Chapter 19: Neighborhood Character

A. INTRODUCTION

This chapter considers the effects of the proposed NYU Core project on neighborhood character. As defined in the 2010 *City Environmental Quality Review (CEQR) Technical Manual*, neighborhood character is an amalgam of various elements that give neighborhoods their distinct "personality." These elements may include a neighborhood's land use, socioeconomic conditions, open space, historic and cultural resources, urban design and visual resources, shadows, transportation and/or noise. However, not all of these elements affect neighborhood character in all cases; a neighborhood usually draws its character from a few determining elements.

As described below and in other sections of this Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), the NYU Core study area has diverse characteristics owing to the varied land uses, neighborhoods, and building forms surrounding the project site. Given the complex character and history of Greenwich Village and the other adjoining neighborhoods, no one feature would be considered dominant in defining the character of the neighborhood; rather a combination of various localized features contribute to creating it.

B. PRINCIPAL CONCLUSIONS

This preliminary assessment of neighborhood character concludes that the Proposed Actions would not have a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character in the study area. The Proposed Actions would introduce a new mix of uses to the Proposed Development Area, but these uses would be consistent with the mix of uses throughout the study area. Major new buildings would be confined to the two superblocks that comprise the Proposed Development Area, and these blocks stand in physical contrast to the rest of the neighborhood, because they break the street grid and their development dates back only 50 years to the era of urban renewal, while the preponderance of the study area contains smaller-scale, much older buildings, in a regular, if distinctive street grid. The increased access to the open spaces within the superblocks, the new public pathways through the blocks, and the improved streetscape on these blocks would be generally beneficial to neighborhood character. Thus, although the new structures would change the character of the Proposed Development Area and along its periphery, they would not create a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character. While the Proposed Actions were found to have a significant impact on historic resources because of the change to open space on the historic North Block, this impact would be generally limited to the visitors' and residents' experience of that block, and thus was not considered to be significantly adverse to overall neighborhood character. The proposed development on the two superblocks would not adversely affect the character of the historic districts in the surrounding area, since the newer, distinct superblocks already stand in their midst.

Potential changes to the Commercial Overlay Area include possible introduction of street level retail in up to six of the area's buildings. Because the area contains retail on nearly all of its

streetfronts, this potential addition was not considered significant to land use, urban design, or visual resources, and thus it would not be significant to neighborhood character.

Chapter 6, "Shadows," identifies a significant adverse impact on the LaGuardia Corner Gardens. However, although the impact would be significant to the utility of this resource, the garden is not a defining feature of the neighborhood with respect to uniqueness or overall characterization of the area, and the property could continue as community landscaped open space. Thus, it would not create a significant adverse impact on community character. In addition, the play of light and shadow on the historic University Village buildings, which are considered sunlight-sensitive, would not change substantially with the Proposed Actions, and the new shadows would not detract from the buildings' contribution to neighborhood character, nor would they create a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character.

The mix of project uses would add students, faculty, and visitors to the area. The travel associated with this population would increase utilization of the area's transportation facilities and in some cases would result in significant transportation impacts requiring mitigation if practicable. While there would be increased activity, the resulting conditions would be similar to those seen in the high activity urban neighborhoods defining the study area, and would not result in density of activity or service conditions that would be out of character with the surrounding neighborhoods. In addition, the project would create new and improved opportunities for crossing the North and South Blocks. Therefore, the changes in activity and transportation in the area would not create a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character.

The presence of the new development would be felt primarily in the Proposed Development Area and along Mercer Street and LaGuardia Place between West 3rd and Houston Streets. Activity in these areas would increase, from the additional floor area and new uses. The superblocks would be opened up more to public use, and the combination of the increased population, access to the interior gardens, new pathways through the superblocks, and new retail along their periphery would enliven the area and make the character of the superblocks more similar to that of the surrounding study area. Overall, the combined effect of changes to the defining elements would not create a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character.

C. METHODOLOGY

The *CEQR Technical Manual* states that an assessment of neighborhood character is generally needed when a proposed project has the potential to result in significant adverse impacts in any of the following technical areas: land use, zoning, and public policy; socioeconomic conditions; open space; historic and cultural resources; urban design and visual resources; shadows; transportation; or noise. Even if a project does not have the potential to result in a significant adverse impact in any of the technical areas listed above, an assessment may be required if the project would result in a combination of moderate effects to several elements that cumulatively may affect neighborhood character. According to the *CEQR Technical Manual*, a "moderate" effect is generally defined as an effect considered reasonably close to the significant adverse impact threshold for a particular technical analysis area.

