

Chapter 1: Locating the Inquiry

Louis Isador Kahn (1901-1974) is a seminal figure of twentieth-century architecture, whose significance can in part be connected to the philosophical nature of his design theory. Accounts of his career in architectural encyclopaedias highlight the fact that he is often remembered 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”.¹ 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”.² 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.³

The eminent architectural historian Kenneth Frampton also comments on the mystical dimension in 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”.⁴ 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”.⁵

Consideration of Kahn’s theoretical pronouncements also suggests that he intends his work to be viewed in a spiritual or mystical light, that is, as an endeavour to evoke a transcendent dimension. In the 1961 article titled “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*.⁶

In the study of Kahn's theory, much scholarly attention is focused on the article from which the above quotation is taken, titled "Form and Design". The central thesis of Kahn's text is that particular buildings of the same type share an archetypal essence, or "form", which is glimpsed in its designer's mind's-eye, or psyche. 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 Kahn's later production phase as one in which "the architect bombards the chosen [realised, deduced or discovered] Form with the particulars of the program until it deforms in response to them".⁷ Whereas other design approaches might strive towards the elimination of contingencies and imperfections to reveal an object's essence,⁸ 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".⁹

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-form¹⁰), 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 in his personal notebook.¹¹ The first recorded public expression of the precise thesis is contained in a public address delivered at the Cooper Union titled “The Scope of Architecture” on 20 January 1960.¹² Kahn’s preoccupation with this thesis dominated his thinking throughout 1960, leading to a Voice of America broadcast on 21 November 1960.¹³ The revised transcript of this broadcast was published in April 1961 as “Form and Design” in *Architectural Design*¹⁴ and reprinted in the 1962 book, *Louis I. Kahn*, by Vincent Scully.¹⁵ According to Tim Vreeland, who was employed in Kahn’s office, the article embodies Kahn’s thinking better than any previous text¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ For these reasons, “Form and Design” can be thought of as Kahn’s central theoretical statement.

For 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 Plato’s doctrine is unmistakable. “House is the form”, Kahn tells us, “in the mind of wonder it should be there without shape or dimension”.¹⁸ While “[a] house”, Kahn argues, “is a conditional interpretation of these spaces”.¹⁹ Writing more than two thousand years earlier, in an invocation of his theory of Forms intended to discredit poetry,²⁰ Plato, in *The Republic*, describes *The Bed Itself* as a transcendent entity on which the craftsman models particular beds.²¹ 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 previous 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”.²² Jencks’ writings often refer to Plato,²³ relating Platonism to the Semiology Triangle²⁴ and to what he calls the idealist tradition.²⁵ Most recently he has related Platonism to what he calls cosmogenetic architecture in his book, *The Architecture of the Jumping Universe*.²⁶ A diagram at the beginning of that book titled “Four Jumps to Consciousness”²⁷ suggests that Jencks may favour a kind of Platonism himself, since — like the theoretical physicist Paul Davies²⁸ to whom Jencks frequently refers throughout that book — he seems to believe that the universe sprang from ground rules, otherwise known as a cosmic blueprint,²⁹ which exists beyond time and space in Plato’s Form realm.

Christian Norberg-Schulz was one of 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”.³⁰ While Norberg-Schulz interprets Kahn’s theory in existentialist terms, for reasons that will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, 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 *existentia* to the *essentia*, and thus thinks within the tradition of Western metaphysics.³¹

In Joseph Burton’s 1983 PhD thesis “The Architectural Hieroglyphics of Louis I. Kahn: Architecture as Logos”,³² and in his article, “Notes From Volume Zero: Louis Kahn and the Language of God”,³³ Plato figures peripherally in the analysis of Kahn’s theory and influences. While 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 betrays a German origin.³⁴

In his footnotes, Burton clarifies his understanding of Plato's Ideas, or Forms, by citing David Ross' canonical text on the topic, *Plato's Theory of Ideas*,³⁵ 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 historical, 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",³⁶ thus joining the scholars listed in this section connecting Kahn to Plato.

