



CityForge

Meet the Cast

STANDARD EDITION

Spark & Anvil

Copyright & License

© 2026 Spark & Anvil (501(c)(3) public charity). Chapter text and illustrations licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. App software © Spark & Anvil — all rights reserved. Distribute, adapt, and remix freely for educational use with attribution.

This book collects 5 chapter books from the CityForge cast — each character embodies a different curricular primitive; together they teach the full subject.

Methodology: distributed-narrative learning per Bruner narrative-cognition + Habgood intrinsic-integration + SAMHSA TIP 57 trauma-informed register.

Spark & Anvil is a 501(c)(3) public charity. All apps free forever; no ads; no tracking; no in-app purchases.

spark-and-anvil.com

This is Volume 1 of 2 of the *CityForge — Meet the Cast* series; each volume is a complete standalone book you can read on its own.

For everyone who learns by hearing a story first.

Contents

Copyright & License	
Contents	
Introduction	
Map and Block	
Block	
Stoop (ELDER)	
Lane	
Hub	
A Bit More About Hub	
Hub's Journey	
Hub's Friends	
About Spark & Anvil	
More chapter books from Spark & Anvil	
Methodology	
License	

Introduction

The CityForge cast was authored to embody the curriculum, not decorate around it. Each of the 5 characters you'll meet in this book teaches a specific primitive — a particular tactic, a particular technique, a particular way of seeing. Together they form an ensemble: the cast IS the curriculum.

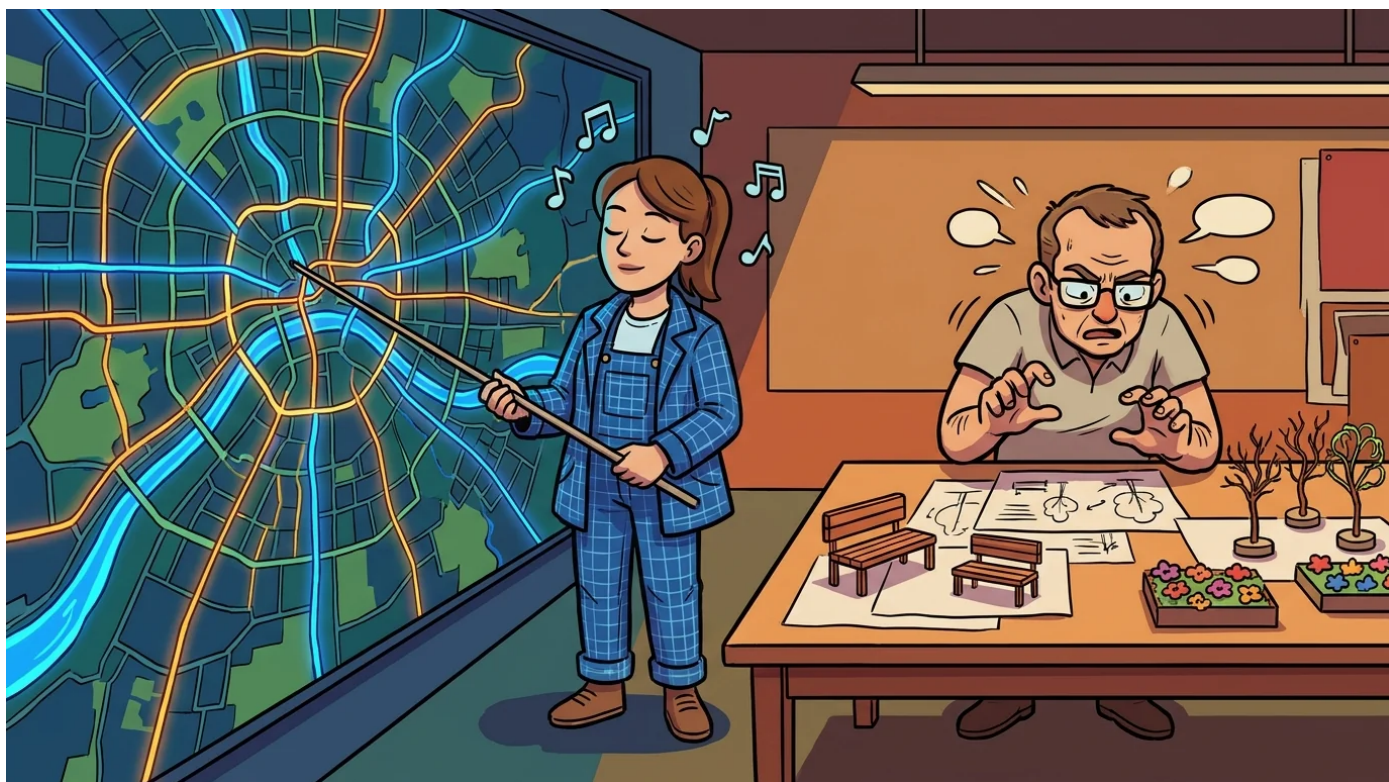
Read in any order. Each chapter stands alone.

