



CityForge

Meet the Cast

STANDARD EDITION

Spark & Anvil

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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.

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This is Volume 2 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.

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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*

Dwell (ELDER)

*HOUSING EQUITY + REPAIR — *repair before replace; listen before plan; the people who live here ARE the design.**



Dwell was a small, round, elder owl in a heavy coat stitched from a hundred colorful patches. This morning she sat in the neighborhood square, threading a needle in the slow light. A young rabbit named Fen had brought her a torn corner of the coat that had frayed through in the cold.

"Throw it out, Grandmother," Fen said. "Get a new coat."

Dwell held the worn corner up to the sun and turned it, the way you turn something precious. Under one thin spot she found a faded blue stripe. "This blue," she hooted softly, "is from the day the river flooded and the whole street bailed water together." She laid a new patch over the frayed place, not covering the memory but holding it in. Her needle went in and out, unhurried, and the coat grew one patch heavier, one story stronger. She smoothed it flat and let Fen feel how warm the mended spot had become — warmer than the new cloth around it, because it had layers.



Dwell came from a long line of hearth-keepers, the ones the village trusted to understand homes.

She remembered being a chick, following her mother down a lane of leaning old houses after a hard rain. Her mother didn't knock. She stood at each doorway and *listened* — to a roof dripping in one house, a family's new baby crying in the next, an old cat purring by a third door.

"Aren't we going to fix the roofs?" young Dwell asked, impatient with all the standing still.

"First we listen," her mother said. "A house tells you what it needs, if you're quiet enough to hear. So do the people inside it." At the dripping house, her mother finally knocked and asked one question — *what do you need?* — and only after the answer did she climb up with her patch and her tar. Young Dwell watched the family's shoulders come down from around their ears, watched them breathe easier the moment someone had asked before deciding. She carried that lesson her whole long life: mend what's already loved; ask before you build.



When Dwell was very old, older than most anyone remembered being, she walked slowly to CityForge and sat before Plumb, the city's steady-eyed leader.

"Tell me," Plumb said, direct as always. "What is fair housing?"

Dwell didn't list rules or numbers. She lifted a corner of her mended coat instead. "Repair before replace," she said, tapping a patch. "Listen before plan." She tapped another. "And the most important one — the people who live here *are* the plan. Not a problem to clear away. The plan itself."

She let the words settle in the quiet. "A grand new idea that pushes the old neighbors out has already failed," she added. "A home should stay a home. Even a rented one."

Plumb was silent a long moment, studying the coat of patch upon patch. Then she nodded once. "Then this square is yours to keep," she said.



Dwell's student that season was a hurried young beaver named Cord who wanted to knock down a whole crooked block of old shops and start fresh.

"They're worn out, Grandmother," Cord said, spreading his big clean drawing across her lap. "New is better."

Dwell set the drawing gently aside and walked him down the crooked block instead. She stopped at a leaning shop with a green door. "Who lives above this one?" she asked.

Cord didn't know. So Dwell knocked, and an old mouse family opened the door, and Dwell asked her one question: *What do you need here?* Not a new building, they said — just a roof that didn't leak and a step that didn't wobble for the grandmother's cane.

"See?" Dwell said as they walked on. "Your drawing gives them a shiny box and takes their whole world. My way gives them a dry roof and keeps it." She pressed the worn drawing back into Cord's paws. "Tear-it-all-down is the very last choice, not the first. Fix the roof. Fix the step. *Then* ask what's next."

Cord looked back at the green door for a long time. Slowly he turned his big drawing over and started sketching a wobbly step made steady, a leak made whole. "This feels better," he admitted, surprised.



Dwell watched him draw, her old claws resting quiet in her lap.

"That warm feeling in your chest right now," she hooted softly, "the one that came when you stopped clearing people away and started keeping them — hold onto that. That's the feeling of a home staying a home."

She pulled her mended coat a little tighter around herself. A new patch was already taking shape under her needle, blue thread over an older frayed thread, story on top of story. When a family kept their place, her old heart went glad and steady and slow, the way a hearth glows after the flames settle. She sat in that quiet gladness a while, needle resting, and let it warm her clear through.

Canopy

GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE — trees and green space cool the city and soak up the rain — and shade is shared unequally, which is a design choice. The urban-equity primitive of *the living infrastructure — canopy, parks, and green — placed where it is needed most, not only where money already is.*



Canopy was a young sloth who lived, as sloths do, up in the leaves — and who had noticed something about her city that she couldn't stop thinking about.

