A. INTRODUCTION

As defined in the *CEQR Technical Manual*, neighborhood character is considered to be an amalgam of the various elements that give a neighborhood its distinct personality. These elements can include land use, urban design, visual resources, historic resources, socioeconomics, traffic, and noise, as well as any other physical or social characteristics that help to distinguish the community in question from another. According to the *CEQR Technical Manual*, an assessment of neighborhood character may be appropriate if a proposed action could result in adverse impacts to one or more of the elements comprising neighborhood character. It is also possible that several moderate changes in the elements that contribute to neighborhood character, while not significant adverse impacts by themselves, could collectively lead to a significant impact on neighborhood character. Potential effects on neighborhood character may include:

- *Land Use.* Development resulting from a proposed action could alter neighborhood character if it introduces new land uses, conflicts with land use policy or other public plans for the area, changes land use character, or generates significant land use impacts.

- *Socioeconomic Conditions.* Changes in socioeconomic conditions have the potential to affect neighborhood character when they result in substantial direct or indirect displacement or addition of population, employment, or businesses; or substantial differences in population or employment density.

- *Historic Resources.* When an action would result in substantial direct changes to a historic resource or substantial changes to public views of a resource, or when a historic resource analysis identifies a significant impact in this category, there is a potential to affect neighborhood character.

- *Urban Design and Visual Resources.* In developed areas, urban design changes have the potential to affect neighborhood character by introducing substantially different building bulk, form, size, scale, or arrangement. Urban design changes may also affect block forms, street patterns, or street hierarchies, as well as streetscape elements such as streewalls, landscaping, curbcuts, and loading docks. Visual resource changes could affect neighborhood character if they directly alter key visual features such as unique and important public view corridors and vistas, or block public visual access to such features.

- *Transportation.* Changes in traffic and pedestrian conditions can affect neighborhood character in a number of ways. For traffic to have an effect on neighborhood character, it must be a contributing element to the character of the neighborhood (either by its absence or its presence), and it must change substantially as a result of the action. According to the *CEQR Technical Manual*, such substantial traffic changes can include: changes in level of service (LOS) to C or below; change in traffic patterns; change in roadway classifications; change in

vehicle mixes, substantial increase in traffic volumes on residential streets; or significant traffic impacts, as identified in the technical traffic analysis. Regarding pedestrians, when a proposed action would result in substantially different pedestrian activity and circulation, it has the potential to affect neighborhood character.

- *Noise.* According to the *CEQR Technical Manual*, for an action to affect neighborhood character with respect to noise, it would need to result in a significant adverse noise impact and a change in acceptability categories.

This chapter of the EIS examines neighborhood character within the area to be rezoned and its surrounding blocks, and the Proposed Action's effects on that character. The study area for the visual resources analysis is coterminous with the study area used for the analysis in Chapter 2, "Land Use, Zoning, and Public Policy," and Chapter 6, "Visual resources," delineated by an approximate ¼-mile radius around the proposed rezoning area. The chapter's impact analysis focuses on changes to neighborhood character resulting from changes in the technical areas discussed above, since changes to these technical areas are most relevant to potential changes in neighborhood character.

As described elsewhere in this EIS, as well as in the Environmental Assessment Statement dated April 2, 2010, the Proposed Action would not result in any significant adverse impacts to land use, socioeconomic conditions, urban design and visual resources, traffic, or noise. Significant adverse impacts on historic architectural resources, one of the components that contribute to neighborhood character, have been identified. Overall, while the Proposed Development Site would be more intensely developed in the future with the Proposed Action, the character of the surrounding neighborhood would not be adversely affected. The analysis concludes that neighborhood character would change with new land uses and a higher density structure on the garage site, increases in residents and employees, but the change would not be adverse, as discussed below.

B. EXISTING CONDITIONS

The Proposed Development Site and rezoning area are located at the crossroads of three distinct communities: Washington Heights, a stronghold of the region's Dominican population; Central Harlem, primarily African American; and West Harlem, a mixed community of blacks, whites and Hispanics. Much of the area to the east, west and south of the rezoning area falls within the State and National Register listed Sugar Hill Historic District and/or the NYCLPC- designated Hamilton Heights/Sugar Hill Historic District. These historic districts are comprised primarily of late nineteenth and early twentieth century row houses and apartment buildings. They are designated both for their architectural as well as historic significance, most notably with respect to the cultural history of Harlem. During the 1920's, the area developed as an epicenter of the Harlem Renaissance when African American cultural, intellectual and social prominence and wealth flourished. By the 1930s, the area became known as "Sugar Hill," a neighborhood that attracted many of the city's most prestigious African-American residents. Since its initial development, the Sugar Hill area has been home to a wide variety of New Yorkers, both native and foreign born, of varied ethnicity and races and from various economic levels.

