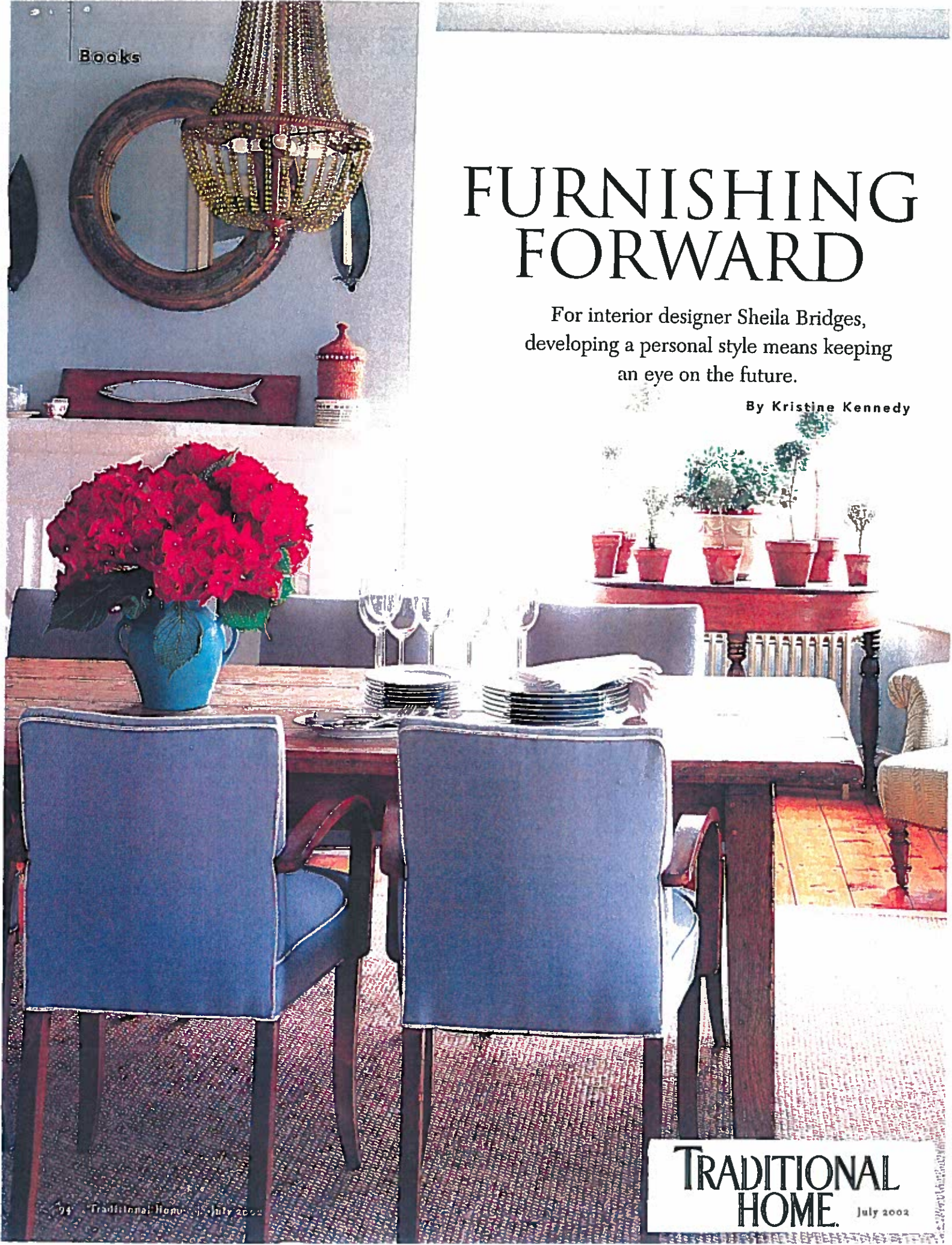


Books

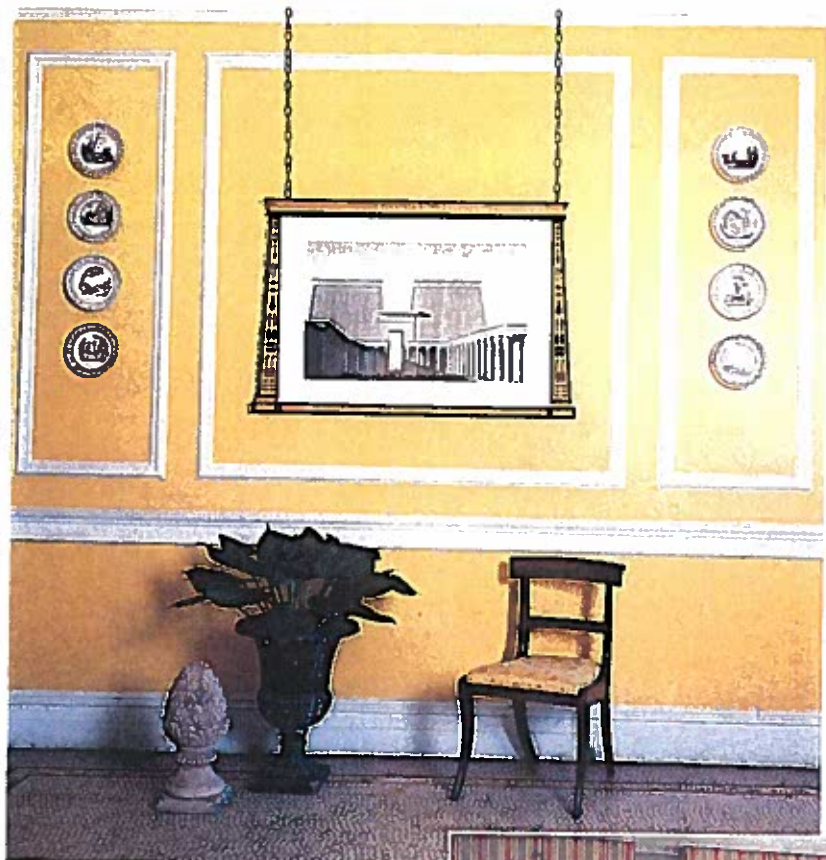
FURNISHING FORWARD

For interior designer Sheila Bridges, developing a personal style means keeping an eye on the future.

By Kristine Kennedy



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Clockwise, from left: Bridges punches up modern chairs in her playful nod to symmetry. She defines a collector's home with bold yellow and decorates for families with young children by substituting ottomans for coffee tables.



Designer Sheila Bridges advocates developing a sense of individual style anchored by favored colors, collections, and classic furniture.

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Forward: A Practical Guide to Furnishing for a Lifetime (Bulfinch Press, \$40). "I thought it would be nice to demystify this world that intimidates many people," she says. The book, aimed at those embarking on their first grown-up decorating, asserts Bridges's philosophy of developing an individual style, mixing things you love, and choosing timeless furnishings. If your style is still evolving, she suggests starting simply by evaluating your space and identifying appropriate colors. When that feels comfortable, acquire smaller items, such as accessories and occasional tables, eventually working your way up to big-ticket furniture. Each stage will further hone your specific tastes, giving you confidence when larger sums are on the line.

Evaluating past mistakes and triumphs is key to expressing your newfound style. Bridges sees equating style with money as a common mistake. "Sometimes, when people get a lot of money, they get a lot of bad advice about how to spend it," she says. In the home, the result is often "arrogant style," she explains, "when people think that because something costs a lot of money, or someone else has it, or they've seen it in the media, they should own it." But what this really communicates is the homeowner's decorating insecurity. Bridges encourages people to ignore monetary values and instead focus on items that adhere to a well-thought-out and individualized design plan.

In her own homes, she mixes old and new, fine antiques, rustic pieces, custom designs, flea-market finds, and family heirlooms for looks best categorized as eclectic. ("I wish they could come up with a different word for it," she exclaims.) Her Manhattan apartment, located in a historic, turn-of-the-century landmark building, is slightly formal. Fewer pat-

