

Celebrity interior designer Sheila Bridges on rediscovering Philly and finding beauty inside and out

by Cassie Owens, Updated: February 29, 2020



TYGER WILLIAMS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



The Rittenhouse rowhouses brought a smile to her face. That day, Sheila Bridges had visited a Bala Cynwyd cemetery to see her parents' newly engraved names where their ashes are stored. That night, she'd go to an event at PAFA. But now, Bridges, a longtime star in interior design, was walking on her own in Center City, surrounded by Victorians made of red brick, her first time back since her mother's memorial.

"It was better than I thought," Bridges said of the feeling of being back home. "It's definitely strange to not have my parents in Philly. I think I'm rediscovering Philadelphia."

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Bridges has lived in New York since 1986. There, for more than 25 years, she’s run her own firm, Sheila Bridges Design, working with celebs like Diddy and music executive Andre Harrell, and designing former President Bill Clinton’s Harlem offices. (Her dad had encouraged her to go for the latter.) She hosted her own show on the Fine Living Network in the 2000s. Her career achievements are exceptional for any designer, but she’s done them as a black woman in an industry that famously struggles with diversity.

**FILE PHOTOGRAPH**

Philadelphia native Sheila Bridges in her Harlem office/apartment in 2001.

Designing thoughtfully

Bridges, now 55, had worked for other firms but sensed it was time to strike out on her own in 1994.

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“I guess I sort of figured out that if I’m going to work this hard, I’m sort of helping somebody else achieve their dream rather than working hard to achieve my own,” she explained. “I got one client, and I jumped ship based on that one client, assuming that I could figure out how to pay my rent ... My friends all chipped in for my birthday and bought me a fax machine.”

Ironically, in her 2002 book, *Furnishing Forward*, she writes that for a time, she had a “color-inferiority complex” that made her lean toward white paint over anything else. With time, with travel, and with a color theory class at Parsons School of Design, that complex was shed. Bridges has become known for taking shades you wouldn’t immediately put together, then designing them into harmony.

Lawyer and business executive Derek Johnson hired Bridges as part of his \$2 million renovation of his Harlem home about 20 years ago. Bridges selected a pale green, an orange, and a hay color, among others, then pulled her palette together so seamlessly, Johnson said, that he can pick up a pillow, window treatment, or chair and move them in any room on his first floor and expect every shade to still fit.

Color is one aspect of Bridges’ aesthetic that Mitchell Owens, decorative arts editor at Architectural Digest, learns from; the way she arranges a room to encompass styles from different eras, from different traditions, is another.

“She likes everything from an 18th-century Swedish tall case clock, as much as she likes graphic modern art, as much as she likes emerging talents in African American design and craftsmanship,” Owens said. “She processes a world of inspirations through a very American prism of relaxation, of a lack of quote unquote rules. Her rooms are super approachable. I know that she herself is sort of an introvert, but she creates the most friendly rooms possible.”



COURTESY SHEILA BRIDGES DESIGN
Harlem Toile, from Sheila Bridges' product line. Rather than showing scenes from the French countryside, Bridges' toile confronts stereotypes about black people.

Bridges is well known for her toile, inspired by 18th-century French fabrics that feature scenes of people enjoying country life. Bridges' version incorporates all black characters depicting moments that, Bridges explains, play on stereotypes. There's a picnic where people are eating watermelon. There are girls jumping double dutch. There are boys playing basketball, one of whom is Wilt Chamberlain. Some assume one scene is a freedom-seeking enslaved woman running away. It's not: It's Bridges running with her horses behind her. The toile, which comes in wallpapers, apparel, and accessories, not only puts black faces in a context where black people lack representation, it raises questions on how black people have been represented over time.

"At first I thought it was really witty and then I just thought, no, it's really provocative. It's really smart," Owens said. "It's thoughtful in the way her rooms are thoughtful. I mean, I don't know the last time I saw a fabric that actually made me think."

Experiencing loss and healing

The path to success for Bridges could have easily been a perfect line. Still, even with her stellar multi-hyphenate success that includes becoming an author and expanding to products, she has had to push through a lot.

During the fourth season of her television show, she started to notice that she had bald patches. She was diagnosed with alopecia, an autoimmune disorder that causes hair loss.

"People saw me on my television show and then they started to see me start to look different and I started to get emails from people like, 'Are you OK?'" she explained. "It was hard because it was something really personal that was happening to me in a very public way. It was like, 'OK, I lost one eyebrow but I still have the other eyebrow, and all my eyelashes are falling out,' all those kinds of things. I think it's hard enough to go through them when you don't have a TV show."

She continued, "That I had to hide it, because of the continuity of the show, made me feel shame at the time, and it just didn't enable me to get to the place where I could start to unpack all the feelings that I had, the grief that I think I needed to grieve that loss."

She doesn't wear wigs — for Bridges, they're uncomfortable and not her thing. Losing her hair, she said, changed her trajectory on television. She hasn't been able to host a show since. People mistake her for a cancer patient; she fields cringe-worthy comments and questions regularly. Navigating as a bald black woman, she isn't always treated like a lady.

Bridges jokes that she's Wakandan, but, she said, she's had to "redefine beauty."

"The healing had to come from the inside out, not the outside in," she explained. "While I have no problem with the people wearing wigs, it just wasn't right for me because I felt like I was masking something, and that at the end of the day I had to take that wig off and really see myself."



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Sheila Bridges, 55, of Wynnefield, Philadelphia, Interior Designer and Author, poses for a portrait in the living room of her home in Harlem, N.Y., on Wednesday, Feb. 19, 2020. Bridges moved to New York in 1986 and started interior design in 1989 for an architectural firm in New York. "I just love design period," Bridges said. Interior design I think is sort of the intersection of business and it's informed by culture, art, and lifestyle. Those are all things I'm passionate about.

Resilience starts at home

Diane Moss, an attorney and friend of Bridges since their college days at Brown University, believes that Bridges got her strength at home.

"I think it came from her family, and I think that's just how she was built. It was just, it was organic," Moss said. "I think we're still teaching those lessons that you have to believe in yourself, the value of confidence. And I think that those things, resilience and confidence, are things that Sheila has."

Her parents, Sidney and Joyce Bridges, had been the cool parents who decorated their sun porch in Wynnefield in red, black, and white with a zebra-print floor. When Bridges was young, her mother would nurture her creative spirit, says Constance Clayton, former school district superintendent, art collector, and a longtime friend to Bridges' mother, who passed away last year.

"She was extremely proud of Sheila, and believed that whatever Sheila made up her mind to do she would do it successfully and knew that Sheila pushed the envelope and didn't confine herself to what was, but recognized what was and what could be."

That Bridges wound up a designer, that Bridges collects art herself, are not surprises for Clayton.

Seeing what Bridges does with colors and textures, Clayton said, "I think she recognizes that what the artist has put on canvas or whatever they've been painting on, it gives her the same broad latitude to do the same thing."