

Chapter 2

Clarksdale, Mississippi: Downtown Regeneration, Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Blues Music



John C. Henshall

Abstract When walking into downtown Clarksdale in the Mississippi Delta, you're walking into the birthplace of Blues music. This is the fabled 'crossroads' of Highways 49 and 61 and the place renowned for Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Ike Turner, Sam Cooke, and many others associated with Blues music and the Delta. The downtown has Blues 7-nights a week, year-round. It has the Delta Blues Museum, juke joints, festivals and other events, art galleries and specialty retail, cafes and restaurants, and unique places of visitor accommodation. Southern hospitality abounds. But just a few short years ago, this focus on cultural tourism and the deep Delta heritage in Clarksdale was struggling at best. Declining population and jobs due to the mechanisation of agriculture, the loss of manufacturing industry, the loss of downtown trade to commercial enterprises located out on State Highway, high levels of social and economic malaise, and many other factors contributed to a decline in the role and function of downtown. Indeed, many downtown buildings were physically derelict and uninhabitable. Today, downtown Clarksdale is now on the road to revitalisation. This chapter highlights the significant role of creative individuals in building on cultural heritage and tourism, bringing new investments in business and in building rehabilitation, and also bringing new jobs, more tourists, and a new 'sense of place' to this small Delta town.

Keywords Cultural tourism · Blues music · Mississippi Delta · Downtown revitalisation · Heritage tourism · Small towns

2.1 Clarksdale and the Mississippi Delta

Much has been written about the economic regeneration of downtown areas in major cities, but little attention has been given to the situation in small cities and towns and the associated importance of cultural heritage and tourism. This chapter addresses the situation, with a focus on cultural-related economic regeneration efforts in the long-established downtown of Clarksdale, Mississippi (in Coahoma County) following

J. C. Henshall (✉)
Ethos Urban, Melbourne, Australia
e-mail: jhenshall@ethosurban.com

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2020
N. Wise and T. Jimura (eds.), *Tourism, Cultural Heritage and Urban Regeneration*,
The Urban Book Series, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-41905-9_2

years of decline. The special significance of cultural tourism is highlighted for its contribution to downtown regeneration, with emphasis on Clarksdale’s association with blues music and the genre’s global appeal. Clarksdale’s location is illustrated in Fig. 2.1.

For generations, Clarksdale was the hub of economic activity in the north-west Mississippi Delta. Indeed, Clarksdale was heralded as the ‘golden buckle in the cotton belt’, reflecting the town’s role as a major service centre to the surrounding cotton plantations and other agricultural pursuits. Manufacturing was also a key sector, supported by a prosperous downtown displaying a wide array of shops, offices, professional services, hotels, hospitality services, and civic facilities and amenities. From around the early 1970s, Clarksdale’s decline began as it lost its role as the dominant centre serving this part of the Delta. This demise was due to several specific factors, including the advent of big box retailing and the location of new retail and commercial businesses along South State Street on the edge of town; a declining trade area associated with the loss of population, jobs and spending caused by earlier agricultural restructuring and further manufacturing decline; the loss of workers and their families as they sought employment opportunities in (mainly) larger, northern



Fig. 2.1 Location of Clarksdale, Mississippi in relation to New Orleans, Memphis and Nashville (map produced by Nicholas Wise)

cities; and the increasing level of competition from other cities and towns in the surrounding Delta and nearby Memphis.

A basic indicator of Clarksdale's economic woes over the years is the significant decline in resident population numbers in both the town and wider Coahoma County. Clarksdale's population peaked in 1980 with 22,200 residents, with this number declining to just 16,000 residents by 2019. In comparison, population in the largely rural-based balance of the County peaked in 1930 with 37,270 residents, but declined significantly to 7,500 residents by 2019. Notwithstanding population loss, the underlying current health of Clarksdale's economy is in contrast with the generally dire economic circumstances of smaller towns in surrounding parts of the Delta. While Clarksdale's resident population numbers declined and the downtown lost much of its traditional role as a commercial centre over the years, the city has taken up the challenge to revitalise its downtown in the face of economic adversity. Recovery is underway and much of this is associated with Clarksdale's connection with blues music and Delta culture, noting also that the town and the surrounding Delta is home to national icons in literature, art, and other cultural pursuits. These are key elements around which the downtown regeneration effort is focused, and reflected in the cultural landscape through street art (see Fig. 2.2).

