

G. Urban Design/Visual Resources

100. Definitions

An area's urban design components and visual resources together comprise the "look" of the neighborhood: the physical appearance, including the sizes and shapes of buildings, their arrangement on blocks, the street pattern, and noteworthy views that give an area a distinctive character. The potential for a project to affect visual character, the urban design and/or the visual resources of an area is considered in a CEQR analysis.

110. URBAN DESIGN

The urban design characteristics of a neighborhood are composed of the various components in the buildings and streets of the area:

- *Building bulk, use, and type.* Buildings in a neighborhood are usually described by their bulk, use, and type (such as "boxy manufacturing buildings," or "narrow, high-rise commercial buildings"). The concept of bulk is created by the size of a building and the way it is massed on its site. Height, length, and width define a building's size; volume, shape, setbacks, lot coverage, and density define its mass. In describing a building, noting its general use (manufacturing vs. residential, for example) conveys a sense of its appearance, and thus adds to the understanding of its visual and urban design character.
- *Building arrangement.* This term refers to the way that buildings are placed on zoning lots and blocks. They may be attached to one another, as are row houses, or detached and separated by driveways or open uses. Building arrangements can be quite varied or organized in a site plan (such as an institutional campus or a large residential development like Stuyvesant Town).
- *Block form and street pattern.* The shape and arrangement of blocks and surrounding streets may be regular—composed of rectangular blocks, formed by streets intersecting at right angles, as is found throughout much of Manhattan. The rectangular grid may be interrupted by superblocks, such as Lincoln Center, or by a diagonal street, such as Broadway, which crosses Manhattan's regular grid at various points, often creating "bow tie" street patterns, the most famous of which is

Times Square. In other areas of the City, the pattern may be defined by irregularly shaped blocks, curving streets, or cul-de-sacs. The block form and street pattern contribute to urban design because they define the flow of activity in an area, set street views, and create the basic format on which building arrangements can be organized. Lincoln Center or Stuyvesant Town could not exist without a superblock pattern; midtown Manhattan's large, regular blocks can and do contain a variety of building sizes, but the small, irregular shapes of blocks in, say, the West Village permit only buildings with relatively small footprints.

- *Streetscape elements.* Most areas include distinctive physical features that make up a streetscape, such as front yards, street trees, curb cuts, street walls (i.e., the "wall" created by the continuous front facade of buildings along the street), street furniture (i.e., items permanently installed on the street, such as street lights, fire hydrants, or newsstands), building entrances, curb cuts, parking lots, fences, stoops, parking ribbons (i.e., the row of parked cars along a street), service entrances visible from the street, etc.
- *Street hierarchy.* Another descriptor for an area's streets is their classification, which convey a sense of width, circulation, and activity. These include expressways, which have limited vehicle access and no at-grade pedestrian crossings (e.g., the Van Wyck Expressway); arterials, which have limited, at-grade crossings (e.g., West Street/Twelfth Avenue in Manhattan); boulevards (such as Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn); collector/distributor streets (such as Flatbush Avenue); and local streets (which include cul-de-sacs).
- *Natural features.* Natural features include vegetation and geologic, topographic, and aquatic features. Rock outcroppings, steep slopes or varied ground elevation, beaches, or wetlands can help define the overall visual character of an area.

120. VISUAL RESOURCES

An area's visual resources are its unique or important public view corridors, vistas, or natural or built features. (For the purposes of a CEQR analysis, this includes only views from public and publicly accessible locations and does not include private residences or places of business.) Visual

resources could include views of the waterfront, public parks, landmark structures or districts, or natural resources. Natural resources may be vegetation, topography, and geologic formations; and wetlands, rivers, or other water resources.

200. Determining Whether an Urban Design/Visual Resources Assessment is Appropriate

A detailed assessment of urban design and visual resources is not necessary for many projects. As described below, a preliminary screen looks for whether a project would have substantially different bulk or setbacks than exist in an area and whether substantial new, above-ground construction would occur in an area that has important views, natural resources, or landmark structures.

210. URBAN DESIGN

When a proposed action would result in any of the following conditions, an assessment of urban design is generally appropriate:

- *Buildings.* If the action would result in a building or structures substantially different in height, bulk, form, setbacks, size, scale, use, or arrangement than exists (such as the construction of a tall, slender office tower in a manufacturing area).
- *Streets.* If the action would change block form (such as would occur with the creation of a superblock); or would demap an active street; would map a new street; or would affect the street hierarchy, street wall, curb cuts, pedestrian activity, or other streetscape elements.

