

The Carpenter Who Built Tiny Homes for Toronto's Homeless

Khaleel Seivwright built himself a wooden shanty while living on a West Coast commune. Then he started building similar lodgings for homeless people in Toronto to survive the winter.



Khaleel Seivwright has built about 100 tiny shelters for Toronto's homeless population.

By [Catherine Porter](#); Photos by Ian Willms for *The New York Times*
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TORONTO — On his way to work on a construction site, Khaleel Seivwright surveyed the growing number of tents lining an intercity highway and in parks with increasing

discomfort. How would these people survive Toronto's damp, frigid winters, let alone the coronavirus, which had pushed so many out of overcrowded shelters?

He remembered the little shanty he had once built out of scrap wood while living on a commune in British Columbia.

So he hauled a new generator into his S.U.V., strapped \$800 worth of wood onto the vehicle's roof and drove down into one of the city's ravines in the middle of the night to build another one: a wooden box — 7 feet 9 inches by 3 feet 9 inches — sealed with a vapor barrier and stuffed with enough insulation that, by his careful calculation, would keep it warm on nights when the thermometer dipped as low as minus 4 degrees Fahrenheit.

He put in one window for light, and attached smoke and carbon monoxide detectors. Later, he taped a note to the side that read, "Anyone is welcome to stay here." Since then, Mr. Seivwright (pronounced Seeve-right), 28, has built about 100 similar shelters with a crew of 40 volunteers and [more than \\$200,000 in donations](#). He has hauled them to parks across Toronto where homeless encampments have slumped into place — jarring reminders of the pandemic's perversely uneven effects.

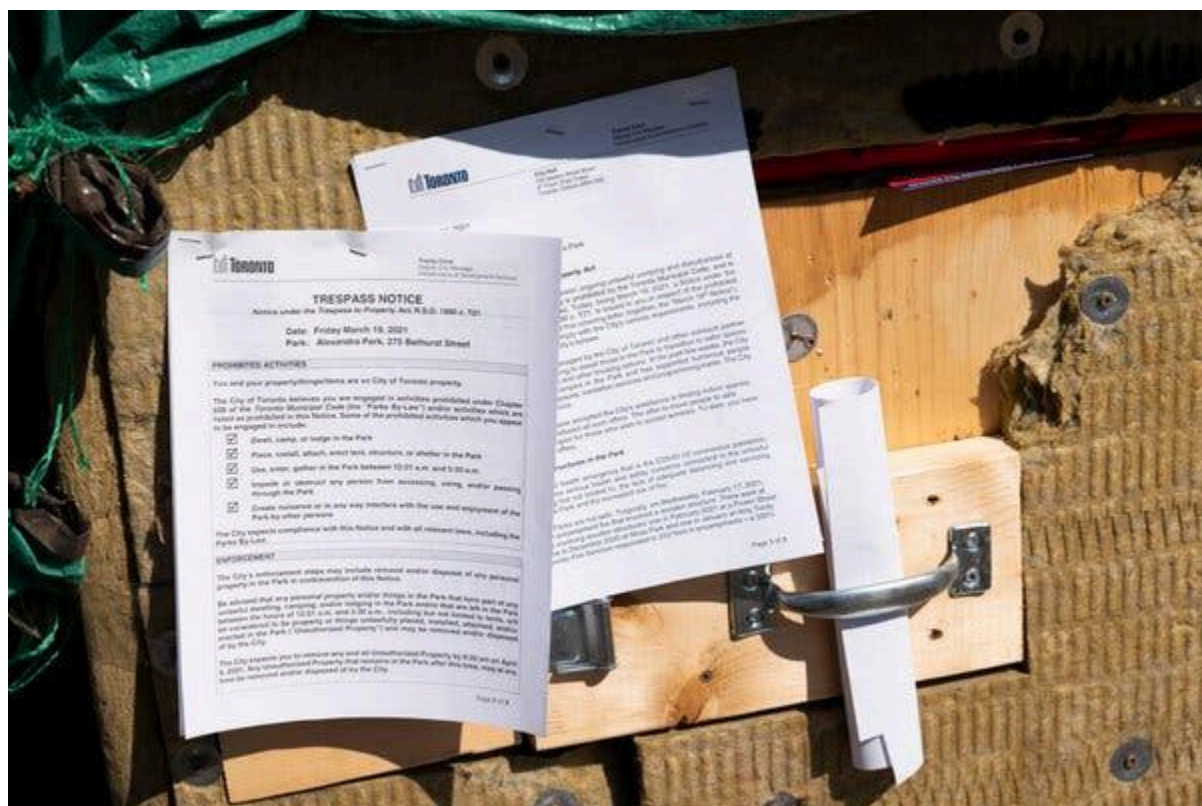


A cluster of tiny shelters in Toronto's Alexandra Park.

The city's bureaucrats called them illegal and unsafe, and stapled trespass and eviction notices to many, informing their residents that the city had rented out hotel rooms for them. They served Mr. Seivwright with an injunction, ordering him to stop putting the structures on city-owned land.

