

# URBAN DESIGN AND VISUAL RESOURCES

## CHAPTER 10

In an urban design assessment under CEQR, one considers whether and how a project may change the experience of a pedestrian in the project area. The assessment focuses on the components of a proposed project that may have the potential to alter the arrangement, appearance, and functionality of the built environment. The analysis of urban design relies on drawings, maps, renderings, and most importantly, photographs and photographic montages taken from pedestrian eye level. These representations allow the public to see what a project would look like. Materials required for the urban design analysis are similar to those necessary to file an application under the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP).

As indicated throughout the Manual, it is important for an applicant to work closely with the lead agency during the entire environmental review process. In addition, the New York City Department of City Planning (DCP) often works with the lead agency during the CEQR process to provide technical review, assistance, and recommendations relating to urban design.

### 100. DEFINITIONS

Urban design is the totality of components that may affect a pedestrian's experience of public space. The following elements play an important role in that experience.

**STREETS.** For many neighborhoods, streets are the primary component of public space. The arrangement and orientation of streets define the location and flow of activity in an area, set street views, and create the blocks on which buildings and open spaces are organized. The apportionment of street space between cars, bicycles, transit, and sidewalk is critical to making a successful streetscape, as is the careful design of street furniture, grade, materials used, and permanent fixtures, including plantings, street lights, fire hydrants, curb cuts, or newsstands.

**BUILDINGS.** Buildings support streets. A building's streetwalls form the most common backdrop in the city for public space. A building's size, shape, setbacks, lot coverage, placement on the zoning lot and block, the orientation of active uses, and pedestrian and vehicular entrances all play major roles in the vitality of the streetscape. The public realm also extends to building façades and rooftops, offering more opportunity to enrich the visual character of an area.

**VISUAL RESOURCES.** 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.

**OPEN SPACE.** For the purpose of urban design, open space includes public and private areas such as parks, yards, cemeteries, parking lots and privately owned public spaces.

**NATURAL FEATURES.** Natural features include vegetation and geologic, topographic, and aquatic features. Rock outcroppings, steep slopes or varied ground elevation, beaches, or wetlands may help define the overall visual character of an area.

**WIND.** Channelized wind pressure from between tall buildings and downwashed wind pressure from parallel tall buildings may cause winds that jeopardize pedestrian safety.



**SUNLIGHT.** Sunlight is essential to the maintenance of a vital streetscape. A successful urban design accounts for the optimization of direct and reflected sunlight.

## 200. DETERMINING WHETHER A URBAN DESIGN ASSESSMENT IS APPROPRIATE

In general, an assessment of urban design is needed when the project may have effects on one or more of the elements that contribute to the pedestrian experience described above. There is no need to conduct an urban design analysis if a proposed project would be constructed within existing zoning envelopes, and would not result in physical changes beyond the bulk and form permitted “as-of-right.”

### 210. PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS THRESHOLDS

A preliminary assessment is appropriate when there is the potential for a pedestrian to observe, from the street level, a physical alteration beyond that allowed by existing zoning, including the following:

1. Projects that permit the modification of yard, height, and setback requirements;
2. Projects that result in an increase in built floor area beyond what would be allowed ‘as-of-right’ or in the future without the proposed project.

However, certain projects that may affect buildings, such as a variance of a rear yard requirement, does not require any assessment of urban design because the project does not result in a change to the experience of a pedestrian since it is located in a rear yard. Another example would be a change in use that does not change the bulk controls of a block, such as a special permit to allow an accessory parking garage to operate as a public parking garage.

To complete a preliminary assessment, the analyst should use the checklist in Section 320. The checklist forms a “snapshot” of the project and provides the minimum amount of information necessary to determine whether a potential for significant adverse impacts exists and, consequently, whether further analysis is needed. If a preliminary assessment determines that a change to the pedestrian experience is minimum and unlikely to disturb the vitality, the walkability, or the visual character of the area, then no further assessment is necessary.

### 220. DETAILED ANALYSIS THRESHOLDS

The lead agency must use its discretion to determine if a more detailed analysis is needed. Examples may include projects that would allow a project to potentially obstruct view corridors, compete with icons in the skyline, or make substantial alterations to the streetscape of a neighborhood by noticeably changing the scale of buildings.

### 230. PEDESTRIAN WIND CONDITIONS

The construction of large buildings at locations that experience high wind conditions may result in an exacerbation of wind conditions due to ‘channelization’ or ‘downwash’ effects that may affect pedestrian safety. If appropriate, the lead agency should consult with DCP or the Mayor’s Office of Environmental Coordination (MOEC) to determine whether a pedestrian wind condition analysis is warranted for a proposed project. Factors that may be considered in making this determination include, but are not necessarily limited to:

- Locations that could experience high wind conditions, such as along the waterfront, or other locations where winds from the waterfront are not attenuated by buildings or natural features;
- The size and orientation of the buildings that are proposed to be constructed;
- The size of the project (generally only projects of a substantial size have the potential to alter wind conditions);
- The number of proposed buildings to be constructed; and
- The site plan and surrounding pedestrian context of the project.



