
Chapter 3: Urban Design and Visual Resources

3.1 Introduction

Urban design is the totality of components that may affect a pedestrian's experience of public space. To determine if a proposed action has the potential to change the pedestrian experience, an urban design assessment under CEQR guidelines focuses on the components of a proposed action that may have the potential to alter the arrangement, appearance, and functionality of the built environment from the pedestrian's perspective. In accordance with the *2014 CEQR Technical Manual*, a preliminary assessment of urban design is appropriate when there is the potential for a pedestrian to observe, from the street level, a physical alteration beyond those allowed by existing zoning regulations.

A visual resource is the connection from the public realm to significant natural or built features, including views of the waterfront, public parks, landmark structures or districts, otherwise distinct buildings or groups of buildings, or natural resources. Visual resources analyses are not often required pursuant to the *2014 CEQR Technical Manual* methodology, and the physical conditions surrounding this project do not trigger the need for conducting a visual resources analysis. While portions of the Throgs Neck Bridge can be seen from Ditmars Boulevard in the vicinity of the project site, these views are extremely limited and are obscured by intervening structures associated with the Grand Central Parkway and LaGuardia Airport and are not considered significant. There are no other natural or cultural resources on the project site, within the 400 foot study area, or directly visible from within the 400 foot study area. Therefore, no further analysis is warranted and the proposed actions would not result in any significant adverse impacts to visual resources.

The following Chapter contains the urban design analysis for the proposed project.

3.2 Methodology

In accordance with the *2014 CEQR Technical Manual* guidelines, the following preliminary urban design assessment considers a 400 foot radius study area where the proposed actions would be most likely to influence the built environment. As stipulated in the *2014 CEQR Technical Manual*, since the purpose of the preliminary assessment is to determine whether any physical changes proposed by the project would significantly impact elements of urban design, the following information, if known, is included in a preliminary assessment:

- A concise narrative of the existing project area, and conditions under the future;
- No-Action and With-Action conditions;
- An aerial photograph of the study area and ground-level photographs of the site area with immediate context;
- Zoning and floor area calculations of the existing and future With-Action conditions;
- Lot and tower coverage, and building heights; and
- A three-dimensional representation of the future With-Action and No-Action (if relevant) condition streetscape.

If the preliminary assessment determines that a change to the pedestrian experience is minimal and unlikely to disturb the vitality, walkability or the visual character of the area, then no further assessment is necessary. However, if it shows that changes to the pedestrian environment are significant enough to require greater explanation and further study, then a detailed analysis may be appropriate.

The following preliminary urban design assessment follows these guidelines and provides a characterization of existing conditions followed by a description of urban design under future No-Action and With-Action conditions, and an analysis determining the extent to which physical changes resulting from the proposed actions would alter the pedestrian experience.

The urban design study area is defined as the area within 400 feet of the project site and is generally bounded by LaGuardia Airport parking fields to the north, mid-block east of 25th Avenue to the east, Curtis Street and 102nd Street to the south, and mid-block west of the 102nd Street Bridge to the west. This is the area in which the proposed actions would be most likely to have effects in terms of urban design and visual resources.

3.3 Assessment

Existing Conditions

Project Site

The project site comprises the majority of the block generally bounded by the Grand Central Parkway to the north, residential uses to the east, Ditmars Boulevard to the south, and the 102nd Street Bridge to the west (Block 1641, Lot 1). The project site contains a 10-story, 111-foot-4-inch tall Marriott hotel building situated in the western portion of the project site, a 410-space parking facility in the eastern portion of the property, public and service entrance driveways, and a landscaped perimeter. See Figures 3.1 and 3.2 for representative photographs of the project site.

Ditmars Boulevard, a wide, two-lane, east-west commercial and residential corridor, runs through the center of the study area and converges with a traffic circle, the intersection of Ditmars Boulevard, 23rd Avenue, and the 102nd Street Bridge, just west of the project site in the western portion of the study area. Ditmars Boulevard continues west of the traffic circle as well (see Figure 3.1).

