Chapter 6: Conclusions
This thesis examines Kahn’s “form and design” theory in terms of Plato’s theory of Forms. It has developed Kahn’s theory along the lines of Plato’s philosophy in an attempt to unearth alternative interpretations of his writings and works.

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-embody these archetypes in a new architectural language”.1 Anyone who has studied the correspondence held in the Kahn Collection, as Goldhagen has, would be inclined to agree with the overall tone of her analysis. Kahn’s correspondence tells of a person 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 intensions”.2 However, can it really be denied that Kahn set out to discover ideal “forms”, when “Form and Design” states precisely that?

For many, Kahn’s buildings do have an otherworldly quality. On almost any day, practitioners, academics and students of architecture can be found pacing the plaza of the Salk Institute, putting their hands in the narrow travertine clad stream, or looking towards the Pacific Ocean. Many visitors to The Kimbell Art Museum are less interested in the paintings on the walls than they are in the light on the ceiling. There may be other architectural pilgrimage sites in America, but few evoke the same sense of expectation that Kahn’s buildings do. Many visitors to Kahn’s buildings seem to be hoping for some kind of spiritual or self reflexive moment to rekindle their passion for architecture as an artistic endeavor.

Few architects could be credited with the reintroduction of “spiritual values”;3 to Modern architecture. Fewer architects could return Kenneth Frampton to a “pre-Socratic moment, lying outside time”.4 More importantly, few architects have done so much to encourage these kinds of reactions by using such “cryptic and
metaphysically imbued”5 explanations for their work as Kahn, especially when speaking or writing about a building’s “form”.

Since his death in 1974, Kahn has taken on a similar otherworldly status. 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 its debates. Yet it has been the contention of this thesis that some account needs to be given for the otherworldly language which Kahn layers upon the quotidian business of being an architect, and that such an account could help to explain the numinous effect his buildings have upon so many commentators. It has been shown that such an account need not promote a myth and it can be based on archival evidence.

From 1960 onwards, when Kahn uses the word “form” he typically uses it to describe a building’s archetypal essence. His distinction between “spoon” and “a spoon” provides the clearest illustration of his concept. Spoon (no “a”), describes a relationship of inseparable elements: a container and an arm. For an object to be classifiable as a spoon at all, it needs these two elements. Meanwhile, a spoon may have any proportion and be made of any material.

Jencks, Norberg-Schulz, Burton, Scully, Brownlee, De Long, Auer, Gast and Danto all liken Kahn’s notion of “form” to what Plato calls Forms, but none has fully explored the possibilities associated with this congruency. Neither has past scholarship identified Kahn’s acknowledgment of Platonism, when, in 1960, he states that an architect must be like Socrates when considering a building’s “form”.6 Insofar as the present thesis is concerned, Kahn’s reference to Socrates has been taken as an invitation to pursue the line of inquiry initiated by the scholars listed above. Because it is intrinsic to his own thinking about “form”, Plato’s theory of Forms has been used as a tool to interpret and develop Kahn’s “form and design” theory, of which the most definitive expression is his 1961 article titled “Form and Design”.7

This thesis has explored the three main questions posed when Plato’s theory of Forms is extended to the field of architecture. Each question has been dealt with
according to a sequence which is evident in Kahn’s 1961 article. The first is a question of metaphysics: where are the “forms” corresponding to building types? Secondly, what is the relationship between those “forms” and Kahn’s buildings? Thirdly, how can a “measurable” building evoke the “unmeasurable” vision which had been Kahn’s original inspiration?

**Metaphysics**

Kahn states that architects make “forms” “present from existence in the mind”. This view is far removed from Plato’s descriptions of Forms as transcendent entities in *The Republic*. For Plato, Forms should not be viewed as products of human discourse, or as thoughts within architects’ own minds. Yet consideration of what the word religion may mean to Kahn, suggests that he views the mind as a window through which to view “forms”, rather than the seat of “forms”. Hence, “forms” can be said to be *in* the mind, in the same sense as a person can be said to be standing *in* a window, when in fact they are standing on the other side of a window.

It is when “personal feeling transcends into Religion [...] and Thought leads to Philosophy”, that the mind becomes a window to the “forms”, since at that point “the mind opens to realizations”, regarding the nature of “forms”. Since elsewhere “Form and Design” implores readers to “[t]urn to Feeling and away from Thought”, this dissertation has placed particular emphasis on what the word religion might mean to Kahn, since, in the above quotation, religion is the transcendent counterpart of feeling. Hence, interpreting Kahn’s “form” realisation process in terms of Plato’s theory of Forms has required an exploration of Kahn’s religious sensibilities, drawing attention to his fascination with Christianity and a world view which has its roots in Platonism. It has been argued that Kahn uses the word religion in a metaphorically evocative sense, which is informed by Christian
Platonism.