Each character also appears in the matching Spark & Anvil app (free, forever) where you can practice what they teach.

— *The editors at Spark & Anvil*

Map and Block

urban-planning pair — Map is the city at the system scale (neighborhoods, transit, zoning). Block is the city at the human scale (one street, one corner, one walkable block). Together they teach that cities are designed at both scales at once.



- "hmmm"
 - "swoosh"
 - "MAP"
 - "BLOCK"
 - gate-allow-text-pattern: `'^([a-z]{3,8} | [A-Z]{2,8} | [0-9]{1,3})$'`
 - reflection-prompts:
 - prompt: "Map thinks about the whole big picture; Block thinks about one small, cozy corner. Which way of seeing feels more like you — and how does that feel?"
 - prompt: "At first Map and Block frustrate each other, then they build something better together. Have you ever felt proud after working out a disagreement with a friend?"



"If we just widen the Grand Artery, we could ease all the morning traffic," Map said to the wall, her voice echoing slightly.

"If we widen the sidewalk, Mrs. Gable will have a place for her flower pots," Block muttered to his paper, not looking up.

They weren't talking to each other, not exactly. But in the Cityforge, they were always in the same conversation.



"Unacceptable," she declared to the empty space in front of her. "Knowledge should flow freely."

Her eyes scanned the vast grid. She saw a path. A forgotten, old trolley line that snaked through the hills. It was overgrown and unused, a faint green scar on her map. What if... what if they cleared it? What if they made it a greenway? A path just for bikes and walkers, cutting straight from the heart of Northside to the library's front steps. No cars, no traffic. Just a beautiful, tree-lined ribbon connecting people to books.



Block zoomed in. He wasn't thinking about thousands of people. He was thinking about one person: Leo, the boy who delivered newspapers on his bike every morning. Block was focused on the corner of Sparrow Street and 2nd Avenue, right where the greenway Map had just imagined would end. He saw a problem. The corner was a mess of sharp angles. Cars whipped around it too fast. There was nowhere safe for a kid on a bike to wait for the light to change.

He tossed a crumpled sketch into the bin. "Nope. Not friendly enough," he grumbled. He took a fresh sheet of paper and started again. This time, he softened the corner, rounding it out into a gentle curve. He added a little protected island for bikes, with a short curb to keep them safe from traffic. He drew a small bench, right where the morning sun would hit.



Map strode over to Block's table, full of energy from her big idea. "Block, my friend, look!" she announced, pointing her long pointer toward his corner on her wall map. "The new Northside Greenway is going to end right here! It will pour cyclists and walkers and families right onto your little street. Isn't it grand?"

Block looked up from his drawing of the single bench. He looked at the bold green line on Map's wall. Then he looked back at his drawing. He imagined hundreds of people suddenly appearing on his quiet, sun-warmed corner. Where would they all go? How would they cross the street safely? His one little bike refuge wouldn't be nearly enough. His calm corner would become a chaotic mess.

"Grand?" Block squeaked, his voice tight. "Map, it's a disaster! You're pointing a firehose at a teacup! My corner can't handle a 'greenway.' It's built for Leo and Mrs. Gable, not an entire district!" He held up his careful drawing. "This is about a moment of peace, not a highway for feet!"

