

**A. INTRODUCTION**

This chapter considers the effects of the proposed project on neighborhood character. Neighborhood character is an amalgam of various elements that give a neighborhood its distinct “personality.” These elements may include a neighborhood’s land use, urban design, visual resources, historic resources, socioeconomics, traffic, 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 2012 *CEQR Technical Manual*, neighborhood character impacts are rare and it would be under unusual circumstances that, in the absence of an impact in any of the relevant technical areas, a combination of moderate effects to the neighborhood would result in an 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 greater detail in Chapter 1, “Project Description,” the proposed project would introduce a higher density development and a different mix of uses on the project site compared with the future without the proposed project, in which the project site would remain a largely vacant and deteriorating structure. In addition, the proposed project would require overrides of certain aspects of the New York City Zoning Resolution. The proposed project would result in significant adverse impacts in two of the technical areas that contribute to neighborhood character: historic and cultural resources, and transportation. Therefore, an assessment of neighborhood character is warranted. This chapter considers the impacts of the proposed project on neighborhood character for both the project site and in the surrounding area. Since many of the relevant technical areas are considered in other sections of this Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), this chapter has been coordinated with those analyses.

**PRINCIPAL CONCLUSIONS**

Based on the methodology of the 2012 *CEQR Technical Manual*, a preliminary analysis of the proposed project’s effects on neighborhood character was conducted to determine the need for a detailed analysis. The preliminary analysis concluded that the proposed project would not result in any significant adverse impacts on neighborhood character and that a detailed analysis was not necessary.

As described in the relevant chapters of this EIS, the proposed project would have significant adverse impacts in two of the technical areas contributing to neighborhood character: historic and cultural resources, and transportation. As described in Chapter 22, “Mitigation,” the significant adverse traffic impacts of the proposed project could be mitigated through changes in signal timing, and the significant adverse impact to historic resources resulting from demolition of the North Building could be partially mitigated such that there would not be an adverse impact on neighborhood character. Through the creation of a new building that complements existing area land uses, and the revitalization and restoration of the South Building on the project

site, the proposed project would be consistent with the key components of the area's character and would, in fact, result in beneficial effects on neighborhood character. The proposed project would provide important space for local cultural organizations, create much-needed affordable and market-rate housing, generate new sources of employment and economic activity, and create a new hotel for an underserved market. The proposed project would preserve and celebrate the heritage of the Victoria Theater and its role in the history of 125th Street, and contribute to the ongoing revitalization of 125th Street as a premier art, culture and entertainment district. Along West 126th Street, what is now a blank brick façade would be transformed into a vibrant and active part of the project site, with ground floor activity and building entrances, visual transparency, and an improved pedestrian experience. Overall, the proposed project would not have the potential to adversely affect the defining features of the neighborhood's character, either through a significant adverse impact in a specific technical area or through a combination of moderate effects. Therefore, the proposed project would not result in a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character.

### **B. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

As discussed in Chapter 1, "Project Description," the analyses in this EIS compare conditions in the future without the proposed project to conditions in the future with the proposed project. The future without the proposed project scenario in all technical areas assumes that none of the discretionary actions currently being sought are approved. Absent the proposed actions, the Victoria Theater site is expected to remain a largely vacant and underutilized State-owned asset that would continue to deteriorate. The tenant occupying the storefront on the west side of the building would be expected to remain in the building.

### **C. METHODOLOGY**

An analysis of neighborhood character begins with a preliminary assessment to determine whether changes expected in other technical areas may affect a contributing element of neighborhood character. The assessment identifies the defining features of the neighborhood, and assesses whether the project has the potential to affect these defining features, either through the potential for significant adverse impacts or a combination of moderate effects.

### **NEIGHBORHOOD CHARACTER COMPONENTS**

According to the 2012 *CEQR Technical Manual*, 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 technical areas that define neighborhood character, or when the project may have moderate effects on several elements of neighborhood character. Potential effects on neighborhood character may include:

- *Land Use*. When development resulting from a proposed project would have the potential to change neighborhood character by: introducing a new, incompatible land use; conflicting with land use policy or other public plans for the area; changing land use character; or resulting in significant land use impacts.
- *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 streetwalls,

