

Chapter 11:

Aesthetics and Visual Quality

11.1 INTRODUCTION

The assessment of visual and aesthetic effects involves examining an action's compatibility with the surrounding context, sensitivity of viewers, and considering potential visual effects in relation to such elements as scale, form, materials, visual character, and distance between viewers and visual resources. This chapter presents the analysis the FRA conducted of the potential effects of the No Action Alternative and the Preferred Alternative on aesthetics and visual quality in the vicinity of the Project Site.

11.2 REGULATORY CONTEXT

NEPA requires the consideration of visual resources when analyzing the potential effects of a Proposed Action.

FRA prepared the analysis in accordance with the *Guidelines for the Visual Impact Assessment of Highway Projects* (January 2015) prepared by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), as appropriate and applicable to the project. Although this project is not a highway project, many of the components in the guidance are applicable, such as effects on neighborhood character, viewer groups, and viewer sensitivity.

11.3 ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

FRA assessed visual impacts by evaluating the compatibility of the No Action Alternative and the Preferred Alternative with the surrounding context, sensitivity of viewers, and degree of impact. The assessment of compatibility considered the No Action Alternative and the Preferred Alternative's visual effects in relation to such elements as scale, form, materials, visual character, and distance between the viewer and the visual resource. The impact on visual quality may be beneficial, adverse, or neutral. A proposed project may benefit visual quality by enhancing visual resources, creating better views of certain resources, and improving the experience of the viewers. Alternatively, it may adversely affect visual quality by degrading visual resources or obstructing or altering desired views.

For details on the analysis methodology, please refer to Chapter 8 of **Appendix B**, "Methodology Report."

11.4 AREA OF VISUAL EFFECT

FRA defined the Area of Visual Effect (AVE) to account for the geographic area occupied by the Preferred Alternative and long views to the Project Site along Eleventh Avenue and West 30th and 33rd Streets (which border the Project Site). The AVE includes the area generally bounded by West 38th Street to the north, Tenth Avenue to the east, West 26th Street to the south, and the Hudson River to the west (see **Figure 11-1**). The rapidly developing urban environment of Manhattan—including the nearly completed portion of the Hudson Yards mixed-use development, Hudson River Park, and the natural environment of the Hudson River—characterizes this area.



- | | | |
|---|--|---|
|  Project Site (Western Rail Yard) |  Proposed Platform |  Existing High Line Park (Remains Unaltered) |
|  Hudson Yards |  Existing Concrete Encasement |  Photograph View Direction and Reference Number* |
|  Approximate Terra Firma Area |  Proposed Tunnel Encasement | |
|  Area of Visual Effect | | |
- * Photographs appear in Appendix H.

0 400 FEET

Aesthetics and Visual Quality
Project Location and Area of Visual Effect

11.5 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

11.5.1 VISUAL CHARACTER AND KEY VIEWS

11.5.1.1 PROJECT SITE

Bounded by West 33rd and West 30th Streets and Eleventh and Twelfth Avenues, the Project Site includes the MTA LIRR's existing rail yard, which is a largely below-grade commuter railroad storage yard and maintenance facility. The Project Site is defined by transportation uses and contains three small buildings that house train maintenance operations and related offices. These buildings have small rectangular footprints, are of one and two stories in height, and clad in siding with few windows. Several one-story temporary trailers, which house offices for the Hudson Yards Operation Center, are situated along the West 30th Street frontage of the Project Site. The southern portion of the Project Site is separated from the LIRR operations by chain-link fencing. The Project Site is enclosed by a mix of tall chain-link fencing and concrete walls along its Twelfth and Eleventh Avenues frontages, a concrete wall along West 33rd Street, and a mix of chain link fencing and plywood walls along West 30th Street. The fencing along West 30th Street has several openings for vehicular access to the Project Site. In **Appendix H**, see Figures H-2 through H-5 and view 9 of Figure H-6 for photographs of the Project Site.

The High Line, a landscaped public open space on a former freight railroad viaduct that runs from Gansevoort Street to West 34th Street, travels through the Project Site, beginning at the southeast corner of the Project Site. From Eleventh Avenue, the High Line viaduct runs westward along West 30th Street above the Project Site and then curves northward as it reaches Twelfth Avenue. Along West 30th Street, the viaduct has a concrete parapet simply ornamented with recessed panels and a tubular steel railing supported by square concrete posts. As it parallels Twelfth Avenue between West 30th and West 33rd Streets above the Project Site, the loop track viaduct has a decorative steel parapet and railing. There are street-level views into the Project Site underneath the High Line, and the elevated park provides views into and across the Project Site; however, the section of the High Line between West 30th and West 34th Streets is currently closed to the public. In **Appendix H**, see Figures H-3 and H-4 and view 7 of Figure H-5 for photographs of the section of the High Line on the Project Site.