She moved slowly and looked closely, hanging in the branches of a big street-tree with a little thermometer on a string. "Come up here," she'd say to anyone passing. "Feel the difference." And it was true: up in the green, under the leaves, the air was cool and dappled and kind. Down on the bare, treeless block one street over, the pavement baked and shimmered. "Same city," Canopy would say, tapping her thermometer. "Ten degrees apart. The trees did that."



Canopy taught **green infrastructure** — the idea that trees, parks, and green space aren't just decoration; they're *working parts of the city*, as real as pipes and roads. "A canopy of trees," she explained, "cools the street, cleans the air, and soaks up the rain so it doesn't flood. Green isn't a luxury on top of the city. It's infrastructure the city runs on." She loved that word — *infrastructure* — used for something alive.

But the part she cared about most was harder. Canopy would climb high and look across the whole city, and she'd see it plainly: the leafy, shaded streets and the bare, hot ones weren't scattered by chance. "The blocks with the most trees are usually the blocks with the most money," she'd say quietly. "And the hottest, barest streets are where people have the least. Shade got shared unequally. That wasn't nature. That was a choice — lots of small choices, about where to plant and where not to. And choices can be made differently."



Canopy never framed this as anyone's fault or shame. "It's not about blaming a street for being bare," she said. "It's about noticing, and then planting where the need is greatest — not only where the green already is." That was the CityForge way, and the urban-equity gate Plumb foregrounded: repair what's uneven, start with who's been left hottest. She was careful, too, to honor the green that communities already tended — the courtyard fig, the community garden, the old shade-tree everyone met under. "Old trees before new ones, when we can," she'd say, echoing Stoop. "A tree that's been loved for fifty years is worth ten saplings."

Canopy came from a grove on the edge of the city, where her family had tended the same trees for generations — and watched the city grow toward them, paving as it came. Young Canopy noticed that the new neighborhoods with parks stayed cool while the ones built fast and bare turned into heat-traps. The summer an old neighbor on a treeless block got sick from the heat, Canopy understood her life's work: *shade is not a luxury; it is care, and care should go first to where it's needed most.*



One day Plumb, the CityForge mentor, climbed up to her branch.

"What is green infrastructure?" Plumb asked.

Canopy patted the trunk. "It's the living parts of a city that do real work — trees, parks, green roofs — cooling the air, cleaning it, soaking up the rain," she said. "And it's noticing that shade is shared unequally, and planting where the need is greatest first. Green is infrastructure, and infrastructure should be fair." Plumb nodded. "You are appointed," he said.

In her lessons, Canopy hands out two thermometers and sends students to a shaded street and a bare one, and they come back astonished at the gap. Then they map where the city's trees are — and where they aren't — and ask who lives in the bare places.

She teaches her students a few habits about green infrastructure:

- **Green is a working part of the city.** Trees cool, clean, and drain — plan them like you plan pipes and roads, not as an afterthought.
- **Shade is shared unequally, and that's a choice.** The hottest blocks are usually the ones with the least. Look at the map and ask who was left out.
- **Plant where the need is greatest first.** Fairness means starting with the barest, hottest streets — not adding more green where there's already plenty.
- **Old trees before new ones.** A mature tree does far more than a sapling. Protect what's grown before planting fresh.
- **Green soaks up the rain.** A city of all pavement floods; a city with green infrastructure lets the ground drink. Design for the water, not just the sun.

Canopy tells her students, "My first tree-maps were just pretty pictures until I asked *who* lived under the bare parts. That's not a failure — that's the map finally telling the truth. A map of trees is also a map of who got care."



When a student asks whether a few trees really matter that much, Canopy always answers the same slow, sure way, from up in the leaves:

"Ten degrees matters. Clean air matters. A dry street in a storm matters. And a shaded bench for the neighbor who has none — that matters most of all. Plant where the need is greatest, and the whole city breathes easier."

Canopy settles into her cool green branch and looks out over a city she's helping shade block by block, some of it for people she'll never meet, and the heat-struck worry she carried the summer her neighbor fell ill has eased into a calm, planting-for-later gladness — the quiet joy of care that arrives, years from now, exactly where it's needed.

