

# Designer Sheila Bridges decorates official Vice President's residence



By [Jura Koncius](#)

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New York interior designer [Sheila Bridges](#) has designed the official vice president's residence for Kamala D. Harris and Doug Emhoff, a year-long project finished at the end of 2022.

The Washington Post has confirmed that Bridges decorated the 1893 Victorian home on the grounds of the leafy U.S. Naval Observatory.

"It's an incredible honor," says Bridges, 58, who in 2001 designed the Harlem offices of former president Bill Clinton and his staff. Other clients have included Sean "P. Diddy" Combs and software mogul and art collector Peter Norton. "The house is an architectural landmark. I love old homes and figuring out how to use them for a family with a modern lifestyle. That is what we did."

Bridges, who is known for her exacting eye for detail and imaginative design sensibility, has redone the public spaces on the main floor with furnishings primarily made by American companies, makers and manufacturers.

"This was an opportunity to celebrate American design and crafts and small artisans," says Bridges. The goal, she says, was to create a space that felt like a family home, yet allowed the vice president and second gentleman to host events such as Diwali celebrations, military family receptions and Latino small business owner gatherings.

The spacious, 33-room white house with the wraparound porch at 1 Observatory Circle in Northwest Washington was designated by Congress as the official residence of the vice president in 1974. While the upstairs rooms are private quarters, the main floor is often used for official receptions and dinners.

It is usually refreshed for each family that lives there using furniture already in the house, pieces in storage from the residence's official furnishings collection and the family's own furniture or accessories. In the past, the furnishings and refurbishing budget came from private funds raised through the Vice President's Residence Foundation. The Washington Post has confirmed that all costs of the project were paid for with private funds.

Bridges, whose office and home is in Harlem and who also has homes in Hudson, N.Y., and Reykjavik, says she and her team initially met with Harris about the project, then continued the planning with Harris's staff. "The house needed to reflect her California sensibilities and a more modern aesthetic," she adds. "Some of the colors come from the landscape, the house has incredible gardens. I wanted it to have a modern feel and lots of interesting details reflecting the vice president's cultural heritage from India and Africa," Bridges says.



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My heart is full with gratitude and utmost humility as I look back on the Diwali celebrations this week. Not only were we able to celebrate the collective joy we grew up experiencing with our loved ones, but we were fortunate enough to share it with the world, and with those new to the celebrations who embraced wholeheartedly. Their generous interest and acceptance made us feel seen by celebrating the spirit of one another and our existence. After all, isn't that the point of holidays – to learn from one another's experiences and cultures, truly seeing each other and realising that we have more similarities rooted in empathy, compassion, and caring, than differences. When you realise this truth, that is when you can truly see your own self.

The walls keep to mostly a neutral palette, with the exception of a vibrant pink wallpaper in the library, a color inspired by crane myrtle tree blossoms, Bridges says. “The trees are right outside the library and I wanted to bring that color inside,” Bridges says. “It’s important to have a dialogue between the landscape, architecture and interior.”

Bridges sits in the top ranks of America’s interior design community. She did a room she called “Le Salon Des Chiens” in the 2019 Kips Bay Decorator Show House, which features A-list design talents. She regularly lands on the AD 100 List, Architectural Digest’s list of top global designers, and Elle Decor’s A-List. Originally from Philadelphia, Bridges moved to Harlem in 1993, wanting to be near its rich African American cultural mix, and soon established her own design firm.

She is the author of two books. “Furnishing Forward — A Practical Guide To Furnishing For a Lifetime” was published in 2002. “The Bald Mermaid A Memoir” came out in 2013, and chronicled her journey with alopecia.

In 2006, Bridges introduced “Harlem Toile,” a line of wallpapers featuring a tongue-in-cheek twist on formal French 18th-century toile de Jouy. “I have always loved French toiles but couldn’t find one that resonated enough to put on my own walls. After searching unsuccessfully for the perfect toile for my own home I simply decided to create one with people who looked like me,” Bridges says. The Harlem Toile de Jouy line has included fabrics, clothing, candles, Converse sneakers and Sonos speakers. She has a special line of Harlem Toile products at the Metropolitan Museum of Art shop.

Last year, Wedgwood debuted a fine bone china collection based on Bridges’ toile. Bridges, who posts on Instagram under @harlemtoilegirl, says her Wedgwood designs were just accepted into the permanent collection of the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Brooklyn Museum.

Harris and Emhoff did not move into the official vice president’s residence for several months after the Inauguration in 2021. They lived temporarily at Blair House, the president’s guesthouse, while work was being done at 1 Observatory Circle. At the time, Harris’s office shared that the repairs included HVAC maintenance, replacing liners in the chimneys and refurbishing hardwood floors.

Each resident of the house makes it their own. Dan and Marilyn Quayle added a heated pool, and the Cheneys upgraded an upstairs galley kitchen. The Bidens used New York designer Victoria Hagan to add more color and personality, including creating an apple green and white sunroom where Jill Biden liked to grade papers and host small meetings. They added a garden and 75 place settings of Lenox china featuring the vice-presidential seal. Mike and Karen Pence painted the dining room matte blue and hung a few of Karen Pence’s watercolors using the designer Arlene Critzos of Interior Concepts of Annapolis. They also installed a basketball court and a beehive.