11.5.1.2 BROADER AREA OF VISUAL EFFECT

Except for a number of superblocks, the street pattern in the AVE is the typical Manhattan street grid with wide avenues running north-south and narrow cross streets running east-west. North of West 34th Street, Eleventh Avenue is a wide arterial road that has two lanes running north and three lanes running south. Below West 34th Street, Eleventh Avenue becomes a one-way street with four southbound traffic lanes and two parking lanes. Twelfth Avenue (Route 9A) is a major north-south road with three lanes of traffic in either direction, divided by a landscaped median strip. Tenth Avenue is a major one-way street with four northbound lanes of traffic and two parking lanes. All of the cross streets, except for West 34th Street, are narrow and carry one lane of traffic. West 34th Street has two lanes of traffic in each direction with a third lane in each direction reserved for crosstown Select Bus Service (SBS) routes. The section of West 33rd Street between Eleventh and Twelfth Avenues adjacent to the Project Site is open to bus traffic, but the New York Police Department (NYPD) uses it for parking, and metal gates block the sidewalks to pedestrians. In the northern portion of the AVE, several cross streets—West 35th, West 36th, West 37th, and West 38th Streets—do not continue west of Eleventh Avenue because of the superblock formed by the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center. West 31st and West 32nd Streets are not mapped in the AVE between Tenth and Twelfth Avenues because of the two superblocks occupied by the Project Site and the Eastern Rail Yard/Hudson Yards development.

In general, the land in the AVE slopes downward from east to west toward the Hudson River. Tenth Avenue experiences changes in topography: north of West 30th Street, Tenth Avenue begins to ascend toward West 34th Street, at which point it slightly levels for a block, and then gradually descends in grade north of West 35th Street. A viaduct that spans over the Project Site and Eastern Rail Yard carries Eleventh Avenue between West 37th and West 30th Streets. The Eleventh Avenue viaduct gradually slopes downward from West 32nd Street south to West 30th Street. Due to the elevation of the Eleventh Avenue viaduct, cross streets east of Eleventh Avenue steeply ascend to the height of the structure; west of Eleventh Avenue, they steeply descend toward Twelfth Avenue and the Hudson River. Twelfth Avenue is relatively flat throughout the AVE.

The block north of the Project Site is a paved, surface parking lot enclosed by a mix of chain-link fencing and concrete walls (see Figures H-6 and H-7). The High Line traverses the Project Site and meets grade at West 34th Street. North of West 34th Street, the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center's large footprint occupies the majority of the superblock bounded by West 34th and West 38th Streets and Eleventh and Twelfth Avenues. The 175-foot-tall building has a dense, boxy form that is clad in dark glass and steel in a lattice design. The building has a central recessed and raised entrance on Eleventh Avenue between West 35th and West 36th Streets. Along West 34th Street, the convention center presents a mostly blank masonry wall with pedestrian and vehicular entrances located toward Twelfth Avenue (see view 9 of Figure H-6).

The block south of the Project Site is mostly occupied by a paved lot currently used by the Greyhound Line bus company for midday storage of buses serving the Port Authority Bus Terminal and by the Port Authority police, with office and support space. The block is enclosed by chain-link fencing covered by an opaque material that prevents views into the block (see Figure H-8). A tall residential building, 601 West 29th Street, is currently under construction at the Eleventh Avenue end of the block. Also, on the block south of the Project Site, a tall residential building at 610 West 30th Street is under development. In addition, a fan plant would be built on the block as part of the Hudson Tunnel project. The 2017 Hudson Tunnel EIS, which is presently under development, concluded that the Twelfth Avenue fan plant would have a neutral to slightly adverse effect on the visual quality of the area.