Today, positive results from the regeneration efforts are evident, with increasing numbers of new businesses and jobs; improved levels of service; refurbishment of derelict buildings; a renewed sense of place; and an uplift in community confidence.



Fig. 2.2 Blues Alley and Street Art, Clarksdale, Mississippi

Much of this regeneration has been achieved by private sector interests, particularly individuals setting up new businesses in downtown. Local government has added support, particularly through the strong promotional efforts of Coahoma County Tourism.

2.2 Clarksdale's Cultural Heritage and the Blues

In the anthology of blues music, Clarksdale is considered by many to be the birthplace of the blues, with its location at the fabled 'crossroads' of Highways 49 and 61. The Crossroads, as the legend goes, is where Robert Johnson sold his soul to the Devil in return for the ability to play blues guitar. Today, blues music is the focal point associated with the geography, sociology, culture, economy, and musicology of the Mississippi Delta, that expanse of fertile land which—as described in popular terms—extends from the front door of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis to Catfish Row in Vicksburg. From an historical perspective, Guralnick (1989, p. 14) describes Mississippi blues as “generally considered to be the richest and most emotionally intense vein of a genre that began sweeping the South in the early days of the (Twentieth) century and then, much assisted by the new technology of the phonograph record, became a central strand in the diffusion of Afro-American culture over the next fifty years”.

In the words of John Lee Hooker, a Clarksdale-born blues musician interviewed in *Melody Maker* in 1964, “I know why the best blues artists come from Mississippi. Because it's the worst state. You have the blues alright if you're down in Mississippi” (Gioia 2008, p. 37). This pertinent comment from John Lee Hooker is a terse reflection on the social, cultural, and economic journey which Mississippi has taken over so many generations, particularly for the African American community, especially those working on the plantations. For past generations, sharecropping was a feature of the cotton industry in Mississippi, with White landlords providing the Black workers with jobs on the plantations and to share in the proceeds at the end of each harvest (but, typically, the workers were in perpetual debt to the landlords). Although sharecropping was born out of a mutual dependency (the planters needed workers and the workers needed jobs), harsh living conditions and continuing indebtedness to the landlord were the norms for the Black community. As Cobb (1992, p. 282) describes the situation, sharecroppers were consigned to “a lifetime of hard labor with little hope of achieving either economic or personal independence from whites”.

Ultimately, these struggles gave birth to the blues as a means of expression in the face of adversity and hardship. The words of Bukka White, quoted in Cobb (1992, p. 279), help to identify the Delta roots of blues music: “That's where the blues start from, back across them fields ... It started right behind one of them mules or one of them log houses, one of them log camps or the levee camp. That's where the blues sprung from. I know what I'm talking about”. Cobb (1992, p. 305) also observes that “the blues, a music born of incessant toil and demolished dreams on impoverished

Delta blacks, exerted ... a formative influence on rock and roll” that was “to reflect and shape the sensibilities of successive generations”.

It was blues music—enmeshed in miserable working and living conditions from cotton fields to levee camps—that gave vent to feelings ranging from discrimination, violence, and deprivation, to incarceration, drunkenness, and loneliness. The blues captures these feelings, just as Robert Palmer describes the ‘density and power’ of Robert Johnson’s ‘Cross Road Blues’: “The guitar rhythm is deliberate and driving, but Johnson repeatedly interrupts it to hammer and bend a single string, so forcefully that the instrument momentarily sounds like an electric guitar. Examined more closely, the guitar accompaniment is a complex, carefully constructed, mercifully shifting succession of two-beat and three-beat figures, and an equally complex, equally mercurial alternation of driving bass riffs and high, bottlenecked lead lines. The singing is tense, as if Johnson was forcing wind through a throat constricted by fear” (Palmer 1982, p. 125).

These culture-related attributes are relevant to the topic of blues music in Clarksdale and the Delta, where poverty and unemployment levels are among the highest in the nation and where many downtown buildings lie vacant and derelict, reflecting this engrained poverty. However, and in a positive sense, blues music today contributes to Clarksdale’s cultural tourism effort and to the economic renaissance of the downtown through support to existing and new businesses, jobs, incomes, and improved levels of service, while also celebrating the very essence of Delta heritage and culture.

