipped like the pros, with notepad, tape measure and Polaroid camera. "You have to be willing to take risks, but know where to take them. Do it with that \$30 candlestick, not the \$2,000 club chair."

Crisscrossing the street, Bridges pops into a series of shops, each as individual as her own. In 9 Pieces, she surveys the whitewashed furniture, pointing out a bargain reproduction farm table. At Sutter Antiques, she re-examines a classical cabinet, admiring the swinging columns that camouflage its hinges and musing over whether it would make a good liquor cabinet for an unidentified client.

Bridges has a house nearby, a rambling colonial set on 13 acres overlooking the Hudson River. Currently single, she shares it with Dolby, a plucky 5-year-old Jack Russell terrier. House Beautiful featured the 1880s clapboard retreat in March, in pages saturated with the languid blues and watery greens used throughout the house, though Bridges declines to say precisely where it is located.

In truth, Bridges has been declining a lot these days, especially interview requests from reporters who want the



inside dirt on her Clinton commission. (The scuttlebutt is that her friend Vernon Jordan helped her land the assignment; the truth, says Bridges, is that her father called to ask whether she planned to pitch the job, which prompted her to do just that.) She has shared some general details: Mahogany — a wood that communicates presence and power — is used throughout; a light



Classic Bridges



Bridges' own dining room, left, contains local Hudson Valley buys. A Harlem bachelor apartment, center, is classic



Photos by Anna Williams

to the core. The breakfast nook at right feels modern and contemporary — just like the high-rise in which it is located.





Newsday Photo / Bruce Gilbert

wood such as beech just wouldn't have the aesthetic heft required for a former world leader. But the "overall feel is very light," says Bridges, with walls and carpets in soft grays and beiges. "The furniture is very contemporary," she continues, "and I think people are very surprised by that."

Requirements included ample room for Clinton's books. And the president was consulted on all the major design decisions, right down to his desk chair. "He can make a decision," deadpans Bridges, "where many of my clients can't."

Though Bridges was well-known in the design community pre-Clinton — her clients have included music producer Sean Combs, novelist Tom Clancy, software designer Peter Norton and former MTV host Bill Bellamy — she wasn't quite ready for the publicity her presidential project brought. She remembers going to the grocery store a few months ago to satisfy an ice-cream craving, only to leave "hyperventilating."

"I literally saw myself on the cover of the *Globe*, right next to Jon-Benet Ramsey," she says, recalling that checkout-line moment in which she clutched a container of Bear Claw ice cream in one hand and the tabloid in the other. Today, Bridges can see the humor in the headline: "Clinton Chasing Sexy New 'Designing Woman'" — at that point, she says, she had yet to meet her famous client.

Bridges grew up in West Philadel-

phia, in a "big old stone house," complete with a carriage house that she argued — unsuccessfully — needed a horse in one of the empty stalls. When she visits her parents there now, she sleeps in the same twin bed of her childhood, in a bedroom papered with the same purple, pink and gray floral pattern she chose in seventh grade.

Bridges went to Brown University, thinking she'd pursue a career in the ad industry. Despite a senior thesis on race and gender in advertising, she swerved into fashion, signing on to Bloomingdale's buyer-training program. "Disastrous" is how she describes her first day, sequestered in the stockroom of the Better Dresses department, "marking down 150 pink angora dresses," dressed head to toe in black.

**A** SUBSEQUENT stint in the Giorgio Armani showroom selling wholesale convinced her that the "fashion thing was not for me." Since she had always had an interest in art history and architecture, she enrolled in night classes at Parsons School of Design and got a full-time job at

Shelton, Mindel & Associates, a Chelsea architecture firm with a con-

temporary focus. Then she went to the other end of the design spectrum, working under the tutelage of the late Renny Saltzman, where the traditional Park Avenue clients often wanted a look "matching fringe to lampshade to pillows."

"I was not aware of any African-American designers, and I felt as though there was a void," she remembers thinking back then. "Why can't I bring these same services to that community?"

Today her clientele is "really diverse, from entrepreneurs to bankers to writers." As the Clinton job winds down, she has started her first West Coast assignment, the Hollywood Hills home of longtime client Andre Harrell, former president of Motown Records and Bad Boy Records, and now head of the fledgling record label Nu America Music. Bridges designed two of his Upper West Side apartments, as well as his country house in Westport, Conn., directly across the road from Martha Stewart.

Her dealings with other clients have not always gone so smoothly. She eventually parted ways with "Puff Daddy" Combs, reportedly over such artistic differences as his insistence on monogramming everything with his signature "P.D."

"It was a tough job," she says evenly. "He's a very, very busy celebrity, and wasn't physically available a lot of the

**Bridges measures a table destined for Bill Clinton's Harlem offices.**

time. And we had different sensibilities. The process should be enjoyable — it should be like that for the both of us."

It's noon in Hudson, the brick buildings reflecting the blazing sun, and Bridges ducks in to one last shop before heading home to Dolby and her Hudson River panoramas. It's not easy being a design diva, she confesses. She has other interests no one even thinks to ask about. Like snowboarding: She teaches a beginner class at a nearby resort on winter weekends, "to combat this idea that all I do is eat and sleep and dream design." She even has the Windham Snow Sports School jacket and name tag to prove it.

In the backyard of a funky little shop called Fern, Bridges spies an old concrete birdbath.

"Acanthus base, which is classic," she muses, circling it deliberately, admiring its washed-out blue basin. "And it has really pretty patina." A little haggling — "What's the best you can do?" — and the price plummets from \$125 to \$100. Sold.

As Brown goes in to pay, a good-looking man about her age stops in mid-stride and calls out to her.

"It's the queen of Harlem," exclaims the man, whom Bridges recognizes as a fellow Brown alum. She smiles self-consciously, embarrassed and immobilized at the characterization.

"Well, then," he corrects himself merrily, "the queen of Harlem on the Hudson." ■