



Japan Local Government Centre, London

Monthly Report July 2009 (Germany) - City of Dresden loses World Heritage Status

The City of Dresden is the first location in Europe to lose the status of World Heritage Site, which it gained in 2004. After only five years, it has now lost the once coveted status and it remains to be seen to what extent it will affect the future of the city.

The World Heritage Site of the 'Elbe river valley' included the city centre and further stretches along the river, covering a length of 12 kilometres. The views along the river were an integral part of the site. The reason why the status of World Heritage Site has now been rescinded lies in the decision of the City of Dresden to construct a new, four-lane bridge (the so-called Waldschlösschenbrücke), which sits very much in the centre of the valley and disturbs the views of this cultural landscape.

The construction of this bridge has been a long-running story. All attempts to have another bridge within the city limits did not come to fruition, although shortly before the end of the East German regime the planning was quite advanced. After re-unification in 1990, traffic levels increased very quickly, and in 1996 the city council approved plans for a new, four-lane bridge. However the exact plans and location for this new bridge were not included in the application material submitted for world heritage status, only a vague mention was made. Furthermore, after the UNESCO inspection conducted on location, the report produced contained a mistake regarding the exact location of the bridge, so the documents on which the commission relied to come to a decision were misleading.

In 2004, the political leadership in the city changed, and it was considered to abandon the bridge building plans. However this led to a referendum on 27 February 2005 which produced a clear majority for the bridge, and as such constituted a legally-binding commitment for the city to construct the bridge.

Quite soon after inclusion as a World Heritage Site, the UNESCO commission already voiced its concerns about the situation, and in 2005 asked the City of Dresden to pay for an independent opinion on the planned bridge project. A well-known city planner from the city of Aachen, Kunibert Wachten, was charged with this task. When this was published in April 2006, the conclusions were that the bridge was not in keeping with the already existing bridges (of which there are five within the city boundaries, most of which were constructed before or around 1900); that through it several important views of

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the city itself and its surroundings would be impeded; and that it would cut the Elbe valley in two at its most vulnerable position, namely where it curves and widens. After receiving this expert opinion, the UNESCO committee included the Elbe Valley on its red list of endangered World Heritage Sites at its meeting in July 2006. After that, negotiations between the UNESCO and the city continued regarding a possible tunnel instead of a bridge, but no compromise was found. The city was forced by court decision to begin construction of the bridge as originally planned in 2007. This led to the final loss of World Heritage status in 2009.

In Dresden and after the facts became known more widely within wider Germany, a large movement supporting change to the bridge plans sprang up, and there were calls on the federal chancellor to intervene. However, Chancellor Merkel was unequivocal in her stance that this was a matter for the city of Dresden herself and the Land of Saxony and not something in which the federal government should intervene. The Land however was putting itself in opposition to the city, when after 2004 the political power shifted within the city and the city leadership and the council favoured compromise with the UNESCO, but the Land in its role as legal supervisor enforced the previously taken planning decision of the council and the referendum supporting the building of the bridge. There are currently still a number of court decisions pending, regarding issues related to the planning decision as well as some connected to environmental protection matters.

The loss of World Heritage status means that Dresden cannot access money from a 150 million Euro fund meant to support all world heritage sites in Germany, and it is an embarrassment not only for the city, but also for Germany as a whole to be the first country in Europe to have a site de-listed. Over the longer term, it remains to be seen how it will affect the visitor economy in the region.

Another World Heritage Site in Germany, the Upper Middle Rhine Region, will have observed the case very carefully, as they are facing the same situation, with a bridge planned very close to the famous Loreley rock. However, representatives from this region emphasise that their approach has been very different: while the City of Dresden did not work with the UNESCO committee in the planning stages of the bridge, the Upper Middle Rhine Region is already doing so and hopes that an acceptable compromise can be found.

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