- landscaping, curb cuts, and loading docks. Visual resource changes have the potential to affect neighborhood character by directly changing visual features such as unique and important public view corridors and vistas, or public visual access to such features.
- *Historic Resources.* When a project would result in substantial direct changes to a historic resource or substantial changes to public views of a resource, or when a historic resources analysis identifies a significant impact in this category, there is a potential to affect neighborhood character.
  - *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; substantial differences in population or employment density; or if a project results in changes to a unique industry.
  - *Open Space.* Changes in open spaces have the potential to affect neighborhood character when a proposed project would result in the overburdening of existing open space facilities or would exacerbate an existing deficiency in open space.
  - *Shadows.* When an action would result in a substantial reduction in the usability of an open space, or in the use, enjoyment or appreciation of the sunlight-sensitive features of a historic resource as a result of increased shadow, there is a potential to affect neighborhood character.
  - *Transportation.* Changes in transportation 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 project. Such substantial traffic changes can include: change in level of service (LOS) to C or below; change in traffic patterns; change in roadway classifications; change in vehicle mixes; substantial increases in traffic volumes on residential streets; or significant traffic impacts, as identified in that technical analysis. Regarding pedestrians, when a proposed project would result in substantially different pedestrian activity and circulation, it has the potential to affect neighborhood character.
  - *Noise.* For a project to affect neighborhood character in regard to noise, it would need to result in a significant adverse noise impact and a change in acceptability category.

According to the 2012 *CEQR Technical Manual*, a proposed project can also have a combination of moderate effects to several elements that cumulatively may affect neighborhood character. Therefore, this analysis also evaluates the potential for the proposed project to affect neighborhood character through a combination of effects.

## STUDY AREA

As stated in the 2012 *CEQR Technical Manual*, the study area for a preliminary analysis of neighborhood character is typically consistent with the study areas in the relevant technical areas that contribute to the defining elements of the neighborhood. The study areas analyzed for the technical areas listed above generally include areas within 400 feet from the project site for analyses such as land use, and up to ½ mile for open space.

## **D. EXISTING CONDITIONS**

The defining features of the neighborhood include: the densely developed urban streetscape; the wide mix of building types, heights, and land uses; the rectilinear Manhattan street pattern; and West 125th Street's function as Harlem's "Main Street."

### **PROJECT SITE**

The project site comprises the former Victoria Theater (Block 1931, Lot 17), at 297 West 125th Street, midblock between Frederick Douglass Boulevard and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard in upper Manhattan. The project site is a T-shaped through lot with approximately 50 feet of frontage on the north side of West 125th Street and 150 feet of frontage on West 126th Street. The former Victoria Theater is largely vacant; other than unused theater-related space, the building contains two ground floor retail storefronts facing West 125th Street, on either side of the theater entrance and marquee. The storefront on the east side of the building is currently vacant. The storefront on the west side of the building is currently occupied by a nail salon. The Victoria Theater has been determined eligible for listing on the New York State and National Registers of Historic Places (S/NR).

### **STUDY AREA**

The neighborhood character of the study area is defined by a mix of commercial, residential, and institutional uses. While Harlem has historically been and is still predominantly a residential community, the study area captures the heart of the 125th Street corridor. 125th Street contains a variety of cultural, commercial, and institutional uses, many of which are historically important to the Harlem neighborhood. Commercial uses, including retail, are concentrated along West 125th Street. Residential uses in the area are spread to the north and south of 125th Street, separated from the dense commercial activity along this main thoroughfare. The immediate area also includes a variety of institutional uses, including a public school, religious academy, and two churches.

The street pattern in the area generally follows the typical Manhattan grid, with wide avenues running north-south and narrow cross streets running east-west, creating long, wide blocks. West 125th Street, at 100 feet wide, is an exception to this pattern. Just north of the project site, the street pattern is interrupted by a superblock containing the St. Nicholas Houses of the New York City Housing Authority.

West of the project site on West 125th Street is the Apollo Theater, a New York City Landmark and tourist destination that has been renovated and functions as a performance venue. Most of the storefronts that face West 125th Street occupy through-block lots; as a result, there are few commercial storefronts along the south side of West 126th Street and the north side of West 124th Street, where many of these buildings have loading entrances.

Within the study area, building heights, footprint sizes, and lot coverages vary. Some buildings—predominantly the older buildings built as residential or mixed-use structures—have small footprints, are less than 6 stories tall and are located on small, narrow lots; others, including P.S. 154, the Adam Clayton Powell Jr. State Office Building, and the St. Nicholas Houses, are taller and/or have large footprints and occupy very large, through-block sites but only cover a portion of their lot, with the remaining portions reserved for play areas, public plaza, or open space uses. Most of the commercial buildings in the study area have medium-sized footprints, are located on medium-size lots, and fully cover their lot. Late 19th- and early

20th-century buildings are typically clad in brick, with more contemporary structures faced with a mix of concrete, cast stone, brick, and glass. As described in more detail in Chapter 7, “Historic and Cultural Resources,” the study area also includes seven architectural resources, including the Apollo Theater, Hotel Theresa, brownstones on West 127th Street, and several office and retail structures.

