

TRADITIONAL HOME

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AERODYNAMIC

BY MITCHELL OWENS PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL WESEHLER PRODUCED BY BONNIE MAHARAM

Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and her son, Remy, enjoy a moment of togetherness on a terrace of their New Jersey home. With them is Buddy, the family's soft-coated wheaten terrier.

Opposite: A vintage model biplane hangs from the library rafters.



High-flying style transforms a classic house in New Jersey.





Jeanne Brooks-Gunn: child development advocate, trained pilot, award-winning psychologist

Vintage model airplanes aren't the most obvious inspiration for a homey color scheme. But when Manhattan interior designer Sheila Bridges took on an English country-style house amid the rolling farmland of central New Jersey—the home of award-winning child development expert Jeanne Brooks-Gunn (known as Brooke) and her husband, Robert Gunn, founder of a leadership firm—she realized that the pint-size aircraft had to be an integral part of the decor.

"It's always interesting to work with people's collections," says the high-style but practical-minded Bridges, whose bold-face clientele (Bill Clinton and Sean Combs, a.k.a. P. Diddy) matches her own considerable star power. She's the author of *Furnishing Forward*, a decorating manual that was released this year in paperback, and starred in the Fine Living Network's

Opposite: The nook in the library is Brooke's favorite place to sit. The custom-made banquette is upholstered in a herringbone-pattern chenille whose tailored simplicity is lightened with flowered cushions. **Above:** A sofa and custom-made armchairs are grouped around a button-tufted ottoman that can be used as a coffee table or for feet-up relaxation. **Left:** Buddy curls up on a sofa covered in linen velvet, a fabric that gets better-looking as it ages.



The look is a little bit Swedish, a little bit French, but with an



all-American sense of ease and simplicity.

The family room gets its Swedish looks from 18th-century antiques and a palette of muted colors that evoke winter giving way to spring. Atop the wool rug stands a settee covered in a large-scale floral cotton. **Opposite:** A quilted pillow on the antique French armchair adds notes of texture and comfort.







Opposite: In the dining room, an 18th-century Swedish giltwood mirror hangs behind a painted table; the nude portrait is one of a series that was painted in Paris in the 1920s by a relative, Isabelle Schaffer. **Above and below:** Designer Sheila Bridges used a striped fabric for the dining room curtains. Their colors echo the exuberance of the gardens outside, as does the woven floral used on the antique French chairs. **Left:** Breakfast is taken at a garden-style table nestled into the kitchen's bay window.

Sheila Bridges: Designer Living. "Robert's airplanes struck me as something that would be a really fun element to work into a classical interior," Bridges explains.

Built more than 20 years ago by the couple, the stucco-clad house (architect Dick Meier was inspired by the innovative British vernacular designs popularized in the early 20th century by Sir Edwin Lutyens) had been renovated by Barbara S. Griffin, a Princeton architect, by the time Bridges came on the scene. The biggest change to the building, which sits on 15 wooded acres surrounded by dairy farms, was the addition of a new wing that's connected to the house by a wide, curving corridor lined with glass doors framing views of the bucolic landscape. At the heart of the addition is an airy library whose vaulted ceiling and picturesque beams and trusses (they're painted white to keep the wood features' hefty visual weight at bay) give the impression of a converted barn. The possibilities of the grand space led Brooke and Robert to reevaluate their general decorating scheme, which, they decided, just wasn't good enough anymore.

"Everything we had was a post-graduate hand-me-down," says Brooke, a professor of child development and co-director of the National Center for Children and Families at Columbia





University, a research facility for improving the lives of impoverished children. (She's written more than 400 articles and 17 books on related topics.) So they decided to add color—"The rooms were stuck in a white-linen-paint phase," says Brooke—and upgrade the furniture from mediocre to classic, while ensuring that the rooms could handle the antics of their son, Remy, 15, and their soft-coated wheaten terrier, Buddy.

Charmed by the country setting and the house's relaxed, aristocratic presence, Bridges created a look that is a bit French and a bit Swedish, but all-American in its simplicity. Reflecting the colors of the model airplanes—one of which hangs from the library rafters, recalling flights the couple, both accomplished pilots, took years ago to Alaska and South America in a 1948 Bonanza—the rooms combine dark woods relieved by painted antiques and crisp cotton fabrics, either plainly colored or graphically flowered. "I tend to use newer upholstered pieces as the foundation and antiques as accents," Bridges explains. "If you want comfort, you can't sit on a rickety chair."

The glimmer of the planes' metal is echoed throughout the house, from the gunmetal-colored chairs that stand outside to the iron chandelier over the dining table. The library, however,



Sheila Bridges— alopecia areata advocate

Soon after Sheila Bridges returned from a week-long trip to Morocco late last year, where she was filming one of the last episodes of her popular Fine Living Network show, *Sheila Bridges: Designer Living*, the interior designer, author, and television personality made a major aesthetic adjustment. Not in her celebrated approach to decorating, but in her elegant personal appearance. "I got rid of the wig," says Bridges, now proudly and openly bald.

The designer, whom *Time* magazine once proclaimed "America's best," lost her hair in 2004 as a result of alopecia areata, one of a group of autoimmune diseases that affects millions of people worldwide, causing them to lose some or all of their body hair, often permanently. Noted alopecians include the director Mike Nichols (the husband of journalist Diane Sawyer) and the Princess of Hanover, better known as Princess Caroline of Monaco, who temporarily became bald a decade ago. (Telly Savalas, the actor famous as the 1970s television detective Kojak, had alopecia, too.)

Since shaving off what was left of her hair and ditching the wig, which she wore on her program for continuity's sake, Bridges has become an enthusiastic advocate for demystifying the disease, talking about it on *The Today Show* and other television programs. "Whether you've lost your hair because of chemo or alopecia or another condition, it's traumatic, especially for a woman, because it upends your culturally conditioned notions of femininity," says the designer, adding that her wardrobe choices have shifted from frilly to sculptural as a result. "*Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* don't have women who look like me. Only *Star Trek* does, and they're all aliens. What does that say about people like us?"

For support groups and other information, Bridges recommends www.boldisbeautiful.com and www.naaf.org, the website of the National Alopecia Areata Foundation.

is the most prominent homage to the worn colors of those aerodynamic collectibles: pale khaki, faded orange, soft red. "The colors reflect the changing of the seasons, too," the designer says, noting that chromatic cues also came from a cache of 1920s paintings of nudes by an artist relative of her clients. The library is outfitted in autumnal shades, while the dining room is spring-like and the bedrooms feature summery blues. It's a seamless melding of divergent tastes: romantic here, modern there, and thanks to Sheila Bridges, eminently livable everywhere. ■

Interior designer: Sheila Bridges **Architects:** Dick Meier and Barbara S. Griffin
For more information, see sources on page 222.

Opposite top: Brooke's home office also serves as a guest room. The daybed is a French antique covered in a muted handwoven linen that nearly matches the color of the daybed's carved wood frame.

Opposite bottom: A metal table and chairs stand in the shade of a tree on one of the house's three stone terraces.

Above: An antique Louis XVI-style bed that Sheila Bridges found in Paris anchors the master bedroom; the headboard is upholstered in a whimsical chinoiserie-motif printed cotton. Above it hang a pair of cloudy mirrors with gilt-gesso frames. Propped on a chest of drawers is a 1920s painting of an artist's model.