

**DELTA BLUES AT THE CROSSROADS: THE ECONOMIC REVITALISATION OF THE  
DOWNTOWN IN CLARKSDALE, MISSISSIPPI AND  
PRACTICAL LESSONS FOR TOWN CENTRES**

***John C Henshall***

Essential Economics Pty Ltd, Melbourne, Australia  
Phone +61 3 347 5255; Fax +61 3 347 5355; [john@essentialeconomics.com](mailto:john@essentialeconomics.com)

**ABSTRACT**

The Downtown areas of many American cities and towns have lost their role as economic centres which provide jobs and services for residents and those living in the surrounding hinterlands. These trends are very much in evidence in the South where significant political, economic and social change has taken place over many generations.

Clarksdale, Mississippi (population 20,000) has taken up the challenge to 'revitalise' the Downtown in the face of adversity. Almost half the shops are vacant and derelict, businesses generate low levels of retail sales, and the Downtown is a shadow of its former self. But recovery is underway and much of this is associated with Blues music and Delta culture: after all, Clarksdale - situated at the fabled crossroads of Highways 49 and 61 - is the 'cradle' of blues music, and is also the home to national icons in literature, art and other cultural pursuits. These are key elements around which the Downtown revitalisation effort is focused.

After six visits since 2001, the Australian-born and -based author spent three months in Clarksdale in 2008, writing an Action Plan for Downtown Revitalisation. The Plan has been adopted by the new Downtown Revitalisation Board Inc. and is now being implemented.

This Paper charts the process by which the Clarksdale community embarked on the road to Downtown recovery. The Paper describes the research and the assessments that underpin the Action Plan, and highlights the importance of 'champions', 'creative people' and community support in achieving positive results. These results are evident in new businesses and jobs, improved levels of service, refurbishment of derelict buildings and a renewed sense of place. The significance of cultural tourism to Downtown revitalisation is also highlighted. Lessons to assist in the revitalisation of other town centres are identified.

**KEYWORDS:** Downtown revitalisation, cultural tourism, town centres.

**1 INTRODUCTION**

I first visited Clarksdale, a small town in the Mississippi Delta, in 2001 when I was driving from New Orleans to Memphis. As Clarksdale is heralded as the birthplace of Blues music, I wanted to see what the place really had to offer to someone visiting from 10,000 miles away and with an interest in Blues music and Delta culture. As I walked around the rather moribund downtown area I was soon captured by the Blues, southern hospitality and dishevelled edginess of the place.

On each visit to Clarksdale I have found the downtown to be undergoing a form of economic renaissance in terms of new businesses, new jobs and new services available to locals and visitors, alike. With my interest in small town development and revitalisation, I felt that a story was here to be told, especially as this downtown renaissance is so indelibly linked with Blues and Delta culture. And I could see that in a very important way this economic renaissance was closely allied to the so-called 'creative' people - those Clarksdale residents with a long history associated with the town, as well as those individuals who had moved here in more recent times, drawn by the same creative, cultural spirit and hospitality that had captured me on my very first visit.

This Paper describes the Clarksdale experience to date, and highlights the important steps that contribute to the ongoing revitalisation of the Downtown. Other towns may benefit from the lessons to be learned from this experience.

## **2 CLARKSDALE: A SNAPSHOT**

Clarksdale is located in the northern part of the Mississippi Delta, that huge expanse of rich alluvial soils which extends from Memphis in the north to Vicksburg in the south, and which embraces the floodplains of the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers. Situated at the junction of Highways 49 and 61, Clarksdale is located some 125 km south of Memphis and has developed as an important centre serving the smaller settlements and farming communities in this part of the Delta. Clarksdale is part of Coahoma County.

The City of Clarksdale and Coahoma County have experienced significant changes in population numbers over the past 100 years or so. In around 1950 the combined population of these two localities peaked at approximately 50,000 persons, with approximately one-third living in the City and two-thirds living in the County. However, by 2008 the total population figure had declined markedly to around 27,850 persons, and this is roughly equivalent to the number of persons who lived in the area in 1900. Today, two-thirds now live in Clarksdale (an estimated 20,000 persons) and one-third (an estimated 7,850 persons) live in the balance of the Coahoma County.

Population loss has been due largely to the mechanisation of farming, especially in the cotton plantations, resulting in significant unemployment levels and the migration of the poor to seek jobs in the large industrial cities in the north. Other factors include poor socio-economic conditions of Delta towns and communities, the lack of adequate education facilities, and the perception of better prospects by moving to larger cities.

According to forecasts prepared by the Delta Regional Authority (DRA), during the period 2000 to 2010, the combined City and County population numbers are expected to drop by a further 3,440 persons.

