Welcome to TimesPeople
What's this?
TimesPeople Lets You Share and Discover the Best of NY... 0:44 AM
Get Started No, thanks

MOON NY&LA 6.12

Advertise on NYTimes.com

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Save the Dresden Elbe Valley

By GÜNTER BLOBEL
Published: June 4, 2009

SIGN IN TO RECOMMEND
SIGN IN TO E-MAIL
PRINT
SHARE
ARTICLE TOOLS SPONSORED BY
(500) DAYS OF SUMMER

The Dresden Elbe Valley is likely to be deleted from the list of World Cultural Heritage sites at the annual meeting of the World Cultural Heritage Committee of Unesco on June 23.

This is due to the construction of a huge four-lane highway bridge that bisects the Elbe Valley site at its most sensitive position, thereby destroying one of Europe's last river landscapes.

Ultimately responsible for this impending calamity is Chancellor Angela Merkel herself. As chairwoman of the Christian Democratic Union she failed to correct the misguided politics of her party colleagues in Dresden, the capital of the federal state of Saxony. She did not publicly oppose their numerous provocations of Unesco. And with her assertion that this is a "regional" problem, she has ignored Germany's contractual obligations to Unesco.

Here is a short synopsis of this conflict. In 2004, after application by Saxony and the German federal government, Unesco granted the title "World Cultural Heritage Site" to a stretch of the Elbe Valley in which Dresden is located. This is a beautifully conserved natural setting of a meandering river surrounded by wide meadows and gentle hills that are dotted with culturally significant, centuries-old villas and castles that survived the ravages of World War II.

In 2005, the German Automobile Club, together with the Dresden branch of the Christian Democratic party, instigated a plebiscite. Through a campaign of misinformation, this coalition managed to obtain a majority of votes for the construction of a highway bridge in the midst of the World Cultural Heritage site.

Armed with this vote and thereby legally enabled to bypass opposition of the Dresden city council, the CDU governor of Saxony set out to build the bridge. In 2007, Unesco responded with a warning by putting the Dresden Elbe Valley on the Red List of Endangered World Cultural Heritage sites. But the governor-led coalition began construction of the bridge to create facts on the ground.

Unesco had no choice but to put the site on a Reinforced Red List in 2008. Unesco indicated that the Cultural Heritage designation would be taken away in 2009 if construction of the bridge was not halted. But the construction continues unabated. I have written two letters of protest, to which I received a standardized answer from the department of cultural affairs that this is a regional issue.

What is at stake? After the near total destruction of Dresden in the Allied fire-bombing of February 1945, few people believed that its beauty would ever return. Dresden's slow but steady comeback was thus met with great relief. Eventually, most of the great buildings were rebuilt, culminating in 2005 with the reconstruction of the soul of Dresden, the Frauenkirche, literally from a pile of rubble. With its unique bell-shaped cupola, it restored the beautiful skyline that was immortalized in many of Bernardo Bellotto's celebrated vedute.

Moreover, the rebuilding of the Frauenkirche evoked broad international support. Millions

More Articles in Opinion »

Advertise on NYTimes.com

MOST POPULAR
E-MAILED | BLOGGED | SEARCHED

1. Nicholas D. Kristof: Rising Above I.Q.
2. A Study in Why Major Law Firms Are Shrinking
3. If All Doctors Had More Time to Listen
4. Well: When Sex Leaves the Marriage
5. Bucking the Tide on the Tuscan Shore
6. Op-Ed Contributors: The Economy Is Still at the Brink
7. Patient Money: Cost-Effective Ways to Fight Insomnia
8. Thomas L. Friedman: After Cairo, It's Clinton Time
9. Next Test: Value of $125,000-a-Year Teachers
10. For Sotomayor and Thomas, Paths Diverge at Race

Go to Complete List »

ADVERTISEMENTS
KNOW

were contributed, notably by America and Britain. Dresden became a powerful symbol of reconciliation.

This will be the first time that Unesco will be deleting a site from its list of several hundred World Cultural Heritage sites. The loss will severely tarnish Dresden's status as a cultural icon. It will also greatly diminish the impact of Dresden's message for reconciliation.

The damage for Germany will be even greater. Here is a wealthy country that is spending huge sums to destroy one of its World Cultural Heritage sites while many poorer countries struggle to maintain theirs.

What can be done? Chancellor Merkel should tell her colleagues in Dresden that the loss of the title for the Dresden Elbe Valley is not acceptable for Germany and is particularly detrimental to Dresden.

Günter Blobel, professor at Rockefeller University in New York City, was awarded the 1999 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. He is founder of the nonprofit Friends of Dresden.

Sign in to Recommend

More Articles in Opinion »

Related Searches

Dresden (Germany) Get E-Mail Alerts
Germany Get E-Mail Alerts
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Get E-Mail Alerts
Merkel, Angela Get E-Mail Alerts

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM

WEEK IN REVIEW »

The Divisions Among Israelis and Palestinians

OPINION »

Op-Art: iPanic

N.Y. / REGION »

A Study in Why Big Law Firms Are Shrinking

OPINION »

Op-Classic, 1999

When J.D. Salinger's love letters were offered for auction, the novelist Joyce Carol Oates recalled when her own letters were put up for sale.

MUSIC »

Crossover Dreams of a Bronx Bachatero

MEDIA & ADVERTISING »

Will Warner Grow Tired of New Line, Its Pet Indie?

Home | World | U.S. | N.Y. / Region | Business | Technology | Science | Health | Sports | Opinion | Arts | Style | Travel | Jobs | Real Estate | Automobiles | Back to Top

Copyright 2009 | Privacy Policy | Search | Corrections | RSS | First Look | Help | Contact Us | Work for Us | Site Map