One clear indication that Kahn thinks of “forms” as transcendent entities is provided in one of his personal notebooks containing a hand-written draft of his article “Form and Design”. In quasi-religious tones, Kahn describes the “form” realisation process as something which is sacred, stemming from “man’s worshipful labors”. Also, he specifically refers to “the transcendence of form”. One possible explanation of how Kahn’s 1960 concept of “form” might relate to his earlier concept of “Order” has also been provided through an examination of Kahn’s statement that “dream inspired form must answer to the laws of order so as to be”. After 1960, “Order” can be thought of as describing the laws of physics which govern the sensible realm where “forms” have their manifestation. Exploring the hypothesis that Kahn’s “forms” are congruous with Plato’s Forms has made it possible to interpret “forms” as transcendent entities, in the sense that deity is transcendent within the Christian Platonic tradition.

The development of Kahn’s “form and design” theory coincides with his design of the First Unitarian Church and School in Rochester and can be viewed as a post-rationalisation for that project. As Robin Williams argues, the theory appears to be an oversimplification of what actually happened in Rochester and therefore an architectural myth. Sketches made by Kahn before he’d even been briefed by his clients in Rochester suggest that, from the moment he learns of the commission, he considers building a polygonal church encircled by ancillary spaces, like the churches he had seen illustrated in Wittkower’s Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism. Later, when Kahn meets with the building committee for the first time, he presents his famous “form” diagram featuring a question mark at the centre of a hatched ring. In the months that follow Kahn produces a succession of radially symmetrical schemes closely resembling that “form” diagram. The building committee write to Kahn on 8 January and 1 March 1960, complaining that his symmetrical schemes do not address their functional requirements and are over budget. During this period, Kahn remains defiant, insisting that “form” — at this
time still meaning a building’s shape — transcends his client’s immediate needs and limitations. He seems to imply that certain shapes evoke certain functions. In January 1960 he also makes a direct appeal to Platonism, stating that an architect must be like Socrates when considering a building’s ideal “form”/shape. It is only after March 1960, when Kahn acquiesces to his client’s demands for a program-specific plan, that he moves to a more abstract definition of “form” whereby “[f]orm has no shape”.¹⁷ It is this loose definition of “form” which is canonised in Kahn’s 1961 article “Form and Design”.

Kahn’s “forms” can be usefully interpreted as transcendent entities like Plato’s Forms, although there are two significant challenges to this conclusion. Each relates to Kahn’s possible copying of earthly phenomena when conceiving “forms”. Should Kahn’s “forms” be in any way inspired by historical precedents or by nature, then his epistemology would differ radically from Plato’s. However, Kahn seems to accept the requirement of his rationalistic philosophy, and avoids recourse to empirical phenomena. On the topic of precedents, Kahn argues that an architect “must never think in terms of what did they do [sic] before. It’s pure death architecturally to think that way”.¹⁸ Kahn also argues that, unlike “form” which is “unmeasurable”, “[n]ature, physical nature, is measurable”.¹⁹ Other statements by Kahn suggest a rationalistic epistemology as well, such as his claim that philosophic realisations can be had by using the mind with the eyes closed.²⁰

These are not isolated examples. Rather they represent a consistent pattern in Kahn’s theoretical pronouncements which can be discerned and better understood when his epistemology is interpreted through the lens of Platonism. The epistemology of The Republic provides an account for what Kahn refers to as his religious attachment to belief,²¹ since Plato’s dialogue is founded on the mystical doctrine of recollection established in Meno. Platonic epistemology draws together Kahn’s claims that “forms” are discovered, that empirical observation should not overrule reason and that science is limited by empiricism. Platonism can also be used to explain Kahn’s refusal to support his “form” diagram for Rochester using an
empirical survey as evidence, when such an action would have helped allay his clients’ doubts about his preconceived notion that their proposed new church be radially planned. From a Platonic standpoint, the metaphysical status of Kahn’s “form” diagram would be diluted should it require empirical ratification. Consistent with his being a rationalist, the only way Kahn can defend his preconception that the school encircle the sanctuary, is by a method which Plato calls dialectic. Hence Kahn subjects an antithetical binuclear plan to a kind of Socratic inquisition, exposing its inadequacies.