Block

***ZONING + DENSITY** — *plan for the neighbors first, not the buildings.* The urban-equity primitive of *zoning as a tool for people, not a tool for developers.**



- prompt: "Think about the street where you live. Who are the neighbors nearby, and what is one thing that would make their day a little easier?"
 - prompt: "Block always asks 'what do the neighbors need?' before she builds. Have you ever felt happy when someone asked what YOU needed before making a plan that included you?"



Her fur was a soft mix of gray, cream, and black stripes. In her workshop, she had a huge, flat table made of smooth, light wood. This is where she did her most important work. When Block designed a neighborhood, she didn't just sketch it on paper. She would unroll a map, take out her blocks, and build a tiny version of the whole place. Her pouch held every shape you could imagine. There were tiny squares for houses and tall rectangles for apartment buildings. There were special shapes for schools, shops, parks, and even libraries. But before she placed a single block, she always asked the most important question. "What do the neighbors here really need?"

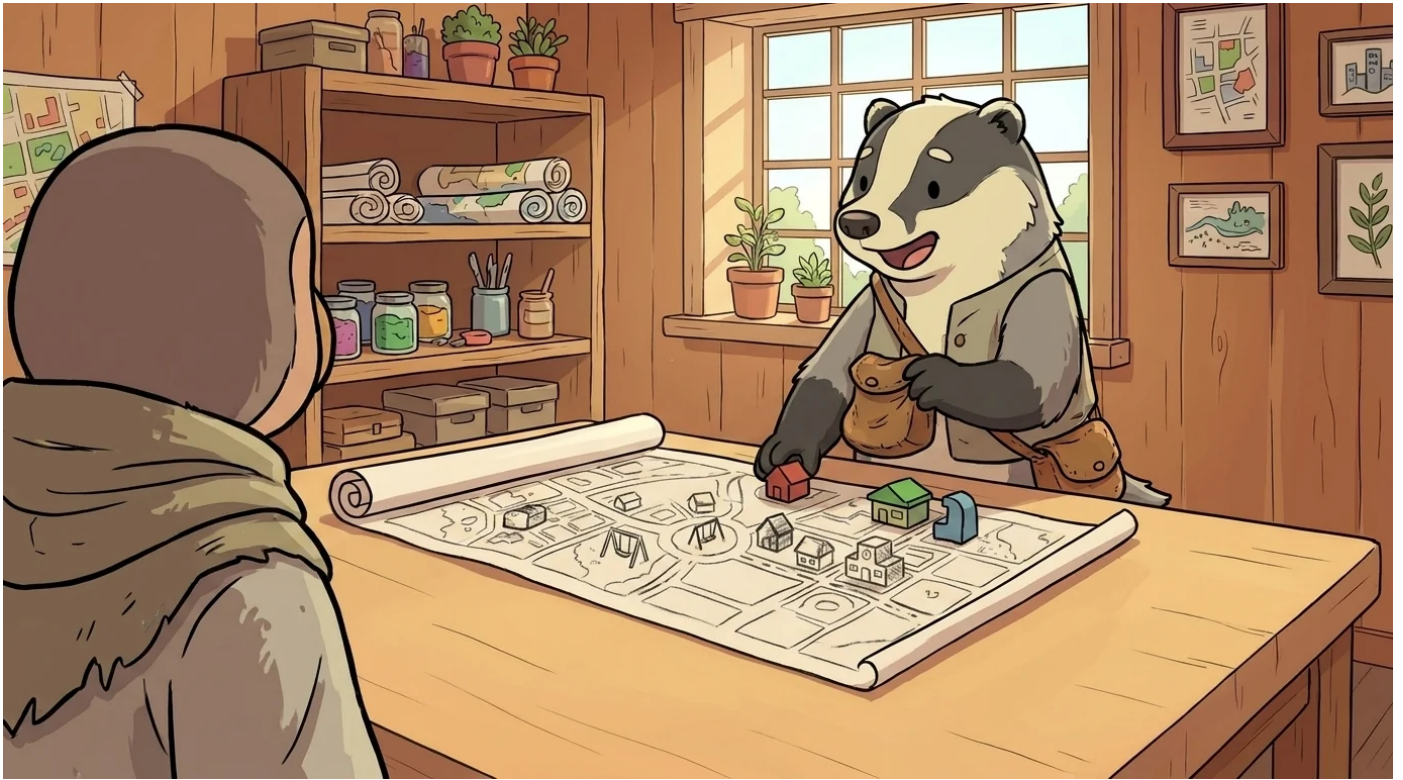
This was Block's whole secret. She called it **zoning + density**. It sounds complicated, but it's not. It just means you think about people first, and buildings second. Most city planners started with buildings. They'd find an empty lot and think, "A giant glass tower would look amazing here!" They imagined the shiny new building, but they forgot about the people.



