Louis Kahn’s Situated Platonism

STEVEN FLEMING
The University of Newcastle

Sarah Williams Goldhagen dismisses as a myth the view that Kahn was “[a] latter-day neo-Platonist… [who] believed it was the architect’s job to ‘discover’ ideal forms and then re-embody these archetypes in a new architectural language.” Goldhagen makes a valuable contribution to Kahn scholarship, but she trivialises Kahn’s approach to form generation, which bares less resemblance to the preoccupations of the Neoplatonists than it does to Plato’s theory of Forms.

The paper examines claims by various scholars including Jencks, Norberg-Schulz, Burton, Scully, Brownlee, De Long, Auer, Gast, and Danto that Plato’s philosophy may be a source of Kahn’s theory. The paper attempts to explain why Kahn does not acknowledge Plato’s influence, by demonstrating, through archival evidence and interviews, that Kahn obscures the influence of numerous other figures and tries instead to present an ex nihilo design philosophy. Yet, despite this tendency, Kahn does, on one occasion in March 1960, state that an architect must “start right at the beginning, as though he were Socrates,” when contemplating ideal “forms.” This solitary reference by Kahn to Plato’s mentor has been discovered by the present author in The Kahn Collection in Philadelphia. It suggests that Platonism is indeed a source of Kahn’s “form and design” theory. It is true that Kahn was a “this worldly” practitioner of architecture, but the alchemic aspects of his metaphysics, for which he is remembered, remain a legitimate subject for continuing scholarship.
Introduction

In the introduction to her book *Louis Kahn’s Situated Modernism*, Sarah Williams Goldhagen dismisses the view that Kahn was “[a] latter-day neo-Platonist… [who] believed it was the architect’s job to ‘discover’ ideal forms and then re-embry these archetypes in a new architectural language.”1 Anyone who has studied the correspondence held in the Kahn Collection, as Goldhagen has at length, would be forced to agree with the overall tone of her analysis. Kahn’s correspondence tells of a person who was deeply involved in the day-to-day business of designing buildings, teaching and interacting with people. As Goldhagen rightly states, “Kahn laid this imaginative, otherworldly language on top of a ‘this-worldly’ architectural vocabulary that had decidedly non-transcendental origins and intentions.”2 However, can it really be denied that Kahn saw it as his job to discover ideal “forms,” when his “form and design” theory states precisely this?

Kahn’s significance to the history of twentieth-century architecture is firmly connected to the philosophical nature of his design theory. Accounts of his career in architectural encyclopaedias leave no doubt that he is remembered primarily for his philosophical and spiritual nature. He is typically described as a spiritual, mystical and religious figure in a period otherwise characterised by sterile determinism.

*The MacMillan Encyclopaedia of Architects* credits Kahn with the reintroduction of “inspirational and spiritual values to an art which had become stereotyped into anonymity and abstractions.”3 In *Contemporary Architects* Robert Maxwell also emphasises the spiritual quality of Kahn’s work, claiming that “[i]f the opportunity had been offered, Kahn would have been equal to the task of designing a cathedral for the modern age.”4 Stressing the metaphysical and religious nature of his theory, *The Thames and Hudson Encyclopaedia of Modern Architecture* writes that;

... [s]upported by a sometimes decidedly cryptic and metaphysically imbued architectural philosophy [...] [Kahn’s] projects have influenced the architects of the succeeding generation in a most decisive manner. His exacting search for architectural form was for him, in the first place, a spiritual, indeed mythical, act; it is no coincidence that his most successful buildings are those of a religious or symbolic nature.5

The eminent architectural historian Kenneth Frampton also comments on the mystical dimension to Kahn’s work. Frampton describes the entrance to Kahn’s Kimbell Art Museum — over gravel, beside fountains and beneath trees — as a “meeting between the essence of things and the existence of beings.”6 In quasi-Platonic strains, Frampton writes that the approach to the Kimbell returns those who walk it “to that pre-Socratic moment, lying outside time, that is at once both modern and antique.”7
Consideration of Kahn’s theoretical pronouncements leaves little doubt that he intends his work to be viewed in a spiritual or mystical light, that is, as an endeavour with a transcendent dimension. In the 1961 article entitled “Form and Design,” Kahn lays the foundations for what will become an increasingly mystical philosophy of architecture, involving insights of a superphysical nature.

