

Morphosis' Emerson College Los Angeles: Interstitial Spaces as a Relational Field through Combinatory Behavior of Rigid Frameworks and Amorphous Volumes

Heegook Jung¹, Jiae Han^{2*}

¹(Department of Architecture Engineering, Hongik University, Sejong 30016, Republic of Korea;

²(Department of Architecture Engineering, Hongik University, Sejong 30016, Republic of Korea;

*(correspondence Authors: **Jiae Han**)

ABSTRACT : *This study explores the characteristics of interstitial spaces created by the juxtaposition of rigid systems and amorphous systems, focusing on Emerson College Los Angeles (ELA) by Morphosis Architects. In contemporary architecture, the intentional intersection of heterogeneous spatial logics creates a distinct spatial tension. Morphosis employs this strategy by inserting non-linear, fluid volumes within a normative rectangular frame. Moving beyond individual formal characteristics, this research examines the relational dynamics occurring at the interface of these two systems. Through a comparative study of major works by Morphosis, this paper highlights the formal balance ELA achieves between structural stability and spatial indeterminacy. The findings reveal that these interstitial spaces are not neutral voids but active social connectors that facilitate informal intellectual and creative interactions among users. By redefining these gaps as a "vertical piazza," this study illuminates the spatial possibilities inherent in the collision of contrasting geometric orders and presents a new analytical perspective for interpreting formal relationships in contemporary architectural design.*

KEYWORDS - *Interstitial spaces, Morphosis, Emerson College Los Angeles, ELA*

I. INTRODUCTION

The dichotomy between rigid systems and amorphous systems in architecture is a long-standing discourse regarding the fundamental order of spatial organization. Traditionally, rigid systems have secured spatial efficiency through clear hierarchy and structural stability [1]. In contrast, amorphous systems have proposed more liberated and open spatial experiences based on the continuity and transformability of form [2]. Contemporary architecture is evolving toward exploring the tension and relationships generated by intentionally juxtaposing heterogeneous spatial logics, rather than converging these opposing systems into a single, unified logic [3].

Within this architectural trend, Morphosis Architects has treated geometry not as a fixed norm, but as an active design strategy for overlapping and modulating divergent systems [4]. Their work is characterized by an orthogonal grid as a foundation, while inserting diagonal axes to provide orientation and tension to the geometric frame [1]. By combining heterogeneous geometric elements, they form multi-layered spatial compositions that challenge traditional boundaries.

This operational mode of systems is manifested as the clearest spatial contrast in Emerson College Los Angeles (ELA). ELA adopts a structure where a frame of a rigid system, characterized by repeatability and stability, forms the building's exterior, while non-linear and fluid system volumes are inserted within [5]. What is noteworthy here is that ELA does not culminate in a single geometric order; instead, the interaction between the

rigid and amorphous systems shifts the architectural focus from "form itself" to the "relationship between forms" [4].

Particularly, the interstitial space that inevitably occurs at the interface of these two systems is a realm where structural stability and formal indeterminacy are perceived simultaneously [6]. This is not a neutral void that merely connects two systems physically; rather, it functions as a core field that induces intense spatial tension where conflicting geometric logics intersect [5]. Therefore, a fundamental understanding of ELA's spatial configuration requires examining the character and role of the space formed between them, moving beyond a mere analysis of the sculptural qualities of individual systems.

The purpose of this study is to explore the characteristics of the interstitial space formed by the juxtaposition of rigid and amorphous systems in ELA. Through this, the research aims to analyze how the spatial tension generated during the coexistence of opposing systems organizes the architectural experience and, furthermore, what social possibilities this space implies in contemporary architecture. By focusing on the relationality between forms, this study seeks to achieve a multi-dimensional understanding of how Morphosis's architecture operates and to present a valid analytical perspective for interpreting relationships between forms in contemporary architecture.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The rigid system examined in this study is defined as a "normative frame" that encapsulates the stable functions of a building while accommodating existing urban flows [7]. In the Emerson College Los Angeles (ELA) project, this system is materialized as a "10-story square frame" encompassing domestic zones for approximately 217 students [5]. Beyond ELA, this system functions throughout Morphosis's broader body of work as a static infrastructure that accepts universal urban order and functional efficiency.