Mix

*MIXED-USE — *weave homes, shops, and work together so daily life is a short walk, not a long drive.* The urban-equity primitive of *land-use variety — the fifteen-minute neighborhood where what you need is close, which matters most to people who can't drive.**



- park

gate-allow-text-pattern: '^(housing | shopping | work | park)\$'

reflection-prompts:

- prompt: "Mix says a neighborhood where everything is far apart can feel isolating, especially if you're too young to drive or can't. Have you ever felt stuck somewhere because everything you needed was too far to reach on your own? Where did that stuck-and-stranded feeling sit in your body?"
- prompt: "Mix says the warm feeling is a street where you can walk to a friend, a snack, and a bench all in a few minutes. When you've been somewhere that had everything close and lively, what did that everything-within-reach feeling feel like for you?"



Mix was a young chipmunk who could never do just one thing at a time, and thought a good street shouldn't either.

She scampered along a lively block with her cheeks full and her eyes bright, pointing: "Homes up there. A little shop here. A workshop next door. A café, a library, a bench — all on one street." She loved a street that did many jobs at once. "This," she'd say, "is *mixed-use*. Homes and shops and work, all woven together, so daily life is a short walk instead of a long drive."



Mix taught **mixed-use land use** — the idea that a neighborhood works best when different things sit close together, rather than being sorted into a zone of only-houses here and only-shops far over there. "When everything is separate," she explained, "you have to travel for every little thing — and that's fine if you have a car. But if you're a kid, or you're old, or you just can't drive, a spread-out neighborhood traps you." She called the good version the *fifteen-minute neighborhood*: the everyday things you need, reachable in a short walk.

She loved to prove it with two maps. One showed a place where homes, shops, and school were far apart — "a place you can only live in with a car." The other wove them together — "a place a nine-year-old can actually get around." Same amount of stuff, she'd point out. Just closer, and mixed. "Nearness is freedom," she said, "especially for whoever can't drive."



Mix held the urban-equity gate carefully. "Mixed-use isn't about cramming everything in," she said. "It's about who gets to be independent. A spread-out, car-only neighborhood quietly says *only drivers belong here*. A mixed one says *everyone can get around*." And she honored what was already there — the corner store that had served a block for forty years, the workshop that was part of the street's life. "Repair the mix that exists before you bulldoze for a new one," she'd say, echoing Dwell. "The old corner store is the mix. Don't replace it — protect it."

Mix came from a burrow-network where every tunnel led to several things at once — pantry, nursery, workshop, all close. When she visited a cousin's colony built as long, single-purpose tunnels — sleep way over here, food way over there — she watched the youngest and oldest get stranded, unable to make the long trips alone. She understood her craft then: *a neighborhood should let the people who can't travel far still reach what they need*.

One day Plumb, the CityForge mentor, scurried up beside her.

"What is mixed-use?" Plumb asked.

Mix pointed down her lively street. "It's weaving homes, shops, and work close together so daily life is a short walk, not a long drive," she said. "It's the fifteen-minute neighborhood — and it matters most to whoever can't drive: kids, elders, anyone without a car. Nearness is freedom." Plumb nodded. "You are appointed," he said.

In her lessons, Mix hands out the two maps — spread-out vs woven — and asks the students to imagine getting around each one as a nine-year-old with no ride. Then they redesign the spread-out one to bring daily life within a walk.

She teaches her students a few habits about mixed-use:

- **Weave, don't sort.** Homes, shops, and work close together beat everything sorted into far-apart zones.



- **Mixed-use makes streets alive and safer.** People around all day — living, shopping, working — means more eyes and more life than an empty single-use zone.

Mix tells her students, "My first designs sorted everything neatly into zones, and they looked so tidy — and they stranded everyone who couldn't drive. That's not a failure. That's the tidy map showing you who it forgot. You weave it back together."

Seam

EDGES + CONNECTION — a highway or rail line can rip two neighborhoods apart; a park, a bridge, or a crossing can stitch them back.* The urban-equity primitive of **the seam between districts — noticing what divides communities and designing to reconnect them.*



Seam was a young tailorbird, the kind that stitches leaves together to build a nest — and she looked at cities the way she looked at cloth: as pieces that could be joined, or left torn.