When personal feeling transcends into Religion (not a religion but the essence of religion) and Thought leads to Philosophy, the mind opens to realizations. Realization of what may be the existence will of, let us say, particular architectural spaces. Realization is the merging of Thought and Feeling at the closest rapport of the mind with the Psyche, the source of what a thing wants to be.8

Kahn’s theory has a religious, philosophical and mystical basis and provokes questions of a metaphysical and theological nature. This dimension to his theory may be laid over a ‘this-worldly’ approach to design, and it may have been embellished in various articles which have been written about Kahn, but it does exist.

Form and Design

In the study of Kahn’s theory, much scholarly attention is focused on the article from which the above quotation is taken, entitled “Form and Design.” The central thesis of this text is that particular buildings of the same type share an archetypal essence, or “form,” which is seen in its designer’s mind’s-eye, or “psyche,” as a vague idea. Such ideas can be represented by an esquisse-like diagram, indicating no more than essential elements and their fundamental relationships. Any particular manifestation of a “form” is subject to circumstances and this is a matter of “design.” Vincent Scully describes this later production phase of Kahn’s as one in which “the architect bombards the chosen [realised/deduced/discovered] Form with the particulars of the program until it deforms in response to them.”9 Whereas other design approaches might strive towards the elimination of contingencies and imperfections to reveal an object’s essence,10 the “design” phase of Kahn’s theory claims to invite contingencies, even an Architect’s personal tastes, so long as they are applied to an underlying “form” which transcends the building’s temporal existence. According to Kahn’s favourite illustration of his thesis,

... in the differentiation of a spoon from spoon, spoon characterizes a form having two inseparable parts, the handle and the bowl. A spoon implies a specific design made of silver or wood, big or little, shallow or deep. Form is “what.” Design is “how.”11
Kahn’s First Unitarian Church and School in Rochester represents the clearest application of his “form and design” theory to a building. Kahn describes his preliminary pictograph for this building as a “form diagram” (Charles Jencks refers to it as a “pre-form”), representing the transcendent “form-essence” on which all Unitarian church/school projects should be modelled. Although it is undated, Kahn’s earliest documentation of this thesis is most likely a hand written draft within his personal notebook. The first recorded public expression of this precise thesis is contained within a public address delivered at the Cooper Union entitled “The Scope of Architecture” on 20 January 1960. Kahn’s preoccupation with the thesis dominated his theorising throughout 1960, leading to a Voice of America broadcast on 21 November 1960, the revised transcript of which would be published in April 1961 as “Form and Design” in Architectural Design and reprinted in the 1962 book entitled Louis I. Kahn by Vincent Scully. According to Tim Vreeland from Kahn’s office, the article embodies Kahn’s thinking better than any previous text, and Kahn would not produce such a painstakingly considered text at any later time. David De Long claims that those inquiring about Kahn’s theory would be routinely sent a copy of this text. For these reasons, “Form and Design” can be thought of as Kahn’s central theoretical statement.

Scholarship Linking Kahn to Plato

For those readers of Kahn’s 1961 article who have previously encountered the Platonic Theory of Forms — typically through the best known of Plato’s middle period dialogues, The Republic — the resonance between Kahn’s thinking and this Platonic doctrine is unmistakable. “House is the form,” Kahn tells us, “in the mind of wonder it should be there without shape or dimension.” Whilst “[a] house,” Kahn argues, “is a conditional interpretation of these spaces.” Plato is the forefather of rationalistic scientific inquiry and a seminal figure of classical philosophy. In an invocation of his theory of Forms intended to discredit poetry, Plato writes, “[y]ou know that we postulate in each case a single [F]orm for each set of particular things, to which we apply the same name?” Following this succinct explanation of the Forms, Plato proceeds to describe The Bed Itself as a singular and transcendent entity on which craftsmen model particular beds. Like Kahn’s capitalised “House,” The Bed Itself is an unchanging concept. Like Kahn’s lower case “a house,” particular beds in Plato’s parable might vary in their shapes, sizes and materials, yet all have the same essential character of “bedness.”