As described in the relevant chapters of this DEIS, the proposed project would not result in significant adverse impacts in the areas of land use, zoning, and public policy; socioeconomic conditions; open space; urban design; or noise. It would also generally not result in effects considered reasonably close to the significant adverse impact thresholds in those technical areas. However, the proposed project would result in significant adverse impacts in the areas of historic and cultural resources, shadows and transportation. (Impacts related to construction including

neighborhood character, are discussed in Chapter 20, "Construction Impacts.") Therefore, a preliminary assessment of neighborhood character impacts from the proposed project is provided below.

As recommended in the *CEQR Technical Manual*, the study area for the analysis is consistent with the study areas in the relevant technical areas assessed under CEQR that contribute to the defining elements of the neighborhood.

D. DEFINING FEATURES

The NYU Core vicinity comprises a well-established set of overlapping neighborhoods and uses of which NYU, a long-time presence here, is an important component. The surrounding areas—Greenwich Village, Lower Fifth Avenue, NoHo, SoHo, and Nolita—are well known as signature New York City neighborhoods and have an active street life both during the daytime and evening hours, bustling streets lined with storefront retail, coffee houses, restaurants and clubs, prominent public spaces, most notably Washington Square Park, a strong mix of residential uses, a distinctive street grid, and, as expressed in its designated historic districts, a rich historic character both in its building forms and public prominence. The NYU Core itself contributes to the character of its surroundings; although it has no one "campus," the academic buildings, Bobst Library, faculty and student residences, and the lively presence of students, faculty, and other employees all add to the mix of uses and contribute to the vitality of the neighborhood. The following sections review the contributing elements to neighborhood character and the relevant areas of impact identified in the DEIS for the purposes of evaluating potential significant impacts on neighborhood character in the vicinity of the NYU Core.

LAND USE

A well-established range of compatible and diverse land uses are one of the defining features of the neighborhood. Within the Core, while NYU plays a prominent role, there is a broader mix of open space, residential, institutional, cultural and commercial uses, and a dynamic street life that contributes to defining the area. Beyond the perimeters of the Core, roughly south of Houston Street, north of West Eighth Street, and east and west of Lafayette Street and Sixth Avenue, the presence of NYU is diminished, but a similar range of land use categories define the area for residents, workers, students, and visitors.

As detailed in Chapter 2, "Land Use," the Proposed Actions would add a new mix of uses to the Proposed Development Area. The proposed academic, public school, dormitory, and University-oriented hotel uses would bring substantial additional activity to the Proposed Development Area, changing the character of the two superblocks, so that their land uses and overall activity levels would more closely resemble that of the surrounding study area. This change to the land use character of the Proposed Development Area would be substantial, but, overall, would not be a significant adverse impact. In the Commercial Overlay Area, the Proposed Actions would not represent a major change in the land use mix of the area, and would improve land use conditions by adding new street-level neighborhood retail uses in six buildings, which would enliven the streetscape by activating currently underutilized ground-floor spaces. The Proposed Actions would not alter the existing land use in the Mercer Plaza Area, which would remain a publicly accessible open space in the future with the proposed project. Further, while the Proposed Actions would increase NYU's operations in the Proposed Development Area, this increase would not significantly alter existing land use patterns in the broader study area. Overall, the Proposed Actions would not result in any significant adverse impacts with regard to land use for

both the 2021 and 2031 analysis years, and the land use changes associated with the Proposed Actions would not contribute to a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character.

URBAN DESIGN

Urban design with respect to building form and scale, street grid, and view corridors is one of the distinct and defining neighborhood characteristics. Largely comprising Greenwich Village, SoHo, and NoHo neighborhoods, and the historic districts corresponding to portions of those neighborhoods, the neighborhood also includes the area around Astor Place and The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art (The Cooper Union), the westernmost edge of the East Village, and part of the southern portion of the Union Square area. Within the portion of the study area closest to the Proposed Development and Commercial Overlay Areas the street grid is generally consistent, with regular rectangular blocks and relatively narrow streets; Sixth Avenue, Houston Street, Broadway and Lafayette Streets, which form a periphery around the core, are the area's major thoroughfares. Most of the blocks contain small and mid-level streetwall buildings from earlier historical periods, often reflecting commercial loft and manufacturing uses that once characterized the area, along with somewhat taller apartment and institutional buildings. Today, the streets to the west of the Development Area are primarily characterized by narrow streets and smaller buildings, with shops below and apartments above. To the east, the blocks contain larger footprint buildings, which reflect their previous industrial uses. Today these buildings contain offices, residences, and NYU facilities. The ground floors of many of these buildings contain stores and restaurants. The two superblocks comprising the Proposed Development Area stand as a clear exception to the prevailing character of the surrounding blocks. In their existing configuration, the two superblocks create a complex of large modern buildings, with a genesis in the period of urban renewal. The buildings do not define a consistent streetwall—they are more of the "tower on plaza" approach to urban design. And their distinction from the adjacent neighborhood is emphasized by the fencing that surrounds the properties.

