

Research Article



Commodifying the Queue: Digital Platforms and Rental Housing Access in Sweden

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Introduction

When I moved to Sweden, I was oblivious to the fact that finding a rental apartment would involve joining a housing queue (*bostadskö*), a term as deeply embedded in Swedish vocabulary as *fika*, IKEA, or Zlatan. A housing queue, I quickly came to learn, is a website where people register to collect *queue time*, also referred to as *queue days* or *queue points*. Once registered, you start accumulating points that can later be exchanged, in a way used as payment, for access to a rental unit. This housing queue system is an integral part of Sweden's universal approach to housing, in which there is no means-tested social housing sector. Instead, the market is expected to cater to the housing needs of the entire population (Bengtsson, 2001; Christophers, 2013; Scarpa, 2024), and housing queues have been established to ensure fairness and transparency in the allocation process (Wiktorin, 1983). Within this context, the rental housing allocation system operates according to a seniority principle: the person who has been registered the longest is first in line to be offered a vacant apartment. The system functions as a kind of non-monetary bidding mechanism, where accumulated queue time replaces financial capital as the currency of exchange. Much like in the owned housing sector, where the highest bidder secures the property, renters in Sweden "bid" for housing with their queue time (Wilhelmsson, 2024).

Once upon a time, the queue was an actual queue, with people standing in line waiting to be allocated an apartment. Today, the system is managed by a comprehensive digital infrastructure that requires people to register through different online platforms to accumulate the highly sought-after queue time. There is, however, no single, unified national queue system; instead, housing queues differ across landlords and regions. For instance, Sweden's largest cities – Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö – each have municipally-governed housing agencies that administer queues, combining access to most local vacancies. Registration is typically open from the age of 16 or 18, after which queue days begin to accumulate and can later be exchanged for a rental contract. In areas without a municipal housing agency, housing allocation often takes place through queues managed by individual housing companies. These *private housing queues* vary in their rules and eligibility criteria, with some even allowing parents to register their children at birth (Boverket, 2009). In practice, this fragmented system means that anyone looking for a rental unit, whether now or in the future, needs to register with multiple queues, each operating according to its own regulations.

The problem with this system lies not only in its complexity but also in its temporality. In the larger urban areas, the average waiting period ranges from three to nine years (Boplat Syd, 2025; Boplat Väst, 2025; Bostadsförmedlingen, 2025). This inevitably favours those who can afford to wait – established homeowners, older residents, or individuals in stable life circumstances – while disadvantaging young people, newly arrived migrants, and those facing urgent housing needs (Grander, 2021; Sveriges Allmännytt, 2024). Research has highlighted that the system exhibits inherent bias against individuals unable to accumulate sufficient queue time (Scarpa, 2024), effectively excluding them from the formal rental market and pushing them toward insecure subletting arrangements (Herbert, 2023; Listerborn, 2018; Samzelius, 2020).

My frustration with the system is hardly unique. Many newcomers, and even long-term residents, struggle to navigate the patchwork of rules and timelines that govern access to the rental housing market. The system has become so complex that an array of digital platforms is emerging to “fix” it, promising to streamline the process by consolidating various queues in one place. Two platforms, *Dibz* and *Hyreslätt*, exist merely to register users in housing queues across the country, and *HomeQ*, a marketplace for rental housing, has evolved to offer similar queue-management services. In one sense, these services assist users in navigating an online infrastructure that has become increasingly difficult to manage by themselves. Yet at the same time, they intervene in a system that was historically administered by municipalities and landlords, without intermediaries.

Drawing on theories of platform capitalism, which conceptualise digital platforms as infrastructures that monetise coordination, access, and administrative functions (Srnicsek, 2017), and on the concept of platform real estate, which shows how these logics increasingly organise housing markets and property relations (Shaw, 2020), this article approaches platforms as digital infrastructures for exchange within the rental market (Aaron, 2024). From this perspective, queue-management services are understood as building upon the existing platform infrastructure that constitutes the housing queue, enabling value creation by introducing fee-based administration within an otherwise free system. I argue that digital real estate platforms are reconfiguring housing allocation in Sweden by turning queues into market-based infrastructures, thereby challenging welfare state notions of fairness and universal access, rather than upholding them.

The analysis proceeds in three steps: first, by outlining how the queue system developed and became digitalised; second, by analysing the practices of platforms that offer digital assistance for managing housing queues; and third, by reflecting on what their emergence means to transparency and urban housing access. Methodologically, the article builds on my master’s thesis research (2022–2024) on the Swedish housing allocation system¹, drawing on 16 semi-structured interviews with housing company representatives and municipal housing agencies, alongside analysis of online materials, such as rental platforms, company websites, and publicly available reports.

