

UPDATE FROM PICTUREVILLE: 2006

(Idea for the Introduction of the Second Edition for 2008)

Update From Pictureville: 2006

About the time I wrote the introduction to the first edition of this book, there was a dynamic, and metaphorical, image-making community I called Pictureville. Pictureville consisted of several quite compatible neighborhoods, each with a different approach to decoration, structure, content, and expression, but universally committed to similar ways of seeing and being. They were, in ways that their aesthetic and political leaders would never comprehend, bipartisan and appreciative of the differences between them. They were, in a charming way, compatible.

One of the neighborhoods in Pictureville was committed to tradition and was quite pragmatic when it came to syntax. Sure, there was a lot of political yammering about content and context but in the end, the intentions were copacetic ... that is until the emperor's new photographers moved in and began talking about pictures that no one else could see.

This traditionalist neighborhood was split into two parts, based upon stylistic beliefs, and was referred to as Upper and Lower Normal. All of the dwellings had white walls... but you always knew which neighborhood you were in by whether there were mirrors, or windows, in the window frames. Both Upper and Lower Normal were constantly damp and smelled like used Rapid Fixer... reminding me of the stench coming from the sidewalk vents in front of the Ferranti-Dege camera store in Harvard Square. I had grown up in this neighborhood, loved it dearly, and the smell, although

unpleasant, was comforting and re-assuring. People in this community wore analog watches with hands on them.

Pictureville also had a modern digital neighborhood... that seemed to have materialized out of thin air. One day the birds were singing and the wind was making those romantic wind noises in the trees... the next it was all paved, cabled, and wired. There had been rumors that a development like this was coming but no one had expected it to develop as quickly as it had. This new part of town was called "The Future" by those who had just moved in.

In The Future, all of the dwellings were in perpetual states of renovation... even those that had just been built. Apple wood and adobe were the accepted building materials and the neighborhood was always crowded with visiting, and very young, specialists brought in to assist in the repairs, upgrades, and reconstruction projects. You had no choice really... upgrades were required if you wanted to live in The Future. People in this community had watches with digits that blinked. This fact led one of the residents from Upper Normal, on Bath Road I believe, to rhetorically ask how the children in this neighborhood would ever learn the meaning of clockwise and counter clockwise.

The oldest section in Pictureville was Alternative Town. This section was populated by a snappy, but friendly, group of "old salts." The structures in this part of Pictureville were made of paper, tin, egg whites, iron, silver, and in the most elegant part of town, noble metals such as gold, platinum, and palladium. Oddly, most of the dwellings featured dark outlined edges

that appeared to be un-concerned with staying in the lines of the house construction.

The inhabitants of this neighborhood enjoyed the eclectic nature of nature... and seemed most comfortable mixing, and appropriating, the visual elements of both their neighbors, and the other neighborhoods of Pictureville. The people in this community didn't wear watches... but some had sundials on the front lawn.

It seemed that it happened without warning. The residents of the Upper and Lower Normal neighborhoods began to have trouble finding building materials to fix their homes. This, because more and more of the traditionalist building suppliers had stopped producing those materials in favor of those better suited to the The Future... the modern, digitally dedicated, neighborhood.

At the same time, the traditionalists were rapidly being seduced by the piped in siren songs of the Naiads, the digital daughters of Achelous whose singing had lured many an "old salt" onto the proverbial rocks. Their tunes were seductive and it wasn't long before the traditionalists were convinced that the loss of their old materials wasn't that tragic. Who, they asked, wouldn't jump at the chance to trade in their stinky labs for the antiseptic cleanliness of the desktop... and the pure dependable beauty of binary code strings over delicate negative films.

And here we are. Pictureville is different now. The smelly neighborhood that I grew up in is shrinking rapidly and getting quainter by

the minute. The digital neighborhood is looking a lot like Las Vegas... or L.A. ... or Mexico City... and the like, when ones flies over them at night searching for a place to land. You know what I mean... like the neighborhood is so big now that you'll never be able to find its true center.

Oddly enough, Alternative Town is also growing. Once it was clear that only two neighborhoods might survive in Pictureville, many of the inhabitants from the Upper and Lower Normal communities began to move in. They began making their own materials, and adapting their unique traditions, in a very anti-iconoclastic way, to the cherished parts of Alternative Town... and appropriating the useful elements they had found in The Future. For many, the health and well being of Alternative Town was nothing less than a battle for the very soul of Pictureville. I hear bagpipes.

In reality... it's not as dire as this allegory. True, all of the cherished family albums recently burned on CD's are doomed. All it will take is a one decent solar storm, like the one that occurred in 1859, and 17 hours and 40 minutes later it's likely that every hard drive on the receiving end of that solar flare would instantly become a good door-stop. As I tell my students, if you have an image that means a lot to your family it would be an excellent idea to make a version of it using an alternative process with a noble metal.

Another thing I tell my students is that the future of photography lies in its past.

© Christopher James, 2006