Alison and Peter Smithson, Upper Lawn Pavilion, Fonthill, Wiltshire, UK, 1959–
View through the patio window to the Fonthill woods to the north, 1995, taken after the Smithsons left Fonthill. The Smithsons’ placemaking skills are evident in the domestic tranquility that their architecture here evokes.
If the museum was the architectural leitmotif of the turn of the millennium, it has been eclipsed in the noughties by landscape architecture. As guest-editor Michael Spens so aptly brings to our attention in the introduction to this issue, it is the planet’s ecological plight and the confinement of people to an ever shrinking natural world that has jettisoned landscape architecture – within a matter of a decade – from a discipline responsible for creating elitist ‘Arcadias’ to that of much sought-after human ‘sanctuaries’. Whether situated on urban, suburban or greenfield sites, these sanctuaries are very much for public consumption (or at least semi-public when attached to an institution or corporation). Certainly they are not like the landscaped estates of the 18th century, land that was partitioned off for the appreciation of all but the smallest ruling elite. Whether the schemes featured here are situated in Beirut, Singapore, New York, Toronto or Birmingham, they engender a sense of place that is precious in its provision of outdoor space for increasingly displaced urban populations, but also enriching in terms of a city’s political and socioeconomic kudos. The design for Toronto’s waterfront, for instance, led by Adriaan Geuze and West 8, is to reclaim a continuous promenade at the edge of Lake Ontario for which three levels of government have pledged $20.1 million for the first phase of construction. This is the tail end of the state-sponsored ‘Superbuild’ programme that has commissioned a college of art from Will Alsop, a substantial reworking of the Art Gallery of Toronto by Frank Gehry, and a makeover of the Royal Ontario Museum by Daniel Libeskind.

It is all too easy to regard landscape architecture as an entirely new episode – severed from any previous tectonic or artistic roots. In his introduction, Spens poignantly corrects this notion by tracing the lineage of landscape architecture’s expanded field from the Land Art of the 1970s, which effectively dispelled architecture’s obsession with buildings as objects. An understanding of the potential of the landscape art of the picturesque for architecture was, though, latent even in the postwar period. As Jonathan Hill has pointed out, Alison and Peter Smithson were influenced by Nikolaus Pevsner’s promotion of the picturesque. For them, the picturesque placed the emphasis on the observer giving meaning. It was about perception and the genius of place making. This is most evident at Fonthill in Wiltshire where the Smithsons bought a cottage in the estate of the ruined folly. The new house they built there was in no way intended to be authentic; one window was displaced to create the garden wall. Life there, though, was described by Alison Smithson as ‘Jeromian’, evoking with its serenity and air of studious calm Antonello da Messina’s St Jerome in His Study (National Gallery, c 1475). It was this triumph of atmosphere over form that was prophetic for 21st-century landscape.

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Note
1. I am indebted to Jonathan Hill for his observations in his paper ‘Ambiguous Objects: Modernism, Brutalism and the Politics of the Picturesque’, presented at the 3rd annual Architectural Humanities Research Association International Conference, St Catherine’s College, Oxford, 17–18 November 2006, and also for his help sourcing this fascinating photograph from Georg Aerni.