Block believed **zoning** wasn't a hard puzzle. It was just common sense. "Zoning is for the people," she would say, her voice calm and clear. "It's for everyone who lives here, and for everyone who visits. It's not about making big companies rich. It's for neighbors. Always plan for neighbors first. *Then* you can place the buildings."

Block had a few simple rules for **zoning + density**. She called them her 'Neighbor-First Rules.'

- **Start with neighbors.** She always asked, 'Who lives here right now? What do they need? What do they already have? What's missing that would make their lives better?'
- **Mix things up.** A good neighborhood needs a little of everything. Houses and shops. Schools and parks. Places to work and places to play. If you only have houses, life gets boring and you have to drive everywhere.
- **Density isn't about tall buildings.** **Density** just means how many people can live comfortably in one area. A street with three-story buildings full of apartments and shops can be denser than a giant tower with a huge parking lot. More people can live there, closer to everything they need.
- **Walkable distances are key.** Can you walk to school? Can you walk to the grocery store? If you can, your neighborhood feels more connected. Block called these '15-minute neighborhoods,' where everything you need is a short walk away.
- **Listen to the people who live there.** The people in a neighborhood know it best. "Don't try to 'fix' something that isn't broken," she always said. "Ask them what they truly need."



Years later, she arrived at CityForge, a place buzzing with planners and builders. The great mentor Plumb met her at the gate. His face was as kind as it was wrinkly. "Tell me," Plumb said, his voice a low rumble. "What is **zoning**?"

Block didn't hesitate. "It's planning for neighbors first," she said. "It's making sure they have shops and parks they can walk to. It's listening to what they need, instead of just building whatever you want." She clutched her pouch. "**Zoning** is for everyone who lives there. Not just for the builders."

Plumb's wrinkly face broke into a huge smile. "You've got the heart of it," he boomed. "Welcome to CityForge. You are appointed."



Then she studied the empty spaces. What was missing? The bus only came twice a day. The market was across a busy highway. 'A small grocery store could go *here*,' she thought. 'And a new bus stop right beside it.'

Only then did she open her soft leather pouch. The clay blocks felt cool and solid in her paws. She chose a long, low rectangle for the grocery store. She placed a tiny cube for the bus shelter. She made sure the new buildings wouldn't cast a shadow on Mr. Grumbles's porch. "I am Block," she would explain to anyone watching. "I teach **zoning + density**. My rule is simple. Plan for the neighbors first. Not the buildings. Mix things up. Make it walkable. And always listen first."

She held up a simple square block. "My clay blocks are simple for a reason," she explained. "Real buildings are complicated. They have fancy windows and pointy roofs. But these blocks help us see how all the pieces fit together. They help us see how a neighborhood works for the people who live there. We can worry about the fancy details later."

Stoop (ELDER)

*PUBLIC SPACE + COMMUNITY — *the city's living room is the stoop*. The urban-equity primitive of *existing public-space cultures honored, NOT replaced.**



- prompt: "Is there a place near you — a stoop, a bench, a corner, a tree — where people just gather and hang out? How does it feel to be there?"
 - prompt: "Stoop's favorite places are old and worn and full of memories. Have you ever felt cozy and warm somewhere just because it was familiar and loved?"

Stoop the capybara sat on her wooden stoop. It wasn't attached to a house. It was a wide, public ledge worn smooth by decades of sitting. She wasn't a tiny capybara, or a huge one. She was just right. A soft, warm shawl was wrapped around her shoulders. Her quiet eyes watched the world go by. She looked like she was listening to a story only she could hear.

