

NEIGHBORHOOD CHARACTER

CHAPTER 21

In a neighborhood character assessment under CEQR, one considers how elements of the environment combine to create the context of a neighborhood and how a project may affect that context. Thus, to determine a project's effects on neighborhood character, the elements that contribute to a neighborhood's context are considered together.

New York City's neighborhoods are organic and dynamic places, often identified as much by a long-established character as they are by their changes over time. Such changes are often brought on by factors independent of the proposed project, such as increases and decreases in population; local, regional, and global economic forces; and shifts in demographic patterns. Neighborhood character impacts are rare. Only under unusual circumstances would a combination of moderate effects to the neighborhood result in an impact to neighborhood character, in the absence of an impact in any of the relevant technical areas.

Moreover, a significant impact identified in one of the technical areas that contribute to a neighborhood's character is not automatically equivalent to a significant impact on neighborhood character. Rather, it serves as an indication that neighborhood character should be examined. The examination focuses on whether a defining feature of the neighborhood's character may be significantly affected. For example, a significant shadows impact may occur if a project would cast incremental shadow on a sunlight-sensitive resource, such as distinctive architectural features of a building's façade that are dependent on sunlight. This significant impact would not constitute an impact on neighborhood character, however, if a building's architectural features are not a defining feature of the neighborhood at large. Conversely, a significant impact on neighborhood character may result due to incremental shadow if that neighborhood is defined by its architectural features that are dependent on sunlight.

As indicated throughout the Manual, it is important for an applicant to work closely with the lead agency during the entire environmental review process. Because the neighborhood character assessment requires considerable coordination among the different technical areas that make up neighborhood character—land use, urban design and visual resources, historic resources, socioeconomics, transportation, and noise—the lead agency should consult, as appropriate, with the City's expert agencies for that specific technical area.

100. DEFINITION

Neighborhood character is a mixture of various elements that give neighborhoods their distinct "personality." These elements may include a neighborhood's land use, urban design visual resources, historic resources, socioeconomics, transportation, and noise. These technical areas are often considered in a CEQR assessment and are defined and described individually in other chapters of the Technical Manual.

200. DETERMINING WHETHER A NEIGHBORHOOD CHARACTER ASSESSMENT IS APPROPRIATE

An assessment of neighborhood character is generally recommended when a proposed project has the potential to result in significant adverse impacts in any technical area presented below, or when the project may have moderate effects on several of the elements that define a neighborhood's character.



210. SIGNIFICANT IMPACTS IN OTHER TECHNICAL AREAS

To determine whether a Neighborhood Character assessment is appropriate, answer the following question:

Would the project have the potential to result in any significant adverse impacts in the following areas?

- A. Land Use, Zoning, and Public Policy;
- B. Socioeconomic Conditions;
- C. Community Facilities;
- D. Open Space;
- E. Historic and Cultural Resources;
- F. Urban Design and Visual Resources;
- G. Shadows;
- H. Transportation; or
- I. Noise.

If “Yes,” a preliminary assessment of neighborhood character may be appropriate. For guidance on conducting a preliminary neighborhood character assessment, proceed to Section 310, below. If the answer is “No,” a preliminary assessment of neighborhood character is probably not warranted. However, depending on the project, a combination of moderate changes in several of these technical areas may potentially have a significant effect on neighborhood character. See Section 220, below, for further information.

220. COMBINATION OF MODERATE EFFECTS

Even if a project does not have the potential to result in a significant adverse impact in any specific technical area(s), additional analysis may be appropriate based on the potential for a combination of moderate effects in more than one area. A “moderate” effect is generally defined as an effect that is reasonably close to the significant adverse impact threshold for a particular technical analysis area.

