

COVER STORY

SHE HELPED FUEL NORTHSIDE'S FLIP

BY LAURIE PIKE • *Courier contributor*

Lisa Meeks was well into her 40s and knew next to nothing about renovating houses when she bought her first investment property in Northside in 2005. But she had picked up a few tips, such as how to strip paint from hardware using a crock pot from TV's "This Old House." They came in handy on the century-old, three-bedroom on Otte Avenue that she bought for \$48,500.

To finance the project, she took out a home equity loan on her own modest digs, and partnered with a contractor.

"It was filthy," she remembers. "The kitchen had to be redone. We refinished the floors. We put in a new HVAC, a new bath, and added a deck."

The contractor worked during the day, and Meeks pulled up the rear on nights and weekends as the self-described "unskilled labor."

Meeks spent \$34,000 on the rehab, and sold the house the following year for \$125,000. She and her partner didn't pay themselves for labor, so when you account for that and the cost of the property, it wasn't exactly a jackpot. Still, it was a benchmark price for the street at the time, and it began a decade of flips by Meeks in the 45223 ZIP code, one of the city's hottest real-estate markets.

"(It) ranks third out of 38 ZIP codes tracked by Realtor.com in the city of Cincinnati, and 33 out of 545 ZIPS in the state of Ohio," says Javier Vivas, manager of economic research at Realtor.com. "It also ranks in the top 10 percent in the country for fastest-moving supply."

Today, a Northside house sells in an average of 39 days, almost twice as fast as the national median of 69 days.

The Memphis transplant was an unlikely real estate entrepreneur. For starters, money wasn't her motivation.

"It was defensive neighboring," says Meeks, 11 years and about 50 houses later. That first property was situated next to her own home on Innes Avenue, and she figured a makeover would attract residents with "good intentions," or at the very least, ones who wouldn't throw rocks at her dogs.

It worked – Meeks became friends with her new neighbor and first buyer. Meeks had no idea that Northside would become a real estate hot spot and that she would emerge as its preeminent rehabber.

Nestled between Mount Airy Forest and Spring Grove Cemetery, Northside is a hexagonal-shaped neighborhood northeast of Clifton. Booming with rail-

road construction in the 19th century and manufacturing in the 20th, it was both a commuter suburb for downtown workers and an entertainment and retail district on its own, centered on the north-south vein of Hamilton Avenue.

After World War II, however, it began a steady decline. Its Victorian houses, Cape Cods and brick foursquares started falling apart. Yet, in boomerang fashion typical of historic metropolitan areas, Northside's old-town charm and cheap rents prompted a new wave of artistic young residents in the 1980s.

Anchor businesses such as the now-defunct Crazy Ladies feminist bookstore, Designs by Dana tattoo parlor and the Comet, a bar and music venue, embodied its gritty character. Diversity and inclusiveness are often cited as reasons people choose it over ZIP codes with better schools and less crime.

"It's Mayberry with tattoos," says Tim Golliher, an electrician and musician who typifies the demographic.

Pleasant surprise

Meeks certainly fit the Northside profile when she moved in the late 1980s from Clifton. She was politically active in liberal causes and taught piano. Still, the strong community spirit surprised her.

"I had the suburban mentality that you come home and pull up the drawbridge," she says. "But Northside is not going to let you do that. The elderly neighbor across the street waved me over and waved me into her life. Next thing you know, I'm an honorary member of her family."

She went house-hunting in 1994 and bought the first property she viewed for \$61,000. Instead of finishing her master's degree, she pivoted into law school.

In 1998 she co-founded a law firm, Newman & Meeks, to specialize in civil rights cases. She sat on boards of progressive organizations such as Stonewall Cincinnati, the gay rights powerhouse, and Cincinnati Human Relations Commission, which helps fight prejudice and discrimination. Still, she grew restless.