In the 1991 exhibition catalogue titled *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture*, David De Long describes Kahn's notion of "form" as Platonic.³⁷ Writing about Kahn's synonymous use of such terms as "silence and light", "law and rule", and "form and design", to describe what Kahn claims to be ostensibly an unchanging concept, De Long's co-author David Brownlee also notes that Kahn's differentiation between the ideal world and the world of daily experience echoes Plato's parable of the cave.³⁸ Brownlee also 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

One year 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) 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 that connects 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 also sees this reflected in Kahn’s design philosophy, 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 are open to Platonic interpretations. 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 While Kohane does not make such a connection, Plato’s Form realm can also be described as a transcendent realm of ideas. In his Derridean deconstruction of Kahn’s Kimbell Art Museum, Michael Benedikt 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 also a major theme of *The Republic*.⁴⁵ Romaldo Giurgola also implies an alignment between Kahn’s “forms” and Plato’s Forms. Giurgola does this in an indirect manner, arguing that Kahn’s buildings are the manifestation of the knowledge sought by Heraclitus,⁴⁶ the 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. Plato responded to the philosophical dilemma of his times with the proposition that absolute knowledge could only be had of 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.

Through these examples, it can be seen that many scholars identify Kahn’s “form and design” theory with Plato’s theory of Forms, although none are more explicit than Arthur Danto in his 1999 essay titled “Louis Kahn as Archai-Tekt”.⁴⁷

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. Danto 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”,⁴⁸ the theory of Forms. According to Danto, Kahn’s notion of “form” is “exactly like its Platonic and Pauline counterparts, invisible and eternal”.⁴⁹

Contemplating what most would expect a Platonic building to look like, namely a composite of elementary geometrical solids, an image to which Kahn’s buildings do not conform, Danto finds Kahn to be even “more in the spirit of Plato than architects whose buildings look like diagrams for geometric theorems”.⁵⁰ It is not Danto’s purpose to deny Plato’s famous love of geometry, but he does remind the reader 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, in order for these things to exist at all. So crucial and perplexing is this search for irreducible and timeless archetypes, that the outward appearance of things becomes a secondary issue.

Of the previously identified examples, Danto’s essay places the greatest emphasis on Platonism and it provides the most comprehensive discussion of Platonic philosophy. Danto’s essay demonstrates the usefulness of Platonic philosophy as a lens through which to interpret and develop Kahn’s philosophy of architecture. Despite this, being only nineteen pages in length, it also leaves many questions unanswered, providing scope for further inquiry into the Platonic dimensions of Kahn’s theory. The present dissertation develops this line of thinking.

However, Danto’s essay raises one obvious question. What does Kahn himself say about Platonism and its influence on his thinking? In locating the present inquiry within a continuum of scholarship likening Kahn’s thoughts to Plato’s, this question seems to be crucial and to warrant immediate attention.

For one whose design theory can be so easily compared to 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 of Platonism. In an interview with the author of this dissertation, Brownlee admits to finding no tangible evidence connecting Kahn to Plato.⁵¹ 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".⁵²

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 apparent Platonic basis.

In answering this, it is important to recognise that Kahn would prefer readers of his theory not to know the historical 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".⁵³ 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 perceived problems by thinking for themselves.⁵⁴ Like his colleagues in the Connoisseur's Club, it is likely that Kahn wishes to appear to be the sole author of his own philosophy, in which case he would be reluctant to credit those who might 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, titled "The Scope of Architecture".⁵⁵ According to Kahn's theory, the human mind consists of the "ena" and "enai". Behind these

innovative neologisms lies a delineation obviously indebted to 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 author of this dissertation 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.⁵⁶

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,⁵⁷ 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 imply that no such influence exists or that Kahn's thinking could not be in accord with Plato's. Paradoxically, Kahn's lack of any need for an authority, in one respect makes him the kind of philosopher that Plato was. Charles Bigger argues that Plato was "extremely contemptuous of those who would justify their statements upon the inspired authority of another",⁵⁸ adding that Plato "would have found it absurd that others should ground themselves on him".⁵⁹ In this case, it is Kahn's personal practice of philosophy, rather than his confessed acceptance of Platonic doctrines, that opens his theory to Platonic interpretations.

