Chapter 18: Neighborhood Character

A. INTRODUCTION

This chapter considers the effects of the proposed project on neighborhood character. According to the 2012 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, visual resources, shadows, transportation, and/or noise. Not all of these elements affect neighborhood character in all cases; a neighborhood usually draws its distinctive character from a few defining elements. According to the CEQR Technical Manual, ordinarily, in the absence of a significant adverse impact in any of the relevant technical areas, a combination of moderate effects to the neighborhood would not result in a significant adverse impact to neighborhood character. Moreover, a significant impact identified in one of the technical areas that contribute to a neighborhood’s character is not automatically equivalent to a significant impact on neighborhood character.

As described in detail in Chapter 1, “Project Description,” the proposed project would result in the redevelopment of the currently vacant, historic Pier 57 site with public open spaces uses; retail, restaurant and other commercial uses; educational and cultural uses; and a marina. The proposed project would preserve and enhance the historic integrity of the pier structure while adding compatible uses to an area with a growing residential population. The proposed project’s design seeks to reutilize the existing historic structure as a successful public space and commercial venue. The neighborhood character analysis relies on the analyses of all of the contributing elements of neighborhood character as analyzed elsewhere in this environmental impact statement (EIS).

PRINCIPAL CONCLUSIONS

The surrounding neighborhood is a former manufacturing area characterized by prominent open space uses such as Hudson River Park and the High Line as well as a mix of residential, commercial, and industrial uses. The neighborhood character of the area is shaped by these open space destinations, as well as its proximity to the waterfront and the nearby art galleries, high end boutiques, restaurants and bars, and food retail that have developed in former manufacturing and meatpacking facilities. The proposed project would preserve and restore the existing historic pier, while enlivening it with new public open space and complementary commercial, educational, and cultural uses that would serve to activate street life along this portion of the waterfront. The proposed uses would add to the open space amenities of Hudson River Park and would be compatible with existing art galleries, restaurants, boutiques, and food-related retail that define the area.

This assessment of neighborhood character concludes that the proposed project would not have a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character in the study area. Rather, it is anticipated that the proposed project would reactivate a vacant and historic structure with a dramatic change.
in use, creating a new cultural, commercial, and open space destination, while enhancing the essential character of the area and adding to the open space amenities of Hudson River Park.

**B. METHODOLOGY**

The *CEQR Technical Manual* states that an assessment of neighborhood character is 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. An assessment may also be appropriate 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 EIS, the proposed project would not result in significant adverse impacts in the areas of land use, zoning, and public policy; socioeconomic conditions; open space; historic and cultural resources; urban design and visual resources; or shadows. It would also 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 transportation and noise. Therefore, a preliminary assessment of neighborhood character impacts from the proposed project is provided below. This preliminary assessment describes the defining features of the neighborhood and then assesses the potential for the proposed project to affect these defining features. As recommended in the *CEQR Technical Manual*, the study area for the neighborhood character analysis is consistent with the study areas in the relevant technical areas assessed under CEQR that contribute to the defining elements of the neighborhood.

**C. PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT**

**DEFINING FEATURES**

In general, the surrounding neighborhood is defined by the prominent open spaces of Hudson River Park and the High Line, the mix of former industrial buildings and new, modern buildings that house concentrations of art galleries, boutiques, restaurants and nightclubs, and increasing residential development in West Chelsea, and the historic residential and industrial buildings in the West Village. The study area is also in large part defined by its proximity to the waterfront, which adds to the character of the area as a historic commercial shipping hub and provides views along Hudson River Park and of New Jersey.

As described in Chapter 2, “Land Use, Zoning, and Public Policy,” the study area is a former manufacturing area that has experienced a trend toward the conversion of industrial uses to residential and commercial uses, developing into a mixed use neighborhood. Former industrial uses in the northern portion of the study area have been converted to art galleries and studios. In the south, former food wholesaling facilities now house high end retail, restaurants, and night clubs that comprise the Meatpacking District. New construction has added modern offices, residential buildings, and hotels throughout the area. Some industrial uses remain in the study area, along with parking and automotive related uses.
Chelsea Market and Chelsea Piers are two notable commercial uses that contribute to the defining character of the neighborhood. Chelsea Market, an indoor market place occupying a former factory building, houses food wholesalers with retail businesses that are supported by the foot traffic in the area and from the office tenants in the floors above the market. Chelsea Piers, a prominent land use in the area and along the waterfront, is a sports facility and event center that occupies Piers 59, 60, and 61 just north of the project site.