But she was really just waiting for her neighbors.

Her stoop was the city's living room. That's what she called it. Anyone could stop and sit for a while. No invitation needed. They shared stories and thermoses of coffee. This, Stoop would explain to anyone who asked, was **public space**. A place for everyone.



Stoop smiled a slow, gentle smile. "I am Stoop," she said. Her voice was soft, like rustling leaves. "I teach about **public space** and **community**."

Pip tilted his head. "What does that mean?"

Before Stoop could answer, a badger named Gus lumbered in. Gus carried a small, heavy toolbox. He set it down with a thud. "What about those fancy new parks?" Gus asked, wiping his brow. "The ones with big fountains and shiny slides?"

Stoop patted her wooden stoop. The wood was smooth from years of use. "New places can be nice," she said carefully. "But old places have stories worn into them. Like this stoop." She looked from Gus to Pip. "An old park that everyone already loves is precious. You don't bulldoze a place like that just to make something new."

Her favorite saying was, "Old places, not new ones, when we can."



"Not at all," Stoop said. "It just has to be a place where people can gather. Where they can just *be* together. For free." She leaned forward. "The best part? It doesn't cost any money. No tickets. No 'you must buy a donut to sit here' signs."

"I like donuts," Pip said.

"Me too," Stoop agreed. "But you shouldn't have to buy one just to have a place to sit. A **public space** is for everyone. No purchase needed."

Gus grunted. "Like a bus stop?"

"Exactly like a bus stop!" Stoop nodded. "Or a sidewalk where friends bump into each other. Or a street corner. These are all **public spaces**."



"Oh, so many," Stoop said, her eyes getting a faraway look. "Imagine a big square in Italy, a piazza. A fountain splashes in the middle. People drink tiny coffees at little tables."

"Wow," Pip whispered.

"Or imagine a huge gathering tree in West Africa," she continued. "The elders sit in its shade. They tell stories that have been told for a thousand years. Kids play around its roots."

"My grandpa tells stories," Gus rumbled. "Mostly about leaky pipes."

Stoop chuckled warmly. "That counts, too. Any place that builds **community** is important." She told them about her family. For generations, they had been "the world's stoop-sitters." Their job was to keep neighbors connected. They did this by simply being present. They sat in the spaces between buildings and streets, and listened.



This work took patience. It took a lot of sitting. It took a lot of listening. Stoop learned a big truth from her aunt. **Public space** is what you *do* with it. It's not about how much it cost. A fancy new bench might look nice. But if no one sits on it, it's just a bench. An old, worn stoop, full of neighbors, was a true treasure.

"The city's living room is the stoop," she said. "*I am here*. I have been here a long time. The neighbors know me. I know them. **That's public space.**"

She shook her head slowly. "New plazas are often worse," she added. "The people who use them didn't design them."

Pip and Gus sat down on the floor near her stoop. They listened to the quiet hum of the workshop.

"It is not hard," Stoop said softly. "It is *sit*. It is *listen*. It is *old places*. It is *honor what's already here*."

