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Twinning Towns

The idea of establishing friendly relationships between individual cities and towns across Europe, known as town twinning, became popular following World War II. It was originally hoped that creating connections at a local level would be effective in undoing some of the harm that had been done to international relations by six years of conflict. Since then, many thousands of twin-town pairings have been established, and their relationships have expanded to include more than just student and cultural exchanges or tourism campaigns. In particular, technology sharing and business-promotion plans have become common to twin-town relationships. In recent decades, for example, the city of Nottingham, England, has received extensive technical support from its twin, Karlsruhe, Germany, in the modernization and expansion of its streetcar network.

Recently, however, a growing number of critics have been arguing that town twinning no longer plays the essential role in European society that it once did, since social media and online information enable individuals and businesses to establish and maintain relationships with people abroad. In addition, many relationships between twin towns have become inactive as volunteers and supporters retire, and young people do not think getting involved is worthwhile.

Advocates of town twinning, however, counter that the relationships that develop between twinned towns still bring unique benefits in the modern age. For example, the longstanding link between Deventer in the Netherlands and Tartu in Estonia led the two cities to hold extensive meetings involving public officials in order to deal with social welfare issues in Tartu. These, in turn, led to training sessions for Estonian healthcare professionals and the introduction of new policies regarding care for the elderly. Similarly, these types of relationships can be important following natural disasters, when a damaged town's twin is often among the first places to send aid. If the rich, long-term community connections enabled by town twinning are lost, such important examples of cooperation may become increasingly rare.