When considered together, effects on defining elements of a neighborhood may have the potential to significantly affect neighborhood character. These may consist of a combination of urban design, visual resources, historic resources, shadows, open space, and noise effects. Moderate effects on several of these elements may affect defining features of a neighborhood and, in turn, a pedestrian’s overall experience. Additionally, a combination of moderate effects on the land use, socioeconomic, and transportation conditions of a neighborhood may also result in changes in the prevailing businesses and economics of an area, which in turn may affect defining features of the neighborhood and the overall experience of pedestrians, workers, residents, and visitors. If it is determined that two or more categories may have potential moderate effects on the environment, the following question should be answered:

Would the proposed project result in a combination of moderate effects to several elements that cumulatively may affect neighborhood character?

If a project would result in only slight effects in several analysis categories, then no further analysis is warranted. If the answer to the above question is “Yes,” then proceed to the preliminary analysis in Section 320, below.

300. ASSESSMENT METHODS

310. STUDY AREA

The study area for a preliminary analysis of neighborhood character is typically consistent with the study areas in the relevant technical areas assessed under CEQR that contribute to the defining elements of the neighborhood.

Unless the project covers a substantial physical area or is a generic action, the study area should generally include at least the project site and the area within 400 feet of the project site boundaries. The extent of the study area



may be modified, as appropriate, either to include any additional areas that may be affected by the project or to exclude areas that would clearly not be affected by the project.

Larger study areas may be appropriate in certain circumstances, such as when projects are large in scale, located just outside a well-defined neighborhood that they may affect, or may result in truck routes or other project-related traffic beyond the proposed site. For example, if a project would facilitate a new commercial building on the outskirts of a well-defined neighborhood, such as Brooklyn Heights, a larger study area may be appropriate. A quarter mile radius may be used as the study area for a commercial building. Even if that neighborhood is outside of the radius generally considered an appropriate study area for a new commercial building, it may be appropriate to include a portion of the Brooklyn Heights neighborhood in the study area if the new building may affect its character.

Smaller study areas may be appropriate if the neighborhood that may be affected is itself smaller than the typical study area. An example may be a mid-rise (15- to 20-story) building proposed for a midblock in a residential part of the Upper West Side of Manhattan and 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 ground floor retail front wide avenues. The proposed building may not affect the character of the ends of the block but may affect the mid-block portion. Therefore, it may be appropriate for the study area to focus on the mid-blocks. Considering a study area that is too large would dilute the intensity of the effects.

For generic actions that would affect relatively small areas, the affected areas would serve as the study area. When large areas would be affected, the analysis considers neighborhoods typical of those that would be affected.

320. PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

A preliminary assessment determines whether changes expected in other technical areas may affect a defining feature of the neighborhood and its character. The assessment should answer the following two questions:

1. *What are the defining features of the neighborhood?*
2. *Does the project have the potential to affect the defining features of the neighborhood, either through the potential for a significant adverse impact or a combination of moderate effects in relevant technical areas?*

DEFINING FEATURES

Because a neighborhood's character is the result of the combination of various contributing elements and features, the salient features of the neighborhood should be identified. The discussion should focus on the major characteristics of the neighborhood and how they relate to the area's overall character and should not merely repeat information about each of the contributing technical areas (e.g., land use, socioeconomic, etc.) found elsewhere in the environmental assessment. For instance, the analysis may consider whether a particular housing type, such as rent-stabilized housing, serves to define the socioeconomic character of an area. The displacement of a large amount of this type of housing from the area may potentially affect neighborhood character. This information should be available from the socioeconomic conditions analysis (see Chapter 5, "Socioeconomic Conditions," for guidance). The discussion of neighborhood character should address all the various components of neighborhood character, even if changes to only one of these elements have triggered the analysis. Some of these elements are critical to the character, while others may only contribute to it.

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 de-



fining characteristics. Other elements, such as socioeconomic conditions, transportation, and noise, contribute to the character, 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.