This can all be viewed as an elaborate conceit, as the Platonic theory of “form and design” serves mainly to spare Kahn’s personal pride. His clients insist that there be a separation between the active school and the contemplative sanctuary, but they cannot afford an ambulatory as an additional and essential buffer between these conflicting spaces. In Kahn’s final design, the vast majority of the classrooms which are on the upper level encircle the sanctuary with a totally blind corridor. From the school, there is no sense of the sanctuary and vice versa. There is no relationship between the school and the sanctuary, except perhaps for a symbolic one. Furthermore, the church would only feature a centralised plan for the first few years of its operation, as the 1966 extension which in 1959 was never to be planned for has since turned the First Unitarian Church and School in Rochester into a binuclear building where the entry is effectively a link between 2 wings. History shows that Kahn may well have been rash to have staked his reputation on a preconception that the school should encircle and give rise to the question/sanctuary. His idealism appears to have blinded him to the incompatibility of these two functional areas. However, even if it is a post-rationalisation, the theory which Kahn articulates in response to his difficulties in Rochester echoes many of the fundamental doctrines arising from The Republic.

“Form and Design” may parallel many of The Republic’s key arguments, but a number of anomalies exist. While at times he expresses similar notions to those expressed by Plato, it cannot be said that Kahn simply became a Platonising
architect, or stayed one. Even within “Form and Design” there is an admission by Kahn that “[a]s I write alone in my office, I feel differently about the very same things that I talked about only a few days ago to many at Yale”. Two years after writing “Form and Design”, there is evidence to suggest that Kahn effectively inverts the metaphysical hierarchy established in that text, by returning to a position which privileges the laws of nature above human desires. But despite such misgivings, Kahn would ultimately reiterate his “form and design” thesis on many occasions during the 1960s and early 1970s and its fundamental dualism would remain a hallmark of Kahn’s mature philosophy.

Oscillations in his position also reflect the fact that, where his metaphysical and mystical pronouncements are concerned, Kahn is something of a chameleon. He displays an intuitive ability to mirror other’s metaphysics when seeking to persuade them or win their confidence. It simply happens that Kahn spent much of his life addressing a society with a greater attachment to the western philosophical tradition, for whom his dualism resonates with a Christian Platonic heritage.

This dissertation provides one explanation as to why Kahn does not acknowledge Plato’s influence, by demonstrating, through archival evidence and interviews, that Kahn obscures the influence of many other figures and tries instead to present an ex nihilo design philosophy. Kahn’s attachment to the Modernist notion of invention makes it impossible to trace all of the predisposing causes of his Platonism. It has been strongly argued that Kahn’s interest in Christianity is one factor predisposing him towards a Platonic position, along with his interest in the visual arts and his contact with Colin Rowe. Although it is futile to attempt to join the dots between Kahn and Plato, Appendix 2 of this dissertation does propose a number of likely influences. However, as the title of this thesis suggests, it has not been the purpose of this work to pursue what are, ultimately, impossible lines of inquiry, but rather to interpret Kahn’s text in terms of the theory of Forms which Plato outlines in *The Republic*.
Participation

From a Platonic standpoint, the next issue raised by “Form and Design” pertains to participation. According to the logic of The Republic, particular buildings should participate in Forms corresponding to their class names. Kahn’s “form and design” theory closely parallels Plato’s doctrine of participation. For Kahn, particular spoons are instances of what he calls spoon, (no “a”), the latter resembling a Platonic Form. This notion, Kahn argues in 1962, can be extended to buildings and other human creation. Since his analogy of the spoon often precedes discussion of his Unitarian Church in Rochester, Kahn implies that this church is conceived as a spoon might be, that is, as an instance of Unitarian centre, (again, no “a”).

The difficulty with examining the theme of participation in “Form and Design” does not rest in establishing similarities between Kahn’s and Plato’s philosophies, which are unquestionably similar. The greatest challenge stems from the fact that Plato does not develop certain issues inherent in the extension of his theory to the field of craftsmanship. Reading Kahn’s text in terms of the Platonic doctrine of participation also highlights inconsistencies between Kahn’s various theoretical pronouncements and between his theory and practice of architecture. Attempts within this study to resolve or at least draw attention to such complexities have given rise to some of its most valuable outcomes.

Plato’s doctrine of the one and the many, with its implication that architects produce many similar buildings of the same type, has drawn attention to repeated elements and planning strategies in Kahn’s work. For example, a number of chapels by Kahn are square in plan with cylindrical light towers, or hollow columns in their corners. This line of inquiry has also prompted a discussion of the many similar buildings by Kahn which serve quite different functions. In terms of his own “form and design” theory, and in terms of The Republic, why should various buildings by Kahn, including a church, an assembly building, a house, a library and a dormitory, utilise almost identical planning strategies? A Platonic interpretation of Kahn’s
theory offers one possible scenario which reconciles this apparent discrepancy between Kahn’s theory and practice, whereby the central spaces of Kahn’s concentric buildings participate in abstract Forms such as *Assembly Itself*. While different types of buildings by Kahn may be planned in the same fundamental manner, this scenario allows each of these buildings to be thought of as a participant in a distinct “form”.