Study Area

Overall, the urban design of the study area is characterized by uses complementary to LaGuardia Airport, including hotels and institutional uses along Ditmars Boulevard. Beyond these uses to the west and south are one- and two-family residences (generally two-to-three stories tall), which also border the project site to the east. Highway transportation infrastructure of the Grand Central Parkway borders the project site to the north, with parking fields associated with LaGuardia Airport beyond. The urban design character of the buildings in the study area generally consists of newer mid- to high-rise hotel buildings (two of which, on the south side of Ditmars Boulevard, share a parking garage) and low-rise one- and two-family residential buildings with small footprints relative to their lot size.

Photo 1

View of the existing hotel building on the project site



Photo 2

View of the existing parking structure



Photo 3

View of parking area, facing
north from Ditmars
Boulevard



Photo 4

View of existing signage on
hotel building



Additionally, a six- to seven-story nursing facility at the far southwestern corner of the study area, fronting on the traffic circle, as well as a three-story homelessness resource center at the confluence of Ditmars Boulevard, 23rd Avenue, and 102nd Street, round out the urban design character of the study area. See Figures 3.3 and 3.4 for representative views of the commercial and institutional buildings to the west of the site, as well as the Grand Central Parkway to the north. See Figure 3.4 for representative views of the residential uses in the area.

Greenstreets are present along Ditmars Boulevard and 23rd Avenue, including the interior of the traffic circle (see Figure 3.5). Other open spaces and greenery in the study area includes landscaping along either side of the Grand Central Parkway as well as the perimeter of properties containing commercial uses.

The Grand Central Parkway is a prominent feature just north of the project site within the study area. As a major automobile thoroughfare, the parkway forms a physical barrier between the project site (to the south) and LaGuardia Airport (to the north) (see Figure 3.3). Similarly, the 102nd Street Bridge, an elevated bridge that traverses the Grand Central Parkway just northwest of the project site, also serves as a physical barrier within the study area (see Figure 3.5).

Ditmars Boulevard is the primary commercial corridor in the study area, lined with commercial uses complementary to LaGuardia Airport, which are hotels with medium- to large-sized building footprints. One- and two-family residential buildings along Ditmars Boulevard are located east of the project site, which feature smaller, but proportionally similar, lot coverages.

Generally, the architectural qualities of the residential buildings along Ditmars Boulevard within the study area are characterized by both detached and semi-attached buildings, generally two stories in height with pitched roofs. Building materials vary, but are generally typical of low-density housing, including brick and mortar, stucco, and vinyl siding. Commercial and institutional buildings along Ditmars Boulevard are generally tall (seven to ten stories, with the exception of the three-story homelessness resource building), and feature traditional façade materials, such as masonry, stucco, and terra-cotta materials. While the buildings are generally irregular in shape, the individual building elements comprising them are generally square or rectangular in shape.

Lot coverage along Ditmars Boulevard ranges from approximately 20 to 50 percent, with the larger hotel buildings, setback from the sidewalk, ranging in height from seven to ten stories. Due to the varying heights of buildings and setbacks of buildings along Ditmars Boulevard in the central and western portions of the study area, the street wall is inconsistent. East of the project site along Ditmars Boulevard, the street wall becomes consistent with one- and two-family residences setback at uniform distances. The presence of street trees is fairly consistent along the entirety of Ditmars Boulevard within the study area (see Figures 3.5 and 3.6).

As noted above, the buildings in the study area consist of a mix of older low-rise residential buildings, mid- to high-rise hotel buildings, and two institutional buildings of varying heights. In general, residential buildings in the eastern half of the study area were built in the early to mid-twentieth century, with a majority of lot coverages ranging from 20 to 40 percent. Residential buildings in the western portion of the study area are older, the majority of which were built in the early twentieth century with lot coverages generally ranging between 30 and 45 percent.

Architectural characteristics of residential buildings in the southeastern portion of the study area, south of Ditmars Boulevard off of 25th Avenue, consist of two- to two-and-a-half-story detached and semi-attached

Photo 5

View of the nursing facility
in the western portion of the
study area

**Photo 6**

View of the Grand Central
Parkway



Photo 7

View of the homelessness assistance facility immediately south of the project site

**Photo 8**

Representative view of residential land uses within the study area



Photo 9

View of the 102nd Street
Bridge



Photo 10

Representative view of
Greenstreets within the
study area



Photo 11

View of the Ditmars
Boulevard corridor



Photo 12

View of the hotel uses along
the Ditmars Boulevard
corridor



buildings with pitched roofs. Building materials include brick and mortar/masonry and vinyl siding. The predominant architectural features of residential buildings in the western portion of the study area are detached row houses, two- to two-and-a-half-stories tall with pitched roofs and vinyl siding as the primary observed façade material.

