

Waiting for the State: A Politics of Housing in South Africa

Although specified in the South African Bill of Rights (1996), the right to access housing translates in practice to the experience of waiting for the majority of South African citizens. In this paper, we reflect on the micro-politics of waiting, practices of 'quiet encroachment' (Bayat, 2010), exploring how and where citizens wait and make do, and their encounters with the state in these processes. We argue that waiting for homes shapes a politics of finding shelter 'in the meanwhile,' partially visible yet precarious, the grey spaces of informality and illegality that constitute South African cities. At the same time, waiting generates a politics of encounter between citizen and state, practices immersed in shifting policy approaches and techniques, the contingent and often-opaque practices of governance. In sum, the politics of waiting for housing in South Africa proves paradoxical: citizens are marked as legitimate 'wards' of the state. Yet, to live in the meanwhile and in the long term requires subversion, an agency that is sometimes visible in mobilization and protest, and at other times out of sight, simultaneously contentious and legitimate.