Defining features of a neighborhood may include geography and topography, land use and density, historic features including buildings or other signifiers of the past, cultural features of a neighborhood, transportation patterns, and natural features. Defining elements of geography and topography may include block front character, street width, existence of view sheds and corridors, elevation, waterfront areas, and proximity to transit. Cultural features of a neighborhood may include a multilingual community, distinctive food or retail options, or a high level of planned cultural activities. Natural features relevant to neighborhood character may include local or destination parks, Special Natural Resource District (SNRD) neighborhood areas, proximity to waterfront, or proximity to other natural open spaces such as natural rock outcroppings or forested areas or beaches.

For purposes of the preliminary assessment, a description of the neighborhood's general defining features is usually appropriate, and depending on the project, a site visit may also be recommended. If a detailed assessment is conducted, that assessment may go into greater depth as needed to make an impact determination.

POTENTIAL TO AFFECT DEFINING FEATURES OF A NEIGHBORHOOD

After the defining features of a neighborhood are identified, the potential for the project to affect the defining features of the neighborhood, either through the potential for a significant adverse impact or a combination of moderate effects in relevant technical areas, should be examined. For example, a project may affect a defining neighborhood feature if a significant adverse shadow impact was identified on sunlight sensitive features of an historic building or park and that resource was determined to be central to a neighborhood's character. A combination of moderate effects that could affect defining features may occur, for example, with a proposal for a large office complex in an area characterized by quiet residential streets with limited pedestrian and vehicular traffic. In this instance the project may result in an increase in traffic and pedestrian activity on local streets to the extent that the character of the area may be significantly altered.

If the project has the potential to affect defining features of a neighborhood, a detailed assessment of neighborhood character may be appropriate. If there is no potential for the project to affect such features, further analysis is likely not warranted.

330. DETAILED ASSESSMENT

After a preliminary assessment has been performed and it has been determined that a project may affect a contributing element of neighborhood character, the detailed assessment is used to examine potential effects of the project by gathering information through field visits, photographs, and interviews, as needed. Using this information as a baseline, the future No-Action and future With-Action conditions are then projected and compared. The steps involved in a detailed assessment of neighborhood character are described in this section.

331.1. Gather Information

FIELD VISIT

Generally, the first step in a detailed analysis is to conduct a field visit to observe the neighborhood. Field visits typically are made during active periods rather than at odd hours. Observations are made of such features as predominate land uses, scale and types of buildings, pedestrian activity, or vehicular movement patterns and intensities, and the relationship between traffic, noise, and the character of the streets. Any unusual features or combination of features are identified.



PHOTOGRAPHS

Photographs are an effective way to illustrate a neighborhood's characteristics. Photomontages which combine multiple photos of an area to describe or understand the context of the neighborhood character can also be used.

INTERVIEWS

Interviewing neighborhood residents and workers to learn about the neighborhood may also be useful in some cases but is not always necessary.

OTHER AVAILABLE INFORMATION

Data gathered for other technical areas of the environmental assessment (such as land use, socioeconomic conditions, community facilities, urban design and visual resources, etc.) are useful in identifying a neighborhood's characteristics.

331.2. Describe the Existing Character

Both graphics and text may be used to describe the character of the neighborhood affected by the project. This assessment should be organized to identify those elements that have a major determining role in the character of the neighborhood. For examples of how to determine the existing character see Section 320, above.

Generic actions may be assessed similarly. Neighborhoods may be described by the regularity of street grid, building form, site planning and configuration, parking, and streetscape, as well as by predominant land use(s): low-rise residential, medium-density residential, commercial, industrial, or undeveloped.

332. Future No-Action Condition

Using the information gathered for other technical areas about changes expected in the future, predict how the character of the neighborhood would change in the future without the proposed project (the No-Action condition). This analysis focuses on the key elements that contribute to neighborhood character and if, and how, they may change without the proposed project.

333. Future With-Action Condition

To determine how the proposed project may affect neighborhood character compared to the No-Action condition, the assessment should describe the proposed project in terms of how it would affect the key elements that define the study area's character (the With-Action condition). 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 project 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 may change neighborhood character in its vicinity, even if it represented a one-for-one replacement of floor area. Also, in this case an increase in traffic alone, although it may be a significant transportation impact that requires mitigation, may not affect neighborhood character.