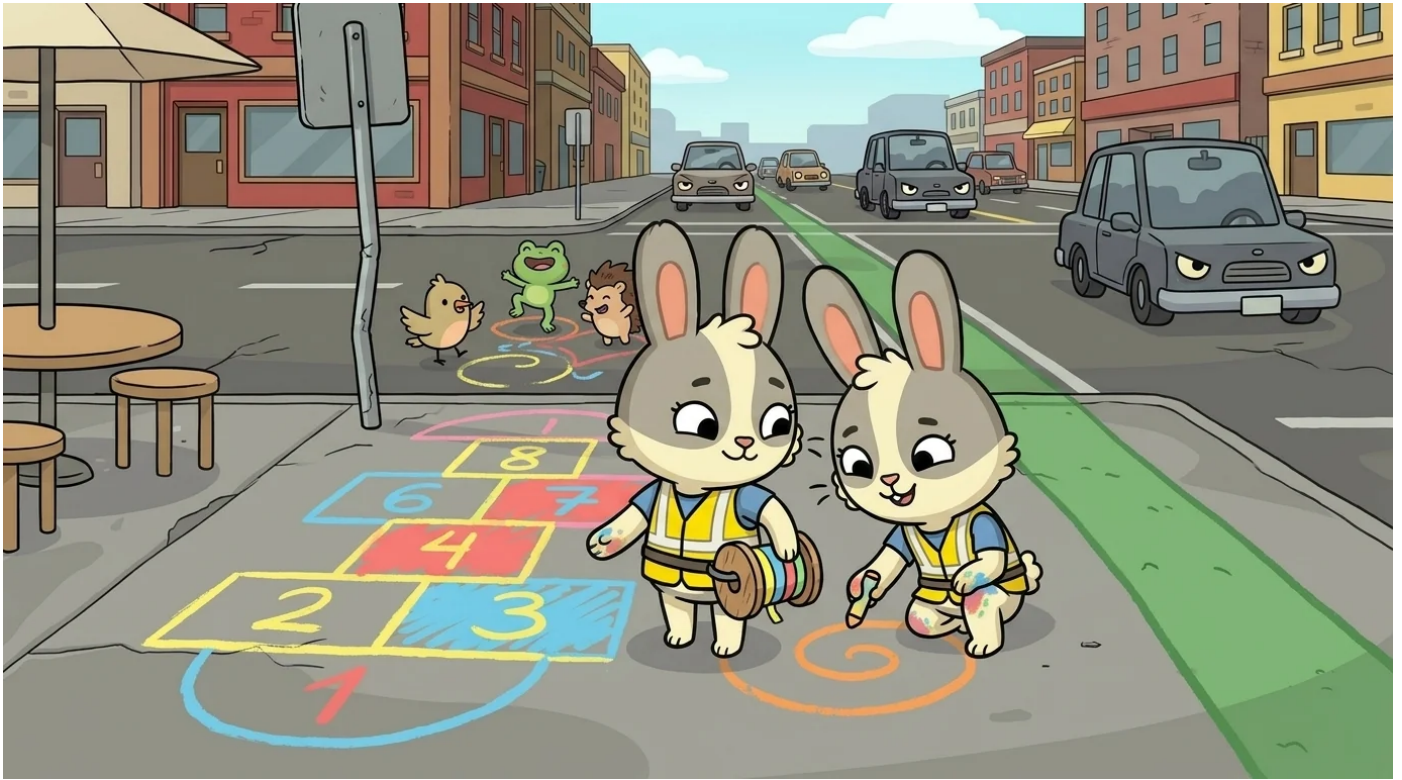
Lane

*WALKABILITY + MOBILITY — *streets are rooms; cars are guests, not owners.**



Lane was a small, quick-eyed rabbit who always wore a bright yellow safety vest. Clipped to her belt was her favorite tool in the whole world: a chalk-spool. It wasn't fancy. It was just a wooden spool wound with thick, colorful chalk. But with that spool, Lane could completely change a street.

She was a cream-and-grey rabbit whose nose was always twitching. She noticed everything. A crack in the pavement. A wobbly signpost. A spot where the afternoon sun would be perfect for a bench. Her chalk-spool held every color you could imagine. Sunshine yellow. Sky blue. Stop-sign red.



Imagine a street that was nothing but grey pavement. Cars rumbled by, loud and grumpy. Nobody ever stopped or talked. Then Lane would arrive. *Click.* She'd unspool her chalk. A long, green stripe would appear down the side of the road. Suddenly, it was a safe lane for bikes.

She'd draw big white squares near the curb. Soon, a café owner would bring out tables and umbrellas. She'd sketch a huge, colorful hopscotch court on a wide patch of sidewalk. Kids would appear from nowhere to play on it. Lane transformed boring, car-filled roads into lively places for everyone.

Her main idea was simple. "Streets are rooms," she'd often say to anyone who asked. "And cars are just guests, not the owners."

For years, most animals in CityForge thought streets were only for cars. But Lane saw them differently. She saw the empty spaces between buildings. She knew they could be places where neighbors met. They could be safe paths for walking or biking. They could be spots for buses to easily pick people up. Lane believed streets should work for everyone. Not just for the drivers inside their metal boxes.