On average, people living in Clarksdale and Coahoma County tend to have a lower socio-economic profile than the State and national averages. This situation is reflected in Census data relating to education, household income, housing value, poverty levels, and other indicators. Clarksdale/Coahoma is one of the poorest localities in the nation in socio-economic terms, although, paradoxically, it is also one of the richest in terms of its Delta culture and intrinsic relationship with Blues music - and which, as later demonstrated, is important in contributing to downtown revitalisation and business and employment growth.

Clarksdale developed over many years as the service centre for this northern part of the Delta, and became the social and economic hub for the provision of jobs, services and amenities. The coming of the railway, followed by the construction of highway networks, reinforced Clarksdale's role as the centre of trade and commerce in this northern part of the Delta.

By the early 1950s, according to the Chamber of Commerce at the time, the city had a total of around 650 retail businesses, most of which were located in the downtown area and were serving a trade area comprising some 130,000 residents. Today, the Downtown has approximately 75 retail businesses and the trade area has contracted to around 70,000 persons.

By the 1970s a number of new trends were becoming evident and were to lead to the shift of business activities away from the long-established Downtown. Principal among these trends was the relocation of many businesses to large sites located out-of-town on State Street where exposure to high volumes of highway traffic was significant and where the trend for 'big box' retailing could be more readily accommodated on large sites with ample room for on-site car parking. Significantly, Wal-Mart opened on State Street and this led to strong competition with small businesses in the Downtown area; since that time many new and expanding businesses have sought locations in State Street as the focus for retail and other business activities.

While the Downtown businesses have been experiencing tough economic conditions over the past two or three decades, in very recent times a renaissance in Downtown business activity has commenced. Much of this is directly related to Clarksdale's close association with Blues and Delta culture.

### **3 BLUES AND DELTA CULTURE**

Driving into the downtown area of Clarksdale, Mississippi, is like entering a small southern town locked in the 1940s. The mainly late 19<sup>th</sup> Century buildings have only survived thus far because new development over the past 30 years has located out of town, mainly along State Street, about a mile away. A walk around the Downtown soon confirms that not much commercial activity seems to be happening: almost half of the buildings are empty, and many of these are derelict. Those businesses that are in operation appear to be just making ends meet in terms of local sales. In a word, the Downtown appears 'moribund'.

But the broken pavements and generally dishevelled edginess of the Downtown also reflect the underlying strength of Clarksdale, rooted as it is in Blues music and Delta culture. This is the Crossroads: the place where - as tradition has it - Robert Johnson went down to the intersection of Highways 49 and 61 and sold his soul to the devil in return for the gift of being able to play the blues guitar. This is the birthplace of Son House, John Lee Hooker, Earl Hooker, Jackie Brenston, Ike Turner and numerous other icons. BB King and Muddy Waters were born nearby; Bessie Smith died here. Sonny Boy Williamson, Elvis Presley and Sam Cooke were heralded at the local WROX radio station where Early Wright (who was at the microphone for 50 years) was probably the world's longest-serving DJ. Others have called Clarksdale 'home' at some stage or another, and include Charlie Patton, Bukka White, Pinetop Perkins, Frank Frost and Sam Carr. And at the nearby small settlement of Tutwiler, WC Handy in 1903 first heard the music he was to describe as "*the weirdest music I had ever heard*", and which was to become the *blues music* phenomenon.

Today, a new phalanx of blues musicians call Clarksdale 'home' or at least come by on a regular basis, playing at the popular local juke joints and blues music festivals. The Juke Joint Festival in April and the Sunflower River Blues and Gospel Festival in August are now well-established annual events for locals and increasing numbers of visitors from other states and from abroad.

Delta culture is also evident in Clarksdale's rich wealth of artists, writers and others who have contributed much to the cultural fabric of the town and the Delta. For example, Tennessee Williams spent much of his boyhood in Clarksdale where his grandfather was minister of St George's Episcopal Church, and often the characters in William's were based on Clarksdale identities from that period of his life. Marshall Bouldin, world-renown portrait painter, has lived here for most of his eighty-plus years and he still paints in his studio on the northern edge of town.

But Downtown Clarksdale is changing, slowly but surely. The Downtown is undergoing a renaissance in economic terms, and this is helping to form a new sense of place for Clarksdalians and for the many visitors who come to the town each year to appreciate a place that is, indeed, the cradle of Blues music. This renaissance is reflected in the growth in new businesses in the Downtown, bringing new investment, new jobs, restored and refurbished buildings, new services, and a new sense of identity for the town. Most importantly, the renaissance is also bringing new residents to Clarksdale who complement the creative talents of existing residents and thus help to revitalise the Downtown economy and provide a catalyst for renewal and for business and community development.