Located across Eleventh Avenue from the Project Site, the eastern portion of the Hudson Yards development occupies the superblock bounded by West 33rd and West 30th Streets and Eleventh and Tenth Avenues, and consists of four residential buildings, a hotel, four office buildings, a shopping mall, the Shed cultural center, and 14 acres of public plazas, gardens, and groves. Built on a platform above the Eastern Rail Yard, the buildings are sited along the street and avenue frontages of the development around a central, elevated plaza that contains the Vessel, a 16-story metal structure composed of interlocking staircases and viewing platforms (see Figures H-9 to H-11). The plaza connects to Eleventh Avenue with a tall flight of curved steps, and a service drive runs around the plaza connecting at-grade to Eleventh Avenue and to West 33rd Street (see view 16 of Figure H-9 and view 22 of Figure H-12). A smaller at-grade service drive provides vehicular access to the building at the northwest corner of the development (see view 23 of Figure H-13). Bollards line the Eleventh Avenue frontages of the plaza steps and two service drives, and heavy planters line the curbside of Eleventh Avenue. The office and residential buildings are tall (up to 1,300 feet in height) and sleek, mostly glass-clad buildings (see Figure H-3, view 5 of Figure H-4, and view 15 of Figure H-9). Located on the southern side of the plaza, the Shed is a four-story glass curtain wall structure with a translucent and faceted movable outer shell that extend over an adjacent portion of the plaza (see view 22 of Figure H-12). Landscaped paths lead from the central plaza to West 33rd Street (see view 23 of Figure H-13). The High Line runs along the southern frontage of the Hudson Yards development (see Figure H-10); close to Tenth Avenue, the High Line turns south to run to Gansevoort Street, and there is a short extension over Tenth Avenue that originally provided a rail connect to the Morgan General Mail Facility (described below).

The Hudson Yards landscaped paths from the plaza to West 33rd Street align with Bella Abzug Park, a midblock linear park of three segments between West 33rd and West 36th Streets (see view 24 of Figure H-13 and view 25 of Figure H-14). The park contains plantings, benches and tables, fountains, a playground, a small lawn, a public restroom, and a canopied entrance to the No. 7 Train 34th Street–Hudson Yards substation station. A large metal sculpture of a reclining gorilla is located at the West 33rd Street entrance to the park.

The remainder of the AVE contains a mix of low- to mid-rise masonry-clad tenements, warehouses, and industrial buildings and tall, recently constructed, or currently under construction, residential buildings (see Figures H-14 through H-18). The early-20th-century residential, warehouse, and industrial buildings tend to be clad in red or brown brick and ornamented with features that include arched windows, stone trim, corbelling, and decorative roof cornices or parapets. The new residential buildings include both masonry-clad and glass-clad buildings. The color palette of the masonry used on the new residential buildings includes grey, cream, red, and tan, and the glass cladding tends to be in shades of blue. Two notable buildings along Tenth Avenue are 5 Manhattan West and the Morgan General Mail Facility (see view 30 of Figure H-16). Located on the east side of Tenth Avenue between West 31st and West 33rd Streets, 5 Manhattan West is a 258-foot-tall, glass-clad office building with a unique massing—each façade slopes down and outward to meet the lot line, and it is a renovation of Brutalist-style concrete building originally constructed in 1969. The building is also unique for its construction over the rail yard to Penn Station. The 10- and 6-story Morgan General Mail Facility occupies the entire block bounded by Ninth and Tenth Avenues, and West 29th and West 30th Streets. Constructed over part of the rail yard in 1933, the building is faced in tan brick and ornamented with Art Deco details. Recessed loading docks line the Tenth Avenue and West 30th and West 29th Street frontages. As noted above, there is a broken connection to a rail spur from the High Line at the Tenth Avenue façade. An almost block-long skybridge over West 29th Street connects the building to a similarly scaled annex that occupies the block bounded by West 29th and West 28th Streets and Tenth and Ninth Avenues.

The western portion of the AVE contains a section of Hudson River Park, as well as the Hudson River. Hudson River Park is a linear, waterfront greenspace and hardscape park along the West Side of Manhattan from Battery Place to 59th Street, bounded on its west side by the Hudson River and on its east side by Twelfth Avenue. In the immediate vicinity of the Project Site, Hudson River Park includes a fenced heliport (the West 30th Street Heliport), a paved walkway, seating, and plantings. Adjacent to the Hudson River Park is a bikeway that is under the jurisdiction of NYSDOT as part of the adjacent Route 9A roadway, which is maintained by the Hudson River Park Trust. The heliport is a paved asphalt area surrounded by a chain-link fence with a mesh screen that limits public access and blocks views of the heliport, as well as of the Hudson River.