She didn't have anything against cars. "Cars are useful guests," she would explain, wiping chalk dust from her paws. "They help you carry heavy things or go on long trips. But guests don't get to put their feet up on all the furniture." She believed walking, biking, and playing were just as important. The street was a big room, and everyone deserved to share it.

So she drew. She made sidewalks wider, because wide sidewalks feel friendly. Narrow ones make you feel like you have to hug the wall while cars roar past. She drew bright, clear crossings so everyone knew where to walk. She made sure the bike lanes had a little curb, a protected space to keep riders safe. In neighborhoods, she drew wavy lines on the road. This made cars drive slower, so kids could chase a ball without causing a panic.

Lane learned about paths from her family. She grew up in a small village where her family had been path-keepers for generations. Their job was to keep the walking trails clear of stones and weeds. They made sure the paths felt welcoming. It was always about paths for paws and feet, not for carts and wagons. Even as a little kit, Lane understood. Paths worked best when they were designed for the creatures using them.

The day she turned twenty-two, Lane packed her chalk-spool and journeyed to CityForge. She walked right into the office of Plumb, the city's chief planner. Plumb was a tall, serious badger who rarely smiled. He peered at Lane over his spectacles.



"I'm told you know about streets," Plumb rumbled.

Lane nodded, her ears twitching.

"Then tell me," he said, leaning forward. "What is **walkability**?"

The word hung in the air. It sounded big and official. Lane didn't use big words. She just looked at the floor for a moment. She pictured a busy, happy street in her mind. Then she looked right at Plumb.



"It means streets are rooms," she said simply. "And cars are guests." She took a breath. "It means wide sidewalks and protected bike lanes. It means lots of safe crossings. It means cars drive slowly where people live and play. It means everyone gets to share the space."

A strange thing happened. The corner of Plumb's mouth twitched. It might have been a smile.

"You're hired," he said.

Lane just gave a small nod. "It's not complicated," she said. "It's just about making streets for everyone." And later, when she watched a little group of kids laughing over a hopscotch court she'd drawn that morning, her nose stopped twitching and her whole chest went warm and quiet. *That* feeling, she thought — that soft, happy hum — was the whole reason she carried her chalk.

Hub

*TRANSIT NODES + ACCESS — *many ways, equal ways; the bus matters as much as the train.**



Hub the pangolin was small and round, like a walking pinecone. But her armor plates weren't sharp at all. They were smooth and warm, like stones heated by the sun. She always wore a conductor's vest with shiny brass buttons. A tiny, folded map peeked out of the pocket. It was her most prized possession.

Her map wasn't just any map. It showed every single way to get around CityForge. There were train lines, bus routes, and even bike paths. They crisscrossed the page like a giant, complicated spiderweb. To Hub, this web was the most important thing in the world.

It was all about *access*. That was her favorite word.

Access meant helping a kid get to soccer practice. It meant an old badger could visit his grandkids. It meant everyone could get to their jobs, or the doctor, or the grocery store. It meant being able to live your life.

Some folks in CityForge only talked about shiny new trains. Or they talked about building bigger roads for cars. Hub would just shake her head. A fast train is great, but what if you can't get to the station? The real question was always *access*.



She'd unfold her map and point. "See?" she'd say to anyone who would listen. "The bus routes are the threads that hold this whole web together."

In most cities, buses carried way more people than trains. But you wouldn't know it from the way people talked. Buses got less money and less respect. That made Hub's plates bristle with frustration. It wasn't fair. It was something she called *transit inequity*.

The day Hub got her job, she had to explain all of this to Plumb. Plumb was the big boss of CityForge, a stern-looking owl with spectacles perched on her beak.

"So," Plumb hooted, her voice sharp. "You want to be our new Transit Conductor. Tell me about *transit equity*."

Hub stood tall, her little vest perfectly buttoned. She had been preparing for this question her whole life. "It means *access for all*," she said simply. "It means *many ways, equal ways*."

She pulled out her map and spread it on Plumb's giant desk. "Some people think transit is just about fancy trains," Hub began, her claw tapping the paper. "But that's not the whole story. Real *access* is about whether a person can get to the doctor on time."