In contrast, the amorphous system refers to a non-linear system that departs from the fixed forms of Euclidean geometry, encompassing diagonal, curved, and fragmented geometries [3]. At ELA, this characteristic is embodied as a "sculpted form" of liberated educational space that weaves through the central void of the rigid rectangular frame, housing classrooms and administrative offices [5]. In cases such as 41 Cooper Square or the Perot Museum, this system operates as a vertical core and a pivotal circulation system, serving as a primary device that imparts dynamism to the spatial experience [8].

Consequently, while the rigid system provides a backdrop of predictable efficiency and normative stability, the amorphous system is defined as an operational device that disrupts this order and instills vitality. Thom Mayne's work navigates the tension between "willfulness and chance," which liberates spontaneity within the space and triggers "chance behavior" among its users [4].

The interstitial space generated through the collision of these two systems is not merely a physical margin; it is a "relational field" where energy condensed from the intersection of conflicting spatial logics resides. This space acts as an active architectural device that enables "spontaneous discourse"—allowing users to meet familiar faces in corridor alcoves or staggered terraces for impromptu discussions and collaborative work [9]. Ultimately, it functions as a crucial social infrastructure that three-dimensionally weaves human relationships within the context of contemporary architecture.

III.COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

3.1 41 COOPER SQUARE

The spatial structure of 41 Cooper Square establishes a system where an undulating lattice-shaped grand staircase (amorphous) penetrates and interacts with the interior of a cubic mass (rigid) that aligns with the urban context [8].

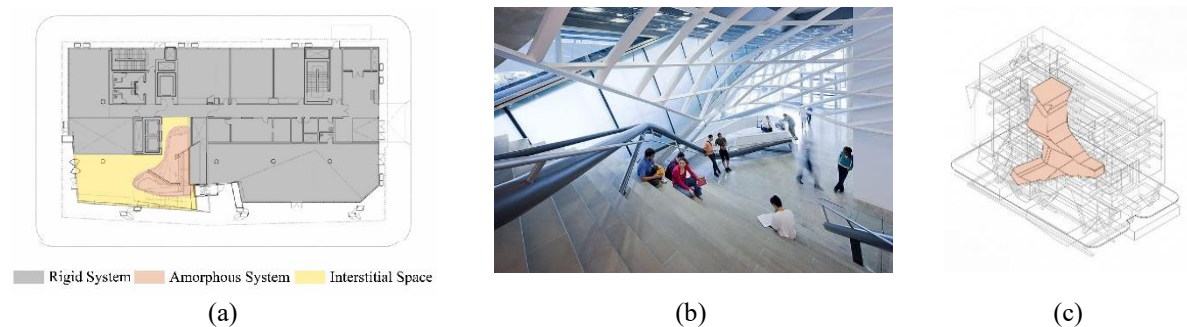


Figure 1. (a) 1st Floor Plan of 41 Cooper Square; (b) Interstitial Space; (c) Amorphous Volume of Grand Staircase

In this configuration, the amorphous core demonstrates a physical act of combination by actively "carving out" the orthogonal facade to expose the interior void to the exterior [8]. The deep void generated by carving into this closed box is not a mere empty space; instead, it forms a "vertical piazza" that serves as the heart of the building [8].

To prevent this interstitial space from remaining static, Morphosis introduced a skip-stop elevator system that mandates physical traversal by the users [8]. Consequently, this space operates as an active social device that triggers spontaneous encounters and multidisciplinary exchanges between previously fragmented departments.

3.2 PEROT MUSEUM OF NATURE AND SCIENCE

The Perot Museum of Nature and Science adopts a configuration where a static gallery cube (rigid) is struck by a heterogeneous and dynamic diagonal escalator tube (amorphous) [10]. Thom Mayne materialized the combination of these two systems not as a seamless fusion, but as a method where the diagonal axis directly "breaks" (Breaking) the perfect geometric cube [10].