"I couldn't talk one more day about community development or reforming criminal justice," she says. "I decided I'm going to pick up a hammer. I'm going to take on that crummy house. I'm going to take on that guy and give him job skills."

She re-invested all of her profits – about \$20,000 – from that first flip into the next one. Spotting a foreclosed property, also near her home, she bought it and began the process again.

"It was buy one, fix one, sell one, then look for another one," Meeks says, opening and closing her right hand, which suffers nerve damage from years of labor.

One of her earlier renovations was back on the market in July, and it offers a case study in how the neighborhood and Meeks' aesthetic have changed over the years. It's a three-bedroom with Victorian touches on Philomena Street. Meeks bought it in 2007 for \$38,000 and flipped it six months later for \$135,000. It listed for \$174,900, and was under contract within weeks, though it has not been significantly updated since Meeks' re-do.

That's a testament to the quality of her work, which included hand-scraping hot-pink paint off original wood mantles and trim. The painstaking preservation of historic detail is classic Meeks, but the kitchen here tells another story. It's on the small side, with no island.



Today, a Meeks house invariably features a trendy open plan on the ground floor, walkout porches upstairs, and large, tiled bathrooms. Such choices are market-led, and all but non-negotiable.

Three blocks away, on Innes Avenue, sits a Sears Catalog mail-order bungalow that illustrates a step up in Meeks' rehabbing career. (The retailer sold 70,000 of the houses nationwide, which are now highly desirable, from 1908 to 1940). It was 2011, at which point she had six years of home improvement under her belt. Where other investors might pull back from the hands-

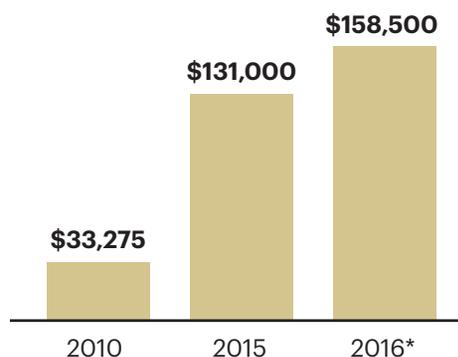
COVER STORY



DAVID KALONICK

► BY THE NUMBERS

The median home sale price in Northside's ZIP code has skyrocketed since 2010.



* Through April

The number of houses and \$200,000-plus houses sold since 2010 has spiked.

	2010	2015	2016
Number of houses sold	92	130	31*
Average number of days on the market	N/A	39	39
Number of houses sold for more than \$200K	1	19	6**

* Through April

** Through May

Sources: City of Cincinnati, Realtor.com, Nextdoor.com, MLS, and the Community Building Institute

Fewer than 100 homes sold in 2010 and 2011 each but last year saw 130 sales. And prices are rising. Last year the \$300,000 sale price for a single-family home in the neighborhood was surpassed for the first time, and this year saw the first \$400,000-plus listing. (It sold for \$399,000.)

\$200 or more per square foot

Meeks recently went out on a limb by sinking thousands into a house under 900 square feet. In a neighborhood where \$100 per square foot was considered astronomical just a few years ago, she is asking for – and getting – more than \$200 a square foot on some listings.

Meeks' success, and that of a handful of other serial renovators, have inspired dozens of new entrepreneurs.

"Any time there's an open house, you see people coming through getting ideas for their own projects," says Valentino, who is Meeks' Realtor.

An inspector with the city's Building and Permits Department says more permits for demolition and remodeling are issued in Northside than in all of its surrounding communities combined. Bidding wars now break out when a home ripe for remodeling pops up cheap.

In a scenario now becoming familiar, a house on Frederick Street last year went to contract hours after it listed for \$24,000. It was flipped twice in four months, with the person who eventually rehabbed it paying \$70,000. It is now on the market for more than four times that last purchase amount, more than 10 times the original listing price. The \$299,000 price tag is unprecedented for the street it's on.

Meeks is one of the few Northside flippers with a full-time crew. She keeps four

on staff while also maintaining consistent work for a demo crew of seven.