The area to be rezoned includes the Proposed Development Site as well as a portion of the northern third of the block bounded by West 155th and West 153rd Street, St. Nicholas Avenue and St. Nicholas Place, and is occupied mostly by automotive and commercial/light industrial uses. The approximately 21,685 sf Proposed Development Site is currently occupied by a two-story plus cellar public parking garage, with a capacity of approximately 300 spaces. The Proposed Development Site is located just within the northern boundary of the Sugar Hill National Register Historic District, but does not fall within the NYCLPC district. However, as noted in Chapter 6, "Visual Resources," the existing garage building on the site is not a distinguished visual resource, as many of its most notable historic features have been altered or removed, nor does there appear to be especially notable historic events associated with this building in particular.

Lot 26, located to the west of the Proposed Development Site and owned by the City (under control of the New York City Department of Environmental Protection (NYCDEP)), includes a 2-story building at the southern portion of the lot, which falls mostly outside the rezoning area. The building is occupied by a NYCDEP leak detection facility and includes a 2-truck garage. The portion of Lot 26 that falls within the proposed rezoning area is currently used predominantly as a surface parking lot, which is entirely enclosed by a brick wall with a fence above. The proposed rezoning area also includes the northern portion of Lot 14, which is occupied by a 6-story elevator apartment building, with approximately 24 units, and it is the only lot within the rezoning area that falls within the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission (NYCLPC) designated Hamilton Heights/Sugar Hill Northeast Historic District. The rezoning area also includes a very small triangular parcel at the corner of St. Nicholas Avenue, identified as Lot 28, which is comprised of only 12 sf, and is currently vacant.

A most unique natural feature of the study area is the topographic drop known as the Fordham Cliffs. This geological rupture creates a formidable topographic shift in the landscape all the way from Inwood Hill Park at the tip of Manhattan to Morningside Park at the south end of Harlem. Caused by a geological rupture and a shift of the eastern plates of the Northern Manhattan Plateau, the Fordham Cliffs drop more than 70 feet, contributing to the unique physical characteristics of several Harlem parks – Morningside, St. Nicholas, Jackie Robinson and Highbridge. In the study area, the Cliffs present an obstacle in terms of access and connectivity between neighborhoods. The Cliffs essentially separate the immediate environs of the Proposed Development Site on high ground from the Polo Grounds/Ralph Rangel Houses and Bradhurst neighborhoods at the bottom.

Land uses in the vicinity of the rezoning area include a mix of residential, mixed-use, institutional, commercial, and open space, with some vacant lots located to the north, south, and east of the proposed rezoning area. Residential uses are predominant in the area and are typically located in all directions surrounding the proposed rezoning area. Commercial uses are mainly limited to the lots directly adjacent to the rezoning area to the north, east and west, while further away commercial uses are found along Amsterdam Avenue, Broadway, St. Nicholas Avenue, Frederick Douglass Boulevard, and Macombs Place – usually in the form of ground floor retail in mixed-use residential buildings. Mixed-uses and institutional uses are scattered throughout the study area. Transportation related uses, including parking facilities, are located on the Proposed Development Site as well as directly to the east of the rezoning area.

Open space is abundant in the study area and is located in all directions. To the north of the rezoning area, across West 155th Street, is Highbridge Park, which extends north to Dyckman Street, between Edgecombe and Amsterdam Avenues. This 118.75-acre park is widely known for its important landmarks, the Highbridge tower and the High Bridge (the city's oldest standing

bridge). Among its strongest features are the magnificent cliffs and large rock outcroppings that dominate the park. Just beyond Edgecombe Avenue (approximately 1 block east of the rezoning area) the topography drops off substantially, this is the location of Jackie Robinson Park, a 12.77-acre park that extends from West 155th Street south to 145th Street, between Bradhurst and Edgecombe Avenues, which provides ten blocks of recreational resources.