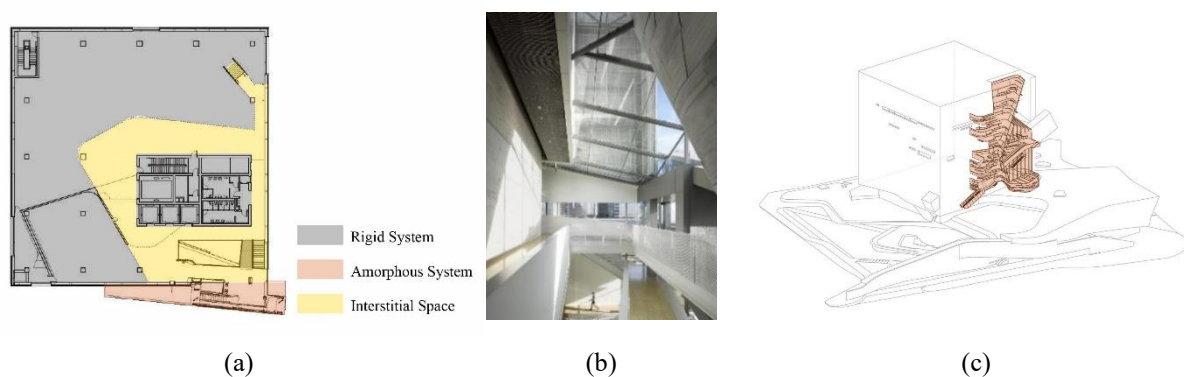


Figure 2 (a) 4th Floor Plan of Perot Museum (b) Interstitial Space (c) Amorphous Volume of escalator tube

The circulation tube, which projects into the air as a cantilever while breaking the cube, creates a gap known as a "mediating circulation space" that connects the closed interior mass with the open urban environment.

This interstitial space operates as a cognitive niche that organizes the user's movement and sensory experience; as visitors transition between dark exhibition halls, they encounter the cityscape, which allows them to regain spatial orientation and take a momentary pause [10].

3.3 EMERSON COLLEGE LOS ANGELES

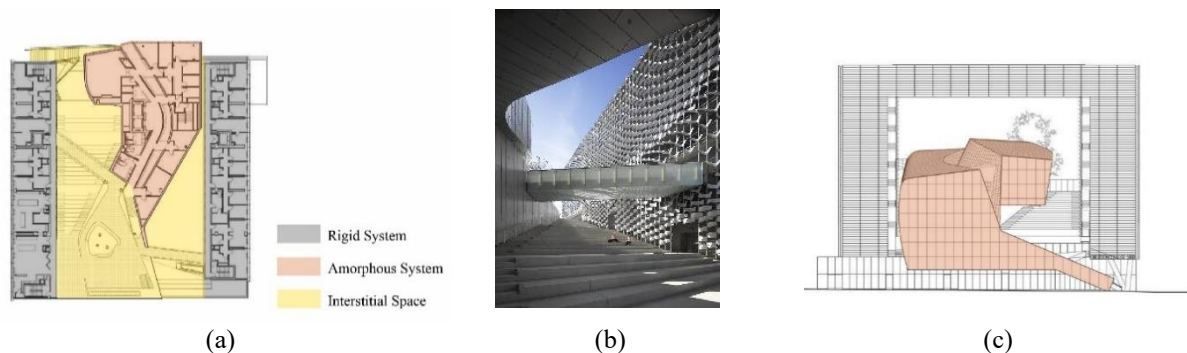


Figure 3 (a) 5th Floor Plan of ELA (b) Interstitial Space (c) Amorphous Volume of classrooms and administrative offices

Emerson College Los Angeles (ELA) presents a configuration where a sculpted form (amorphous), housing classrooms and administrative offices, is positioned within the central void of a square frame (rigid) dedicated to student housing [5]. The combination of these two systems manifests as an organic interaction where the liberated sculptural volume "weaves through" the massive central void left open by the rigid exterior frame [11].