Because it is surrounded by lower-scale development, the Adam Clayton Powell Jr. State Office Building is visible throughout much of the area. The Hotel Theresa’s bright white brick and terra-cotta façade and height relative to lower-scale surrounding development make this building also notable in views from Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard and portions of West 125th Street. Views west on West 124th, 125th, and 126th Streets are of the NYCHA Grant Houses, as West 125th Street angles to the north west of Morningside Avenue around the superblocks containing that development. From West 126th Street looking north, the towers of the St. Nicholas Houses can be seen above low-scale P.S. 154. Taller residential and commercial buildings within Harlem also are visible from the area surrounding the project site.

In terms of traffic, levels of service (LOS) at intersections analyzed in Chapter 14, “Transportation,” range from LOS B to D in existing conditions. The project area is well-served by mass transit, including the No. 2/3 subway lines at the West 125 Station (Lenox Avenue); the A/B/C/D subway lines at the West 125th Station (St. Nicholas Avenue); and the M2, M3, M7, M10, M60, M100, M1010, M102, and BX15 bus routes. All sidewalk, crosswalk, and corner reservoir analysis locations operate at acceptable levels for pedestrians. Noise levels are fairly high and reflect the volume of traffic on adjacent roadways, which is the dominant noise source at the project site.

## **E. THE FUTURE WITHOUT THE PROPOSED PROJECT**

### **PROJECT SITE**

As noted in Chapter 1, “Project Description,” in the future without the proposed project none of the discretionary actions currently being sought will be approved. Absent the proposed actions, the Victoria Theater site is expected to remain largely vacant and under the jurisdiction of the State. The tenant occupying the storefront on the west side of the building is expected to remain in the building. As it would be only minimally occupied, the project site would remain an underutilized part of the West 125th Street commercial corridor. The site would continue to deteriorate and would stand in contrast to the vibrant mix of active uses that characterize much of the area.

### **STUDY AREA**

As described in greater detail in Chapter 2, “Land Use, Zoning, and Public Policy,” there are a number of developments planned or under construction in the neighborhood. These include the development of a 1,300-seat Promise Academy charter school; a 400-seat Harlem Village Academy High School; a 4-story office and retail structure; a 3-level shopping center; and a 10-story mixed-use development with affordable and supportive housing and administrative space for a not-for-profit child welfare agency.

Taken together, the projects expected to occur in the future without the proposed project would generally be in keeping with the range of building types and uses found in the area and are unlikely to significantly change the defining features of the neighborhood. The development

projects that would be completed in the future without the proposed project will reinforce the study area's mix of uses, and although they will somewhat change the visual character of the area, they are not expected to alter the neighborhood's defining characteristics.

## **F. PROBABLE IMPACTS OF THE PROPOSED PROJECT**

### **PROJECT SITE**

In the future with the proposed project, the largely vacant building on the project site would be redeveloped with residential, hotel, cultural and retail uses. The proposed project would represent a major change to the character of the project site, but this change would result in beneficial effects to neighborhood character. Unlike the future without the proposed project, the future with the proposed project would introduce active residential, hotel, cultural, and retail uses to the project site, and would restore vitality to both the project site and surrounding area. The proposed residential use—which would include 50 percent affordable units—would be consistent with the pattern of residential development in the area and would complement and be supportive of other uses found throughout the neighborhood, including community facilities and retail shops. The proposed hotel and retail uses would be compatible with surrounding land uses and would generate new jobs and economic activity. In addition, the proposed hotel would address a growing market demand for an underserved area. Furthermore, the cultural and entertainment uses proposed for the project site have a long history on both the project site and the surrounding area and would be compatible with the surrounding neighborhood. These changes would contribute to an enlivened streetscape, would enhance the pedestrian experience, and would be an improvement to neighborhood character compared to conditions without the proposed project.

As described above, the project site building (which is composed of two parts, the North and South Buildings) has been determined eligible for listing on the S/NR. The project proposes to retain, restore, and reuse the South Building as part of the proposed project and demolish the North Building to construct a new building with cultural, commercial, residential and hotel uses. While demolition of the North Building would constitute an adverse impact on historic resources, mitigation for this adverse impact is being developed in coordination with the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP). The South Building on West 125th Street would be retained and its façade restored, and the restored lobby and foyer of the South Building would serve as the public entryway to the proposed cultural events and hotel. In this manner, the project would retain the original historic purpose of the lobby as the entryway to an entertainment venue. The design and setback of the proposed new building also would respect and not compete visually with the South Building's historic masonry façade on West 125th Street.

Although the demolition of the North Building would affect the visual character of the site, it is not expected to have adverse impacts on the key components that define the character of the neighborhood. Conversely, what is now a blank brick façade on West 126th Street would be transformed into a vibrant and active part of the project site, with ground floor activity and building entrances, visual transparency, landscaping and art features, and an improved pedestrian experience.