As detailed in Chapter 8, "Urban Design," the Proposed Actions would not have a significant adverse impact. Streetscape and landscape changes to the University Village and Washington Square Village sites would provide new parkland and publicly accessible open space and more pedestrian-friendly site perimeters; the replacement of mostly windowless buildings on the South Block of the Proposed Development Area with new buildings that would have transparent and active ground floors; and the creation of new buildings with transparent ground floors and a new publicly accessible open space on the North Block of the Proposed Development Area. While the proposed Zipper Building on the South Block would be larger in terms of floor area than other buildings in the study areas, and its massing of staggered, narrow towers of varying heights above a low-rise base would serve to break up the building's bulk, provide visual interest, and locate some of the mass away from Mercer Street. The varied massing and staggered heights would reference the arrangement of buildings across Mercer Street and on the surrounding streets where there are variegated heights. The Zipper Building would be approximately the same height as the University Village towers.

The Proposed Actions would not change urban design in the Commercial Overlay Area, which is currently dominated by larger buildings in use by NYU, although there are several apartment buildings of varying sizes with ground-floor retail, as well. The portions of the Commercial Overlay Area that do not have ground-floor retail and do not have a strong residential presence generally offer blank walls or loading docks to the street. In this area, the project is assumed to introduce ground-floor, neighborhood retail space in up to six buildings on Waverly and

Washington Places, which would help to enliven the streetscape, but would not represent a significant adverse change in urban design.

With respect to view corridors and visual resources, Chapter 8, "Urban Design and Visual Resources" concludes that the Proposed Actions would not have significant adverse impacts on visual resources in the 400-foot or ¼-mile study areas. The proposed Bleecker and Zipper Buildings on the South Block of the Proposed Development Area would be visible from south of West Houston Street in certain northward view corridors, but in those view corridors the new buildings would be seen as background behind the existing mid-rise loft buildings lining those streets. The Bleecker Building would not obstruct views northward up LaGuardia Place from Houston Street and West Broadway that include Washington Square Park, the Washington Square Arch, or 1 Fifth Avenue. From where the Bleecker and Zipper Buildings could potentially be seen from Washington Square Park and from the north on Fifth Avenue and University Place, they would be background buildings seen among numerous buildings of varying heights. Both buildings would be visible along Bleecker Street, from west of LaGuardia Place and from east of Mercer Street, along with the southern Washington Square Village residential building, but they would not block any significant views and their visibility would decrease from farther away due to intervening buildings.

The proposed LaGuardia and Mercer Buildings on the North Block of the Proposed Development Area would not be visible from the east or west within the study areas as there are no east-west view corridors to the sites of those proposed buildings. From locations to the north and south, it is expected that the LaGuardia Building would have limited visibility because it would be shorter than the two existing Washington Square Village residential buildings. The Mercer Building could likely be seen from the north in Washington Square Park and on Fifth Avenue and University Place, but only the uppermost 60 feet of the building would be visible behind the north Washington Square Village residential building on West 3rd Street, and the building's limited visibility would have no effect on southward views. It is not expected that the Mercer Building would be visible in the northward view corridors on Mercer and Greene Streets because of the intervening Zipper Building.

Visual changes from the Proposed Actions in the commercial overlay area would be restricted to an increase in street retail and related activity.

Given that the new construction would not have a significant adverse impact on urban design, that it would add certain elements that would improve the area's streetscape, and that changes to the streetscape in the commercial overlay area would be very limited, there would be no significant adverse impact on neighborhood character in the 400-foot or 1/4-mile study areas from the urban design features of the Proposed Actions.

