

## H. Neighborhood Character

### 100. Definition

Neighborhood character is an amalgam of the various elements that give neighborhoods their distinct "personality". These can include land use, urban design, visual resources, historic resources, socioeconomics, traffic, and noise. These technical areas, and whether an action would affect them, are often considered in CEQR, and they are defined and described individually in other chapters of the Technical Manual. For neighborhood character, CEQR considers how those elements combine to create the context and feeling of a neighborhood, and how an action would affect that context. Thus, to determine an action's effects on neighborhood character, these contributing elements are considered together.

### 200. Determining Whether a Neighborhood Character Assessment is Appropriate

An assessment of neighborhood character is generally needed when the action would exceed the preliminary thresholds for neighborhood character, presented below, or when it appears that the action would have moderate effects on several of the elements that contribute to neighborhood character that in combination could have an effect on neighborhood character.

#### 210. PRELIMINARY THRESHOLDS

When the proposed action would result in any of the following conditions, an assessment of neighborhood character is generally appropriate.

- *Land use.* When development resulting from the proposed action would conflict with surrounding uses; conflict with land use policy or other public plans for the area; change land use character; or result in a significant land use impact, as determined in that technical analysis.
- *Urban design.* When the proposed action would result in substantially different building bulk, form, size, scale, or arrangement; block form, street pattern, or street hierarchy; streetscape elements, such as streetwall, landscaping, curbcuts, loading docks, and pedestrian activity and circulation; changes to natural features; or when a significant urban

design impact is identified in that technical analysis.

- *Visual resources.* When the proposed action would result in substantial direct changes to a visual feature, such as unique and important public view corridors and vistas, or to public visual access to such a feature.
- *Historic resources.* When the proposed action would result in substantial direct changes to a historic resource or substantial changes to public views of a historic resource; or when a significant impact on historic resources is identified in that technical analysis.
- *Socioeconomic conditions.* When the proposed action would result in substantial direct or indirect displacement or addition of population, employment, or businesses; substantial changes in the character of businesses; substantial differences in population or employment density from the prevailing condition; or a significant socioeconomic conditions impact, as identified in that technical analysis.
- *Traffic.* When an aspect of traffic—such as the amount of traffic or the type of vehicles—contributes to neighborhood character, *and* when the proposed action would result in a change in level of service (LOS) to C or below (see the traffic chapter of this Manual for details on level of service);
  - Change in traffic patterns;
  - Change in roadway classification (from local to collector, etc.);
  - Change in vehicle mix;
  - Substantial increase in traffic volumes on residential streets; or
  - Significant traffic impact, as identified in that technical analysis.
- *Noise.* When a proposed action would result in significant adverse noise impacts *and* would result in a change in acceptability category (see the discussion in the noise chapter of this Manual).

#### 220. COMBINATION OF MODERATE EFFECTS

Even if an action would fall below the preliminary thresholds for neighborhood character (Section 210, above), it is possible that several moderate changes in the elements that

contribute to neighborhood character could lead to a significant impact on neighborhood character. If it appears that this might occur, a neighborhood character analysis may be appropriate. More information on this kind of significant impact is provided in Section 400, below.

### **300. Assessment Methods**

#### **310. STUDY AREA**

The study area for neighborhood character is the area that may have its character affected by the proposed action. Often, it is coterminous with the land use study area. Unless the action covers a substantial physical area or is a generic or programmatic action, the study area should generally include at least the project site and the area within 400 feet of the project site boundaries (see discussion of study areas in the land use chapter in this Manual). These boundaries can be modified, however, as appropriate, to include any additional areas that would be affected by the action, or to exclude areas that would clearly not be affected by the action.

Larger study areas may be appropriate in such circumstances as actions that are large in scale, that are just outside a well-defined neighborhood that they could affect, or those with truck routes or other action-related traffic some distance from the site of the action. An example of an action requiring a larger study area would be an action that would facilitate a new commercial building on the outskirts of a well-defined neighborhood, such as Brooklyn Heights. Even if that neighborhood is outside of the quarter-mile radius generally appropriate as the study area for a new commercial building, including some of Brooklyn Heights in the study area may be warranted if it appears that the new building could affect its character. This could occur, for example, if the new building would be visually inconsistent with and visible from the neighborhood, or if it would generate increased traffic along quiet, residential neighborhood streets.

Smaller study areas may be appropriate when the neighborhood that would be affected would itself be smaller than the typical study area. An example would be a mid-rise (say, 15- to 20-story) building proposed for midblock in a residential part of the Upper West Side in Manhattan, where the midblock portion of the block has a strongly defined low-rise (four- to

five-story) residential character that is very different from the ends of the block, where mid-rise buildings with stores on the ground floors front the wide avenues. The proposed building would not affect the character of the end portions of the block, but could affect the mid-block portion. Therefore, the study area would focus on the midblock portion of the block. Considering a study area that is too large would dilute the intensity of the effects – in this case, a larger area could make it appear that the action would have no significant impacts.