A Fragmented System of Queues

Housing allocation regulation was introduced in the post-war period, as a response to severe housing shortages. At the time, landlords maintained waiting lists for prospective tenants and would offer available apartments to those first in line. However, there were no formal rules ensuring that apartments went to those who had waited the longest, and informal practices sometimes allowed certain applicants to bypass the queue altogether. So, in 1947, when the first Swedish Housing Provision Act was introduced, it called for municipalities to establish municipal housing agencies to channel all apartment vacancies. This was done to centralise and formalise the allocation process and state intervention in the existing waiting-list system intended to make access to housing more universal and transparent (Christophers, 2013; Wiktorin, 1983). Although the Housing Provision Act did not legally require municipalities to organise housing allocation, most municipalities set up and maintained their own queues through a municipal housing agency (Hedenmo &

von Platen, 2007, Wiktorin 1983). Queuing thus became a widely accepted mechanism of fairness and equality, one that embraced the broader ethos of the Swedish welfare state model.

But the law was repealed in 1993, abolishing any legislation that called for municipalities to maintain housing agencies, or queues, and shortly after, the number of municipal housing agencies began to decline. Today, only seven of Sweden's 290 municipalities operate housing agencies, with the largest, *Bostadsförmedlingen* in Stockholm and *Boplats Syd* in Malmö, now function on a regional scale, matching tenants with available apartments across multiple municipalities. But the idea that rental housing is best allocated through a seniority-based queue lives on, as even though many landlords have opted out of the municipal allocation system, they still maintain their own queues. These queues are, however, specific to individual housing companies, and registration takes place through each company's website.

This is where the system gets complicated. Depending on where in the country one looks for housing, the procedure varies considerably. In regions with a municipal housing agency, applicants register through that agency and can then access listings from multiple landlords on a single website. In areas without such an agency, applicants must identify individual housing companies and register separately in each of their queues. Even in municipalities that do operate a housing agency, not all landlords use it to allocate their vacancies, meaning that applicants often need to combine registrations across several different queues and platforms. It is in this digital landscape that rental platforms emerge as a new layer of digital infrastructure that facilitate housing allocation through the established queue-based model.

Shaw (2020) uses the term “*platform real estate*” to describe the rise of digital platforms that mediate property transactions, transforming real estate into a data-driven and algorithmically-organised system. These platforms are not bound to traditional institutions or geographic boundaries; rather, they reshape how housing is accessed, valued, and circulated, introducing new forms of market coordination. Such digital interventions typically take the form of apps or websites, for instance, Airbnb, which enables short-term rentals between individuals. Real estate platforms operate as *multi-sided markets*, where the technology functions as an intermediary that organises interactions between market agents (Fields & Rogers, 2021), in this case, landlords and tenants. In Sweden, several such platforms have emerged: *Hemnet* and *Booli* facilitate property sales, while *Qasa* focuses on sublets. In addition, a smaller group of platforms is organised specifically around the housing queue system, catering to tenants waiting for rental apartments. These queue-based platforms form the empirical focus of the analysis that follows.

Platforms for Managing Queues

In interviews with housing companies, three platforms alongside the municipal housing agencies frequently appeared: Hyreslätt, Dibz, and HomeQ. All three were founded by students who, much like me when I first encountered the system, experienced frustration

with its complexity, and they sought to simplify it (Åkesson, 2023; Ek, 2022; Ljungqvist, 2020). Hyreslätt and Dibz operate in similar ways: rather than allocating apartments directly, they function as digital assistants that register users in, and maintain their presence across, the numerous housing queues managed by landlords throughout Sweden. HomeQ, on the other hand, is a rental marketplace that has increasingly incorporated this queue-management model as part of its broader platform services. The problem these assistants address is straightforward but consequential: many housing companies require that people registered in their queue log in, often every six months, to keep their queue time active and prevent their points from expiring. Missing an update can result in losing years of accumulated waiting time. In addition, these platforms register users in housing queues across the country, addressing another inherent issue: those who wish to relocate to a different region but have not previously registered in that area's queue otherwise find themselves immediately placed at the back of the line.

Hyreslätt, launched in 2018, was created to help people navigate the complex digital structure of the many different housing queues. The service runs on an ad-based model and is offered free of charge, and on its website the founders describe it as “the best possible assistance for managing housing queues” (Hyreslätt, 2024, translated by author). The initiative came from students who themselves had struggled with navigating the rental system when moving away from home to begin university. Dibz, founded in 2020, takes the same idea but transformed into a lucrative business. Operating on a monthly subscription model (22–35 SEK per month), the platform manages access to more than 200 housing queues nationwide. It not only registers users into different queues, but also maintains their positions by automatically handling updates and notifications (Dibz, 2024). Like Hyreslätt, Dibz was started by students, but in this case, the venture rapidly evolved from a student project into a scalable business. Supported by the Stockholm School of Economics' Business Lab, which has fostered companies such as Klarna, Budbee, and Voi, Dibz attracted significant investment and professionalised its operations (Thambert, 2021). By 2021, the service had secured 6.6 million SEK in funding, and by 2023 the platform reached 8.0 million SEK in recurring revenue (Bolmgren, 2023; Wahlqvist, 2021). Marketing campaigns on Instagram and TikTok targeted at young adults have helped Dibz expand to over 30,000 users. Both Hyreslätt and Dibz thus perform the same task: placing and maintaining users in existing, publicly accessible queues. But their logics differ. Hyreslätt frames itself as a civic-minded solution to an inefficient system, while Dibz exemplifies how queueing itself can become a profitable business model. Dibz consolidates many dispersed housing queues into a single interface, generating value not from apartments directly, but from streamlining access to them.

