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**Authors** Hagens, J.E.

**Title** **The Nature of a Network Concept: Urban Networks, from Imagination to Outcome**

**Keywords** spatial planning, planning concepts, discourse

**Abstract** This paper reflects on the features and meaning of 'urban network' as planning concept in Dutch national and regional planning. What is the relation between the initial concept of urban network and its following use? Planning concepts can be defined as packages of specific terms and images, used in spatial planning to understand the current situation of an area or to guide the spatial future. Considering the use of planning concepts, planning presents a process of re-imagination. This research concentrates on urban networks in Dutch planning, a concept that takes in the notion of 'network'. Networks are often used in planning and related fields to understand (nowadays) complexity of an area and to emphasize current or possible connectivity between people and places. In brief: planning concepts and networks –or network concepts- involve aspects of understanding and ambition. However, the use of network concepts in practice is various and (therefore) often ambiguous, for example depending on scale level, tasks and intentions of users. The national government of the Netherlands has designated six so-called 'National Urban Networks' in The National Spatial Strategy. According to this Strategy an urban network is a concept that enhances "coherence between the various cities and urban areas" in support to the consequences of the development "into a network society and a network economy". An urban network is as such "an entity of larger and smaller cities, including the open spaces in between". The concept's role of 'routing' is for example reflected by the use of a network metaphor as description and by the effects of attached "priority" and "expectations" of urban networks. This paper investigate the meaning and possible ambiguity of named urban network, as an example of a network concept in planning. The study firstly investigates the nature of urban networks by exploring some 'hidden' characteristics. Specifically, this research focuses on the meaning of concept's values as knowledge, desire, power, expression and direction. Insight in the nature is used to explain the possible meaning of a label, i.e. the consequences of 'being' an urban network. Secondly, the paper concentrates on the use of 'network' in title and explanations of urban networks, in which the meaning of network will also be related to named features. In addition, this paper will briefly look into the role of a network concept in the discussion about a Greater Europe and its duality of cohesion and diversity: what can we learn from this research that focuses on the relation between the initial planning concept of urban networks and its simultaneous and subsequent meanings? The paper is illustrated by planning practice in the Netherlands, investigated from a discursive approach. The cases highlight the working and meaning of some urban networks of The National Spatial Strategy (translation into regional plans, viewpoints of decision makers, interpretations of policy makers, etc.) and these results are compared to experiences of previous planning concepts.

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