For generic or programmatic actions that would affect relatively small areas, the affected areas would serve as the study area. When large areas would be affected, the analysis can consider neighborhoods typical of those that would be affected. For example, in its evaluation of the Quality Housing zoning amendments, the City chose 35 neighborhoods representative of the types of neighborhoods that could be affected and studied the rezoning's potential effects on those neighborhoods.

#### **320. ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES**

##### **321. Determining Characteristics of Neighborhood Character**

After the appropriate study area has been established, the determining characteristics of that neighborhood should be identified. The analyst should determine the neighborhood's overall character, as well as the elements that contribute to and define that character. The steps involved in assessing neighborhood character are described in this section.

###### **321.1. Gathering Information**

1. *Field visit.* Generally, the first step is a field visit to observe the neighborhood. Field visits are made during typically active periods rather than at odd hours. The analyst observes such features as the major uses, scale and types of buildings, activity patterns and intensities, and the relationship between traffic, noise, and the character of the streets. Any unusual features or combination of features are identified.
2. *Photographs* Photos are effective in illustrating a neighborhood's characteristics.

3. *Other available information.* Data gathered for other technical areas of the environmental assessment (such as land use, visual quality, socioeconomics, etc.) are useful in identifying the neighborhood's characteristics.
4. *Interviews.* Interviewing neighborhood residents and workers to learn about the neighborhood is also useful in some cases, but generally is not necessary.

### **321.2. Describing the Existing Character**

Both graphics and text can be used to describe the character of the neighborhood affected by the action. This assessment should be organized to identify those elements that have a major determining role in the character of the neighborhood.

Because a neighborhood's character is the result of the combination of various contributing elements, the description should characterize the salient features of the neighborhood rather than repeating information about each of the contributing technical areas (e.g., land use, socioeconomics, etc.) found elsewhere in the environmental assessment. The discussion should focus on the major characteristics of the neighborhood and how they relate to the area's overall character. The discussion should address all of the various components of neighborhood character, even if changes to only one of these elements have triggered the need for an analysis. Some of these elements will be critical to the character, while others may be only contributing.

For example, the Financial District area of Manhattan is characterized and defined by its tall buildings and narrow, winding streets. The skyscrapers front uniformly onto the street, creating a wall. During much of the day, these streets are crowded with pedestrians. In this neighborhood, the height and form of the buildings, the width of the streets, the block form, and the pedestrian activity are the defining characteristics. Other elements, such as socioeconomic conditions, traffic, and noise, contribute, but are not key features of the Financial District area.

In another area, however, such as suburban Staten Island, the width of the streets and the buildings' positions relative to the street may not be important, but the size and form of its single-family, detached homes, the landscaping, and the quiet and traffic-free streets may be.

Generic or programmatic actions can be assessed similarly. In the evaluation of the Quality Housing zoning amendments described above (Section 310), for each of the 35 representative neighborhoods, the following characteristics were noted: regularity of street grid, building form, site planning, parking, and streetscape. These descriptors were particularly relevant because they were characteristics that could be directly affected by the proposed action. Each neighborhood was also described according to its predominant land use(s): low-rise, residential, medium-density residential, commercial, industrial, or undeveloped.

### **322. Future No Action Condition**

Using the information gathered for the other technical areas about expected changes in the future, assess whether and how the character of the neighborhood would change in the future without the proposed action. This analysis focuses on the key elements that contribute to neighborhood character, similar to the analysis of the proposed action, described below in Section 323.

### **323. Future Action Condition**

To determine how the proposed action would affect neighborhood character, relative to the no action conditions, the assessment should describe the proposed action in terms of how it would affect the key elements that define the study area's character. For example, if one of the most important aspects of a neighborhood's character is that a street ends in a cul-de-sac, so that the area is very quiet and has very little traffic, note whether the action would change that condition (by continuing the street through, for example). In the example of Manhattan's Financial District, where the height and form of the buildings, narrowness of the streets, and pedestrian activity are the defining characteristics, a tower-on-a plaza design for an office building would change neighborhood character in its vicinity, even if it represented a one-for-one replacement of floor area and use of a more characteristic building. Also, in this case an increase in traffic alone, although it might be a significant traffic impact and require mitigation, would not affect neighborhood character.

Generic or programmatic actions can be assessed in much the same way, with somewhat less detail than site-specific actions' assessments. In some cases, when less detail about the action is available, the assessment will consider the types of circumstances or issues that *could* affect

neighborhood character in the study area.