Buildings associated with commercial uses in the study area have much larger building footprints than the residential uses, however proportional lot coverages are similar (i.e., between 20 and 40 percent), all of which were constructed in the latter half of the twentieth century or later. The homelessness resource center and nursing facilities buildings feature lot coverages of approximately 36 percent and 47 percent, respectively. The homelessness resource center building was constructed in the mid-twentieth century. The nursing center was constructed in two phases, the first in the mid-twentieth century and the second, what appears to now be the primary building, constructed in 1999.

Portions of the study area were rezoned as part of the 2013 East Elmhurst Rezoning from the R3-2 zoning district to the R3A and R3X zoning districts, which are contextual zoning districts whose purpose is to promote development consistent with existing neighborhood character. These various contextual rezonings were undertaken in order to address community concerns relating to recent developments that were not consistent with the lower density residential character of the area.

No-Action Condition

Without the proposed actions, the project site would continue to be developed with a hotel and 410-space accessory parking facility due to the restriction of uses on the project site associated with an existing Restrictive Declaration.

There are no planned developments within the 400-foot study area that are expected to be completed by the 2018 analysis year. It is noted, however, that the LaGuardia Airport Hotel, located to the northwest of the project site within the study area, is currently undergoing renovations in order to create two smaller hotels from the existing facility.

With-Action Condition

The proposed actions would allow for the construction of the proposed project. The With-Action condition would contain three components: 400 parking spaces accessory to the hotel (replacing the existing 410 spaces), 1,800 parking spaces available to the public for air travelers from LaGuardia Airport in need of long-term parking, and approximately 600 square feet (sf) of ground-level retail space along Ditmars Boulevard.¹ The new structure would rise eight-stories along the Ditmars Boulevard frontage with two cellar levels (10 stories along Grand Central Parkway). In addition, as per the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) and New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) tree planting regulations, street trees are proposed along the southern and eastern property boundaries of the project site, as well as various plantings throughout the site.

¹ The With-Action condition established in the DEIS for analysis purposes has a slightly greater number of parking spaces (2,200 total) than the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) application (2,195 total, comprised of 1,775 public spaces and 420 accessory spaces).

The With-Action condition would consist of a rectangular structure situated in the eastern and central portions of the project site, fronting along Ditmars Boulevard, and setback approximately 77 feet from the existing residential uses adjacent to the project site to the east. The proposed parking garage structure would reach a roof height of 128-feet-2-inches (including bulkheads). There would be three vehicular entrances to the proposed parking garage structure, two directly from Ditmars Boulevard (one towards the eastern end of the project site and one just east of the existing main entrance), and another at the western end of the proposed parking garage structure from within the project site, accessed via the existing project site entrance along Ditmars Boulevard.

Assessment

The proposed development would be constructed on an existing block and would not alter street orientation or street pattern in the study area. Construction of the parking garage structure would increase the total building coverage at the project site from approximately 20 percent to 51 percent, which would remain comparable to other buildings and lots in the study area. As previously discussed, construction of the proposed project structure would reinforce the existing urban design character of the study area. The proposed project would coordinate with the design of the existing Marriott hotel building. The maximum proposed building height of the proposed parking structure would be approximately 106 feet (without bulkheads) measured from the Grand Central Parkway grade and approximately 84 feet (without bulkheads) measured from the Ditmars Boulevard grade, both of which would be lower than the hotel's maximum height of 111-feet-4-inches (excluding parapets and bulkhead). The highest elevation of the proposed project would be located at its western end, closest to the existing hotel, and would step down towards the lower-rise residential neighborhoods to the south and east (see Figure 3.7).

Two other hotels within the study area (i.e., those on the southern side of Ditmars Boulevard) feature a shared parking garage. Further, it is the applicant's opinion that the proposed parking garage structure would improve the streetscape along Ditmars Boulevard by creating a consistent street wall along the northern side of the thoroughfare at the project site, which would improve the pedestrian experience as well (see Figures 3.8 and 3.9).