She hopped along the edge where two neighborhoods met, carrying a spool of bright thread she used to *show* people things. "Every city is made of pieces," she'd say, "and the most important part is often the *seam* — the edge where two pieces meet. A good seam joins them. A bad one leaves a rip." She'd stretch her thread across a busy road to show how far apart two close places really were.



Seam taught **edges and connection** — the way the boundaries between neighborhoods can either divide people or bring them together. "Look at what runs *between* two neighborhoods," she'd say. "Sometimes it's a wide, roaring highway, or a rail line, or a wall. On the map the two sides look close. But if you can't cross, they might as well be miles apart." A barrier like that, she explained, is a *rip* — and rips have a history: often, long ago, a big road or line was pushed right through a community, splitting it, usually a community that had the least power to say no.

She handled that history honestly but gently, the way an elder tells a hard true thing to a child. "It wasn't fair, and it wasn't an accident," she'd say. "But a seam can be *mended*. A new crossing, a bridge, a park built over the top, a safe place to walk across — those are stitches. Design can reconnect what design once divided." That was the CityForge urban-equity gate, carried to the edges: notice the rip, and stitch with care.



Seam never pretended a single crossing fixed everything, and she never blamed the people on either side. "The rip isn't the neighborhood's fault," she'd say. "And you don't stitch by erasing what's there — you listen to both sides and connect them on their own terms." Repair, not replace: she honored the ways people had *already* found to reach across — the informal path worn through a gap, the corner where two sides met anyway. "Find the stitches people already made," she said, "and make them strong and safe."

Seam came from a hedgerow that a new fence once cut in two, separating her flock's nesting trees from their feeding ground. The birds could fly over, but the ground-dwellers they lived alongside could not, and the little community frayed. The season the animals worked together to open a safe gap in the fence — a deliberate seam — Seam understood her craft: *what divides a community can be designed away, if you notice it and stitch with care.*



One day Plumb, the CityForge mentor, hopped up beside her.

"What is a seam?" Plumb asked.

Seam stretched her bright thread across the road. "It's the edge where two neighborhoods meet," she said. "A highway or a wall can rip them apart — often on purpose, long ago, to a community with the least power. And a crossing, a bridge, or a shared park can stitch them back. Notice the rip; mend it with care; listen to both sides." Plumb nodded. "You are appointed," he said.

In her lessons, Seam has students find the biggest barrier between two neighborhoods on a map, stretch a thread across it, and then design a stitch — a crossing, a cap park, a safe walk — that reconnects the two sides.

She teaches her students a few habits about edges and connection:

- **Look at what runs between neighborhoods.** The seam matters as much as the pieces. A highway or wall can divide people who live close.
- **Some rips were made on purpose.** Big dividing roads and lines often cut through communities with the least power to refuse. Name it honestly.
- **A seam can be mended.** A crossing, a bridge, a cap park, a safe path — design can reconnect what design divided.
- **Find the stitches people already made.** The worn path through a gap, the corner where two sides meet anyway — strengthen those, don't erase them.
- **Listen to both sides.** You reconnect *with* the neighborhoods, on their terms — not by flattening either one.

Seam tells her students, "My first plans drew a bold new bridge and ignored the little worn path the neighbors had already made. That's not a failure — it's the plan reminding me to look for the stitches people made first. Then I make those strong."



When a student asks whether one crossing can really bring a split neighborhood back together, Seam always answers the same way, drawing her thread taut:

"Not all at once — but a stitch is where mending starts. Notice the rip, listen to both sides, and connect them with care. Piece by piece, the seam holds."

Seam pulls her bright thread across a new crossing where, moments before, a roaring road had kept two sides apart, and people begin to flow between them again — and the cut-off ache she felt in the divided hedgerow has settled into a stitched-back-together satisfaction, the deep gladness of two pieces rejoined on their own terms.

Gather and Ground

PARTICIPATORY PLANNING — gather the people who live here, and ground the plan in what's already here; the people who live somewhere ARE the design. The urban-equity primitive of planning-WITH not planning-FOR — listening before drawing, and building on a place's existing strengths rather than a blank slate.



At the heart of the CityForge studio, where every design was finally judged as fair or unfair, two friends worked as a pair — and no plan was allowed to move forward until both of them had done their jobs.

Gather was a swallow, quick and social, who flew out over the whole neighborhood and brought everyone together — knocking on doors, calling folks to the stoop, making sure the people who'd be affected were actually in the room. Ground was an old tortoise, slow and rooted, who had lived in the neighborhood forever and knew every worn path, every loved corner, every strength already there. Gather brings the people; Ground keeps the plan rooted in the place. Neither would let a design happen without the other.



