

From Certainty to Doubt: An Opportunity for Theory-Building or a Source of Instability? A Critical Examination of the Role of “Doubt” in the Formation of Contemporary Architectural Theories



Mahdiyeh Afshar Bakeshloo¹
Hamidreza Ebrahimi^{2*}

1. PhD Researcher in Architecture, Department of Architecture, School of Architecture, University of Tehran, Iran
2. Assistant Professor, Department of Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, College of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

“Doubt” in the process of theorization can both provide a basis for rethinking and transformation and, when extended without limit, challenge conceptual stability and the possibility of theoretical judgment. Accordingly, this study critically examines the role of “doubt” in the formation of contemporary architectural theories and seeks to clarify the extent to which doubt can function as a productive force in the rethinking and transformation of theory, as well as the conditions under which it may lead to the weakening of shared foundations and theoretical instability.

Drawing on epistemological and theoretical literature from Cartesian methodic doubt and Popperian fallibilism to Kuhn’s concept of paradigm shift and contemporary architectural theory the study critically addresses the two opposing dimensions of doubt. The analysis demonstrates that doubt possesses theory-building potential when it leads to the questioning of established assumptions, the redefinition of problems, and the formulation of defensible positions and criteria. By contrast, when doubt turns into the perpetual suspension of any foundation or criterion, the capacity of theory to explain, judge, and guide architectural practice is diminished.

On this basis, the distinction between “productive doubt” and “destabilizing doubt” is formulated not according to the intensity of doubt, but rather in terms of its consequences for the process of theorization. The critical analysis indicates that, in order to remain dynamic, architectural theory requires neither immutable certainties nor a continual negation of all foundations; rather, it depends on a form of critical, provisional, and revisable stability. This framework can provide a basis for evaluating theoretical positions and for examining the relationship between critique, theory, and practice in future architectural research.

Keywords: Doubt; Contemporary architectural theory; Critical rethinking; Theoretical instability

Has “doubt,” as a critical mechanism in the formation of contemporary architectural theories, provided the conditions for the production and transformation of theory, or has its expansion from a critical method into a state of perpetual uncertainty led to the weakening of shared foundations and theoretical instability in architecture?

Extended Abstract

Contemporary architectural theory has been significantly shaped by the transition from certainty toward questioning established principles. This study critically examines the role of “doubt” in the formation of contemporary architectural theories and asks whether doubt functions as a productive mechanism for theoretical transformation or, when extended indefinitely, becomes a source of theoretical instability. Drawing on epistemological discussions from Descartes, Peirce, Popper, and Kuhn, alongside architectural debates involving Le Corbusier, Venturi, Eisenman, Hays, Tafuri, Somol, Whiting, Baird, Till, and Lefebvre, the study distinguishes between productive doubt and destabilizing doubt.

The analysis shows that doubt contributes to theory formation when it operates methodically, questions established assumptions, redefines problems, and enables the formulation of alternative concepts, positions, and evaluative criteria. Historical examples from modern and postmodern architectural discourse demonstrate that critique becomes theoretically productive when it does more than reject previous principles and instead proposes new frameworks for judgment and action. Venturi’s challenge to modernist purity, simplicity, and unity, for example, replaced dominant criteria with complexity, contradiction, ambiguity, and multiplicity.

However, the study also argues that doubt becomes destabilizing when it turns into the continuous suspension of every foundation, criterion, or theoretical position. In such conditions, theory loses part of its capacity to explain, judge, guide practice, and assume responsibility. The central distinction, therefore, does not depend on the intensity of doubt but on its consequences for the process of theorization. Productive doubt connects three stages: questioning a specific foundation, formulating an alternative or revised position, and evaluating its implications through provisional and revisable criteria.

The study concludes that contemporary architectural theory requires neither a return to absolute certainty nor the permanent rejection of all foundations. Instead, it needs a form of critical, temporary, and revisable stability. Such a framework preserves the transformative potential of critique while maintaining the possibility of theoretical judgment, practical orientation, and constructive engagement with architectural reality. It reconnects theoretical reflection with changing cultural, social, technological, and professional conditions.

Doubt in contemporary architectural theory should not be understood as inherently productive or destabilizing. It becomes productive when questioning established assumptions leads to the re-formulation of problems, the construction of alternative positions, and the development of criteria that remain open to revision. By contrast, when doubt turns into the continuous suspension of every foundation and criterion, theory loses its capacity to explain, judge, and guide architectural action. The central issue, therefore, is not the intensity of doubt, but its theoretical consequences. Contemporary architectural theory requires neither a return to absolute certainty nor the permanent rejection of all foundations, but a form of critical, provisional, and revisable stability that can remain open to critique while still enabling judgment, position-taking, and action.

COPYRIGHTS

Copyright for this article is retained by the authors with publication rights granted to Journal of Critical Reviews (JCR); The Iranian Journal of Critical Studies in Place. This is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/version4/>)