220. VISUAL RESOURCES

When an action would result in above-ground development or would change the bulk of new above-ground development (such as with a zoning change) and is proposed in an area that includes significant visual resources, an analysis of visual resources may be appropriate.

300. Assessment Methods

310. STUDY AREAS

Because the land use study area is the area where the action may influence land use patterns and, hence, the built environment, the study area for urban design is generally consistent with that

used for the land use analyses.

For visual resources, the designation of specific study areas is less defined. 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 (such as from within the area to a visual landmark, such as the Statue of Liberty or Verrazano-Narrows Bridge) or from locations outside the study area into the study area (such as in an instance where there are views to significant visual landmarks within the study area, such as the Williamsburgh Bank in Brooklyn or Trinity Church in lower Manhattan).

320. ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

321. Determining Characteristics of Visual Quality

Once the study areas have been established, the urban design characteristics and significant visual resources should be described. The following steps may be undertaken in preparing that assessment.

321.1. Gathering Information

Urban Design. The gathering of information is focused on those elements of an area's urban design that may change as a result of the action. For example:

- If an action would result in development of a building substantially different from much of its surroundings (a tall building in a midblock that is usually typified by row housing, for example), then the analysis would focus most detail on the types of buildings in the area and their relationship to overall urban design. An understanding of that relationship may require analysis of block form or street grid, for example, so these elements would be inventoried in some detail, as well.
- If an action would alter the street grid (demap a street, create a superblock, for example), the urban design analysis would focus on the street grid itself, block forms in the area, and building arrangements.

For most localized actions, detailed data are presented for the area in the immediate vicinity of the site affected by the action, and more generalized information is presented for the remainder of the

study area. The first step in the analysis is a *field visit*, which is made during a typical day, rather than at odd hours. The observer documents the elements of urban design relevant to the action, describing conditions with the use of maps, field notes, and photographs. (Black and white photographs make the best reproductions in a report.) The analyst then *supplements the information gathered in the field* with data on such features as building heights, footprints, and setbacks, which can be obtained from Fire Insurance Underwriters' maps and Sanborn maps; and age of buildings, which can be obtained from the Department of Buildings or other secondary sources. The information from field and research sources can include, as relevant:

- Building bulk, height (in stories and feet, as appropriate), setbacks, and density.
- Building use, as it relates to visual character.
- Building arrangement (for this information, Sanborn maps may be particularly useful).
- Block form and street pattern, including the shape and arrangement of blocks and surrounding streets. This description notes, as appropriate, whether there are mapped, unbuilt streets in the area; information on which streets are officially mapped is found on the City Map, available for review in the Borough President's office in each borough.
- Streetscape elements should be described, including street furniture, streetwall, front lawns, median strips, stoops, loading docks, etc.
- Street hierarchy may be an important visual factor in some areas—for example, where an expressway divides a neighborhood or where a boulevard is a centerpiece of pedestrian activity, such as Broadway on the upper West Side of Manhattan.

Once the information is gathered, it is assessed, focusing on the relationships among urban design elements that could be affected by the proposed action. The written assessment typically includes illustrations, including maps, photographs, or drawings.

Visual Resources. As with urban design, the focus for visual resources depends on anticipated impacts of the proposed action and on the character of the study area itself. For example, if the action

would result in a development that would block a street that gives views of a river, the analysis would focus on that and other view corridors in the area; if the action would result in a development close to and obscuring views of a visually defining (and perhaps historic) structure, the visual resources study would focus on the relationship between the important structure and its surroundings.

A *field visit* is essential to identify and document important visual resources, such as views from the study area as well as distinctive resources within the study area that may be observed from outside the area. Often this field visit is undertaken with the urban design field visit, and the elements of visual resources described in field notes, on maps, and through photographs. The field visit can be supplemented by *documentary research* on the area or feature in question, such as the history of an important natural resource or unusual building. The approach to the gathering of information is as follows:

- The context in which a view is generally observed should be noted, such as a view that is seen by people traveling to and from work (e.g., views of the harbor and the Brooklyn waterfront seen from lower Manhattan) or one that is seen during recreational activity (such as that of lower Manhattan from the promenade in Brooklyn Heights). Note whether there are existing obstructions to these views.
- In addressing a view corridor issue, note whether the view corridor is unique or rare in the study area, or whether there are other, parallel corridors available to the same viewer group.
- If the issue is the potential obscuring or altering the context of a natural or built visual feature, then the analysis should focus on defining in some detail the character of that visual feature. This may include, for a structure, its history, size, shape, location in the neighborhood, unusual materials, or architectural design; if the building is an example of a particular architectural style or the work of a noteworthy architect, this information is also included. The reason for the building's importance as a visual feature is assessed: it may be important because it is taller than the surrounding area (such as a church), or stands at the end of an important street (such as Trinity Church at the end of Wall Street), or sets a particularly fine example

of surrounding architectural style, or represents an era gone by, etc. A similar analysis is undertaken for a natural or open space feature: the feature is assessed for its defining visual qualities (such as unique land forms, elevation, unusual vegetation, etc.) and for its importance to the surrounding area.

321.2. Describing the Visual Character

Combined, the data on urban design and visual resources as well as photographs and illustrations are used to describe the visual character of the area. The assessment is organized to focus on key components of the visual character as relevant to the proposed action and organized so as to describe the most prominent visual features first. The previously described urban design characteristics and visual resources can be used to structure this discussion. The description should also underscore those features that define the visual character of the area and should pay particular attention to the way in which the location of the proposed action fits into the visual character of the area under existing conditions. For example, a vacant lot that is the site of the proposed action may have a blighted, trash-strewn appearance in an otherwise well-kept residential area, or the existing structures on the proposed project site may block views to the waterfront.

322. Future No Action Condition

Using data gathered in the land use study on future actions and proposed projects in the study area, assess whether urban design or visual resources in the study area would change in the future. For example, if a zoning change is planned in the future that would facilitate new types of construction, the assessment of future no action conditions would need to consider how urban design could be affected by the different types or scales of development that could occur. Other no action plans and projects, such as construction of new buildings, or even implementation of a business improvement district, which may add street furniture or median-strip plantings, may also affect both urban design and visual resources.

The description of future no action conditions need not repeat the description of existing conditions. Rather, the no action condition discussion can reference the existing conditions discussion and focus only on changes that would be expected to occur to the urban design and visual resource characteristics of the area, without implementation of the proposed action. Generally,

the level of detail of the no action discussion should be greater for the expected no action condition changes closest to the site of the proposed action.

323. Future Action Condition

The description of future action conditions details what the project would look like, how it would fit within the urban design of the area, and whether and how it would affect visual resources of the area. In almost all instances, visual character impacts are related to the physical design of the building(s) (or proposed permissible physical design characteristics) associated with the proposed action. Illustrations are important in communicating the results of this analysis. Such illustrations can include, as appropriate, site plans, renderings, perspective drawings, photographs, and photomontages, in which the development associated with the proposed action is superimposed on a photograph of existing conditions.

In instances where a proposed action does not include a specific development but rather applies to a large area (such as an areawide rezoning action), it is sometimes helpful to frame potential effects within the context of the entire area to be rezoned, through illustrations of a series of conditions that could occur within the area subject to the proposed action. Using this as an example, if the proposed rezoning would allow low lot coverage, higher-rise commercial buildings, and would affect an area that was predominantly industrial with high lot coverage, low-rise buildings at one end of the area and the opposite at the other end of the area, the assessment and illustrations could present both conditions, and then discuss which of the conditions was most applicable to various parts of the area to be rezoned. More possible typical conditions within this area would lead to the need for additional illustrations and text to cover these prototypical conditions. In developing the prototypical illustration for this analysis, the reasonable worst case, proposed permissible building massing in terms of urban design and visual resources in the area should be assumed.

323.1. Urban Design

The future action condition first describes what the project would look like—its height, bulk, setbacks, placement on the block, etc. Even if a project fully complies with existing zoning, its appearance should be described, as conformance with zoning does not necessarily mean the project would conform with the look of the neighborhood. (For example, a district zoned C-4 and C-6 may

include buildings that are predominantly older and reach only 6 or 8 stories; a new building complying with zoning may be more than 20 stories in height and would appear dramatically different). Depending on the action itself, the assessment would focus on the relationship of the new development to key urban design elements in the surrounding area, as follows:

- If the action introduces development with different building forms or scale than the prevailing urban design features; if that change is to a very homogenous urban design setting or to one that is already quite varied.
- If the action alters block forms or the street grid; if that change alters the basic organizing format of the urban neighborhood or if the future no action street grid is already quite varied.
- If an action alters the streetscape, by, for example, breaking a street wall or introducing new street furniture and signage; if that change is to a homogenous and consistent streetscape or to one that is characterized by variety.
- If an action alters street hierarchy, for example, an action designed to promote through movement on a street that serves as a boulevard focus for a neighborhood; if that change really introduces a new visual character for the street, or emphasizes a character that is already prevalent.