The proposed ground floor retail space is anticipated to be occupied by a small coffee establishment, providing related goods to both patrons of the proposed parking garage and pedestrians in the area. It is the applicant's opinion that this retail space would activate the pedestrian presence along the Ditmars Boulevard corridor by providing local retail space in an area currently lacking in similar uses (see Figures 3.8 and 3.10).

The exterior treatment of the proposed parking structure would complement the façade of the existing Marriott hotel building, which would also generally reflect other commercial hotel development within the study area. Overall, the proposed project would be compatible with the urban design character of the study area and would not adversely affect the pedestrian experience.

The proposed parking garage structure would include signage along its Ditmars Boulevard and Grand Central Parkway frontages. The proposed signage would consist of the three existing hotel signs and three proposed accessory signs for the parking garage fronting on Grand Central Parkway; and one new hotel sign, five public garage signs, and one retail store sign fronting on Ditmars Boulevard. Illuminated signs are permitted as-of-right. The signage along its Grand Central Parkway frontage would extend to a maximum height of approximately 100-feet-4-inches. The signage along Ditmars Boulevard would be minimal in order to respect pedestrian and vehicular views along the thoroughfare as well as the north to south commercial – residential



For Illustrative Purposes Only

102-05 Ditmars Blvd. Garage
Queens, New York

Proposed Project: South Elevation

Figure
3.7



① VIEW D - ENTRANCE @ DITMARS BLVD
FOR ILLUSTRATIVE PURPOSES ONLY

102-05 Ditmars Blvd. Garage
New York, New York

**Ditmars Boulevard Streetscape:
No-Action and With-Action Scenarios**

Figure
3.8



102-05 Ditmars Blvd. Garage
Queens, New York

**Proposed Project: Illustrative
Rendering of Ditmars Blvd.**

**Figure
3.9**

transitional nature of the area. It should also be noted that, as part of the Large Scale General Development (LSGD) Special Permit, the three existing signs on the north, west, and east façades on the hotel building would be legalized (see Figure 3.2).

Design and landscaping elements of the LSGD plan would integrate the existing hotel building and proposed project with an entry court which would serve three off-street functions: (1) hotel entrance; (2) entrance and egress for the accessory garage component of the proposed garage structure; and (3) pick-up and drop-off location for the combined shuttle buses that would take both hotel visitors and long-term parkers to and from LaGuardia Airport. The proposed parking structure would be setback from Ditmars Boulevard, providing a large landscaped area between its façade and street, emulating the landscaped area created by the existing hotel building's setback from Ditmars Boulevard. The proposed landscape design would provide a coordinated treatment that would integrate the existing hotel and proposed parking structure within the overall LSGD plan. The resulting location of the two buildings would have no detrimental effects on the adjacent residential properties on the block or on the public street, and it is the applicant's opinion that it would enhance both. Further, the various plantings (i.e., trees, shrubs, etc.) associated with the landscape plan would help to minimize views of the proposed parking garage structure from pedestrians and automobiles along Ditmars Boulevard, creating a vegetative screen from the street-level.

Approximately half a mile west of the project site and study area, at the intersection of Ditmars Boulevard at 94th Street, is another access bridge to LaGuardia Airport, which features surrounding urban design conditions similar to those of the study area, including low density residential buildings and commercial buildings complementary to LaGuardia Airport (i.e., hotel and rental car buildings and parking facilities). Thus, implementation of the proposed actions would be consistent with the urban design character of not only the study area, but all development at the other neighborhood access points to LaGuardia Airport at 94th Street.

3.4 Conclusion

Overall, the proposed project would be compatible with the surrounding context in terms of the various factors that comprise urban design, including vitality, walkability, and visual character. The proposed project is consistent with nearby commercial buildings and has been designed to be set back from adjacent residential uses in the surrounding area and screened with landscaping, and would be compatible with the overall urban design of the area, which is characterized by a mix of commercial buildings and residential uses. Construction of the proposed parking garage structure would reinforce the existing urban design character found in the study area (i.e., a character defined by businesses and uses complementary to LaGuardia Airport, as well as residential uses). Further, the proposed parking garage, in conjunction with the existing hotel building to the west and residential structures to the east, would create a consistent and strong street wall along the north side of Ditmars Boulevard, fostering a more inviting pedestrian environment. The proposed project would include greenery and plantings along the project site's Ditmars Boulevard frontage. Overall, the proposed actions would not have a significant adverse impact on urban design and therefore no further analysis is necessary.