The surrounding neighborhood is also characterized by major open space uses, most notably Hudson River Park along the waterfront and the High Line Park to the east. The project site is surrounded to the north and south by Hudson River Park, a major open space destination in the city. The West Chelsea neighborhood is bisected by the High Line, a prominent open space which cuts through the area west of Ninth Avenue along an elevated former freight line. The High Line is a notable visual resource from ground level views and provides extensive views of the study area not typically available to pedestrians. Providing views of the Hudson River and surrounding architecture, the High Line is an important open space and historic feature that draws a substantial number of visitors through the study area.

As a historic resource itself, Pier 57 contributes to the character of the neighborhood. The project site consists of a vacant, art deco headhouse and pier shed, supported by three underwater hollow, concrete boxes called caissons. The caissons were an innovative mechanism in pier engineering when the pier was constructed, and they contribute to the pier’s historic significance. The east elevation of the headhouse is clad in brick and is notable for its bank of tall window openings in the central section. The north and south elevations of the pier shed are lined with vertical lift doors providing access to bays on the first and second floors, which allowed ships to be loaded and unloaded by trucks. The roof edges on the north and south façades are metal frameworks or “burtons” that were originally used for cargo handling. The project site is visible from multiple vantage points throughout the surrounding area, and is therefore a significant visual resource in the neighborhood. Other than the project site, there are four known historic resources in the study area that reinforce the area’s importance as a historic center for production, storage, shipping, and commerce and contribute to the area’s existing character. As discussed in Chapter 7, “Historic Resources,” these resources are the Hudson River Bulkhead, the Merchants Refrigerating Company Warehouse, the Gansevoort Market Historic District, and the High Line.

In terms of urban design, the study area is roughly divided by West 14th Street, which separates the portion characterized by the typical Manhattan street grid pattern in the north, and the irregular, older street pattern of The West Village in the south. In the northern portion, the study area is characterized by tall commercial buildings with full lot coverage. Many of these commercial uses occupy former industrial and manufacturing buildings, such as the Chelsea Market facility in the former National Biscuit Company factory and the Merchants Refrigerating Company Warehouse. In West Chelsea, also north of West 14th Street, modern buildings with curved and glass facades provide a contrast to the older manufacturing buildings. South of West 14th Street, the West Village is defined by historic, low-scale buildings. These two areas both feature remnants of the meatpacking and industrial era, with aerial pedestrian bridges and the High Line in the north, and loading docks and broad metal canopies in the south. Pedestrian activity in the study area is centered on retail and restaurant uses in the inland areas, as well as Hudson River Park and the High Line, which provide views throughout the study area and are also significant visual elements themselves.
Like many neighborhoods in New York City, the character of the study area is defined by a wide range of travel modes, with moderate foot traffic on most of the area’s sidewalks and crosswalks, a mix of auto/taxi/service traffic on the streets, and bus transit services nearby with subway service further away, along Eighth Avenue. The foot traffic patterns and timing for pedestrian activity associated with residents, workers, and visitors are consistent with the mix of office, retail, and residential uses in the area. The street system consists primarily of one-way streets, generally carrying one lane of moving traffic on the east-west streets and three or four lanes on the north-south streets. Route 9A, a state highway adjacent to the Hudson River waterfront and the Route 9A Bikeway and Hudson River Park waterfront esplanade, separates the project site from the surrounding street network. Route 9A carries the highest volumes of traffic in the study area, and in general the greatest volume of and most visible travel in the area pertains to vehicular traffic during commuter and weekend peak periods.

Due to the proximity of the project site to Route 9A and the level of traffic on the roadway, vehicular traffic is the dominant noise source in the study area and noise levels are classified as “marginally unacceptable” according to the CEQR Technical Manual. In addition, noise levels in the portions of Hudson River Park adjacent to the project site exceed CEQR guidelines for outdoor areas requiring serenity and quiet, but are comparable to other open spaces around New York City.

POTENTIAL TO AFFECT THE DEFINING FEATURES OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Overall the proposed project would have a positive effect on neighborhood character by reutilizing a vacant but historically significant structure with compatible new uses and contributing to the existing network of open space in the study area. As described in Chapter 1, “Project Description,” the proposed project would result in new public open space; retail, restaurant and other commercial uses; educational and cultural space; and a marina. The program and the design of the proposed project would reflect the neighborhoods in which the pier is located and draw from the design and history of the existing structure of the pier itself. The proposed public marketplace, technical arts school, restaurants and food-retail would draw specific inspiration from existing businesses in the study area in the realms of fashion, design, art, and food. The proposed project would be consistent with zoning in the study area and would contribute to the completion and financial support of Hudson River Park as well as revitalizing an underutilized portion of the waterfront. This would in turn enliven the streetscape along this portion of the waterfront, providing visitors with access to new open spaces and commercial uses.

