# Rural focus on city planning will provide room to grow

## STREET WISE

■ **Philip Stejskal**

Much discussion has centred on the capacity of the Australian city to deal with population growth through smart densification.

Locally, studies such as #designperth have built a compelling case for this model, demonstrating benefits across the triple bottom line. And yet, another local research project — MADE IN AUSTRALIA, The Future of Australian Cities — systematically demonstrates a collective urban saturation point for our nation, just 5.5 million inhabitants away.

So where will our growing population be accommodated beyond this figure? For the late British urbanist, Sir Peter Hall, the answer was in regional planning.

Australian cities have been following the doctor's orders to decentralise, but this process has retained an urban focus. In contrast, Hall espoused decentralisation with broader geographical reach — one that gathers city and surrounding regions into an interdependent, mutually sustaining network. Here growth is not facilitated by expansion at the urban fringes, instead casting a net
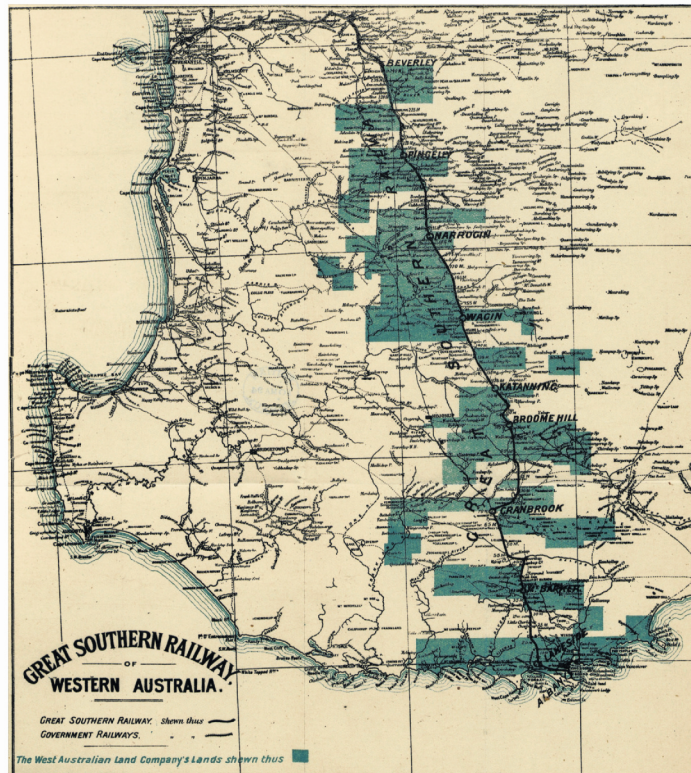


Map of the Great Southern Railway of WA.

further afield to embrace the diversity of existing towns, regional centres, natural assets and agriculture.

This shift has begun in WA with Royalties for Regions and Supertowns initiatives. Both aim to increase the appeal of non-metropolitan areas for existing and potential inhabitants.

Yet, arguably, best intentions have failed to deliver much aside from

white elephants in rural rooms. So how does "regional planning" propose an alternative? Interestingly, the primary deficiency in the question of regional health is considered by many to be the same that plagues our cities: inadequate physical connectivity. Our country towns have become isolated islands. As the size of farms grows our rural population declines. Injection of funds into these entropic systems

is not enough; they have lost their raison d'etre. A regional planning model proposes to give them (and our city) a collective new purpose: that of facilitating mutual survival by partnering in the creation of more sustainable and diverse systems over bigger areas.

This model has hard infrastructure at its core, without which it simply would not work. One cannot create a networked region without a mechanism to facilitate the necessary connectivity. Although technology knits us tight, it cannot replace being somewhere in person. We must look beyond the asphalt to the rest of the world.

So, what if we imagined this: A high-speed rail link between Armadale and Albany, following the highway to Cranbrook, then linking up with the existing rail line via Mt Barker to the harbour?

Not as a crutch for the regions, but rather inviting them on a bigger and more sustainable journey.

It's a question masters of architecture students from the University of WA will be considering over the next 13 weeks.

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