If determined to be necessary, analysis may include computer modeling or the use of a wind tunnel, as appropriate, and should focus on the extent to which the massing and orientation of buildings and other features of the proposed development contribute to an exacerbation of pedestrian wind conditions. In the event that studies indicate the potential for exacerbation of pedestrian wind conditions that could affect pedestrian safety, modifications to the urban design features of the project, including changes to building massing, landscaping and other measures, that are consistent with the overall urban design objectives of the project, should be considered.

## 300. ASSESSMENT

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### 310. STUDY AREAS

The study area for urban design is the area where the project may influence land use patterns and the built environment, and is generally consistent with that used for the land use analysis. For visual resources, the view corridors within the study area from which such resources are publicly viewable should be identified. The land use study area may serve as the initial basis for analysis; however, in many cases where significant visual resources exist, it may be appropriate to look beyond the land use study area to encompass views outside of this area, as is often the case with waterfront sites or sites within or near historic districts.

#### 311. Describing the Existing Area

Both graphics and text may be used to describe the area affected by a project. This assessment should be organized to identify those elements of urban design in the area.

The information required in both the preliminary and detailed assessments help describe the existing urban design of the area. For example, the affected areas 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.

### 320. PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

The purpose of the preliminary assessment is to determine whether any physical changes proposed by the project may raise the potential to significantly and adversely affect elements of urban design.

The preliminary analysis, therefore, should provide the following information, if known:

- A concise narrative of the existing project area, the future With-Action condition, and the future No-Action condition;
- Aerial photograph of the study area (a current online map is sufficient);
- Zoning calculations of existing and the future With-Action conditions;
- Floor area calculations;
- Lot and tower coverage;
- Building heights;
- Ground-level photographs of the site area with the immediate context (three is sufficient);
- A three-dimensional representation of the future With-Action condition streetscape – (lines drawn over a photograph indicating the location size and general shape is sufficient, see illustration below); and
- If view corridors exist within the study area, describe the proposed project as it relates to visual resources including, as appropriate, proximity, orientation, height, bulk, etc.



EXISTING SITE AND CONTEXT



PROPOSED PROJECT

If the preliminary assessment shows that changes to the pedestrian environment are sufficiently significant to require greater explanation and further study, then a detailed analysis is appropriate. Detailed analyses are generally appropriate for all area-wide rezonings that include an increase in permitted floor area or changes in height and setback requirements, general large scale developments, or projects that would result in substantial changes to the built environment of a historic district or components of an historic building that contribute to the resource's historic significance.

Conditions that merit consideration for further analysis of visual resources include:

- When the project partially or totally blocks a view corridor or a natural or built visual resource and that resource is rare in the area or considered a defining feature of the neighborhood; or
- When the project changes urban design features so that the context of a natural or built visual resource is altered (for example, if the project alters the street grid so that the approach to the resource changes; if the project changes the scale of surrounding buildings so that the context changes; if the project removes lawns or other open areas that serve as a setting for the resource).

### 330. DETAILED ANALYSIS

To complete a detailed analysis, use the checklist below to compile the information, if applicable and known, needed for review. This checklist requests drawings and other information that provide an objective and clear representation of the intention and likely effect of the proposed project on the pedestrian's experience of the public realm. If feasible, the analyst should compile these items for the existing condition, the future No-Action condition, and the future With-Action condition, and annotate these as necessary to identify potential positive and significant adverse impacts of design.

- Concise narratives of existing project area condition, future No-Action condition, and future With-Action condition.
- Context plan – 1: 500.
- Site plans – 1: 100 (multiple as necessary).



- For those instances when a proposed project does not include a specific development site, but applies to a large area (such as an area-wide rezoning), include a series of potential site plans covering a range of possibilities.
- Photographs of existing conditions.
- At a minimum, views should include each street intersection bounding and within the site.
- Photographs should be taken from the sidewalk at pedestrian height.
- Sketches or renderings of the future With-Action condition for each existing view.
- Architectural and landscape detail is not required, unless the details are to be approved as part of the project (i.e. required components of a site plan, architectural designs that are mandated through the approval process, etc.). Any details that are shown on sketches and renderings that would not be required as part of the project should be noted as illustrative on the figures, and should be understood to be placeholders.
- Completed chart of building massing.
- Floor area calculations.
- Lot and tower coverage.
- Street-wall heights.
- Open area.
- Building heights.
- Average floor-plate sizes.
- Building setbacks.
- Proposed program and use distribution.
- Birdseye views of the entire project area. The views should be taken at 90 degrees from each other to surround entire project area.
- Elevations along all street fronts showing street wall heights, setbacks, recesses and transparencies. All should be clearly labeled.
- Detailed landscape plans of the future With-Action condition public areas showing paving, lighting, planting, seating and other elements.
- Sections through street and other pedestrian areas showing sidewalk widths, plantings, furnishings, and other elements of pedestrian streetscape for the future With-Action condition. Sections should extend to surrounding buildings on both sides.
- An area map showing existing view corridors and access to visual resources both within and outside the project area.
- Wind assessment study, if required.
- NOTE: For all drawings, all significant dimensions should be labeled clearly. Dimensions should be given in feet and inches. Drawings should be printed on 8.5" x 11" paper or be able to be folded easily to that size. All drawing should be clearly labeled with titles from the checklist. All annotations should be legible. All drawings and renderings should be readable in a black and white printed format.