The study area is well connected by the transit system and regional road network. The area is well connected to the greater region via West 155th Street which connects to the Westside Highway (Route 9A), FDR Drive, and Major Deegan Expressway/New York State Thruway (Interstate Route 87). The C subway line stops adjacent to the rezoning area at the intersection of West 155th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue, and the number 1 subway line stops at West 157th Street and Broadway. Bus routes connect the area to the Bronx, Harlem, and Midtown Manhattan. Yankee Stadium is located directly across the Harlem River, just over a ½-mile from the rezoning area, and is connected to the area by Macombs Dam Bridge.

The housing typology of the area generally consists of three types – row houses (3 to 4 stories), apartment buildings (6 to 8 stories), and high-rise apartment buildings (over 15 stories). The built form varies from small courtyard entrances to 6-storey buildings on Edgecombe Avenue, to stepped entrances to individual row houses on St. Nicholas Avenue. A majority of the buildings in the study area were built from 1900-1920, with the oldest developments dating back to the 1880s. The area is largely comprised of prewar buildings up to six stories in height. Newer mid-century buildings, especially those owned by the New York City Housing Authority, are taller, with the Polo Grounds Towers reaching a maximum of 30 stories. Located on the north side of West 155th Street, between Bradhurst Avenue and Frederick Douglass Boulevard, the Polo Grounds Towers consists of four buildings with 1,612 apartments. The NYCHA Rangel Houses are located at the northern extent of this block, containing eight 14-story buildings with 984 apartments.

Driven in part by the existing infrastructure and housing stock, the area surrounding the proposed rezoning area has experienced greater construction activity in recent years. Within the immediately surrounding area, this has been limited mostly to rehabilitation of residential prewar buildings. However, some new construction projects are in progress or planned near the rezoning area, as further discussed in Section C below.

C. THE FUTURE WITHOUT THE PROPOSED ACTION (NO-ACTION)

In the future without the Proposed Action, the RWCDS assumes none of the properties within the proposed rezoning area would be redeveloped, and the existing visual character of the rezoning area would remain unchanged. The Proposed Development Site would continue to be occupied by a 2-story public parking garage (Lot 21). It is expected that the study area's current land use trends and general development patterns would continue. As discussed in Chapter 2, "Land Use, Zoning, and Public Policy," two developments are expected to occur within the ¼-mile study area in the future without the Proposed Action.

Parts of two blocks to the east of the proposed rezoning area are expected to be rezoned from C8-3 to R8/C1-4, which would facilitate the planned redevelopment of the site of a 125-space parking facility with a new mixed-use building. This development, according to available information, is

expected to be completed by 2012 and is planned to consist of a 12-story mixed-use building that would include approximately 272 residential units and 32,800 sf of retail uses, as well as 144 public parking spaces. In addition, the School Construction Authority (SCA) has proposed to construct the Community Health Academy of the Heights, a proposed 572-seat intermediate school, on a site located at 1970 Amsterdam Avenue between West 157th and West 158th streets, which comprises a NYCHA development. While these developments would affect the areas immediately surrounding the proposed rezoning area, these planned developments would not change the character of the neighborhood significantly and it would remain essentially the same as it is today.

D. PROBABLE IMPACTS OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

The Proposed Action would enable construction of a new 13-story mixed use building on the Proposed Development Site, with residential, museum, community facility and accessory parking uses. In the future with the Proposed Action, the existing 2-story garage on the Proposed Development Site would be replaced by the Proposed Development, which would consist of a 13-story plus cellar mixed-use building, with a height of approximately 120 feet from the average curb level to the roof line. The Proposed Development would include approximately 124 residential units, all of which would be affordable; the Faith Ringgold Children's Museum of Art and Storytelling; a day care facility and early childhood center for approximately 100 children; approximately 2,350 sf of non-profit program and office space; and a 114-space below-grade accessory parking garage.

The Proposed Action is not expected to affect existing land use patterns in the study area except on the Proposed Development Site, nor is it expected to affect the viability of land uses in the surrounding area. The blocks immediately to the north, south and west of the rezoning area support predominately residential uses, as well as a few institutional uses, and commercial uses along the main thoroughfares. To the east and north are large public open spaces. The Proposed Development would provide quality housing and services to the City's lower-income families, and expand the supply of affordable housing in the City, while providing valuable community services, including a day care center and a children's museum.