As the rigid frame and the amorphous mass intersect and weave together across multiple levels, "multi-level terraces" and "outdoor rooms" are naturally derived, forming the building's dynamic core [5].

These interstitial spaces do not function as neutral zones; instead, they serve as active interstitial spaces that actively foster and nurture informal social activities and creative cross-pollination among students of diverse academic backgrounds [5].

IV. INTERSTITIAL SPACE

In Emerson College Los Angeles (ELA), the interstitial space—created as the amorphous volume of the educational space organically weaves through the rigid framework of the dormitory [5]—operates as an active field that captures the urban context and facilitates user interaction, transcending a mere physical void.

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of ELA's interstitial space, focusing on the visual frame established by the rigid and amorphous forms and the relational dynamics generated by the organic weaving between these systems.

4.1 VISUAL FRAME OF CITYSCAPE

The 10-story square frame that forms the residential zones does not remain a mere window for the passive observation of the city; instead, it serves as a powerful framing device that defines the entire building as a grand stage set [5]. This frame performs the role of "added scenery," drawing the landscapes of the Hollywood sign and downtown Los Angeles into the architectural interior [5].

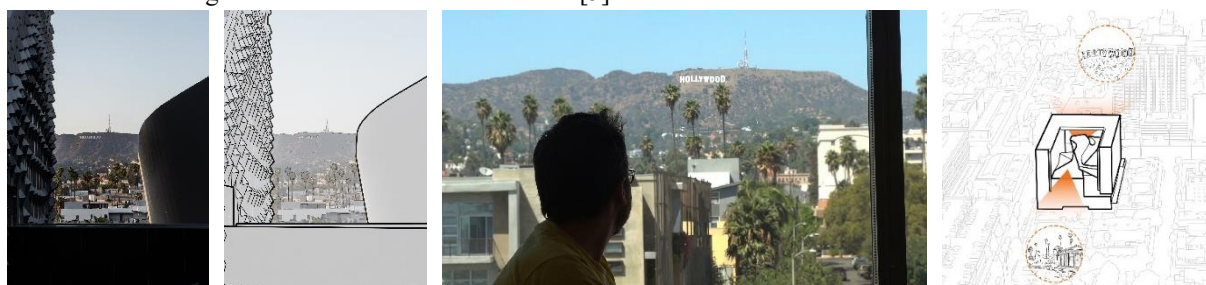


Figure 4 (a, a') Urban view framed through the rigid and amorphous geometries (b) Urban view from the building (c) Diagram illustrating the visual frame of the cityscape, showing a person's view through a window frame

Enveloping the interior walls of this static frame, the undulating textured metal scrim adds a layer of depth to the space as an active skin [5]. This scrim functions as an environmental filter providing shade to the exterior corridors while simultaneously establishing spatial porosity by delicately modulating light and shadow [6]. Within the cold orthogonal frame, users encounter this organic texture, experiencing a dynamic visual backdrop [5] and a unique spatial atmosphere that contrasts with the static order.

4.2 RELATIONAL FIELD

The interstitial space of ELA functions as the core of a "Vertical Campus," where the public domain of the ground level is extended three-dimensionally to the upper floors, and as a "Relational Field" where diverse academic exchanges occur. The massive central void enclosed by the 10-story square frame is defined not as a disconnected exterior, but as a "flexible outdoor room" [5] continuous from the ground to the sky, integrating the physical flow of the city with the building's internal vertical circulation.

In particular, the north-facing "Grand Stairs" and the south-facing "Outdoor Terrace" combine with the educational volume that flexibly weaves through the void [11], forming a three-dimensional "Social Promenade"



Figure 5 (a) Grand Stairs (b) Outdoor Terrace (c) Bridges (d) Interstitial Spaces of ELA

that transcends simple floor divisions. This structural weaving transforms the heart of the building from a mere empty space into an active interstitial space that induces spontaneous encounters and exchanges among students.