As in the above quotation from Frampton, interpretations of Kahn’s theory are often couched in quasi-Platonic terms. The earliest observation of this kind dates from 1973, when, in his book Modern Movements in Architecture, Charles Jencks describes the then living Kahn as the “major prophet” of the “metaphysical school” who built elements which seem to have “arrived perfected from Plato’s ideal realm.” Jencks’ writings often refer to Plato. He has related Platonism to the Semiology Triangle, what he calls the idealist
tradition and most recently to cosmology since the advent of quantum mechanics, in his book *The Architecture of the Jumping Universe.* A diagram at the beginning of that book entitled “Four Jumps to Consciousness” suggests that Jencks may be a kind of Platonist himself, since he seems to believe — after the theoretical physicist Paul Davies to whom Jencks refers frequently throughout that book — that the universe sprang from ground rules, otherwise known as a “cosmic blueprint,” which exists beyond time and space in Plato’s Form realm.

Christian Norberg-Schulz is the first to recognise the need to interpret and develop Kahn’s theory in terms of philosophy. “As it has a philosophical basis,” Norberg-Schulz argues in 1979, “this work cannot be confined within the limits of architectural theory as such.” Whilst Norberg-Schulz decides to interpret Kahn’s theory in existentialist terms, he does write that:

Kahn’s philosophy evidently has Platonic origins. Thus he talks about *form* in the Platonic sense of *idea* [...]. He even uses the word “shadow” in connection with the concrete things of the world, as did Plato in his *Allegory of the Cave*. Kahn also subordinates the *existencia* to the *essentia*, and thus thinks within the tradition of Western metaphysics.

In Joseph Burton’s 1983 Ph.D thesis “The Architectural Hieroglyphics of Louis I. Kahn: Architecture as Logos,” and in his article “Notes From Volume Zero: Louis Kahn and the Language of God,” Plato figures partially in the analysis of Kahn’s theory and influences. Whilst Burton is more concerned with tracing Kahn’s buildings to worldly sources from history (specifically Egyptian hieroglyphics) than to transcendent Forms, he does state that “Kahn’s primary notion of *form* is like Plato’s theory of the ideas, also known in English by the term ‘Forms’, as well as ‘Ideas’. His use of the word *form* betrays a German origin.” In his footnotes, Burton clarifies his understanding of Plato’s Ideas, or Forms, by citing David Ross’s canonical text on the topic, *Plato’s Theory of Ideas,* in which Ross describes the Forms in their classical sense, as transcendent entities.

Vincent Scully’s writing on Kahn’s theory places a strong emphasis on ancient European ruins which Kahn visited shortly before the blossoming of his career and mature style. These ruins, according to Scully, are the sources of Kahn’s mature work. Despite being the strongest advocate of the view that Kahn’s “forms” have historic, that is worldly, origins, Scully also likens Kahn’s “forms” to Plato’s transcendent Forms. Writing in the introduction to the complete catalogue of Kahn’s drawings published in 1987, Scully describes Kahn’s “form and design” theory as, “a curious but very useful amalgam of Platonic Idealism and Pragmatic Realism.” Although Scully does not discuss precisely how pragmatism could be amalgamated with Platonism without affecting the latter’s
uncompromising idealism, he nonetheless joins the scholars listed here in connecting Kahn to Plato.

In their 1991 exhibition catalogue entitled *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture*, David Brownlee and David De Long use the word “Platonic” as an adjective to describe Kahn’s notion of “form.”37 They also note that Kahn’s differentiation between the ideal world and the world of daily experience echoes Plato’s parable of the cave.38 Writing about Kahn’s synonymous use of such terms as “Silence and Light,” “law and rule,” and “form and design,” to describe what he claims to be ostensibly an unchanging concept, David Brownlee observes that Kahn’s new vocabulary was fortified by allusions to respected authority. Most fundamentally, the role played by light and shadow in differentiating the ideal world from the world of daily experience was an echo of the famous discussion of the same subject in Plato’s *Republic.*39

Shortly after the release of Brownlee’s and De Long’s book, Gerhard Auer reiterates what has become a common interpretation of the word “form” within Kahn’s vocabulary. “Kahn’s *form* is not a visible idea,” Auer writes, “but a (Platonic) [brackets in original] idea which has not yet materialised, the premonition of a slumbering archetype, an intuitive inspiration, at best formulated as an ideogram.”40

A recent text to connect Kahn to Plato is Klaus-Peter Gast’s book *Louis I. Kahn: The Idea of Order.*41 Gast argues that Kahn’s buildings are inscribed with hidden geometrical figures, which Gast associates with Platonism. Gast sees this reflected in Kahn’s design philosophy as well, claiming that Kahn’s statement, “what will be has always been,” relates directly to Plato.42