Overall, the proposed project would revitalize the project site, converting an inactive and deteriorated building with a mix of active uses appropriate for the site, including residential, hotel, cultural, and retail uses. The proposed project would preserve and celebrate the heritage of

the Victoria Theater and its role in the history of 125th Street, and contribute to the ongoing revitalization of 125th Street as a premier art, culture and entertainment district.

### **STUDY AREA**

As described above, the proposed project would introduce new residential, hotel, cultural, and retail uses to the project site. Unlike the largely vacant and deteriorated condition of the site in the future without the proposed project, these new uses would be compatible with the existing and anticipated land use patterns in the surrounding study area.

The proposed project would not add a substantial new population with different socioeconomic characteristics that would adversely affect neighborhood character. The retail space that would be added to the project area would serve the population of the proposed building as well as the neighborhood and would not alter existing economic patterns such that neighborhood character would be adversely affected.

The proposed project would not have any direct, physical or contextual effects to study area architectural resources that would result in significant adverse impacts on those resources. The project would not adversely affect the context or setting of architectural resources or alter the qualities for which they have been determined significant. The project would also not obstruct views to architectural resources or introduce significant new shadows on architectural resources that have sunlight-dependent features.

The proposed building would be taller and bulkier than permitted by zoning and would be taller than many of the other buildings in the area; however, as described in Chapter 8, “Urban Design and Visual Resources,” the proposed development would not be out of context with the height of large residential and commercial developments in Harlem that are within the study area’s viewshed, including the Adam Clayton Powell Jr. State Office Building and the Lionel Hampton Houses. Overall, the proposed project would introduce building forms in keeping with the context of the surrounding neighborhood, which includes a wide range of building heights, forms, and densities. The proposed restoration of the West 125th Street façade of the South building would restore and revitalize an important historic component of West 125th Street, reactivate the building’s public entryways on this street, and improve the pedestrian experience on West 125th Street.

In the future with the proposed project, views along the study area’s corridors are expected to remain substantially the same, although views toward the project site would now include a new, tall building. From within the study area—as well as from more distant viewpoints—the proposed new building would be anticipated to join the Hotel Theresa, St. Nicholas Towers, and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. State Office Building as prominent features of the study area’s skyline, above the surrounding lower-scale development. The proposed project would not obstruct any views to important visual resources, or eliminate any existing view corridors. The project has been designed to step back from West 125th Street, which would respect the historic 125th Street façade of the Victoria Theater and allow it to be viewed as a distinct entity along this corridor. Thus, the change in views would not result in a significant adverse impact to neighborhood character.

The proposed project would not result in any significant adverse open space impacts, and would, to a degree, offset project-generated open space demand by including separate open spaces and gym facilities for project residents and hotel visitors. Therefore, the proposed project would not adversely affect open space resources such that the defining features of the neighborhood would

be affected. In addition, the proposed project would not result in any significant adverse shadows impacts on P.S. 154 or nearby sun-sensitive resources, and would not result in potential impacts on neighborhood character due to potential impacts related to shadows.

In the future with the proposed project, as in existing conditions and the future without the proposed project, most study area intersections would have traffic LOS ranging from B to D. The proposed project would not result in any significant adverse pedestrian, transit, or parking impacts. While project-generated vehicle trips are expected to result in significant adverse traffic impacts at eight approaches/lane groups, these impacts could be mitigated with minor adjustments to existing signal timings and would not result in potential impacts on neighborhood character.

In the future with the proposed project, traffic on roadways near the project site, which is the dominant source of noise, would increase only slightly due to natural growth and the proposed project itself would not generate sufficient traffic to have the potential to cause a significant noise impact. Therefore, the proposed project would not result in potential impacts on neighborhood character due to noise.

The 2012 *CEQR Technical Manual* states that even if a project does not have the potential to result in a significant adverse impact in a certain technical area, the project may have the potential to result in a combination of moderate effects to several elements that cumulatively may affect neighborhood character. A moderate effect is generally defined as an effect considered reasonably close to the significant adverse impact threshold for a particular technical analysis area. 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; shadows; or noise; nor would it result in moderate effects in these areas as defined by 2012 *CEQR Technical Manual* guidelines. Therefore, the proposed project would not have the potential to result in a combination of moderate effects to several elements that cumulatively may affect neighborhood character. While the proposed project would result in significant adverse impacts in the areas of historic and cultural resources and transportation, these impacts would not affect the defining features of the neighborhood.

## **G. CONCLUSION**

Overall, through the creation of a new building that is consistent with its surroundings, and the revitalization of the project site, the proposed project would be consistent with the key components of the area's character and would, in fact, result in beneficial effects on neighborhood character. The proposed project would not have the potential to adversely affect the defining features of the neighborhood's character, either through a significant adverse impact in a specific technical area or through a combination of moderate effects. Therefore, the proposed project would not result in any significant adverse impacts on neighborhood character.\*