

RESTORATION DRAMA

A couple reaches out to neighborhood doyenne Sheila Bridges to bring new light and life to their historic Harlem brownstone

TEXT BY CELIA BARBOUR
PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILLIAM WALDRON
STYLED BY JC GARCIA-LAVIN



“Buy local” is a phrase commonly associated with greenmarkets and farm stands. But when a high-powered Manhattan attorney ditched a Chelsea apartment to purchase a brownstone in Harlem, he and his partner wanted to apply the same principle that works for tomatoes and peaches to their new home’s interior design. So they hired decorator Sheila Bridges, who has lived in the neighborhood for more than two decades, and charged her with the task of turning the 5,000-square-foot house into an elegant, welcoming retreat in the city. Says the client, “I thought someone who knew this part of town would understand how to get things done here and would be in tune with the community.”

For Bridges, whose recent projects have taken her from Martha’s Vineyard to Denver, the chance to work close to home again was appealing. “It was such a pleasure to do a job in my own backyard,” she says. “I get tired of getting on and off airplanes. And I love Harlem.”

What’s more, Bridges is in tune not just with her neighborhood, but also with the unique challenges posed by the brownstones that line so many of its streets—and those of the rest of the city. “Most of these buildings are sandwiched between other brownstones,” she says, “so the sunlight is generally coming from only the front and back of the house. Part of my job is to create the illusion of light where it doesn’t exist.” By using a soft, luminous palette for this project, she aimed to “make the spaces flow together without seeming tunnellike,” she says.

LEFT: In the living room of a Harlem townhouse designed by Sheila Bridges, the sofa and armchairs are by George Smith, the cocktail table is from BK Antiques, and the cabinet is a custom design; the drawing at left is by Graham Nickson, the rug is by Stephanie Odegard Collection, and the walls are painted in Farrow & Ball Estate Emulsion in Light Blue. **ABOVE:** A bust of Napoleon in the entry; the wallcovering is by Holland & Sherry, and the sisal stair runner is by Stark Carpet. See Resources.

Antique Swedish chairs surround a Spanish Colonial table in the dining area; the Venetian glass chandelier is from Jean-Marc Fray, and the mahogany pocket doors leading to the kitchen are original. **FACING PAGE, FROM TOP:** The kitchen's stools are by Milo Baughman, the subway-tile backsplash is from Shelly Tile, the refrigerator is by Miele, and the pine flooring is original. An Hervé Van der Straeten mirror hangs above the living room's original mahogany fireplace; an ottoman by George Smith is covered in a Lee Jofa fabric. See Resources.





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Making her job easier is the fact that Harlem is a neighborhood of low buildings—homes, shops, churches—without the looming skyscrapers that create shadows and dark canyons elsewhere in the city. Moreover, this house is on a rise, near the spot used centuries ago by the natives as a lookout over the island and waterways beyond. “We have really great views down Lenox Avenue,” the client says. “We can see the Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building, and our office tower,” which is a quick subway ride away.

Of course, light is not just a measurement of lumens but a mood as well, and Bridges delivers it with graceful pieces, such as the bull’s-eye mirror over the living room mantel, framed in a wreath of bronze tendrils. The furniture has light-on-its-feet tapered legs, the upholstery is trim and tight-backed, the window treatments clean and columnar. Pairs of exuberant sconces dance above each mantel.

Bridges is equally adept at handling another challenge posed by many historic brownstones: the heavy-handed beauty of the original architectural details. Infused with character, these irreplaceable moldings and doors can overwhelm contemporary designs and crowd airy spaces. But here, crisp edges and a judicious use of sugary-white paint allow Bridges to celebrate the original craftsmanship while keeping its temperament gently in check, and to create a compelling interplay between the light trim and the dark mahogany doors and wood floors.

The client’s collection of contemporary and modern art, which includes many large-scale paintings, photographs, and drawings by such artists as Graham Nickson, Helen Frankenthaler, and Richard Diebenkorn, also provides a counterpoint to the house’s historic character. “The art is challenging in some ways,” he says, “but it’s also pleasing and easy to live with.”

The same could be said of the wallpaper used in every room. Both Bridges and her client have a strong predilection for it. “I rarely have a project with a client who really loves wallpaper,” says Bridges, who likes it so much that she has designed her own line. “We did it everywhere, and that was fun for me.” Its patterns and textures soften the spaces and interact with furnishings in playful ways.

The client also happens to love comfort, according to Bridges. “We got great sheets and pillows and duvets and bed skirts. He liked the idea of very luxe beds throughout the house.”

It wasn’t just his interest in grass cloth and pillow shams that made him unique, however. It was his commitment to the whole process. “This was the first time in a long time that I’ve worked with a couple where the man drove the sensibility,” says Bridges. “It was his aesthetic and his decisions, and that was refreshing to me.”

“I’m into design and architecture in a way I can’t even explain,” agrees the client, whose education in these subjects is entirely recreational: He reads design books, magazines, and websites in his rare spare time. “I don’t think I’m actually that good,” he adds, laughing. “But I have a strong opinion about everything.” Fortunately, that includes when to seek the help of a local. “With the guidance of somebody like Sheila—that’s the only way it works.” ■

RIGHT, FROM TOP: The master bedroom features drawings, from left, by Graham Nickson and Sangram Majumdar, the wallcovering is by John Mahoney Designs, and the curtains are in a Donghia linen damask. The wallpaper in the study is by Phillip Jeffries, and the painting is by Gideon Bok. **FACING PAGE:** In a guest room, a Swedish settee is covered in a Holland & Sherry fabric, the custom headboard is in a Donghia suzani, and the mirror is from And George; the wallcovering is by Studio Printworks, the rug is by Stark Carpet, and the curtains are in a Jim Thompson silk. See Resources.