11.5.2 AFFECTED POPULATION AND VIEW SENSITIVITY

Pedestrians and motorists on the streets adjacent to the Project Site all have views of the Project Site; however, these views are partially obscured by the mix of temporary and permanent barriers—chain-link fencing, concrete walls, and plywood barricades—that enclose the Project Site. On Eleventh Avenue and West 33rd Streets, the below-grade rail yard is not visible, only the surrounding concrete wall (see Figure H-5). Motorists have brief, passing views of the Project Site. Eleventh Avenue provides longer street-level views to the Project Site. Views north on Eleventh Avenue to the Project Site are of the enclosing concrete wall and are partially obscured by the new residential building under construction on the west side of the avenue between West 30th and West 29th Streets, the rise in grade of the Eleventh Avenue viaduct, and the High Line, which crosses over Eleventh Avenue (see view 29 of Figure H-16). Views south on Eleventh Avenue to the Project Site are open, but the rail yard itself is not visible, only the concrete wall around the perimeter (see view 11 of Figure H-7). From east of Eleventh Avenue, views west on West 30th and West 33rd Streets of the Project Site are limited by distance and intervening buildings (see view 18 of Figure H-10 and view 24 of Figure H-13). Additionally, the High Line obscures long views west to the Project Site along West 30th Street. On West 34th Street, there are views south to the Project Site across the intervening block that is developed with surface parking, but the High Line and the concrete walls along the north and south sides of West 33rd Street obscure these views (see view 10 of Figure H-6). Recreational users of Hudson River Park, cyclists on the Route 9A bikeway, and motorists along Twelfth Avenue can view the Project Site from the west, although some views are slightly obscured by trees and shrubs in the roadway median between the northbound and southbound lanes of Twelfth Avenue, and by the High Line that runs along the Project Site's western edge (see view 4 of Figure H-3). Motorists on Twelfth Avenue have brief, passing views of the Project Site. Similarly, joggers and cyclists in Hudson River Park and on the Route 9A bikeway would have brief, passing views of the Project Site.

Although closed to the public at the time of this assessment, the section of the High Line that traverses the Project Site provides clear, lingering views of the Project Site. This section of the High Line also provides expansive views of the Hudson River and New Jersey in the distance and of Hudson Yards. The elevated Hudson Yards plaza provides expansive views across the Project Site to the Hudson River and beyond to New Jersey, but these views are variable from within the plaza. At the stairs to Eleventh Avenue, the Project Site appears prominently as a vast field of rail cars, but from farther east into the plaza, the view is less of the Project Site and more of the Hudson River vista (see view 1 of Figure H-2 and view 21 of Figure H-12). Located east of Eleventh Avenue in the approximate alignment of West 32nd Street, the Vessel provides more elevated views of the Project Site and the Hudson River vista. The service drive along the south side of the plaza also provides views west to the Project Site and the Hudson River (see view 22 of Figure H-12).

Visual resources within the AVE are the Hudson River and the Vessel. The cross streets that continue west of Eleventh Avenue provide long, but narrow views to the Hudson River in the distance. Both the High Line and the elevated Hudson Yards plaza provide expansive views of the Hudson River. Hudson River Park provides good views of the river, except in the vicinity of the heliport, which blocks views. Motorists on Twelfth Avenue have brief, passing views of the river. Although it was recently constructed, the Vessel could be considered a visual resource, because of its unique design among the surrounding office and residential buildings. The Vessel is visible from Hudson River Park, although the High Line partially obscures views of it. The adjacent section of Eleventh Avenue provides clear views of the Vessel, and Bella Abzug Park provides views south to this visual resource.

11.6 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

11.6.1 NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE

In the No Action Alternative condition, the Project Site would remain unchanged and would continue to be used as an active rail yard operated by LIRR, specifically as a commuter railroad storage yard and maintenance facility. In addition, the Tunnel Encasement would not be constructed. Therefore, aesthetics and visual quality in the AVE would be the same in the No Action Alternative as in the Affected Environment.

11.6.2 OPERATIONAL IMPACTS OF THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

The Preferred Alternative would have a neutral effect on the visual quality of the AVE. The Tunnel Encasement would be buried below ground and would not be visible to pedestrians, motorists, recreational users of the High Line and Hudson River, or visitors to the Hudson Yards plaza. The new permanent LIRR service buildings would be located along the western edge of the Project Site, and the new electrical substation would be located on the southern terra firma portion of the Project Site. These LIRR service buildings would be consistent with the aesthetics and visual quality of the mixed-use character of the area, where there are similar existing buildings currently on the southern portion of the Project Site, and viewer groups would not be sensitive to the LIRR service buildings.