With more than two dozen rehabs in process and a portfolio of rental properties in her mini-empire – all in the 45223 ZIP code – Meeks has scaled up on volume and scaled back on hours at her law firm. Still, she has yet to cut herself a check for the work she has done.

"I don't think I have seen the fruits of my labor in my checking account, but I have seen it in people's lives," she says, citing the transformation of blighted buildings into livable homes. Add to that the millions of dollars her business has pumped into the Cincinnati economy, and that empire doesn't seem so "mini" after all.

Still, she says, it's not about the money. The claim is backed up even by Northsiders concerned about rapid gentrification.

"She is very passionate about helping those who are disenfranchised," says Libby Hunter, a former real estate agent who runs a Northside non-profit for kids. "We've shared experiences on working with low-income and vulnerable populations. She is committed to helping ex-cons get a second chance in employment."

In a move that will help keep Northside inclusive, Meeks recently put up for sale some bungalow rehabs for under \$100,000. As such, she is elevating the grittier nooks of the neighborhood along with its more elegant avenues. But Northside isn't at risk to become another Over-the-Rhine, watchers say. Consensus among rehabbers and Realtors is that a plateau has been reached here, at least price-wise. For starters, says Valentino, Northside doesn't have the concentration of businesses or population to support endless escalation.

Ironically, Meeks has both raised the real estate values in Northside and kept them in check. That's because her operation is so efficient, and her profit margin so slim, that her houses maintain a sort of cap on what other Northside sellers can ultimately ask for a high-end renovation. Simply put, fellow flippers are hard-pressed to match the quality of her houses and expect to reap outrageous profits; buyers could simply wait for another Meeks house to come on the market.

"My favorite part is going back to the house after it's been bought and seeing where people put their furniture and art," she says.

Meeks was doing just that on a recent Sunday in a turreted house on Cherry Street, whose bathroom features a free-standing bathtub under a huge chandelier. Its third-floor master deck offers fabulous views of the neighborhood Meeks has visibly transformed. After a tour, the young couple who bought it – a UC professor and an emergency medical worker – settle onto couches with Meeks around one of the home's five fireplaces.

"This house is captivating," the professor says. "There's such detail and history."

He points out the window to a property in disrepair across the street.

"I'm told squatters and rodents are part of the process over there," he says to Meeks. "It needs someone like you."

► Lisa Meeks has flipped nearly 50 houses in Northside since her first one in 2005. ► This house at 4212 Williamson Place is one of 12 houses Meeks bought in November 2015 as a lot for \$415,000 (about \$35,000 per lot). It is listed at \$257,490. ► Century-old houses in Northside typically feature dining rooms. Meeks removed the wall between kitchen and dining room to create a single, larger, eat-in kitchen. ► To create an open plan, Meeks took down interior walls on the ground floor and relocated the staircase. She installed an engineered hardwood floor and a bathroom. The fireplace and its grate are original.



COURTESY OF COMEY & SHEPHERD

on aspects of the job to focus on the business part of it – Meeks was now over 50 years old – she did the majority of demolition and rebuilding herself.

"This was in-house everything, to the studs," she says. "I was dipping my toe into the water of keeping the architectural interest and making it livable for a modern family."

That meant replumbing, rewiring, reflooring and reconfiguring the layout to include a ground-floor bathroom and second-floor laundry. Still, she finished it within two months and sold the \$15,100

sheriff's-auction purchase for \$125,000. Three years later, it sold for \$140,000 and then, last year, for \$170,000.

Housing prices have rebounded across Cincinnati since the Great Recession but in the past two years Northside real estate has truly soared.

"More than half the first-time buyers are tenants getting priced out of OTR," says Emily Buzek Valentino, the neighborhood's top-selling Realtor for the past four years. "Others buyers find their way to Northside as a reasonably priced alternative to the Clifton Gaslight area."