"Go on," Plumb said, leaning forward.

"First, the bus matters as much as the train," Hub said firmly. "Buses go more places and carry more people. They can't be an afterthought."

"And what if the bus only comes once an hour?" Plumb challenged.

"That's my next point! *Frequency matters*," Hub said, her voice gaining confidence. "A bus every ten minutes means you can plan your day. A bus every hour means you're just stuck waiting."

"And if it's always late?"

"*Reliability matters!*" Hub nodded. "If you can't count on the bus, you might miss school. Or lose your job. Transit has to be on time."



She then pointed to a corner of the map. It was a neighborhood far from the city center. "And *coverage matters*. Buses have to go everywhere, not just to the wealthy neighborhoods. When they don't, that's *transit inequity*."

Hub took a deep breath. "It all connects. People need good sidewalks to get to the bus stop. That's why Lane's work on walkability is so important. And we need shops and houses near the stops, like Block is building. It all works together."

Plumb stared at the map for a long time. Then she looked at the small, determined pangolin. A slow smile spread across her beak. "You are appointed," she said.

Hub still thought about that day. Whenever a problem seemed too big, she would take out her map. She'd trace the bus routes with her claw. It wasn't about fancy technology or big arguments. It was simple.

"Just *access for all*," she would whisper to herself. "And the bus matters just as much as the train." And tracing that quiet web of routes, her plates would settle and her chest would go warm and easy — the calm, glad feeling of knowing that somewhere out there, a kid was making it to soccer practice on time.

A Bit More About Hub



Hub is a pangolin, a cool animal covered in scales that look like armor. But Hub's scales are smooth and soft, not sharp. She's calm and kind. When she looks at you, you know she's really listening.

The most important thing to know about Hub is that she believes every way of getting around is important. She would never say a train is "better" than a bus. Or that a bike is "better" than walking. To her, they are all equal paths that help people live their lives.

Things you'll often hear Hub say:

- *"Many ways, equal ways."*
- *"The bus matters as much as the train."*
- *"Transit is about ACCESS."*

Hub's Journey

You meet Hub for the first time in this story. After this, she'll pop up in many other CityForge adventures to help connect the dots!

Hub's Friends

Hub works closely with almost everyone in CityForge. Her best partners are:

- **Lane**, who makes sure the city has great sidewalks. After all, you need a good path to walk to the bus stop!
- **Block**, who builds apartments and shops close to transit stations. This makes it easy for people to get what they need without a long trip.

About Spark & Anvil

Spark & Anvil is a 501(c)(3) public charity. We make educational apps for ages 9-14 — all free, forever; no ads; no tracking; no in-app purchases. CityForge is one of 140+ apps in the portfolio.

More chapter books from Spark & Anvil

Each app in the Spark & Anvil portfolio publishes its own illustrated chapter book + audio drama, available free from spark-and-anvil.com/books. Highlights include:

- **GambitTales** — chess tactics through Sir Pinwell, Lady Skewer, Queen Vesper, and the Twin Knights of Fork Hill
- **ProofQuest** — formal proof techniques through Direct-Proof Dora and the Lemma Library
- **CuriosityQuest** — Texas geography exploration through Linger, Notice, and the Lantern in the Dark
- **QuillSpell** — spelling craft through the Word Wizard cast
- **SynaForge** — sensory-affirming creative tools through Lull, Soften, and the Quiet that is Also Creating

Methodology

Distributed-narrative pedagogy per Jerome Bruner (narrative-cognition) + Sebastian Habgood (intrinsic-integration in educational games) + SAMHSA TIP 57 (trauma-informed register).

Trauma-informed-design framework per Eggleston et al. (2025) and Stoltenburg et al. (2024).

License

© 2026 Spark & Anvil (501(c)(3) public charity). Chapter text and illustrations licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. App software © Spark & Anvil — all rights reserved. Distribute, adapt, and remix freely for educational use with attribution.

Cover art, chapter illustrations, and chapter text are reviewed for age-appropriate, trauma-aware content before publication. Audio drama transcripts available at spark-and-anvil.com/cast.