323.2. Visual Resources

The assessment of the impact of the proposed action on visual resources focuses on those visual resources that may be affected by the proposed action. The first step, then, is to describe the proposed action as it relates to such resources, including, as appropriate, proximity, orientation, height, bulk, etc. Then, the change to the resource attributable to the action can be assessed. This would include, as appropriate, the following types of effects:

- If the action blocks, partially or entirely, a view corridor; if that view corridor is rare in the area or one of several; if the viewer group affected is particularly vulnerable to the change in view.
- If the action blocks, partially or entirely, views of a natural or built visual resource; if the views blocked are the ones essential to visual

character in the area.

- If the action changes urban design features so that a natural or built visual resource is no longer dominant in an area (for example, if the action's building is taller than the one other tall structure that identifies a neighborhood); if that change in dominance changes the visual identity of the area.
- If the action changes urban design features so that the context of a natural or built visual resource is altered (for example, if the action alters the street grid so that the approach to the resource changes; if the action changes the scale of surrounding buildings so that the context changes; if the action removes lawns or other open areas that serve as a setting for the resource).

400. Determining Impact Significance

The determination of significance is somewhat subjective, as no standards exist for measuring visual character impacts. In general, substantial changes to urban design or views and context of visual resources may be considered significant. Substantial changes in either urban design characteristics or visual resources could result in a significant impact to visual character, which encompasses the two. In making the determination, it is important to consider the "purity" or uniqueness of the no action condition visual character relative to the visual conditions that would be created by the proposed action. For example, in an area having a mix of building forms, scales, and heights, a building associated with the proposed action may be much larger in scale than one of its neighbors, but consistent with other buildings in the immediate area. In such a case, significance would not likely be determined.

Some projects may affect visual character significantly, but not adversely. A project may greatly improve the appearance of an abandoned lot, or create a new, important visual landmark. In these instances, a major new structure that may be larger or have a different appearance than the surrounding area, would not, necessarily, have an adverse impact on visual character.

410. URBAN DESIGN

A project may have a significant impact on urban design if it would result in buildings or streets (or would allow for new construction of buildings or streets, as in a zoning change) that

would appear considerably different from that in the area as assessed in the no action condition. As noted above, a significant change in urban design is not necessarily an adverse impact; a qualitative judgment must be made to assess this. Some of the key considerations in determining whether such impacts are significant and adverse include the following:

- *Bulk, building type, setbacks.* If the size and mass of the proposed action would be substantially different from that prevailing in the area or anticipated in the future no action condition (e.g., a slender commercial office tower in a low-rise manufacturing area).
- *Building arrangement.* If the proposed action would include a building arrangement that is substantially different from that of the neighborhood so that it would change the characterization of building arrangement in the area (e.g., placement of a large detached building at an angle to the street in an area characterized by attached structures facing the street).
- *Block form and street pattern.* If the action would create a shape and arrangement of blocks and/or surrounding streets that is different from that of the area so that it changes the prevailing form and pattern (e.g., the mapping or demapping of streets in an area where the streets create a regular block pattern).
- *Streetscape elements.* If the proposed action would add to, eliminate, or alter a critical feature of a streetscape (e.g., the introduction of a long, blank wall on a street characterized by active storefronts).
- *Street hierarchy.* If the proposed action would change the street hierarchy in a manner that would substantially visually change the area (e.g., the alteration of a local street to a more active collector street).
- *Land use.* If the action would alter that aspect of land use that defines urban design character (e.g., the replacement of a series of small shops with a single use, such as an office building).