Although demolition of the existing garage structure has been identified as a significant adverse impact on architectural resources (refer to Chapter 5, "Historic Resources"), it is not expected to result in a significant adverse impact with respect to neighborhood character. The building is not visually distinguished, as many of its most notable historic features have been altered or removed, and the brick façade shows wear. Moreover, the building is not typical or characteristic of the surrounding historic district, as it exhibits a different scale, use and style. With the loss of many of the historic features that make this building a contributing resource, its demolition would not diminish the special architectural and historic character of the rest of the S/NR historic district because it would not create a significant change in the overall context or cohesion of the historic district as compared to existing or No-Action conditions. This is particularly due to the site's location on the northern periphery of the historic district and the core of historic and architecturally significant buildings. Moreover, the existing garage structure does not represent a defining element of the neighborhood's character.

In the future with the Proposed Action, views of visual resources in the vicinity of the rezoning area would not experience any significant adverse changes. View corridors along West 155th Street, St. Nicholas Avenue, and St. Nicholas Place, would not be expected to change as a result of the Proposed Development. While views of the study area from locations to the north, east and west would change, the Proposed Development would not block views of any visual resources from these vantage points. The Proposed Development would also not block any view corridors along public streets or sidewalks. Although the site's geological height will make the Proposed Development visible from a distance, the new building would relate well to the taller contemporary buildings in the neighborhood, particularly along the West 155th Street corridor. In addition, the Proposed Action would not eliminate any public views of historic resources in the area, as these resources and their distinguishing characteristics are oriented to and viewed from the public streets, and these views would not be obstructed by the Proposed Development.

Therefore, the 13-story Proposed Development would change the character of the surrounding neighborhood, but not in a significant adverse manner. The new uses resulting from the Proposed Action would enliven and improve the streetscape by creating more active uses on the Proposed Development Site, and increasing 24-hour pedestrian activity. Although the Proposed Development would be much more visible than the existing structure on the site, given its location along West 155th Street, a major 2-way roadway lined with many of the taller buildings in the area, this greater visibility would not be an adverse effect on neighborhood character. The Proposed Development would provide land uses that would be compatible to existing and anticipated uses in the surrounding area, and would further promote and enhance the ongoing revitalization of this area of northern Manhattan.

In addition, as discussed in other chapters of this EIS and/or in the EAS document dated April 2, 2010, the Proposed Action is not anticipated to result in any significant adverse socioeconomic, urban design, traffic, or noise impacts. As discussed in Chapter 10, "Noise," the Proposed Action would have no effect on ambient noise levels, although noise levels in the area would remain somewhat high due to the presence of traffic on nearby streets. However, the (E) designation placed on the zoning map for the Proposed Development Site as part of the Proposed Action would ensure that the required noise attenuation of up to 35 dBA would be provided when the Proposed Development is constructed.

E. CONCLUSION

The Proposed Development would change the character of the surrounding neighborhood, but not in a significant adverse manner. The development would enliven and improve the streetscape by creating more active uses on the Proposed Development Site, and increasing 24-hour pedestrian activity. The Proposed Development would provide land uses that would be compatible to existing and anticipated uses in the surrounding area, and would further promote and enhance the ongoing revitalization of this area of northern Manhattan.

While demolition of the existing garage structure on the site has been identified as a significant adverse impact on architectural resources, it is not expected to result in a significant adverse impact with respect to neighborhood character. The building is not visually distinguished, as many of its most notable historic features have been altered or removed, and the brick façade shows

wear, nor is it typical or characteristic of the surrounding historic district, as it exhibits a different scale, use and style. With the loss of many of the historic features that make this building a contributing resource, its demolition would not diminish the special architectural and historic character of the rest of the S/NR historic district.

Although the Proposed Development would be much more visible than the existing structure on the site, given its location along West 155th Street, a major 2-way roadway lined with many of the taller buildings in the area, this greater visibility would not be an adverse effect on neighborhood character. In addition, the Proposed Action is not anticipated to result in any significant adverse socioeconomic, urban design, traffic, or noise impacts. Overall, the Proposed Action would alter neighborhood character in beneficial ways, by creating opportunities for new affordable housing and community facility development on an underutilized site.

Therefore, although the Proposed Development would alter the character of the neighborhood by revitalizing the site and its immediate surroundings and adding a taller higher density structure, these changes – individually or cumulatively – would not constitute a significant adverse impact to neighborhood character.