HISTORIC AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

The historic districts that regulate development in portions of the study area are defining elements in the character of the neighborhood. These districts highlight and preserve the area's historic importance both with respect to architecture and to NYC's history and popular culture, which are core features of the character of the study area. The balance between new development and retention of historic features is a fundamental factor in the evolution of the neighborhood. This is reflected in the proposed project. Within this context, the two sections of the Project Area play different roles in defining neighborhood character on site and in the blocks that surround them. The Proposed Development Area, comprising two superblocks with large, tower-on-plaza structures built in the 1960s, stands as a contrast to the buildings on the adjacent

blocks, most of which are at least 80 years old and many of which date back to the 19th Century. The historic character of the superblocks themselves is consistent with the urban renewal era in which they were built and, given the quality of design and the stature of the designing architects, both are considered historic. As discussed in Chapter 7, "Historic Resources," the Proposed Actions would result in significant impacts to cultural resources on the North Block that would not be fully mitigated. The effect of the adverse impact would generally be limited to the visitors' and residents' experience on the North Block, and would not resonate through the study area. The proposed development on the two superblocks would not adversely affect the character of the historic districts in the surrounding area, since the newer, distinct superblocks already stand in their midst.

On the South Block the new buildings would change the context of University Village with taller structures built adjacent to the landmarked site. However, the newcomers would not affect the pinwheel configuration of the three University Village towers, and the University Village towers would continue to be viewed as a unified building complex. Further, the redevelopment of the Coles Gymnasium site and the Morton Williams grocery store site would not be expected to adversely affect University Village because these two sites do not have a meaningful historic or contextual relationship with University Village.

In the future with the Proposed Actions, the existing and new buildings on the North and South Blocks would continue to act as visual dividers between the historic district buildings to the east, south, and west of the Proposed Development Area. Therefore, the addition of new buildings and landscaping changes in the Proposed Development Area would not adversely affect views to architectural resources in these historic districts because these views are already limited by the existing buildings in the Proposed Development Area.

The existing development within the commercial overlay area is consistent with the architecture in the NoHo Historic District, in which it is partly located. Because no new construction is anticipated for this area, the Proposed Actions' effect on the historic character of the area would stem only from changes to street level architectural features. These were found to have potentially significant impacts on historic resources, if the changes do not respect the historic character of the building, but they would not be widespread enough to affect neighborhood character.

Thus, the Proposed Actions would not have a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character resulting from its impact on historic resources.

SHADOWS

Sunlight sensitive resources assessed in the DEIS include: Washington Square Park; the LaGuardia Corner Gardens; the willow oaks in the Oak Grove area of the South Block; the Time Landscape Greenstreet; Schwartz Plaza; Mercer Plaza; the east, south and north facades of the University Village towers; the north façade of the Church of Saint Anthony of Padua; the landscaped areas on the South Block along Bleecker Street; LaGuardia Landscape; and Mercer Street Playground. A detailed shadow analysis conducted for these resources identified significant adverse shadow impacts only on LaGuardia Corner Gardens, a community garden located on the corner of LaGuardia Place and Bleecker Street on the South Block. As assessed in Chapter 6, "Shadows," the proposed project would result in significant adverse shadow impacts on the LaGuardia Corner Gardens in the spring, summer, and fall. While the remaining sunlight could support shade-tolerant species, the proposed Bleecker Building adjacent to the garden would cast between four and five-and-a-half hours of new shadow on the garden during morning

hours throughout the growing season, jeopardizing the viability of shade-intolerant species. Potential mitigation for this significant adverse impact is discussed in Chapter 21, "Mitigation." The impact would be significant with respect to the utility of the resource. However, as it is not a defining feature of the neighborhood with respect to uniqueness or overall characterization of the area, and the property could continue as community landscaped open space, it would not create a significant adverse impact on community character.

The gridded and sheer concrete facades of the three identical 30-story towers of University Towers are distinctive, and thus do contribute to neighborhood character in the immediate vicinity of the superblocks. These were analyzed as sunlight-sensitive features because documents supporting their historic designation state "that each tower has four to eight deeply-recessed horizontal window bays, as well as a 22-foot wide sheer wall, creating dramatic juxtapositions of light and shadow."[1] By 2021, the proposed Zipper Building would for several morning hours throughout the year cast new shadows on the east facade of 100 Bleecker Street/Silver Tower II (the easternmost of the three University Village buildings), on the south façade in December and March/September for shorter durations, and on the north façade in May/August and June for a brief duration. New shadows also would be cast on one or more facades of the other two University Village buildings, but for shorter durations and on smaller areas in most months. Despite these new shadows, large portions of the gridded and sheer concrete facades of the three buildings would remain in sunlight during the affected periods. In addition, the proposed project's Greene Street Walk would introduce a new publicly accessible vantage point from which to view the facades. Therefore, the University Village buildings would not experience significant adverse shadow impacts as a result of the proposed project, and the new shadows would not detract from the buildings' contribution to neighborhood character and would not create a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character.

