

MANSION



SPREAD SHEET | BY SANETTE TANAKA

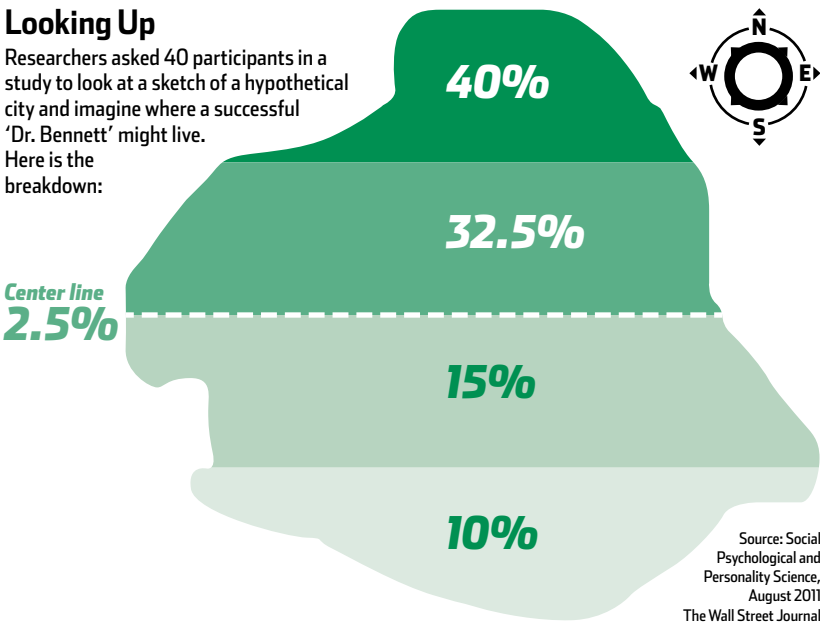
WHERE THE BETTER HALF LIVES?

Location bias for a city’s north side is partly based on longstanding cultural cues about ‘feeling up’ or ‘down in the dumps’

NORTH, SOUTH, east or west, researchers find north seems best. Most people, knowing nothing else about a city, would rather live in the northern half of town than in the southern, says Brian Meier, associate professor of psychology at Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, Pa. People tend to see the north as more desirable and affluent, in turn fueling stereotypes about where the rich and the poor live. “For some reason, people see the north and south as very different,” Prof. Meier says. “When all else is equal, people have this bias to think that northerly areas are better or more affluent.” Prof. Meier and co-authors Arlen Moller of Northwestern University, and Julie Chen and Miles Riemer-Peltz, both of Gettysburg College at the time, conducted four studies with groups ranging from 28 to 87 participants to see how “north” and

“south” affects housing preferences. The study, “Spatial Metaphor and Real Estate: North-South Location Biases Housing Preference,” was published in Social Psychological and Personality Science in August 2011. Prof. Meier’s research didn’t examine actual real-estate transactions. The researchers found that participants preferred to live in the northern part of a city. The participants saw the north as more affluent—72.5% of respondents believed an affluent person likely lived in the northern half of a hypothetical city. The location bias likely boils down to psychology and how we view the words “north” and “south,” Prof. Meier says. Although north and south are abstract concepts, we tend to understand them in spatial terms, with north meaning up and south meaning down. We then take it a step further and tie the two

Looking Up Researchers asked 40 participants in a study to look at a sketch of a hypothetical city and imagine where a successful ‘Dr. Bennett’ might live. Here is the breakdown: words to emotion, where up means good and down means bad—“feeling up or feeling down, on cloud nine or down in the dumps,” he explains. Pop culture furthers this idea; think of Billy Joel’s 1983 song about a blue-



collar “downtown man” in love with a high-class “uptown girl.” At some point, this directional metaphor becomes so ingrained in our minds that we can’t separate metaphor from concept, and north be- comes good, and south becomes bad, Prof. Meier says. To check this effect, study participants were shown an outline of a hypothetical city on which the south was placed at the top, the north at the bottom. In that case, the preference to live north was eliminated. Beverly Hills, Calif., agent Jade Mills, an estates director with Coldwell Banker, says she plays up the words “north” and “northern” whenever possible when selling a property. In her market, she says, homes in the north really are better. “The larger homes are going to be north. The properties are more desirable and more expensive,” she says. Still, when it comes to actually purchasing a house, Alex Coon, Boston-based market manager for Redfin, says he believes direction alone has little sway. “People choose houses for all the right reasons—distance, location, commuting time, square foot-

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