But to the people who live in them, the shelters are a tiny room of one's own, providing a sanctuary from disease and danger. And they are a slap in the face to lawmakers, a powerful reminder of Canada's failure to build social housing for the past 25 years. "This man is a hero," said Domenico Saxida, who has lived among a cluster of tiny shelters in a downtown park since before the coronavirus stalked the city. "He made the Canadian government look stupid. One man on his own dime and time."

On a recent Sunday, more than 200 people gathered in the park to protest the eviction notices and to hear from Mr. Seivwright, who is so deeply private that his social media accounts have long been hidden behind aliases. But he is propelled by what he considers a moral imperative, as well as the writings of his favorite philosophers.



The city has begun evicting people and removing the shelters from city parks.

“It’s becoming more and more unaffordable for people to live here,” he told a cheering crowd. “It’s like we’re all standing in a line, waiting to get pushed out. And everyone that’s staying outside here is just at the end of that line.”

Mr. Seivwright has experienced homelessness — although more as an experiment in self-reliance than the result of misfortune. In 2017, he pitched a tent in a large park on Burnaby Lake, 30 minutes from downtown Vancouver, while working on a construction site. Over five months he learned what it was like to wake up shivering, after snow had collapsed the nylon ceiling, and to fall asleep worried about being attacked by coyotes, he said.

He was inspired by Henry David Thoreau’s famous experiment, documented in the 1854 book “Walden,” of confronting “only the essential facts of life,” by moving to a log cabin in the woods.

“I was very interested in these ideas of what you really need to live off,” Mr. Seivwright said. “After doing that, wow, I feel less terrified about losing a place or not knowing where I’ll sleep.”



A woman who gave only her first name, Samantha, lives in one of the shelters built by Mr. Seivwright and his team of volunteers.

He also knows from personal experience the importance of subsidized housing. He grew up in a low-income co-op on the edge of suburban Toronto, the middle child of two working-class immigrants from Jamaica. His mother is a school custodian, and his father a master electrician who started bringing Mr. Seivwright and his younger brother, Ali, to work sites when they were 12 and 11.

After high school, Mr. Seivwright found a job framing houses. His boss motivated him with a promise: With every new skill he mastered, he'd get a \$1 raise. Within a few years, he learned enough to run his own crew.

Six years ago, he joined a small community in northern British Columbia, where he learned how to slaughter chickens, identify mushrooms, build a greenhouse and manage a composting toilet. He woke up early most mornings to walk barefoot in the forest so he could feel "intimately connected with nature." When he ran out of money, he got jobs in town.

"It felt like how I wanted to live," he said. "It was entirely up to me. I didn't have to fall into line."

His friends and siblings describe Mr. Seivwright as a passionate autodidact. He is not someone who dabbles — he plunges.

In high school, he took up piano and practiced for hours a day, until he was good enough to start a band and tour bars. He became "obsessed" with chess and played so much that he now offers lessons online. He taught himself to paint, and got good enough to sell his works at subway stations.

Recently, he's been reflecting on Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of the eternal return — that people might be excited at the concept of reliving their lives repeatedly, "Groundhog Day" style. "I like his wonder at life, the sense of being satisfied by the worst things in your life and making a wonderful journey out of everything you do," he said, adding that the idea had been part of his inspiration to build the shelters.

So while few of his friends foresaw his latest pursuit, they weren't surprised by it.



Tents erected near a tennis court in Toronto. More than 80,000 people are on the city's waitlist for public housing.

After his second tiny shelter, Mr. Seivwright dedicated himself seven days a week to the project, throwing himself feverishly into the work in a rented warehouse. The initiative hit a nerve — not just within the city bureaucracy, but with regular citizens, many of whom were cooped up at home amid the pandemic without cluttered agendas to distract them from the poverty laid bare across their local park.

Mr. Seivwright joined forces with a group of musicians and artists called the [Encampment Support Network](#), dropping off food and supplies to people living in camps that now number 75, with up to 400 inhabitants, the government estimates.

He started a [petition](#) urging the city not to remove his shelters from the parks — an effort that to date has received almost 100,000 signatures. Many others followed, penned by [health care providers](#), musicians, [church groups](#), lawyers, academics, [artists and authors](#).

“I’ve become the face of something that is a lot bigger than me,” he said.



A rally for affordable housing in Toronto, organized by the Encampment Support Network, last fall.

So far, the city bureaucracy and politicians have [not been swayed](#). Fires in the shelters, [one of which proved fatal](#), have stiffened their opposition. They have the law on their side: In October, an [Ontario judge ruled](#) that the encampments impaired the use of park spaces and that the city had the right to remove them.

“I cannot accept having people in parks is the best that our country and city can do,” said Ana Bailão, Toronto’s deputy mayor, adding that the city had 2,040 units of affordable housing under construction and thousands more approved — a sizable increase from previous years, but hardly a notch in the city’s 80,000-plus waiting list for social housing.

Mr. Seivwright worries that once the parks are empty, the urgent conversation about affordable housing will be quickly forgotten. He has hired lawyers to fight the city’s injunction on constitutional grounds.

While he waits for the court date, he has stopped making shelters. He has also delayed his plans to move to the country’s east coast to build his own community, with even fewer rules and more time to play music, make art and read.

“It’s worth it,” he said. “I had a funny thought: Life is long. It’s not so terrible to have to wait a little bit.”



A shelter in Alexandra Park.