A survey of businesses, buildings and other entities located in Downtown and which have a relationship with Blues and Delta culture shows some 60 places, as listed in Appendix A.

Although much is available in the academic literature in regard to the 'creative class' and 'creative cities', the revitalisation now underway in Downtown Clarksdale is home-grown: the local community got together and identified their need to 'revitalise', they became organised and incorporated, they employed a co-ordinator, and they set about introducing improvements to their Downtown.

This Paper shows that much of the revitalisation of the Downtown in Clarksdale is directly related to the town's close association with Blues and with Delta culture, with these elements contributing in important ways to the economic and cultural landscape of the town.

#### **4 REVITALISATION: THE ROLE OF CHAMPIONS AND CREATIVE PEOPLE**

Downtown Clarksdale's economic revitalisation is intrinsically related to the entrenched traditions in Blues music and Delta culture and the associated growth in new investment, businesses and jobs. Initiatives by local property owners, developers and businesspeople are creating new and expanded opportunities in business and, in so doing, are helping to sustain the community as well as keeping the Blues and Delta culture alive.

The role of 'champions' is important in this regard. Two prominent individuals who provide the inspiration, drive and leadership in the Clarksdale community are Bill Lockett, a prominent lawyer, investor and developer and Chairman of the recently-formed Clarksdale Revitalisation Board Inc, and Kinchen 'Bubba' O'Keefe, a local contractor with a long history of contributing to community service, building redevelopment and refurbishment, and

local enterprise. Each individual, in his own way, provides the initiative to identify projects and work towards their satisfactory conclusion, with community support. In some instances, the task is huge (such as eventually restoring the historic Alcazar Hotel), while in other cases important achievements are in evidence (such as introducing Madidi as the town's first fine dining restaurant and the iconic Ground Zero Blues Club, and restoring the historic Greyhound Bus Station).

While Messrs Lockett and O'Keefe provide the necessary inspiration and leadership, it is also important to highlight the many individuals who contribute their ideas, creativity, investments, business acumen, and personal time and effort in supporting Downtown revitalisation in some form or other. All of these individuals can be broadly described as being among Clarksdale's creative people. The following listing provides an indication of the number and type of projects, businesses and events that have been established in the Downtown over the past ten years and in more recent times by these local interests, including newcomers.

Projects developed by longer-term residents:

- Aaron Cotton Co Cotton Museum - Bob Aaron
- Alcazar Hotel (planned) re-development - Bill Lockett, Charles Evans, Others
- Birdsong Tours - Robert Birdsong
- Bluestown Music and Studio 61 Recording - Ronnie Drew
- Delta Blues Museum – community, with Shelley Ritter as Director
- Delta Cotton Company - Bill Lockett and Morgan Freeman
- Ground Zero Blues Club - Bill Lockett and Morgan Freeman
- Hopson's Commissary - James Butler (on Highway 49)
- Madidi Restaurant - Bill Lockett and Morgan Freeman
- Rust Restaurant - Clint Davis and Randall Andrews
- Shack Up Inn and Cotton Gin Inn - Bill Talbot and Guy Malvezzi (on Highway 49)
- The Depot - Charles Ledbetter
- The Lofts at Five and Dime (former Woolworth building) - 'Bubba' O'Keefe
- Juke Joint Festival (community, April)
- Sunflower River Blues and Gospel Festival (community, August)
- Tennessee Williams Festival (August) – community, with Panny Mayfield
- Pinetop Perkins Homecoming (October) – James Butler at Hopson's

Among newcomers, the following involvements are noted:

- BluesSource.com music/CDs - Gary Miller (Chicago)

- Cat Head Music, Folk Art and Books - Roger Stolle (St Louis)
- The Clark House Residential Inn refurbishment and numerous other properties for renewal - Charles Evans (California)
- Hambone Art Gallery - Stan and Dixie Street (Florida)
- Lambfish Art Company - Joey Young (Mississippi)
- New Roxy refurbishment (underway) - Robin Colonas and Matt Bolden
- Quapaw Canoe Company - John Ruskey (Colorado)
- Rock 'n' Roll & Blues Heritage Museum - Theo and Cindy Dasbach (Holland, via NYC)
- Stone Pony Pizza Restaurant and Bar - Buddy Yass and Rodney Boswell
- Tricia's Italian Restaurant - Tricia and Steve Kolbus (Indiana)
- Vincent Productions recording and film studio - Gary and Carol Vincent (Nashville)
- Café / Gallery / Music - Tony Ward (Australia) and Rosalind Wilcox (Mississippi)
- Clarksdale Revitalisation Board Co-Ordinator – Mac Crank (Oklahoma)
- Cat Head Mini Blues Fest (April/August/October) - Roger Stolle)
- Clarksdale Caravan Music Fest (May) - Theo Dasbach
- Hambone Festival (October) - Stan Street

In summary, Clarksdale has a wealth of arts and related activities, virtually all of which are located in the Downtown area where they contribute to active street life and help to generate local business revenues and employment. As a result, Clarksdale is now enjoying a renaissance in local economic development, and this is reflected in new businesses, new development and more local jobs and incomes.