#### 400. Determining Impact Significance

Understanding key elements that define neighborhood character and the relationship among elements forms the basis for determining impact significance. Usually, a significant change to one of the determining elements of neighborhood character will result in a significant impact on neighborhood character. In general, the more uniform and consistent the existing neighborhood context is, the more sensitive it is to change. A neighborhood that has a more varied context can typically tolerate greater changes without experiencing significant impacts. A significant impact identified in one of the technical areas that can contribute to neighborhood character is *not* automatically equivalent to a significant impact on neighborhood character. Rather, it serves as an indication that neighborhood character should be examined. If that examination determines that one of the defining features of the neighborhood's character would be significantly affected, then a significant impact would occur. For example, a significant traffic impact might occur if an action adds vehicles to an intersection, increasing the delay there. This significant impact would not be an impact on neighborhood character, however, if traffic is not an important determining characteristic of that neighborhood. Alternatively, a significant impact on neighborhood character could occur because of an increase in traffic on area roadways, even if that increase did *not* constitute a significant traffic impact.

Significant impacts on neighborhood character can also occur even if the proposed action would not have a significant impact on any one defining feature of the area. In these cases, the action may instead have moderate impacts on a number of defining features that cumulatively may result in a significant impact on the neighborhood character. For example, a small commercial strip in a suburban section of Staten Island might be different in land use and in urban design from the area's detached houses with lawns and landscaping, but not significantly; it might add some traffic to the local residential streets, but not a significant amount; and it might increase area noise levels, but not significantly. Altogether, however, the commercial strip could have a significant impact on the neighborhood's character by changing it from a small-scale, quiet residential area to a busier commercial one.

As in other technical areas, significant impacts on neighborhood character can be beneficial or adverse. Because a neighborhood's character is perceived and contextual, this judgment may be more subjective than in other technical areas. For example, a new and modern apartment building in an older neighborhood may be perceived as an improvement by some, but as out of context and adverse by others. The lead agency must make the final decision as to which significant impacts are adverse and require mitigation and may consider comments made during public review in making such a determination (see Chapter 2).

#### 500. Developing Mitigation

Often, the mitigation proposed for significant impacts in the technical areas that contribute to neighborhood character will also mitigate neighborhood character impacts. For example, when a significant traffic impact is predicted and increases in traffic would also significantly affect neighborhood character, measures to mitigate the significant traffic impact may also reduce traffic to levels that are consistent with the neighborhood. Mitigation of urban design impacts will often effectively mitigate related impacts on neighborhood character as well.

Other times, however, mitigation measures may alleviate significant adverse impacts in the other technical areas, but significant impacts on neighborhood character will remain. In the example of significant traffic impacts, above, mitigation measures might reduce the delay at area intersections to acceptable levels, but not the overall effect that increased traffic may have on the character of an area. The number of vehicles might still be high enough to change the character of the streets. Another example is an action that would result in significant adverse socioeconomic impacts related to secondary displacement of neighborhood residents, and a related significant impact on neighborhood character because of the change in the area's population profile. The socioeconomic impacts may be mitigated by finding affordable housing for those residents displaced, but if the residents move outside the neighborhood, the significant impact on the neighborhood's character would still occur.

If the mitigation measures presented for the action's other significant adverse impacts, if any, would not mitigate neighborhood character impacts, other mitigation measures should be

identified where feasible. For example, if a signal timing change addresses a traffic impact, but not a related neighborhood character impact, the solution might be deliberate rerouting of project-related traffic to a more suitable street. This solution might be considered even if the diversion causes a new traffic impact (which can be mitigated) but does not affect neighborhood character.

## **600. Developing Alternatives**

Alternatives proposed to avoid impacts in other technical areas of the environmental assessment may also avoid neighborhood character impacts. Similar to mitigation, alternatives proposed in response to impacts in the technical areas of the assessment may not necessarily avoid neighborhood character impacts (see the discussion of mitigation measures in Section 500, above).

Mitigation measures developed specifically to avoid neighborhood character impacts may be incorporated into alternative proposals.

## **700. Regulations and Coordination**

### **710. REGULATIONS AND STANDARDS**

There are no special statutory regulations or standards that control the study of neighborhood character in particular. Regulations and standards for each of the technical areas that can contribute to neighborhood character are discussed in Section 710 of the appropriate Manual Chapters.

### **720. APPLICABLE COORDINATION**

The neighborhood character chapter requires considerable coordination among the different technical areas that make up neighborhood character—land use, urban design, visual resources, historic resources, socioeconomics, traffic, and noise. The lead agency will want to be sure that the analysts addressing individual technical areas are aware of the issue of neighborhood character and that the analyst for neighborhood character coordinates with these other disciplines.

### **730. LOCATION OF INFORMATION**

Information related to the elements of neighborhood character is found in the other technical areas of the environmental assessment (see Section 730 of the appropriate technical chapters of this Manual).