Actions assessed in a generic assessment may be evaluated in much the same way with somewhat less detail than an assessment of site-specific projects. In some cases, when less detail about the project is available, the assessment considers the circumstances or issues that may affect neighborhood character in the study area.

400. DETERMINING IMPACT SIGNIFICANCE

An understanding of the key elements that define neighborhood character, and their relationships to one another, forms the basis for determining impact significance. Usually, a significant change to one of the determining elements of neighborhood character would result in a significant impact on neighborhood character. In general, the more uniform

and consistent the existing neighborhood context, the more sensitive it is to change. A neighborhood that has a more varied context is typically able to tolerate greater changes without experiencing significant impacts.

A significant impact identified in one of the technical areas that may 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 may occur. For example, a significant shadows impact may occur if a project would result in incremental shadow to a sunlight-sensitive resource, such as distinctive architectural features of a building's façade that are dependent on sunlight. However, a shadows impact does not necessarily result in an impact on neighborhood character if a building's architectural features are not an important determining characteristic of the neighborhood as a whole. Alternatively, a significant impact on neighborhood character may occur if a neighborhood is defined by architectural features that are dependent on sunlight.

Significant impacts on neighborhood character may also occur even if the proposed project would not have a significant impact on any single defining feature of the area. In such cases, the project may have moderate impacts on a number of defining features that, cumulatively, result in a significant impact on the neighborhood character. For example, a commercial strip in a suburban section of Staten Island may be different in land use and in urban design from the area's detached houses with lawns and landscaping; it may add some traffic to local residential streets, but not a significant amount; and it may increase area noise levels, but not significantly. Altogether, however, the commercial strip may 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 with other technical areas, significant impacts on neighborhood character may be either 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.

500. DEVELOPING MITIGATION

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

In other situations, however, mitigation measures may alleviate significant adverse impacts in other technical areas, but significant impacts on neighborhood character may remain. In the example of significant shadows impacts, above, mitigation measures may reduce the extent and/or duration of incremental shadow, but not the overall effect that incremental shadow may have on the character of the area. Another example is a project that may result in both significant adverse socioeconomic impacts related to secondary residential displacement 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 displaced residents, but if the residents move out of the neighborhood, the significant impact on the neighborhood's character still occurs.

If mitigation measures presented for the project's other significant adverse impacts, if any, would not mitigate neighborhood character impacts, other mitigation measures are to be identified where feasible. For example, if a signal timing change addresses a transportation impact, but not a related neighborhood character impact, the solution may be deliberate rerouting of project-related traffic to a more suitable street. This solution may be considered even if the diversion causes a new traffic impact (which may 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 other technical areas may not necessarily avoid neighborhood character impacts.

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 statutes, regulations, or standards that specifically control the study of neighborhood character. Regulations and standards for each of the technical areas that may contribute to neighborhood character are discussed in Section 700 of the appropriate Manual chapters.

720. APPLICABLE COORDINATION

The neighborhood character assessment requires considerable coordination among the different technical areas that make up neighborhood character—land use, urban design, and visual resources, historic resources, socioeconomics, transportation, and noise. The lead agency should ensure that the analysts addressing individual technical areas are aware of the issue of neighborhood character and that the analyst addressing neighborhood character coordinates with these other disciplines.

730. LOCATION OF INFORMATION

- Information related to the elements of neighborhood character is found in Section 700 of the land use, urban design and visual resources, historic resources, socioeconomics, transportation, and noise technical chapters of this Manual and the following web sites: For Landmark Preservation Commission (LPC) Viewshed map, go to: www.landmarks.nyc.gov
- For the Community District Profile, go to: www.communityprofiles.planning.nyc.gov
- For Historic Database by New York Public Library (NYPL), go to: www.oldnyc.com
- For Urban Archive database (organization), go to: www.urbanarchive.org/cities/nyc