420. VISUAL RESOURCES

A proposed action may significantly and adversely affect visual resources if it would affect the public's ability to view and enjoy those resources. Key considerations in the assessment of

significance of an visual resource impact may include the following:

- *Views or vistas.* If the project would significantly and permanently obstruct important views or vistas. Aspects to be considered include whether the obstruction would be seasonal or temporary; how many and what type of viewers would be affected; whether the view is unique or do similar views exist; or whether it can be seen from many other locations.
- *Natural resources.* If the project would result in significant changes to natural features. Aspects to be considered include whether the action would permanently eliminate natural features that are now enjoyed by the community or designated as special resources in the Zoning Resolution; whether the action would obstruct the public's ability to enjoy natural features (by blocking views or access).
- *Historic resources.* If the proposed action would significantly affect the visual enjoyment of an historic resource (e.g., if the construction of a new building would impair the public's ability to view the historic resource or would change the visual context in which the resource is understood). This analysis is undertaken in coordination with the historic resources analysis (Chapter 3F).
- *Waterfront.* If the proposed action would significantly affect the public's enjoyment of waterfront views. This analysis is undertaken in coordination with the waterfront revitalization analysis (Chapter 3K).

500. Developing Mitigation

Because significant adverse impacts on visual character relate to projects that physically change a site (or provide an opportunity for a physical change, such as through a rezoning), their appearance, location, placement on the block, effect on the street grid, or alteration of topography etc., mitigation for these impacts looks at changes to these features to make the project visually more in character with the area. Changes to a building's location or major alterations to its size and shape, or a different mapping action would, generally, constitute a different action and are examined under Alternatives, Section 600, below; minor alterations to the way a building is designed are examined as mitigation.

510. URBAN DESIGN

The way in which mitigation is approached for a significant adverse urban design impact relates to the specific design elements that would cause the impact.

- *Bulk, building type, setbacks.* Minor design changes may be sufficient to make a structure visually compatible with the surrounding area. These changes may be implemented by minor alterations to the building (e.g., reducing height and increasing width without otherwise changing the building's proposed function) or by provision of screening, such as landscaping, if appropriate.
- *Building arrangement.* Minor changes to the proposed site plan may create a building arrangement more compatible with the surrounding area.
- *Block form and street pattern.* There is no mitigation for significant adverse impacts on block form and street pattern. Relief from such impacts would involve substantial design changes to the proposed action and can be sought through project alternatives (see below).
- *Streetscape elements.* Mitigation for impacts related to streetscape elements would involve changing those elements that are incompatible (e.g., elimination of incompatible curb cuts).
- *Street hierarchy.* If an action is found to have a significant adverse impact on the street hierarchy, it may be possible to revise the proposed street system so that it is more compatible with the surrounding area. This would be true of a project that included the widening of street along the blockfront of a proposed project, to serve as a drop-off area. In the instance where the widened street would have an arterial or boulevard character, joining with streets having a "local" visual character at each end of the widened street, mitigation may include eliminating the proposed street widening and providing for drop-offs within the site boundaries. Such mitigation would have to be closely coordinated with the traffic studies for the proposed action.
- *Land use.* Partial mitigation for visual impacts related to land use changes would be to alter some design elements. In the example of the removal of many storefronts for a single office

user, the design could include strategic placement of pedestrian entrances, storefront-type displays to break up a blank street wall, etc.

520. VISUAL RESOURCES

Mitigation for a potential significant adverse impact on visual resources may include development of alternate viewing areas or alteration of minor design elements to make the proposed action more compatible with the resource. The major way to reduce or eliminate impacts on visual resources is through design or site configuration alternatives, discussed below.

600. Developing Alternatives

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

Alternative site analyses would involve the examination of a different site for the proposed action, which would result in a project more in keeping with the visual character 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

710. REGULATIONS AND STANDARDS

There are no specific City, State, or Federal statutory regulations or standards governing the analysis of visual character.

720. APPLICABLE COORDINATION

721. Urban Design

Coordination with the Department of City Planning may be useful in any urban design assessment, but is only required when the Department of City Planning is an involved agency.

This would occur if the project included an action subject to approval by the City Planning Commission.

722. Visual Resources

An impact on public waterfront views may be inconsistent with the Waterfront Revitalization Program (see Chapter 3K, Waterfront Revitalization); and consultation with the Waterfront and Open Space Division of the Department of City Planning is recommended in those circumstances. Similarly, obstructing a view of a landmark (see Chapter 3F, Historic Resources) may also be a significant impact; consultation with the Landmarks Preservation Commission is recommended in those instances.

730. LOCATION OF INFORMATION

The Department of City Planning maintains a copy of the Zoning Resolution and Sanborn maps, Fire Insurance Underwriters maps, and tax maps for the entire city. These sources are also available in local public libraries. City Maps are available for viewing in the Borough President's office in each borough and at the Department of City Planning.

2001 Technical Manual
Out of Date - DO NOT USE