## **5 ACTION PLAN FOR DOWNTOWN REVITALISATION**

Clarksdaliens decided in April 2008 to set in motion a movement to revitalise their declining Downtown. The first public meeting coincided with my arrival in Clarksdale to spend three months to write a personal account about what I had already detected, over numerous visits, to be the slow but certain renewal of Downtown activities, mainly associated with Blues music and Delta culture. The outcome of the meeting was to set up the Clarksdale Revitalisation Board Inc, and to seek support and funds from local interests and government sources. Before long, the new Board appointed a Co-ordinator and the revitalisation effort was underway. During this time I altered course, turning my personal 'blues odyssey' into an Action Plan which was subsequently adopted by the new Board prior to my return home.

The Action Plan provides the following assessments:

- Why Downtown is important

- The Socio-economic setting of Clarksdale and Coahoma County
- A statement on Clarksdale's Downtown, yesterday and today
- A description of Tourism and Downtown Clarksdale
- A listing of community views on the outlook for Downtown renewal/revitalisation
- A listing of key issues to address
- An Action Plan for economic revitalisation, including Vision, Objectives and Actions
- A listing of Ten Essential Do's and Don'ts in promoting Downtown revitalisation

The Action Plan is based on a consultation program involving in-depth interviews with 50 individuals in Clarksdale and a personal interview survey conducted among people visiting the Juke Joint Festival, as well as the conduct of land use and floorspace surveys of Downtown businesses and assessments of retail and tourism trading activities.

A copy of the Downtown Clarksdale Action Plan for Economic Revitalisation is available at [www.essentialeconomics.com](http://www.essentialeconomics.com) under 'downloads'.

## 6 LESSONS FOR TOWN CENTRES

Lessons from Clarksdale's experience include the following, many of which can apply to small towns in other places:

- 1 **Identify the 'champions'** who can lead the process, provide inspiration and engender community support.
- 2 **Get organized.** The Clarksdale Revitalisation Board Inc was established with strong local support from businesses, local government and other interests, ranging from the regional hospital and the Delta Blues Museum, to many businesses and individuals.
- 3 **Start with a Plan.** "*We know what we want, but we need a plan to get there*", was the call at the first town meeting. In this case, the Clarksdale Action Plan was adopted by the new Board to guide Downtown Revitalisation.
- 4 **Engender community support.** The City and the County came together with funds (seen by some to be a local 'miracle' in itself!) and the Regional Hospital also chipped in to help get the ball rolling, together with numerous local businesses and other community interests and individuals.
- 5 **Recognise and continue to attract 'creative people' to the community.** In this case, Clarksdale has many musicians, owners of music venues and recording studios, artists, galleries, museums, several fine dining restaurants plus cafes, and a range of specialty shops. Many of the 'creative people' involved in these activities have recently located in Clarksdale and have established businesses in the Downtown, drawn by the underlying attractions of Delta music and culture. Other 'creative people' are to be found locally in such diverse areas as professional services, management, marketing and construction, adding their skills to the revitalisation effort.
- 6 **Build a data base.** This can be difficult to achieve in under-resourced places (like Mississippi in general). Not even a base map of the Downtown can be found in

Clarksdale; basic information we otherwise take for granted simply doesn't exist. So a data base has to be developed, perhaps from scratch.