These architectural devices form a field of daily life where students' residence and physical social activities take place, while simultaneously creating "active interstitial spaces" that maximize aimless, spontaneous encounters. Consequently, ELA's interstitial space becomes an incubator that promotes informal social activities and "creative cross-pollination" among students of diverse majors [5]. It operates beyond simple functional connection to break down boundaries between programs and induce community cohesion as an active platform for relationships.

V. CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the juxtaposition of two heterogeneous geometric systems—rigid and amorphous—in the architecture of Morphosis Architects forms an active interstitial space that transcends a mere physical void to trigger informal social exchange among users.

An investigation into the combinatory behavior of these systems across three cases revealed distinct logics of integration. In the case of 41 Cooper Square, an amorphous vertical piazza takes a form that is "carved out" of the rigid mass to be exposed to the exterior [8]. The Perot Museum demonstrates a radical mode of collision where a diagonal circulation tube is "breaking" the perfect geometric cube [10]. In contrast, ELA is characterized by an organic interaction where the sculpted form of the educational volume "weaves through" the interior of the normative outer frame [5].

While the interstitial space of Cooper Square induces physical traversal to elicit spontaneous encounters between disciplines, and the Perot Museum focuses on providing a cognitive niche through urban views, ELA simultaneously realizes a field for students' daily interaction and a visual frame of the cityscape. In particular, the

multi-level terraces extending from the ground level to the upper floors function as a "vertical piazza" and a "flexible outdoor room" [5] maximizing the social value of the space.

In conclusion, the collision between the rigid and amorphous systems in ELA is balanced more effectively than in the previous cases. Thus, the gap resulting from the collision of these two systems is evaluated as an exemplary case that operates most actively as a social infrastructure.

Funding: This work was supported by a National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF) grant funded by the Korea government (MSIT) (No. RS-2022-NR069427).

Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

REFERENCES

- [1] P. Johnson and M. Wigley, *Deconstructivist architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988).
- [2] G. Lynn, *Animate form* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999).
- [3] T. Mayne, *Combinatory urbanism: The complex behavior of collective form* (Culver City, CA: Stray Dog Café, 2011).
- [4] V. Ago, 'Strange networks': Inhabiting the boundary condition a conversation with Thom Mayne, *Archit. Design*, 92, 2022, 68-77.
- [5] Morphosis Architects, Emerson College Los Angeles, *Morphosis Architects*, 2014. <https://www.morphosis.com/architecture/127/> (accessed March 5, 2026).
- [6] R. Arnheim, *Art and visual perception: A psychology of the creative eye* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1954).
- [7] Morphosis Architects, FJC Communications, *Morphosis Architects*, 1996. <https://www.morphosis.com/architecture/49/> (accessed March 17, 2026).
- [8] Morphosis Architects, 41 Cooper Square, *Morphosis Architects*, 2014. <https://www.morphosis.com/architecture/4/> (accessed March 5, 2026).
- [9] Morphosis Architects, Bill & Melinda Gates Hall, *Morphosis Architects*, 2014. <https://www.morphosis.com/architecture/212/> (accessed March 17, 2026).
- [10] Morphosis Architects, Perot Museum of Nature and Science, *Morphosis Architects*, 2014. <https://www.morphosis.com/architecture/4/> (accessed March 5, 2026).
- [11] T. Mayne, *Strange networks* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2021).
- [12] Y.J. Kim and B.K. Jun, A study on objective characteristics of Morphosis's architecture: Focusing on construction of student housing, *Proc. 2018 Spring Conference of the Architectural Institute of Korea*, 38(1), 2018, 12-13.
- [13] S.C. Kim, *A study on design characteristics of Morphosis's works: Re-design of a Morphosis' design work in Korea based on analyses of his design philosophy*, Master's thesis, Korea University, Seoul, Korea, 2005.