Within the literature on Kahn, a number of statements can be found which suggest a Platonic reading of Kahn’s theory, without specifically mentioning Plato. For example, a remark in Peter Kohane’s essay on Kahn’s libraries can be seen to imply a Platonic level to Kahn’s theory. Kohane writes that for Kahn “the nature of an institution belong[s] to a realm of ideas which transcend[s] the interests of the individual architect.”43 In his Derridean “deconstruction” of Kahn’s Kimbell Art Museum, Michael Benedict makes an oblique allusion to Plato when he describes the Kimbell’s “banal repetition of ribs,” or cycloidal vaults, as announcing “the problem of the One and Many — that deepest of philosophical themes,”44 which is a major theme of *The Republic.*45 Romaldo Giurgola also implies an alignment between Kahn’s “forms” and Plato’s Forms. He does this in an indirect manner, arguing that Kahn’s buildings are the manifestation of the knowledge sought by Heraclitus,46 that famous ancient Greek philosopher who had set the stage for Plato’s theory of Forms by first casting doubt on sense knowledge. Heraclitus had sought absolute knowledge, the objects of which Plato proposes are the Forms. It is possible
therefore to interpret Giurgola as calling Kahn’s buildings manifestations of Forms, since, in one sense, Forms are the knowledge sought by Heraclitus.

It can be seen that many scholars identify Kahn’s “form and design” theory with Plato’s theory of Forms. None are more explicit though, than Arthur Danto in his 1999 essay entitled “Louis Kahn as Archai-Tekt.” Danto begins his essay with a quotation from the second epistle to the Corinthians in which Saint Paul calls attention to an unseen and eternal realm. He proceeds to unite the metaphysical explanation of Plato, the religious assurance of Saint Paul and the architectural embodiment of Kahn, using this single “piece of thought,” the theory of Forms. According to Danto, Kahn’s notion of “form” is “exactly like its Platonic and Pauline counterparts, invisible and eternal.”

Contemplating what most would expect a Platonic building to look like — an image to which Kahn’s buildings do not conform, that of a composite of elementary geometrical solids — Danto finds Kahn to be even “more in the spirit of Plato than architects whose buildings look like diagrams for geometric theorems.” It is not that Danto would deny Plato’s famous love of geometry, but he does remind us that Plato is not particularly concerned with cosmetic appearances and that Plato dedicates his intellect instead to the correct deduction of eternal essences. According to Danto, both Plato and Kahn are concerned with the essential elements required of such things as political states, beds and Unitarian Churches, for these things to exist at all. So crucial and perplexing is this search for irreducible and timeless archetypes, that the “look” of things becomes a secondary issue.

Kahn’s concern for the essential elements of a building plan, rather than the geometrical regulation of those elements, sets his theory apart from the Neoplatonic tradition. Rather harshly, Jowett describes Neoplatonism as “the feeble expression of an age which has lost its power not only of creating great works but of understanding them.” How exactly Kahn’s, Plato’s and the Neoplatonists’ approach to geometry differ is the topic of another paper by the present author, which was presented at the 2002 Nexus conference. What needs mentioning here, is that Goldhagen’s use of the word Neoplatonist when referring to Kahn’s interest in ideal forms, reiterates a common misconception within architectural discourse. This misconception is too complex to be resolved within a paper such as this. The problem is dealt with definitively in Erwin Panofsky’s book Idea: A Concept in Art Theory, which explains the way in which Plato’s original notion of transcendent Forms has been diluted through latter day epistemological paradigms.

Covering His Tracks

Danto’s essay raises one very obvious line of inquiry. What does Kahn himself say about Platonism and its influence on his thinking?
For one whose design theory is so like Plato’s theory of Forms, Kahn is conspicuously silent about Plato’s influence on his thinking. In fact, there is no published record of any such acknowledgment. Brownlee and De Long, who both identify Platonism as a source of Kahn’s theory, recognise the difficulties raised for historians by Kahn’s silence on the topic. In an interview with the author of this paper, Brownlee admits to finding no tangible evidence connecting Kahn to Plato.\textsuperscript{53} Rather, Brownlee’s observations are based on apparent similarities between Kahn’s and Plato’s philosophies. “Regarding sources and extensions of Kahn’s neo-Platonism,” David De Long writes, “there has been much thought, most of it necessarily speculative, as Kahn left few specific references.”\textsuperscript{54}

As will be discussed shortly, Kahn had so many ways of learning of Platonism that it is difficult to imagine how he could not have known of the similarities between his notion of “form” and Plato’s theory of Forms. A more pressing question though, is not whether Kahn was aware of Platonism, but why his theory does not openly acknowledge its own Platonic basis.