TRANSPORTATION

The character of the area, like many neighborhoods in New York City, is in part defined by a wide range of travel modes, with high foot traffic on many sidewalks and crosswalks (although there are also quieter blocks), a mix of auto/taxi/service traffic on the streets, as well as dense and essential transit services, primarily underground in the subway system, but identifiable where the street entry creates nodes of activity. The greatest volume and most visible travel is by foot, with patterns and timing varying for pedestrian activity associated with residents, students, shoppers, visitors and tourists. The street system is primarily one ways streets, often fairly narrow carrying one or two lanes of moving traffic, but there are a number of high capacity roadways, most notably Houston Street, Broadway, Sixth Avenue and Lafayette Street that allow the movement of through traffic in the area

The mix of project uses would add students, faculty, and visitors to the area. The travel associated with this population would increase utilization of the area's transportation facilities and in some cases would result in significant transportation impacts requiring mitigation if practicable. While there would be increased activity, the resulting conditions would be similar to those seen in the high activity urban neighborhoods defining the study area and would not result in density of activity or service conditions that would be out of character with the surrounding neighborhoods. With respect to pedestrian circulation through the Development Area, the project

[1] Landmarks Preservation Commission's November 18, 2008 designation report, Designation List 407, LP-2300. http://www.nyc.gov/html/lpc/downloads/pdf/reports/university_village.pdf

would create new and improved opportunities for traversing the north block, by providing increased pathways, enhanced landscaping, clearer visibility and expanded capacity. On the south block, the notable change would be the provision of a major new north-south walkway following the alignment of Greene Street. By recessing the walkway into the block, demand would be shifted from Mercer Street sidewalks to a new corridor with a more park-like path with benches and landscaping.

Thus, the changes in transportation due to the Proposed Actions would not result in significant adverse impacts on neighborhood character.

E. COMBINED EFFECT

The major physical changes from the Proposed Actions would occur only on the two superblocks that comprise the Proposed Development Area. These blocks are distinctly different from the surrounding study area in that they are much larger contiguous blocks than any other in the area, their development is consistently from one era, some 50 years ago, and the land use in almost entirely residential. Most of the residents are connected to NYU. The design form of the blocks is of the "tower in plaza" type, which is seen nowhere else in the immediate neighborhood. These blocks are not easily accessible to the general public; their larger open spaces are interior to the blocks, which are further separated from their neighbors by fencing. Except for some activity to and from the few uses that are publicly accessible (e.g., Morton Williams Supermarket and other retail along LaGuardia Place) and certain private uses (e.g., the Mercer-Houston Dog Run and Coles Gymnasium entrance on Mercer Street), these superblocks generate only moderate pedestrian or vehicular activity.

In contrast, the surrounding neighborhood is characterized by a distinctive but regular street grid, with narrow streets that are lined with shops, coffee houses, restaurants, and clubs. The retail occupies the ground and sometimes also basement and second floors of small to medium sized buildings, the upper floors of which are primarily residential in the smaller structures, or contain offices in the larger, former loft buildings. NYU occupies many of the older loft buildings east and just south of Washington Square Park and along Broadway and Mercer Street. Most of these structures are greater than 80 years old, and they all lie within historic or historic-eligible districts. On any given day, the neighborhood accommodates large numbers of students, workers, residents, and tourists. Because the streets are narrow, traffic generally moves slowly, but the actual numbers of vehicles are not great, through traffic tends to gravitate to wider, higher-capacity streets, like Houston Street, Sixth Avenue, and Broadway.

The presence of the new development would be felt primarily in the Proposed Development Area and along Mercer Street and LaGuardia Place between West 3rd and West Houston Streets. Activity in these areas would increase, from the additional floor area and new uses. The superblocks would be opened up more to public use, and the combination of the increased student, faculty, and visitor population, access to the interior gardens, and new retail along the periphery of the superblocks would enliven the area and make the character of the superblocks more compatible with that of the study area. Overall, the combined effect of changes to the defining elements would not create a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character.

As noted above, the introduction of new ground-floor retail in the some portions of the Commercial Overlay Area would enliven those streets and would not have an adverse impact on neighborhood character. ✷