While Hyreslätt and Dibz operate as auxiliary services within the existing queue infrastructure, facilitating registration, search, and navigation across already-established housing queues, HomeQ marks a shift toward platformisation of the allocation process itself. HomeQ, launched in 2017, represents a slightly different type of platform. While Hyreslätt and Dibz only act as assistants for managing existing queues, HomeQ positions itself as a marketplace for rental housing. The platform aims to centralise apartment vacancies nationwide into a single, accessible interface (Herold, 2019). HomeQ provides

landlords with a platform to advertise vacancies and allows housing applicants to register in the queue free of charge. Notably, municipal housing agencies charge an annual service fee, typically between 200 and 300 SEK, in accordance with legislation permitting such fees if housing is allocated according to the queue system. HomeQ, as a privately run platform, is not allowed to charge users for access to the queue; instead, it charges the housing companies that use the platform, which could otherwise allocate housing through municipal housing agencies for free. The strategy has proved successful: by 2023, HomeQ reported more than 900,000 registered users, partnerships with 400 housing companies, and a valuation of 146 million SEK (Ek, 2022; HomeQ, 2023). More recently, HomeQ has introduced additional fee-based services for tenants, expanding its business model beyond landlord-oriented revenues. *HomeQ+* offers a premium subscription that boosts a user's visibility to landlords, including benefits such as early access to listings, the ability to see one's position in the queue, filters showing the "best chances," and prioritised customer support. Prices range from 349 SEK per month to 834 SEK for a yearly subscription. In addition, *HomeQ Samla* mirrors the services of Hyreslätt and Dibz, automatically managing users' registrations in multiple private housing queues for 29 SEK per month or 228 SEK annually. Together, these platforms illustrate how the digital infrastructure surrounding the housing queues is increasingly commercialised, transforming access into a site of market value creation.

Commodification of the Queue

The emergence of digital platforms around Sweden's housing queues illustrates how a system once closely tied to welfare state ideals of universalism is being reshaped through commodification. The housing queue, long defended as a transparent and equal method of allocating apartments, is no longer merely a question of who has waited the longest. Platforms such as Hyreslätt, Dibz, and HomeQ intervene by offering tools, subscriptions, and premium services that enable some users to manage queues more efficiently or increase their visibility to landlords. In doing so, they transform queueing, a bureaucratic mechanism of fairness, into a site of market opportunity. The queue was never intended as a commodity, yet through these platforms, it increasingly functions as one. This commodification raises important concerns. First, it blurs the line between public and private responsibility. Housing queues have historically been managed either by municipalities or by landlords themselves, without intermediaries. The platforms insert themselves into this relationship, claiming to make the system more efficient while simultaneously profiting from its complexity. Second, it challenges ideals of transparency and equality. When visibility or convenience can be purchased through subscription fees, access risks becoming stratified according to ability to pay – precisely the inequality the queue system was designed to prevent. Third, it highlights how digital infrastructures, often presented as neutral solutions to bureaucratic inefficiency, actively reshape the conditions of access to urban housing.

As Fields and Rogers (2021, p. 89) note, "existing social, cultural, political and economic structures often change more slowly than technology, generating novel interactions among platform real estate and the 'old' housing question." The Swedish case exemplifies

this tension. Digitalisation has made it possible for users to register in multiple housing queues across the country. Yet through fee-based services like Dibz and HomeQ+, this expanded access is no longer equal: it depends on who can afford to pay for convenience, automation, or increased visibility. What was once a universal right to queue becomes differentiated through purchasing power. These dynamics align with the broader logic of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017), in which digital intermediaries capture and monetise the flows of information and activity that pass through them. Here, queue time becomes a temporal commodity, leveraged for profit through subscription models.

The analysis reveals deeper dilemmas about fairness within the Swedish housing model. Should everyone have the right to register in all housing queues nationwide, as an expression of universal access? Or should queuing prioritise those with urgent housing needs, shifting from a principle of equal waiting time to one of differentiated necessity? Digital platforms do not resolve these questions; rather, they expose how competing ideals of fairness, transparency, and efficiency are now mediated through digital infrastructures. From this perspective, real estate platforms constitute not merely digital services but rather a new layer of housing infrastructure, one that overlays the formal allocation system with market-based mechanisms of coordination. By turning the administrative function of queuing into a fee-based service, these platforms reconfigure how access to housing is organised and valued. The queue, once a bureaucratic tool of welfare universalism, has thus become embedded within the logics of platform capitalism.

NOTES

¹Kangas, H. (2024). *Why do Swedes queue?: Investigating housing allocation through real estate platforms* (Master's thesis, Malmö University). The thesis explored how emerging digital platforms influence housing allocation in Sweden, analysing municipal housing agencies and rental marketplaces as data-driven systems that shape access to rental housing and create new forms of valuation through queues. <https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:mau:diva-68251>

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