



Standard of Living: The Measure of the Middle Class in Modern America

Marina Moskowitz

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Coined in 1902, the term "standard of living" grew popular in early twentieth-century America. Though its exact definition remained ambiguous, it most often reflected the middle class and material comfort. The term was not a precise measure of how people lived. Instead, it embodied the ideal of how middle-class Americans *wanted* to live. With increasing wages and the mass production of consumer goods, the standard of living became an important expression of the shared national culture that emerged in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. But what material and social components constituted this standard? Who decided what they were and how they were to be promoted?

In *Standard of Living*, Marina Moskowitz explores these questions, focusing on the relationship between middle-class identity and material culture through four case studies. In one, she examines the incorporation of silverplate flatware into the daily rituals of American life. Mass production made this former luxury item affordable, while advertising, etiquette books, and home advice columns stressed its value as a family heirloom and confirmed its place in the middle-class dining room. Moskowitz then turns her attention to the bathroom and the proliferation of indoor sanitation, bathroom fixtures, and a hygiene industry equally interested in profits and public health. Home ownership contributed an essential element of this standard, and Moskowitz next charts the mail-order home industry, which sold not just kit houses but also the very idea of owning a home. Concluding with a look at zoning and urban planning as a means of fostering and protecting the standard of living for whole communities, this book offers important evidence of and fresh insights into the history of the American middle class.

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