In answering this, it is important to recognise that Kahn would prefer readers of his theory not to know the historic influences on his thinking. He was, as Vincent Scully argues, profoundly affected by Modernism and its “dictum that everything had to be reinvented from the ground up.”\textsuperscript{55} This attitude, particularly as it applies to philosophy and religion, is expressed in newsletters produced by the Philadelphia based “Connoisseur’s Club” of which Kahn was an active member. In those newsletters, members are urged to solve the world’s apparent problems by thinking for themselves.\textsuperscript{56} Like his colleagues in the Connoisseur’s Club, Kahn wishes to appear to be the sole author of his own philosophy. He is therefore reluctant to credit those who may have influenced his thinking. Illustrative of this reluctance is Kahn’s homespun theory of the subconscious mind, which occupies a later part of the aforementioned address made at the Cooper Union Great Hall on 20 January 1960, entitled “The Scope of Architecture.”\textsuperscript{57} According to Kahn’s theory, the human mind consists of the “ena” and “enai”; behind these innovative neologisms lies a delineation obviously indebted to such concepts as Freud’s “id” and “ego,” or Jung’s “animus” and “anima.” Commenting on Kahn’s “ena” and “enai” theory and his unwillingness to credit those before him, Kahn’s former mistress and muse, Anne Tyng, states in an interview with the present author that Kahn;

... had moments of thinking that everything begins with him, it’s like nothing happened [prior to him]. A lot of people are like this, Bucky [Buckminster] Fuller was like that, [he] never refers to history. Lou was much better about referring to history in fact than Bucky Fuller. All these people, like Alexander Graham Bell, and all of these other people who may have worked with these forms — Leonardo — he doesn’t ever mention, its like he just arrived full blown with these things.”\textsuperscript{58}
In wishing to give the impression that “everything begins with him,” Kahn is not inclined to credit such figures as Freud or Jung, even though he may know that they are the original authors of his own psychological theory. According to Tyng, Kahn knew Freud’s terms and understood Jungian psychology through herself, yet nowhere does Kahn mention the influence of these two figures. Likewise, had a particular encounter introduced him to Plato’s theory of Forms, then there is reason to believe that Kahn would attempt to erase such an encounter rather than cite it as an influence on his understanding of “form.”

That Kahn does not acknowledge Plato’s influence on his thinking, does not mean that no such influence exists and it certainly does not mean that Kahn’s thinking could not be in accord with Plato’s. To the contrary, Kahn’s lack of any need for an authority, makes him precisely the kind of philosopher that Plato was himself. Charles Bigger points out that Plato was “extremely contemptuous of those who would justify their statements upon the inspired authority of another,” adding that Plato “would have found it absurd that others should ground themselves on him.” It is Kahn’s personal practice of philosophy and not his confessed acceptance of Platonic doctrines, that would suggest that his thinking is in accord with Plato’s.

Kahn’s Knowledge of Plato

Meanwhile, to argue that Kahn did not know of Plato, would be absurd. Already one scholar, Joseph Burton, has argued that Kahn knew of Plato’s Forms through his mother. Burton argues that Kahn’s use of the word “form” in the Platonic sense “betrays a German origin,” and he goes on to argue that “Kahn became acquainted with the romantic mysticism of much eighteenth and nineteenth century German literature,” through his mother, who had a “deep-seated interest in German literature.”