- 7 **Undertake the supporting research.** The Action Plan included assessments based on surveys and interviews, plus economic analyses for the retail and tourism sectors, as well as assessments of key issues. It's also important to identify the likely multiplier or flow-on effects to other local businesses and to regional tourism, and to identify links between businesses and economic development.
- 8 **Ensure the supporting infrastructure exists or can be developed.** For Clarksdale, this ranges from visitor accommodation and restaurants and cafes, to venues and recording facilities, museums and the like.
- 9 **Hold festivals and other events.** Most communities have something they can 'hang their hat on' as the basis for regular events and for Clarksdale this includes the Juke Joint Festival (April), the Sunflower River Blues and Gospel Festival (August), the Tennessee Williams Festival (September), and numerous smaller events.
- 10 **Get creative and start marketing!** Publish supportive material, posters, slogans, 'must see' lists, visitor maps, get into the media, and attract business support. Focus on business growth and marketing as much as you would on upgrading the built environment and improving local amenity.
- 11 **Get everyone reading from the same page.** In Clarksdale, this means co-ordinating the separate backers of the several main festivals so that a well-supported and organised festival program is in place. Get the other 'parts' of the jigsaw together, from museums and galleries to libraries and schools, all contributing to the 'whole'. Overcome any 'turf wars'!
- 12 **Get the media on side.** In Clarksdale, solid support is provided by the local newspapers, the Clarksdale Press Register and the Clarksdale Blues Star, with articles on all manner of projects, events, and other issues relating to the Downtown, its revitalisation, and its role and future.
- 13 **Recognise the importance of 'comprehensiveness': "it's not just 'Downtown'".** In Clarksdale's case, the education system needs to be addressed as it appears to be failing the community, 30% of whom live below the poverty line. It's no good fixing the physical form of the Downtown unless the poor social and economic conditions are also positively addressed. This need was highlighted in the Clarksdale Action Plan, especially the positive link between education and finding employment.
- 14 **Deal with Detractors.** Every community has them. So deal with these people in a positive way so that the wider community really can understand the benefits to be gained from Downtown revitalisation.
- 15 **Monitor and review progress** so that we know how the Downtown / Town Centre is travelling in its efforts to 'revitalise'. Each year, measure the numbers of new businesses, new jobs, new events, patronage levels, visitor origins, tourist information sources, media representation, retail sales levels, market share changes, and so on. These tasks need not be onerous or costly.

These lessons are now becoming evident in Clarksdale as the Downtown enters its second full year with the Revitalisation Board in place and with its Action Plan providing helpful directions under the guidance of Board members and their creative Co-ordinator who is introducing many initiatives aimed at Downtown revitalisation.

For those involved in town centre renewal and re-growth, the lessons from Clarksdale should not be news; however, these lessons do reinforce the importance of supporting local champions and creative people, attracting community support, having an Action Plan in place, and ensuring the implementation of initiatives which improve the economic, social and physical conditions of our town centres.

### **Appendix A: Businesses and Buildings in Clarksdale's Downtown Associated with Blues Music and Delta Culture, 2008**

<b>Type of Business</b>	<b>No. of Businesses/Entities (*)</b>	<b>Business/Entity/Building (Names *)</b>
Museums	4	Delta Blues Museum, Aaron Cotton Co Museum, WROX Museum, Rock 'n' Roll and Blues Heritage Museum
Juke Joints / Clubs	12	Ground Zero, Red's Lounge, Sarah's Kitchen, Club 2000, Club Millennium, Delta Blues Room, Bluesberry Café / Super Chickan's Place, My Brothers' Sports Bar, The Depot, Big D's Blues Club, Messenger's Pool Hall
Art Galleries / Art Shops	5	Hambone Art Gallery, Gimme Gumbo Gallery, Cat Head Folk Art, Brick Gallery (web-based), Lamb's
Dining/Cafes	11	Madidi, Rust, Delta Amusements, Bluesberry Café, Dutch Oven, Sarah's Kitchen, Two Brothers Wangs and Thangs, Ground Zero, The Depot, Stone Pony Pizza Restaurant and Bar, Tricia's Italian Restaurant
Music / Recording	9	Cat Head, Blues Town Music, Studio 61, WROX Museum, Delta Blues Museum Stage, Bluessource.com, Ground Zero, Mississippi Music Hall, Vincent Productions
Accommodation	6	Delta Cotton Co, Riverside Hotel, Big Pink B&B, Woolworth Condos (under-construction), Uptown Motor Inn, The Clark House Residential Inn
Other Businesses / Buildings of Tourism Interest	11	Delta Cinema, New Roxy, Greyhound Bus Station, Delta Hardware, Quapaw Canoe Co, McWilliams Building, Paramount Theater, Alcazar Hotel, Menagerie House (Catalpa House), New Roxy, St George's Episcopal Church
Heritage Area (Residential Area)	10 approx.	Cutrer Mansion (Higher Education), The Clark House, and buildings associated with Tennessee Williams and early townfolk

Source: Middleton Realty listings, and John Henshall *Land Use and Activity Survey, 2008*.

Note: \* Listings may be recorded more than once, according to type of business/activity  
Other Shops / Businesses (20 or so) typically not associated with direct tourism include clothing, footwear, gifts, hairdressers, clothing alterations, chemists, a grocery store, etc