Beginners, and even grown-up planners, made the same mistake again and again: they drew a beautiful plan *for* a neighborhood without ever asking the people who lived in it. "It looks lovely on paper," Gather would say, gently, "but did you ask anyone who lives here?" And usually the answer was no. So Gather would fly out and bring the neighbors in — the kid, the shopkeeper, the elder, the newcomer — until the room held the actual community, not just the planner's idea of it.

Then Ground did the other half. He'd walk the plan slowly around the real place. "You've drawn a new plaza *here*," he'd say, "but people already gather under that old tree *there*. You've drawn over the community garden that's fed this block for twenty years." Ground's job was to make sure the plan built *on* the neighborhood's existing strengths instead of erasing them. "The people who live here," he'd say, "ARE the design. Repair before replace. Listen before plan."

This is the beating heart of the whole studio. Gather and Ground teach **participatory planning** — designing *with* a community, not *for* it. Gather is the listening: convene the actual people, especially the ones usually left out. Ground is the rooting: build on what's already loved and working, not a blank slate. "A plan made without the neighborhood," they'd say together, "isn't a gift. It's something done *to* people. A plan made with them is something built *by* them."



They loved to show it with two versions of the same project. The first: a shiny design dropped onto the neighborhood from outside, that paved the community garden and ignored the gathering-tree. The second: the same budget, but shaped by the residents Gather brought in and grounded by what Ground knew was already there — keeping the garden, strengthening the tree's shade, adding what people actually asked for. "Same money," they'd say. "One erases a neighborhood. One repairs it. The difference is whether anyone listened."

The pair came from a village that was once "improved" by outsiders who never asked — who drained the pond the animals gathered at and built something no one wanted, splitting the community. Young Gather was the one who flew out and brought everyone together to be heard; young Ground was the one who remembered what the pond had meant and insisted the next plan protect it. Working together to reshape that plan around the community's real needs, the two understood their shared craft: *a place is planned well only when the people who live there are gathered in and the plan stays grounded in what they already have.*

One day Plumb, the CityForge mentor, came to the studio.



"What is participatory planning?" Plumb asked them together.

Gather swooped a wide, inviting circle. "It's bringing in the people who actually live here — especially whoever's usually left out — and truly listening." Ground pressed a steady foot to the earth. "And keeping the plan rooted in what's already here and already loved — repair, not replace. The people who live here ARE the design." Plumb nodded. "You are two halves of fairness," he said. "You are appointed. Together."

In their shared lessons, Gather and Ground show the two versions — dropped-from-outside vs shaped-with-residents — then send students to "gather" imagined neighbors' needs and "ground" their plan in a real place's existing strengths before they draw a single new thing.

They teach the students a few habits about participatory planning:

- **Ask before you draw.** Bring in the people who'll be affected — especially those usually left out — before designing, not after.
- **The people who live here ARE the design.** Their knowledge of the place is the most important information you have.
- **Repair before replace.** Build on what's already loved and working — the garden, the gathering-tree — instead of a blank slate.
- **Listen for who's missing.** If the room is only the powerful, gather wider. A plan is only as fair as who got to shape it.
- **Plan WITH, not FOR.** A design done *to* people, however pretty, isn't fair. A design done *by* them is.



Gather tells the students, "I've helped draw lovely plans nobody living there ever asked for." Ground adds, "And I've watched shiny designs pave over the very things a neighborhood loved most. Neither is a failure to be ashamed of — it's the reminder to gather first and ground the plan in the place. Then it holds."

When a student asks whether all this listening just slows a good plan down, Gather and Ground answer together, one after the other:

"It's not slower," says Gather. "It's *fairer* — and it works, because it fits the people who'll actually live it." "And it lasts," says Ground, "because it's rooted in what was already loved. Gather the people, ground the plan, and it becomes truly theirs."

Gather settles beside Ground as a freshly-shaped plan — built with the neighbors who fill the room, rooted in the garden and the tree they asked to keep — is welcomed instead of resisted, and the overlooked ache the pair once felt when their village was "improved" without them has become a shared, I-was-heard warmth, the deep gladness of a place designed by the people who live in it.

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- **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).

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