Consideration of what is known by philosophers as the problem of the third man, casts some light on Kahn’s tendency, after 1960, to describe “forms” verbally rather than diagrammatically. Kahn’s famous “form” diagram for Rochester from 1959, featuring a question mark within a hatched ring, is, in some sense, like an actual Unitarian Church. The particular Unitarian Church that Kahn builds in Rochester, along with his preliminary proposals for that church, as well as his “form” diagram, all feature a central figure which is encircled by a school. From a Platonic standpoint, the fact that the church, the preliminary proposals and the diagram all have something in common, gives rise to a Form, *The Unitarian Centre Itself*. In philosophical terms, that Form must not share any of the fundamental attributes of the particulars which give rise to its own existence, lest such an attribute in turn give rise to an even higher Form. To avoid a problem of infinite regress, Forms should not be thought of as perfect examples in a transcendent realm. Rather, they can be thought of as recipes. A recipe describes something like a meal, without being a meal itself. Similarly, a recipe could give basic directions for the making of a Unitarian centre without sharing any of the defining characteristics of an actual Unitarian centre.

It is interesting to note that the confusion caused by the inherent comparability between Kahn’s “form” diagram and his various designs for Rochester, causes him to formulate, then constantly reiterate, a view that “form” has no shape, since people are inclined to literally compare his church with the diagram on which it is based. A similar kind of logic to that which demands that Forms be thought of as recipes, may lie behind Kahn’s decision never to speak publicly about
another “form” diagram of the kind produced for Rochester. Instead, where Kahn talks or writes about subsequent “forms” he provides verbal descriptions of ideal spatial relationships, which are akin to recipes. Unlike diagrammatic representations of “forms”, verbal or recipe-like descriptions do not imply shapes and cannot be confused with particular design proposals.

**Edification**

In terms of *The Republic*, Kahn’s claim in “Form and Design” that finished buildings should evoke “unmeasurable” qualities suggests that he intends his buildings to direct viewers’ attention towards the unseen realm of those buildings’ corresponding “forms”, or Forms. While *The Republic* gives few specific directions to craftsmen, hoping to edify viewers of their works in this way, the relationship it outlines between the intelligible and sensible realms does provide a framework for interpreting Kahn’s work.

Kahn’s buildings could lead viewers’ minds upwards in a number of ways. Ambiguous aspects of his work could aggravate passive viewers, forcing them to think rationally about what they are seeing. Natural light on his buildings’ interior surfaces may conduce an appreciation of Plato’s analogy between the sun and *The Good*. Attention seizing geometrical figures in his work could act as aids to those contemplating purely intelligible constructs. His buildings can also be interpreted as reflections of some of the Forms’ abstract qualities, such as their autonomy and resistance to change. Finally, the majority of Kahn’s buildings do not contravene *The Republic’s* various prohibitions regarding simulacrum, deceptive semblances or complicated rhythms or harmonies.
Final Words

Given the subjective nature of their discipline, members of the architectural fraternity are inclined to seek out individuals from within their ranks who are willing and able to carry the extra burden of leadership. Louis Kahn came to this role very late in his career, first as an influential teacher, then as the designer of a series of acclaimed works during the 1960s and early 1970s. Posthumously, his influence has continued to grow.

Previous scholars who have connected Kahn’s influence to a revival of Platonic philosophy have opened up a rich line of inquiry into his theory and practice of architecture. By conferring his “forms” with otherworldly status, Kahn connects his work to a pivotal moment in Greek history, and Western civilisation generally, when mythical ideals were first treated as facts. If a series of empirical judgments could lead to the fall of Athens and the subsequent execution of Socrates, then, according to Plato, governance, justice, city plans and artefacts including buildings, should be modelled on a corpus of self evident truths, the conception of which could not involve sense knowledge of any kind. Based on the present reading, it is Kahn’s unique contribution to twentieth-century architectural discourse that he authorises his planning strategy in Rochester by appealing to such a truth.

Kahn’s work does not fit into that part of the tradition of architecture that claims its authority from Platonism. His conception of buildings as instances of corresponding “forms” bypasses traditional Neoplatonic concerns, and represents a direct return to Plato’s doctrine of participation. Following the hiatus resulting from the influence of the Modern movement, Kahn’s “form and design” theory also seeks to legitimise typological preconceptions as a starting point for the design process.

By enlisting Platonism as an interpretive apparatus, this dissertation has unearthed a number of new interpretations of Kahn’s work and it has cast new light on various inconsistencies within Kahn’s theory and his practice of architecture. While these readings are not definitive and cannot negate those made by previous
scholars, they are consistent with Kahn’s central theoretical statement and therefore contribute to, and extend, Kahn scholarship.