As described in Chapter 2, “Land Use, Zoning, and Public Policy,” the proposed project would develop a vacant site with new uses that would complement the existing and future mix of uses in the area. The proposed project would serve the neighborhood’s growing population of residents and office workers, as well as visitors attracted to the area by art galleries, bars and restaurants, retail and hotels. In general, the uses included in the proposed project would complement the surrounding arts- and food-related commercial uses, as well as residential and open space uses, and would contribute to the character of the area. The proposed project would improve an underutilized component of Hudson River Park, opening a new portion of the waterfront to the public, and would contribute to the network of waterfront open space that is a defining component of the neighborhood’s character. In terms of open space, the proposed project would have a positive impact on this defining component of neighborhood character.

As described above, there are several known architectural resources in the study area, including the existing pier structure on the project site. The proposed project would result in the restoration
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of the pier’s historic headhouse and foothouse, and would make this historic resource an accessible component of Hudson River Park. The proposed project would change the visual relationship between the pier and surrounding architectural resources—specifically the Gansevoort Market Historic District and the High Line—by providing a view of an active use, rather than a vacant structure. As discussed in Chapter 7, “Historic Resources,” while the proposed project would result in changes to the historic structure on the project site and the relationship of that structure to the surrounding area, these changes would not be adverse. Therefore, the proposed project would not result in any significant adverse neighborhood character impacts related to historic or cultural resources.

Similar to historic resources, the urban design character of the neighborhood would be improved by the proposed project’s reactivation of Pier 57 through preserving its historic integrity, improving its appearance, and providing new views for pedestrians from the proposed rooftop open space. The restored headhouse would provide a new entrance into Hudson River Park from Chelsea and the Meatpacking District. The alterations to the pier would not noticeably change the scale of the existing structure. The new rooftop open space and perimeter walkways, as well as the new uses within the pier, would enhance the pedestrian experience along this portion of Hudson River Park. In addition, new views would be made accessible from the new rooftop open space and perimeter walkways. Therefore, as discussed in Chapter 8, “Urban Design and Visual Resources,” the proposed project would enhance the existing urban design character and improve the pedestrian experience. The proposed project would also not result in any significant adverse shadows impacts and therefore would not adversely affect neighborhood character as a result of shadows.

The proposed project would introduce a variety of specialty retail goods, food retail, and eating and drinking establishments to the study area. As the study area has become a destination for visitors to Chelsea Market, the High Line, Hudson River Park, and the restaurants and bars in the Meatpacking District, the additional retail introduced by the proposed project would not introduce a new trend in the study area and the proposed project would not result in any significant adverse socioeconomic impacts. The proposed project would complement the surrounding food-related retail, art galleries, high-end boutiques, and bars and nightclubs that define the character of the neighborhood.

The proposed project would add vehicle and pedestrian trips in the study area, resulting in significant adverse vehicular and pedestrian traffic impacts at several locations. However, the neighborhood is in part defined by the traffic along major roadways like West 14th Street and Route 9A, and the study area would continue to be characterized by high traffic volumes in the future without the proposed project. In addition, as described in Chapter 22, “Mitigation,” all of the traffic and pedestrian impacts could be fully mitigated. Therefore the proposed project would not alter the character of the neighborhood due to significant adverse traffic and pedestrian impacts.

While noise levels in the proposed project’s open space areas would exceed CEQR Technical Manual noise level guidelines for outdoor areas, these levels would be comparable to the existing noise levels in Hudson River Park and other open spaces that are also located adjacent to heavily trafficked roadways. Therefore, the noise levels in the proposed open space would not adversely affect neighborhood character. In addition, noise levels within the structure would be consistent with the active, vibrant retail experience of the proposed project and would not adversely affect neighborhood character.
As discussed above, the proposed project’s significant adverse impacts in the areas of transportation and noise would not adversely affect neighborhood character. However, according to the CEQR Technical Manual, additional analysis of neighborhood character may be warranted based on the potential for a project to result in a combination of moderate effects in more than one technical area. 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 discussed above and throughout this EIS, the proposed project would not result in moderate effects that would be reasonably close to the impact thresholds in the other technical areas. Therefore, the proposed project would not have the potential to affect neighborhood character through a combination of moderate effects. Overall, the proposed project would benefit the neighborhood character of the surrounding area by reutilizing a vacant historic pier structure with commercial, cultural, and educational uses that reflect the surrounding neighborhoods and adding to the open space amenities of Hudson River Park.