A community urban art project that brings a burst of colour to the city as it prepares for the rains. Made possible with a grant from the Alliance of Artist Communities, supported by the Rockefeller Foundation.
The city of Mumbai viewed from the air or almost any high-rise is dominated by a patchwork of blue tarpaulin rooftops. A thin layer of protection for the most vulnerable against the monsoon, these tattered inland seas are hemmed in by towers and construction sites. As the city tries to resettle these communities and unlock valuable real estate, various vested interests prolong and complicate the process. This is a view from Gilbert Hill, one of the largest such clusters in the city comprising thousands of households.
The first site that I worked on was at Murugan Chawl in Khar. This is a cluster of 168 households, and has existed as a settlement for over 50 years. Originally the site of a graveyard and an illicit liquor operation, the community has been negotiating resettlement for the last 20 years. At present it is surrounded by mid and high rise apartments, which can cost millions of dollars.

Google Maps Link (incorrectly named as Borgan Chawl on the map)
https://www.google.co.in/maps/place/Borgan+Chawl,+Main+Ave,+Vithaldas+Nagar,+Santacruz+West,+Mumbai,+Maharashtra+400054/@19.0771733,72.8317541,911m/data=!3m1!1e3!4m2!3m1!1s0x390bb065c68b0xc9792948ee593e4f6m1!1e1
For those who dwell in these irregular settlements any outside interference is viewed with suspicion. Material assistance often opens up internal jealousies and demands. Local politicians and thugs try to muscle in on the opportunity.

I was fortunate to find partners in the form of Raja and Reshma Keshavan. This young couple managed the coordination and logistics very efficiently. Records and accounts of material and labour were carefully kept.

Raja’s mother (pictured on the previous page) who is well respected in the community was instrumental in ensuring everyone’s support.
Over the two weeks of surveying and installation 10 different boys were formally involved; however, almost all the teenagers of the area lent a hand in the proceedings. Hasan, Saji, Suresh, Kumar, Kaliya, Ganesh, Nitin and Sunny were the key workers under Raja’s direction. His connections with the security guards gave us access to a 13th floor penthouse in a new building that was still unoccupied (pictured left).
Using tarpaulin opened up a whole new approach to the act of image making as well. I had always intended for the image to emerge from some consensus of the participants. Our palette of colours was chosen for their brightness and contrast. Each rooftop became a single block of colour or pixel.
I asked the boys to imagine a game-board or puzzle of interlocking forms coming together. We worked in teams and reviewed each day’s progress before moving further.

The abstract nature of the composition made various participants see it differently. We would discuss their views and the final graphic decisions were made on site in real time.
From the initial survey to completion. Selfie with Bonda, Kumar and Raja from the 13th floor of the building in the first frame. This building which is still being completed boasts a rooftop infinity pool among other amenities.
The installation has created a sense of pride in the area and some of the young residents have been expressing their own creative interpretations. This project does not imagine it can bridge the divides in the city. We only demonstrate that our ideas and ability to adapt and provoke make us resilient.
The success of the first site led to an ambitious venture in a highly visible location at Bandra Reclamation.

Google Maps Link
https://www.google.co.in/maps/place/Reclamation,+Bandra+West,+Mumbai,+Maharashtra/@19.0511091,72.8335618,455m/data=!3m1!1e3!4m2!3m1!1s0x3be7c938304c8e93:0x870757227fa84b46
Work around the Bandra Reclamation flyover faced difficulties due to the topography and diverse local issues. Most importantly, the torrential winds that precede the monsoon made it impossible to continue.
The third site takes shape. The rooftops at Bandra Camp / Rang Sharda were much more accessible, and the team responded with their neatest effort yet.

Google Maps Link
https://www.google.co.in/maps/place/KC+Marg,+Bandra+West,+Mumbai,+Maharashtra+400050/@19.051642,72.8314538,912m/data=!3m2!1e3!4b1!4m2!3m1!1s0x3be7c939112cb327:0xba2c1f81cd3a12a89
The work ethic and irreverent humour of the boys who worked in tough conditions made my task relatively easy. The impact of the project on the aesthetic sensibilities of the participants and even the residents is becoming apparent in various ways.

The new locational pride in the communities is probably the most enduring aspect of the whole project. The idea of marking their own home on the map, on the satellite view is a constant theme in my conversations with residents in the areas.

Word of the project is spreading and the hope is that eventually local communities are inspired to organise and create similar self-sustaining initiatives.
In a city where the visual culture is largely defined by the narrow aesthetics of commercial and cultural stereotypes, what has emerged is an urban artwork that is an expression of the aspirations unique to its time and place. The narrative of Mumbai shall not be defined by the most privileged, but subverted by the most inventive.