

# Sheila Bridges designs

The hot new "decorator to the stars" (and ex-presidents) is poised to expand into a Martha Stewart-like empire.

BY CATHERINE McGRADY

**W**HAT DO novelist Tom Clancy, software magnate Peter Norton and hip-hop bad boy Sean "Puffy" Combs have in common? They each have living spaces designed by Sheila Bridges. She's now putting the finishing touches on Bill Clinton's offices in Harlem, imbuing the space with a look and feel more contemporary than the staid quarters the former president occupied for eight years.

In recent years, the New York interior decorator has become a tastemaker for an upscale urban lifestyle, and her work in the homes of entertainers, entrepreneurs and business people has garnered attention and accolades. Bridges has become known for a comfortable and elegant aesthetic that has landed her on *House Beautiful* magazine's list of "America's Most Brilliant Decorators," and her rooms have been spotlighted in publications from *Time* to *Martha Stewart Living*. The spaces she creates are characterized by minimal furnishings — a careful combination of antiques and new pieces — for a look that is modern but will stand the test of time.

"I want to create very classic, timeless interiors that are as beautiful as they are livable," says the 36-year-old designer. "Not overly decorated and



At home in the Harlem apartment that is her calling card, Sheila Bridges with her dog, Dolby

not so overly precious that you worry about touching things. The spaces I decorate or design should represent who my clients are or aspire to be, not who I am or aspire to be."

A graduate of Brown University and Parsons School of Design, the Philadelphia native began her career at Manhattan design firms. Solo success occurred soon after Bridges purchased and moved into an apartment in a landmark historic building in Harlem in 1993. The seven spacious, high-ceilinged, well-lit rooms provided her with a blank canvas,

and she was able to experiment with colors and pieces to refine her style. Her home quickly became the best way to showcase her provocative designs. A year later, she launched Sheila Bridges Design out of the apartment.

"My first goal was to provide access for African Americans to high-end residential design," she recalls. Since then,

her clientele has expanded and diversified in moneyed circles, including those of celebrities, mostly through word of mouth. She'll often get a call from someone who has attended a dinner party in a home she designed, then she'll collaborate with that person to help him refine his tastes.

**"The spaces I design should look like who my clients are, not who I am."**

Taking her inspiration from art and architecture, two lifelong passions, and the colors of nature, Bridges relishes new projects and the challenge of a total redesign. "A client might be an art collector, and we'll work around those pieces. That's a great place to start."

Now that Bridges has established her reputation and her business among the elite, her next goal is to reach an even wider audience. "I want to bring good design to the mass market." She's hoping to appeal to "25- to 45-year-olds who want to have a really nice home."

She'll make her foray into that mar-

ket next spring when her first book, *Furnishing Forward: A Practical Guide to Furnishing for a Lifetime*, is published. Featuring photographs of Bridges' homes and those of her clients, the book will offer direction for young people decorating their first "real" homes and investing in furniture for the first time.

Among the practical recommendations she makes is to approach decorating the way you would any other major purchase, like a car. "Comparison-shop. Buy things you'll want to own for a period of time," she advises, "and remember that any home evolves over time."

If all goes according to Bridges' plans, it may not be long before more and more homes bear the mark of Sheila Bridges Design. After the book, she looks forward to developing a television program to share her design vision with a broad audience. And following that, her desire is to license her designs and create a brand that will be accessible to more Americans. "I hope to, at some point, offer products such as furniture, bedding and a paint collection," Bridges says.

As she ventures into the mass market, comparisons to Martha Stewart are inevitable. Though she doesn't mind being placed in the same category as the highly successful businesswoman, she points out a major difference between herself and Stewart: "I don't want to show people how to make a lampshade or sew their own drapes." Instead, she'll offer practical tips on how to find the perfect lampshade, directing people to auctions and flea markets and teaching them how to bargain ("always bring cash").

As Sheila Bridges Design expands and evolves, she may need to find more office space (she has expanded to the Web with [sheilabridges.com](http://sheilabridges.com)) — but till then she and her small staff remain settled in her Harlem apartment. Bridges thinks it makes sense to run this type of enterprise from her home. "Everything I do is about the home. I wouldn't call myself a homebody," she says with a pause. "but I guess I am." □

CATHERINE McGRADY is slowly decorating a 19th house in Columbia, S.C.