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MANHATTAN INTERIOR DESIGNER Sheila Bridges has helped entrepreneurs, Wall Street financiers, and movie moguls express themselves with their homes. President Bill Clinton's Harlem offices came together in her hands. But Bridges—named "America's best designer" by Time in 2001—is not, herself, a high-flier. Introspective, even a touch introverted, she prefers the relaxed, let-your-guard-down pace that's found at home. Her business, Sheila Bridges Design, is about the home, and after eight years of having her own firm, she still works from home. "I've created a career out of what I truly am—a homebody," she says.

While the rich and famous frequently employ her services, Bridges strongly contends that style is available to everyone. To that end, she has written *Furnishing*

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Antique bookcases, comfortable seating, sisal rugs, and ottomans are signature touches in Bridges's relaxed decorating style. Mantels, often with decorative mirrors above, are ever-changing vignettes. Opposite: Symmetry and well-chosen pairs of furnishings organize disparate elements in the designer's well-edited interiors.

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terns, more solids, and silk accent pieces reinforce the space's grandeur. Her Hudson Valley country home tends toward the casual, which she highlights with cottons and linens in florals, stripes, and plaids. Both spaces are graced by her collections of china, dishware, porcelain, and glassware. Much of the china has been in her family for generations, and she is the proud owner of the crystal her grandmother received at her marriage. Furniture and accessories are just as likely to come from local antiques stores as they are from a weekend in Miami or a journey to South Africa.

What allows Bridges to paint her bathroom black or pair ornate Victorian side chairs with a sleek marble-topped coffee table is her self-assurance and an ability to turn a deaf ear to others' opinions. "Style has more to do with confidence than anything else," she says. If your friends aren't supportive of your interior-design choices, she playfully suggests that you invest in new friends when you invest in new furniture.

"All my life, I've had people tell me that they don't get it—they don't understand my style," says the successful designer. "You have to push it aside and keep moving forward." ■

A chair is a very difficult object. A skyscraper is almost easier. That is why Chippendale is famous.

—MIES VAN DER ROHE