The Platform would be minimally visible above-grade to the affected population and the effect on the visual quality of the AVE would be neutral. Views from the Twelfth Avenue sidewalk adjacent to the Project Site would include the existing concrete wall. To pedestrians and motorists, the Platform may be minimally visible above the top of the wall, but it would not affect those viewers' experience of the visual quality of the AVE along Twelfth Avenue. This view would be similar to that in the Affected Environment from Hudson River Park, where visibility of the Platform would be limited due to distance, existing trees in the median of Twelfth Avenue, and the High Line. For these reasons, there would be no effects to aesthetics of visual quality for users of Hudson River Park.

Along West 33rd Street, views would not change appreciably from the Affected Environment where there is and would continue to be a concrete wall along the Project Site's street frontage. On Eleventh Avenue, the Platform would not be visible over the existing concrete wall that borders the Project Site's frontage. This is because the Platform would be located at or below surface of the avenue viaduct. Therefore, the Platform would have neutral visual effects to pedestrians and motorists on West 33rd Street and Eleventh Avenue.

From West 30th Street, the Platform would be minimally visible from views underneath the High Line and across the southern portion of the Project Site. Viewers on West 30th Street would experience the Project Site in much the same way they do in the Affected Environment. To viewers on the streets bordering the Project Site, the Platform would have a neutral effect on the aesthetics and visual quality of the AVE.

Farther removed from the Project Site, the Platform would not be visible to pedestrians and motorists due to distance, intervening buildings, and topography. Overall, pedestrians and motorists in the AVE would have minimal to no sensitivity to changes in visual quality from the Preferred Alternative, and these changes would have a neutral visual effect on the AVE.

The High Line and the Hudson Yards plaza would provide views of the Platform, and users of those spaces would be moderately sensitive to changes in visual quality from the Preferred Alternative. While users of the High Line would have views of the Platform, their immediate views of the Hudson River and Hudson Yards would not be affected. Nor would longer views into Manhattan, as the Platform would be below the High Line. From the elevated plaza in Hudson Yards, viewers from the steps and the plaza's western edge would clearly see the Platform. As would visitors to the Vessel, but the Platform would not obstruct views of the Hudson River and the Hudson River vista. Therefore, the Platform would have a neutral effect on these views. From farther west within the plaza, the Platform, like the Project Site, would not be visible due to distance and the angle of the view. Similarly, from the service drive between the plaza and the Shed, views of the Platform would be limited.

The Platform would have a neutral effect on the two visual resources in the AVE. It would not block views to the Hudson River along West 30th and West 33rd Streets or from the High Line and the Hudson Yards plaza. Those views would remain largely the same as under the No Action Alternative. Further, the Platform—located across the wide, heavily trafficked Twelfth Avenue from the Hudson River and Hudson River Park—would not affect the visual context of the Hudson River. From Twelfth Avenue and Hudson River Park, the Platform would not block views of the Vessel, which is distant from the park and raised above street grade on the elevated plaza.

11.6.3 CONSTRUCTION IMPACTS OF THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

Construction staging and activities would occur within the Project Site, on the adjacent sidewalk, in the parking lane on West 33rd Street and Eleventh Avenue, and in the parking lane on West 30th Street. The Project Contractor would erect construction fencing around the construction activities and staging areas. Construction of the Preferred Alternative would not require any property acquisitions. Construction fencing would block views of construction activities to all viewers except those on the High Line and the elevated Hudson Yards Plaza, but those segments of the affected population have views of multiple construction sites in the AVE. Therefore, project construction activities would have a neutral effect on visual quality to users of the High Line and Hudson Yards plaza. Although construction fencing would be visible to the affected population and could result in temporary visual obstructions, it would have a neutral effect on visual quality in the AVE. Further, there are multiple construction projects currently underway within the AVE, and thus construction activities and equipment associated with the Preferred Alternative would be difficult to distinguish from these other activities.

11.7 AVOIDANCE, MINIMIZATION, AND MITIGATION MEASURES

The Preferred Alternative would have a neutral effect on the visual quality of the AVE. No avoidance, minimization, or mitigation measures are proposed. *