

The Critique

See inside Kamala Harris's V.P. house as JD Vance prepares to move in

As vice president Kamala Harris's tenure ends, the public finally gets a look at the residence, as decorated by top designer Sheila Bridges in an ode to American artisans.

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Column by [Robin Givhan](#)

In preparation for a new administration, the dismantling of the Kamala Harris era in the vice president's residence is nearly finished. But just before history was completely boxed and crated, before furniture went into storage and art work was returned to its lenders, the work of interior designer [Sheila Bridges](#) was memorialized by photographer Frank Frances. His images capture the ways in which Bridges transformed the historic space at the Naval Observatory into a home for Harris and Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff. The public can see the details and subtle design strokes intended to reflect the groundbreaking nature of Harris's tenure. And people can ruminate over the singular chapter of the American story to which Harris bore witness and that made this project a special challenge — and a testament to creative tenacity.

Bridges, one of the few Black designers working at the most rarefied level of interiors, began this work in the midst of the pandemic, when masking was de rigueur, supply chains were in shambles and many business owners wondered if they might have to shutter their doors for good. She took on this enormous task in the aftermath of Jan. 6, when democracy was stress-tested and power ultimately transferred amid violence and chaos. There was widespread suffering, both physical and existential. What did community mean? And would the very notion of it survive?

From 2021 to 2022, Bridges collaborated with furniture makers, rug weavers and artists to highlight [American craftsmanship](#), which in turn underscored the country's ability to endure and overcome the toughest circumstances. At a time when "home" took on a multitude of meanings and served as a backdrop for work and school and play, Bridges's work at the vice president's residence will, perhaps, a generation from now, be considered a symbol of how the country came through it all.

While the residence has 33 rooms, including private quarters, Bridges's decoration is limited to the first-floor public spaces. Her work reflects her client, which to some degree was both the vice president, who was living in the house during the project, and the American people.

"You're always thinking about the client. It's not necessarily what I like but how can I help? What I do is visual storytelling. How can I tell this person's story in a way that's respectful to the home, to the location, to history?" Bridges said. "The story that we were trying to tell was about American craftsmanship, about the talent that is here in the United States, and the ability of people to make these pieces of furniture and to do it during covid."

"It was a challenge," said Bridges, whose clients have included former president Bill Clinton. "So much of what we buy, without thinking about it, comes from elsewhere."

The furniture and fixtures she chose were crafted by people in Virginia and New York, Texas and California. They made chairs and dining room tables from American walnut; they hand-loomed rugs from wool sheared from Kansas-raised sheep; they hand-stenciled wallpaper and manufactured those designs in Brooklyn.

There are chairs, created by the Ethiopian-American furniture maker Jomo Tariku, inspired by the mountain antelopes found in East Africa and by the prayer staffs used in Ethiopian Orthodox churches. Vibrant pink wallpaper by Pintura Studio is printed with gold flourishes that recall the spindles of houseboats in Kashmir, India. The company's more subdued dove gray wallpaper takes its pattern from drawings on bark cloth by artists in Africa and Oceania.

The public spaces of the residence are filled with the work of both men and women, firms that have been in families for generations — such as the Shade Store and the carpet maker Stark, and those that have been established more recently, such as lighting designer Lindsey Adelman Studio. The crafts people themselves are as much a reflection of the country as are the furnishings. The rooms speak to the breadth of who and what is American — and what defines excellence.

"I think that was important to the client. It was important to me. People don't hire me if they don't want to include a diverse group of makers," Bridges said. "For all of us, this is our legacy. This is what we leave behind in this residence and in history."

The rectangular dining room table by Fischer Furniture can be deconstructed to form three separate tables that can then be transformed into circular ones. Made of American walnut, the transformer of a table was handmade by a team in Red Hook, Brooklyn. In the library, the barware, with its lowball glasses and decanter, are by Ralph Lauren — and readily available to anyone with the urge to indulge.

"Sheila brought unparalleled creativity and vision to the vice president's residence," wrote Jon Henes, chairman of the Vice President's Residence Foundation, in a statement. The cost of the redecoration was paid for with private funds. "Her inspired design, featuring exclusively American-made materials, reflects the diversity and progress of our nation, creating a space that celebrates the past while embracing the future."

Perhaps the most striking element in Bridges's design is the grand Murano glass chandelier in the dining room. Created by Fred Wilson, the glass artwork, with its mix of clear, white and black classic swirls and pendants, is part of his long-standing inquiry into Blackness and Western art. But even without that explicit knowledge of his intent, it's a breathtaking mix of artistry and technical skill.

It also speaks to the historic Whiteness of the office of the vice presidency, as well as the change Harris represented. So do the softer colors and the references to flowers. They were acknowledgments that a Black person, a woman with Indian heritage, occupies this seat of power.

"A lot of the palette is quite subtle and muted but punctuated with color, and is modern," Bridges said. "A lot of the window treatments in the living room and library, they're floral. They're plucked a little from the gardens ... They're not overly feminine, but definitely softer."

Bridges's work is reminder that the country's creativity, optimism and determination survived a pandemic. It pulled through something else, too. In the entry, on a console table made from American walnut, under a painting by Helen Frankenthaler, there's another symbol of perseverance: a reproduction of the U.S. Capitol. It's protected under a glass cloche — a reminder of the building's beauty, its meaning, and its fragility.

The incoming administration will have the opportunity to make changes to this American house. Each occupant is merely a steward of it, making sure it remains sound, welcoming and relevant. "Spaces evolve. Design is a process," Bridges said. "Otherwise you'd be heartbroken every time someone moves or renovates."