It is also known that Kahn frequently attended open lectures on diverse topics. For example, within his office files is a program of Cooper Union adult education courses, which includes a class entitled “The History of Philosophy.” Through verbal contact with various academics at The University of Pennsylvania, Yale, Princeton and other universities, Kahn would have had ample opportunity to hear of, and to discuss, Plato’s theory of Forms. Indeed, as one holding Professor status at the University of Pennsylvania from 1955 onwards, it would almost be inconceivable for Kahn not have had at least some awareness of philosophical doctrines such as Plato’s theory of Forms. Furthermore, given his often repeated adage “I love beginnings,” he surely would have been drawn to Platonism on learning of it, simply by virtue its representing the beginning of Western philosophy.
One person who is likely to have spoken with Kahn directly about Plato’s theory of Forms before Kahn’s announcement of his “form and design” theory in 1960, is Colin Rowe, who wrote to Kahn in February of 1956 to thank him for an evening of intense discussion which they had spent together and to inform Kahn that he would be sending him a copy of Rudolf Wittkower’s *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*. The thrust of Wittkower’s book is to prove that “[t]he Renaissance conception of the perfect church is rooted in Plato’s cosmology,” a fact Rowe could not have ignored when informing Kahn that in it, “I think that you will discover attitudes with which you are profoundly in sympathy.” In that letter, Rowe also told Kahn that, “[f]or me, your cubes, your hexagonal cells, are objective data with a life of their own in which one can’t intervene. They are independent, aggressively so, irreducible, intractable phenomena.” As one versed in Platonism, Rowe must have known that his description of the shapes in Kahn’s work is equally as applicable to Plato’s Forms, which could also be described as objective, independent, irreducible and intractable. Elsewhere Rowe recognises that the Platonic aspects of Wittkower’s book are central to Wittkower’s interpretation of Renaissance architecture. Rowe writes that:

> It was Wittkower’s decisive contribution to advertise Renaissance architecture as the presentation of a quasi-religious conviction abstracted in terms of a natural order. For architects of the Renaissance, so the argument ran, did receive in a specific way the Platonic Myth that: ‘the universal motion of the cosmos itself cannot be lacking in perfect order.’

On those occasions where Rowe’s writing touches on Platonism, it is with an appreciation of the conflict between transcendent ideals and worldly circumstances. The notion of Platonic ideals versus empirical conditions is indeed a favoured analytical tool of Rowe’s. He claims that his urban design studio at Cornell “believed in a dialectic […] between the empirical and the ideal.” An example of this theme is Rowe’s description of Joseph Ellicott’s square plan of 1804, for Buffalo, New York, as Ellicott’s “Platonic idea,” which is in conflict with “empirical conditions.” Although there is no record of his discussion with Kahn in 1956, Rowe is likely to have made mention of Plato’s Forms/Ideas to Kahn at that time, since firstly, it is one of Rowe’s own favourite themes, and secondly, because Rowe would describe Kahn’s buildings using words which could also describe Plato’s Forms, that is, as “irreducible, intractable phenomena.”

*Kahn’s Reference to Socrates*

It was previously stated that Kahn’s first recorded public expression of his “form and design” theory is contained within a public address delivered at the Cooper Union on 20 January 1960. It seems to be more than a coincidence that in the same venue where Kahn is likely to have attended an adult learning class entitled “The History of Philosophy,” he
makes the only connection between his own thinking and Plato’s. During this address Kahn speaks about the institution known in the singular as “School.” Using what would become a convention for him, Kahn delineates between the “form” of “School” and any particular instance of that “form” which he would call “a school.” Kahn tells his audience that when contemplating the idea of “School”, an architect must;

... start right at the beginning, as though he were Socrates when he’s talking about school. He must be this man [Socrates]. From it [the Socratic contemplation of typology] comes form, from the other considerations comes another duty called design.78

This unpublished statement by Kahn, which exists on a cassette recording in the Kahn Collection in Philadelphia, provides the only proof that Kahn consciously connects his “form and design” theory to Socrates, whose philosophy we read in Plato. It states that in the perplexing search for the arrangement of essential elements required of schools for schools to exist at all, architects must be like Socrates, who, as we read in Plato, concerned himself with the transcendent realm of Forms rather than the illusionary realm of visible things.

**Conclusion**

Since his death in 1974, Kahn has taken on the status of a mystical guru or prophet. Goldhagen’s work serves as a timely reminder that Kahn was in the first instance, a person of his time who was influenced by the major debates of his time. However, it has been the contention of this paper that some account needs to be given for the otherworldly language which Kahn layered upon the temporal business of being an architect. It has been seen that such an account needn’t promote a myth and it can be based on archival evidence.

