

“Experiment Democracy” : Dortmund celebrates USA@250 with major highlights and broad support

The City of Dortmund and TU Dortmund University are coming together to celebrate 250 Years of the United States of America. This tribute to the “Experiment in Democracy” has garnered much support: around 40 stakeholders from the fields of culture, education, leisure, science, and administration are dedicated to strengthening transatlantic relations. In doing so, they are taking a conscious stand against the systemic crisis currently facing one of the world’s oldest democracies.

On July 4th, 2026, the United States will mark a quarter-millennium of independence and celebrate its "Happy Independence Day!" for the 250th time. "250 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence – a milestone that stands for freedom and democracy and symbolizes shared values that bridge continents," explains Dortmund's Lord Mayor, Alexander Kalouti. The program assembled for this occasion resonates as a clarion call for Democracy, serving as clear evidence of a deep-seated conviction that solidarity knows no borders.

In his welcoming message, TU Dortmund's Rektor Manfred Bayer defines democracy as the "dream of justice and equality that, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., strives for realization". He emphasizes: "The United States did not simply gift democracy to Germany after 1945; they invited us to develop it further together. They inspired and helped us build a new society in Germany and across Europe, enduring setbacks and crises along the way." In 2026, TU Dortmund University and the City of Dortmund aim to honor this legacy with an extensive program of events.

A Long History of Relations

For both the City and the University, the decision to celebrate the 250th Anniversary of the USA had long been made, given the many commonalities and the long history between Dortmund and the United States. For a whole year, city and university will look at the past, highlight shared bonds, and explore common ground. "America@250 is not just a reflection of the past – it is a launchpad for the future," says U.S. Consul General Preeti V. Shah.

The year-long program, which features over 80 individual contributions is now available, curated by an interdisciplinary project team involving the City's Science Office, the International Relations team, Dortmund's Cultural Departments ("Kulturbetriebe"), and TU Dortmund. The events were either specifically designed for this purpose or selected for their strong U.S. connection. Whether it be concerts or readings, botanical tours or cooking classes, comedy or critical panel discussions – on campus and across the city. "The cultural differences between the USA and Europe are increasing," says Konzerthaus Artistic Director Raphael von Hoensbroech, having in mind the challenges of curating the '250 Years of USA' thematic focus.

“For us, this means to celebrate what connects us while simultaneously engaging critically with our respective understandings of freedom.”

Some highlights include:

- The Konzerthaus Dortmund presents a nuanced program focus on the theme, bringing to the stage great American voices. Among these are Joyce DiDonato and Gregory Porter, world-renowned orchestras like the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, as well as indigenous music.
- schauraum: comic + cartoon: The comic showroom opposite of Dortmund’s main station shows how 250 years of the USA have unfolded “between the pages of comic books.” To mark the 80th anniversary of the world’s oldest comics cowboy, there will be exhibitions, readings, screenings, and even a “comics debate” focusing on Lucky Luke and other (anti-)heroes of American comic culture.
- Theater Dortmund: Dortmund’s major stage artists contribute highlights such as a modern performance of *Grease* and a silent film concert of Charlie Chaplin’s *The Kid*.
- Literaturhaus Dortmund: Students from the Faculty of Cultural Studies will present a series of evenings featuring U.S. authors and German books about the United States. In another intercultural project, American Studies students will conduct and analyze interviews with citizens from Dortmund and the USA on “Images of America” and present them.
- Dortmund Philharmonics: In their concert “America!”, musicians will play side-by-side with the youth orchestra DOJO. The focus is on American music, featuring famous composers like George Gershwin and Florence Price – the first Black woman to have her music performed by one of the “Big Five” U.S. orchestras in 1933.
- Dortmund Adult Education Center (VHS): Under the motto “The USA in the Focus of Education and Culture”, the VHS offers a comprehensive program in the first half of the year with contributions from journalism, politics, science, and entertainment.

Many Voices

The program is enhanced by numerous other exhibitions, performances, workshops, and film nights. The list of participating institutions is long, with some 40 partners contributing, including the University of Applied Sciences and Arts (Fachhochschule), the Foreign Society (Auslandsgesellschaft.de), the City and State Library, the Zoo, the Dietrich-Keuning-Haus for young people, and various museums, cinemas, and sports clubs. Furthermore, partners like BVB (Borussia Dortmund) and Wilo have contributed editorial pieces on their own ties to the USA.

“We are delighted when many people participate with their own perspectives,” says Angela Märtin, Science Officer for the City of Dortmund who co-coordinates the program together with her university counterpart Walter Grünzweig, professor of American Studies. “Dortmund’s

perspectives are just as diverse and multi-layered as American culture itself - we want to give a voice to many different people."

Dortmund's Ties to the USA

Many of these connections grew out of the cooperation between the City and the University, which maintains one of the largest exchange programs with the USA in Germany. "Our student exchange program, for which TU Dortmund received a national teaching award, allows German and American students to learn together," says Prof. Dr. Manfred Bayer, Rector of TU Dortmund.

"Our partnerships with American cities and institutions promote innovation and help us tackle global challenges together. They show how important it is to maintain relationships, embrace diversity, and stand together for a peaceful, sustainable future," adds Lord Mayor Alexander Kalouti.

Dortmund has been partnered with Buffalo, New York, since 1978. While exchanges between school and universities are vital, they are only one part of active international relations on the levels of cities. "Now is the hour for urban diplomacy", says Martin van der Pütten, Head of International Relations for the City of Dortmund. "Cities are the strongholds of democracy and the rule of law. Through close international cooperation, cities are indispensable for future transformation. With over 200 city partnerships between Germany and the USA, they can and must be a fortress against anti-democratic forces."

Dortmund also works closely in project partnerships and global networks with Oklahoma City, Seattle, and Montgomery County. The collaboration with Pittsburgh started more than 20 years ago. Both Pittsburgh and Dortmund are linked by their post-industrial history that have signed an innovative partnership agreement in 2021 focusing on climate protection.

What is the USA celebrating on July 4th?

The formal occasion for the anniversary is the Declaration of Independence of the United States from the British reign, signed by the delegates of the 13 colonies during the 2nd Continental Congress in 1776. The document formulated Enlightenment principles of "unalienable" human's right to liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness.

"In 1871, American author Walt Whitman spoke of the 'Experiment of Democracy', which is not a gift but something that must be preserved, renewed, and even fought for," explains Americanist Walter Grünzweig. As a student, Grünzweig experienced the "Bicentennial" in 1976. Fifty years later, he believes such a celebration is more important than ever: "This project is a birthday gift and a sign of our bond to a shared democratic experiment that we must never perceive as finished," says Grünzweig, looking forward to a year of "resounding drumbeats."

For more information on the collaboration of city and science and the "USA@250" project, visit the website of the Masterplan Wissenschaft www.masterplan-wissenschaft.de and www.dortmund.de/usa250.