#### 340. FUTURE NO-ACTION CONDITION

Using the information gathered above, assess whether and how the urban design conditions of the neighborhood are expected to change in the future No-Action condition. The assessment should reference the figures provided and explain the specific changed conditions that the figures illustrate.

### 350. FUTURE WITH-ACTION CONDITION

To determine how the proposed project may affect urban design relative to the No-Action conditions, the assessment describes the proposed project in terms of how it would affect the area's defining elements of urban design in the With-Action condition compared to the future No-Action condition. The assessment should reference the figures provided and explain the specific changed conditions that the figures illustrate.

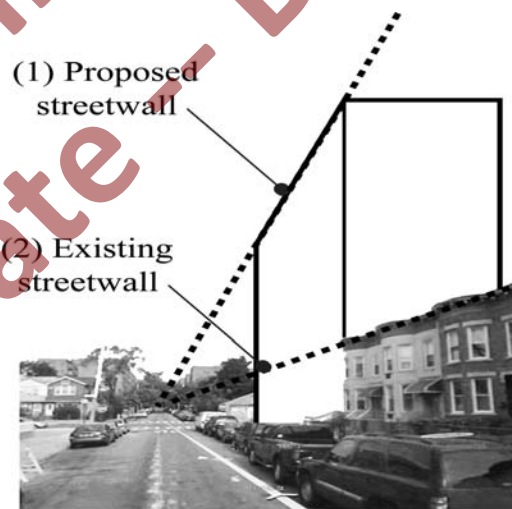
Generic actions can be assessed in much the same way, with somewhat less detail than site-specific actions' assessments. In some cases, when less detail about the project is available, the assessment considers the circumstances or issues that may affect the urban design in the study area.

### 400. DETERMINING IMPACT SIGNIFICANCE

Determining the significance of an urban design impact requires consideration of the degree to which a project would result in a change to the built environment's arrangement, appearance, or functionality such that the change would negatively affect a pedestrian's experience of the area. One important consideration is a project's context -- for example, the scale and use of surrounding buildings. However, matching context is not necessarily the sole benchmark for measuring urban design impacts, and this subject is further assessed in the Chapter 21, "Neighborhood Character."

All changes should be clearly denoted on the drawings in which they are shown to determine the impact, and whether that impact is significant. See the drawing below for an example. The proposed streetwall (1) has a different street wall height than its neighbors (2). This may be considered a negative urban design impact in some zoning districts.

Key considerations in the assessment of the significance of a visual resource impact may include whether the project obstructs important visual resources and whether such obstruction would be permanent, seasonal, or temporary; how many viewers would be affected; whether the view is unique or do similar views exist; or whether it can be seen from many other locations.



PROPOSED PROJECT





## 500. DEVELOPING MITIGATION

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Because significant adverse impacts on urban design relate to projects that physically change a site (or provide an opportunity for physical change, such as through a rezoning) in terms of the project's appearance, location, placement on the block, effect on the street grid, or alteration of topography, *etc.*, mitigation of these impacts may involve changes to these features that would better complement the area. If a significant adverse impact is identified, project changes necessary to avoid the impact may be examined as described in Section 600, below.

## 600. DEVELOPING ALTERNATIVES

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Alternatives that reduce or eliminate significant adverse impacts on urban design may be classified into two major types: those that involve substantial design changes to the proposed project (beyond those appropriate as mitigation) and those involving alternative sites. Project alternatives usually include a different physical design that would not result in the same impacts as the project as proposed. These physical changes may include a reduction in size, major alterations to the site plan, changes in the orientation of buildings, or alterations to proposed street mappings or demappings.

Alternative site analyses may involve the examination of a different site for the proposed project, which would result in a project more in keeping with the streetscape of the alternative site's surrounding area, or one that would not block important view corridors, eliminate important natural areas, *etc.*

## 700. REGULATIONS AND COORDINATION

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### 710. REGULATIONS AND STANDARDS

There are no specific city, state, or federal statutes, regulations, or standards governing the analysis of visual character.

### 720. APPLICABLE COORDINATION

Coordination with DCP may be useful in any streetscape assessment, but is required only when the DCP is an involved agency. This occurs if the project includes an action subject to approval by the City Planning Commission.

If a project may affect public waterfront views, consultation with the Waterfront and Open Space Division of DCP is recommended. Similarly, if a project may cause obstruction of a view of a landmark (see Chapter 9, "Historic Resources"), consultation with the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) is recommended.

### 730. LOCATION OF INFORMATION

DCP maintains copies of the Zoning Resolution, Sanborn maps, Fire Insurance Underwriters maps, and tax maps for the entire city. These resources are also available online (except Sanborn maps) and in local public libraries. City maps are available for viewing in the Borough President's office in each borough and at DCP.