This paper has examined claims by various scholars that Platonism may be a source of Kahn’s theory. An explanation has been provided as to why Kahn does not acknowledge Plato’s influence, by demonstrating, through archival evidence and interviews, that Kahn obscures the influence of numerous other figures and tries instead to present an ex nihilo design philosophy. Yet, despite this tendency, Kahn does, on one occasion in March 1960, state that an architect must “start right at the beginning, as though he were Socrates,” when contemplating ideal “forms.” This solitary reference to Plato’s mentor and the protagonist in his dialogues, which was discovered in the Kahn Collection in Philadelphia by the present author, suggests that Platonism is indeed a source of Kahn’s “form and design” theory. It is true that Kahn was a “this worldly” practitioner of architecture, but the alchemic aspects of his metaphysics, for which he is remembered, remain a legitimate subject for continuing scholarship.
Steven Fleming is an Associate Lecturer in architectural history and theory at The University of Newcastle, Australia. His main area of research is into Louis Kahn’s design theory, and he has recently published “Louis Kahn’s Platonic approach to number and geometry,” in José Francisco Rodrigues and Kim Williams (eds.), Nexus IV: Architecture and Mathematics, Florence: Kim Williams Books, 2002.

steven.fleming@newcastle.edu.au
7Frampton, Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture, p. 246.
11Kahn, “Form and Design,” p. 113.
14Cassette recording, “The Scope of Architecture at The Cooper Union Hall, 1-20-60,” Kahn Collection.
20Kahn, “Form and design,” p. 113.
21In Plato’s time, the works of poets such as Homer were treated as primary sources of moral and political instruction. Plato argues that their works are merely imitative, and easily produced, since the poet requires no real understanding of the issues their works cover.
24Perhaps too readily, Jencks treats many architects as Platonists whose theories, if they were held against Plato’s actual dialogues, would fall short of Plato’s strict rationalism. For example, Jencks points to Mies van der Rohe’s “neo-Thomist education” and his frequent quoting of Saint Thomas of Aquinas, as foundations of Mies’ Platonism. [0 Yet Aquinas is famous for reconciling Aristotle’s empiricism with Scripture, thus abrogating the Platonic/rationalistic views of Saint Augustine which had previously dominated Christian theology. In that respect, Thomism is the very antithesis of Platonism. Therefore, Mies’s references to Aquinas are more likely to suggest a preference for Aristotelian empiricism, than Platonic rationalism, a point made by Richard Padovan. See: Richard Padovan, “Machines a mediter,” in Rolf Archilles, Kevin Harrington & Charlotte Myhrum (eds.), Mies van der Rohe: Architect as Educator, Chicago: Illinois Institute of Technology, 1986, pp. 17-25.

Based on little more than their “commitment to a general idealism,” Jencks likens Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Aldo van Eyck, Louis Kahn and James Stirling to Platonic idealists, thus implying that the ideals to which these architects allude are like Plato’s Forms. See: Jencks, Modern Movements in Architecture, p. 31.


Norberg-Schulz, “Kahn, Heidegger and the language of architecture,” p. 35.


Burton, “Notes from volume zero: Louis Kahn and the language of God,” p. 76.


Brownlee, “Light, the giver of all presences: Designs to honor human endeavor,” p. 128.


Plato, The Republic (476a, 507b and 596a-b).


Danto, “Louis Kahn as Archai-Tekt,” p. 188.


35Cassette recording, “The Scope of Architecture at The Cooper Union Hall, 1-20-60,” Kahn Collection.

36Interview, Steven Fleming with Anne Tyng, 29 January 1998, The University of Pennsylvania. (Cassette recording held in Kahn Collection).


42File labelled, “College and University Correspondence, Jan. 1960 through ...,” Box L.I.K. 64, Kahn Collection.

43One such acquaintance is Josef Albers who Kahn helps bring to Yale in 1950. As previously mentioned, Albers, a former Bauhaus professor and artist, is influenced by de Stijl, a style philosophically underpinned by the Neoplatonic writings of Theo Van Doesburg.


45Letter, Colin Rowe to Louis I. Kahn, 7 February 1956, file labelled, “Correspondence From Universities and Colleges,” L.I.K. Box 65, Kahn Collection.


47Wittkower, Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism, p. 23.

48Letter, Rowe to Kahn, 7 February 1956.

49Letter, Rowe to Kahn, 7 February 1956.


53Letter, Rowe to Kahn, 7 February 1956.

54Cassette recording, “The Scope of Architecture at The Cooper Union Hall, 1-20-60,” Kahn Collection.

55File labelled, “College and University Correspondence, Jan. 1960 through ...,” Box L.I.K. 64, Kahn Collection.

56Cassette recording, “The Scope of Architecture at The Cooper Union Hall, 1-20-60,” Kahn Collection.