Meanwhile, it would be difficult to argue that Kahn had no knowledge of Plato whatsoever. Already one scholar, Joseph Burton, has argued that Kahn knew

of Plato's Forms through his mother.⁶⁰ Burton's references to Plato are tangential to his central theses: an interpretation of Kahn's design theory in terms of alchemical doctrines and freemasonry⁶¹ and a related interpretation in terms of the Neoplatonic tradition with an emphasis on Egyptian hieroglyphs.⁶² On the specific topic of Platonism, Burton maintains that Kahn's use of the word "form" in the Platonic sense "betrays a German origin",⁶³ 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".⁶⁴

It is also known that Kahn frequently attended open lectures on diverse topics. For example, within his office files is a program for Cooper Union adult education courses, which includes a class titled "The History of Philosophy".⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ Indeed, as one holding Professorial status at the University of Pennsylvania from 1955 onwards, it would almost be inconceivable for Kahn not to 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",⁶⁷ he naturally would have been drawn to Platonism on learning of it, simply by virtue of its representing the beginning of Western philosophy.

One person who may 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 together⁶⁸ and to inform Kahn that he would be sending him a copy of Rudolf Wittkower's book, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*.⁶⁹ The thrust of Wittkower's book is to prove that "[t]he Renaissance conception of the perfect church is rooted in Plato's cosmology"⁷⁰ 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”.⁷¹ In the same 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”.⁷² As one versed in Platonism, Rowe must have known that his description of the shapes in Kahn’s work is equally applicable to Plato’s Forms, which could also be described as objective, independent, irreducible and intractable. Elsewhere, Rowe demonstrates his appreciation for the Platonic aspects of Wittkower’s work, writing that in Wittkower’s “particular scheme of exegesis the principal places are given to Plato, to Alberti and to Palladio”.⁷³ Rowe recognises that the Platonic aspects of Wittkower’s book are central to Wittkower’s interpretation of Renaissance architecture. Rowe writes that

[i]t 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’.⁷⁴

On those occasions where Rowe’s writing touches on Platonism, it is with an appreciation of the conflict between ideals and worldly circumstances. Often Rowe contrasts Platonic ideals with empirical conditions. He claims that his urban design studio at Cornell “believed in a dialectic [...] between the empirical and the ideal”.⁷⁵ 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”.⁷⁶ Although there is no record of his discussion with Kahn in 1956,⁷⁷ Rowe may have made mention of Plato’s Forms to Kahn at that time, since firstly, it is one of Rowe’s own favourite themes, and secondly, because Rowe describes Kahn’s buildings using words which could also describe Plato’s Forms, that is, as “irreducible, intractable phenomena”.⁷⁸

It was previously stated that Kahn’s first recorded public expression of his

“form and design” theory is contained in a public address delivered at the Cooper Union on 20 January 1960.⁷⁹ It may be more than a coincidence that in the same venue where Kahn may have attended an adult learning class titled “The History of Philosophy”,⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹

This unpublished statement by Kahn, which exists on a cassette recording in the Kahn Collection in Philadelphia, provides indirect evidence that while Kahn was conceiving his “form and design” theory, he was consciously connecting that theory to Socrates, whose philosophy is relayed by Plato.⁸² Kahn 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 realm of Being and not the illusionary realm of Becoming.

The present inquiry into the philosophical and mystical aspects of Kahn’s theory, the most definitive expression of which is his 1961 article titled “Form and Design”, takes its cue from an often diffuse and attenuated chain of scholarship linking Kahn’s theory to Plato’s. While Kahn’s reference to Socrates isn’t proof that his “form and design” is informed by Platonism, it does represent a similar cue for this study. The following chapter proceeds to define the precise purpose and topic of this inquiry.