Going back some 25 years, a listing of “Mississippi Blues Musicians” (Rooster Records and Delta Blues Museum 1995) highlighted the birthplace of 310 musicians, with some 180 of these musicians from the Delta. The prominence of the Delta as the ‘cradle’ of blues is also highlighted by the number of historical ‘Blues Trail Markers’ or plaques located in the Delta, with the Delta described as ‘the birthplace of America’s music’. Among Trail Markers are dedications to Albert King, BB King, Big Jack Johnson, Eddie Shaw, Elmore James, Furry Lewis, Henry Townsend, Honeyboy Edwards, Hubert Sumlin, Ike Turner, James Cotton, Jimmy Reed, John Lee Hooker, Little Milton, Mose Allison, Muddy Waters, Pinetop Perkins, Robert Nighthawk, Sam Cooke, Son Thomas, Sonny Boy Williamson, and WC Handy. This is the cultural heritage that provides the foundations upon which the economic regeneration of downtown Clarksdale is based.

While much of the blues is rooted in the Delta of past generations, Clarksdale today is ‘home’ to many musicians and to those who come by on a regular basis, playing at the popular local juke joints and blues music festivals. These individuals include Super Chikan, Terry ‘Big T’ Williams, Big George Brock, RL Boyce, Bill Abel, Terry ‘Harmonica’ Bean, Lucious Spiller, Anthony ‘Big A’ Sherrod, Lightin’ Malcolm, Cadillac John, Jimbo Mathus, Watermelon Slim, Bill ‘Howl-N-Madd’ Perry, Dick ‘The Poet’ Lourie, Heather Crosse, and RL Superbad. Other blues musicians who have passed away in recent times include Pinetop Perkins, T-Model Ford, Robert Belfour, LC Ulmer, Elmo Williams, ‘Big Jack’ Johnson, CeDell Davis, Robert ‘Bilbo’ Walker, Leo Bud Welch, and Josh ‘Razor Blade’ Stewart. Younger musicians

in Clarksdale are now coming to the fore and popular among them are Christone ‘Kingfish’ Ingram, Lee Williams, Jacqueline Nassar, and Shy Perry.

While places such as Chicago or Memphis may lay claim to being the home of blues music, most would agree that the Mississippi Delta, and Clarksdale in particular, is the true place of origin. Fodor’s Travel in 2018 voted Clarksdale as No.1 of the “12 Best Music Cities that Aren’t Nashville” (Fodor’s Travel 2018). The travel publisher mentioned that although Nashville has earned the nickname ‘Music City’ for fostering country music legends, other cities are also recognised for their live music. Clarksdale tops the list.

A regional perspective on the Mississippi Delta is provided in the publication prepared by the Delta Center for Culture and Learning at Delta State University and titled *Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area Management Plan* (2014). A National Heritage Area is defined by the National Park Service as “a place designated by the United States Congress where natural, cultural, historic and recreational resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally significant landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography” (Delta Center for Culture and Learning 2014, p. xvii). In the Management Plan, the Delta is described as:

the land where the Blues began, where Rock and Roll was created and where Gospel remains a vibrant art. It is an agricultural region where cotton was once king, and where ‘precision-ag’ rules today. It is a place that saw the struggles of the Civil War and the cultural revolution of the Civil Rights Movement. It is the home of the Great Migration, and a land of rich culinary, religious, artistic and literary heritage (Delta Center for Culture and Learning 2014, p. 2).

The 18-County region in the Delta was designated by the US Congress as a National Heritage Area in 2009, recognising the Delta’s role in “shaping the nation’s character and culture” (Delta Center for Culture and Learning, p. 4).

2.3 Downtown Clarksdale’s Regeneration

Today, driving into Clarksdale’s downtown is like entering a small southern town locked in the 1940s. The mainly late Nineteenth Century and early Twentieth Century buildings have only survived to date because new commercial development over the past 40 years or so has generally located on the edge of town, mainly along South State Street, about 2–3 km away and where Walmart established in 1971. At least this out-of-centre development has avoided the pressure to demolish and replace the long-established downtown building stock and streetscape. To the visitor new to downtown, the general appearance of the local streets and buildings suggests that not much commercial activity is happening: 41% of the commercial buildings remain empty and many are in a derelict condition (Henshall 2019). Many businesses appear to be just making ends meet in terms of local sales turnover. In a word, much of 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.

While Clarksdale's downtown had been moribund for a generation or two despite this rich cultural vein, the place is changing in a new and positive direction. The downtown is now 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 the place that is, according to many ethnomusicologists, the cradle of blues music (Lomax 1993; Guralnick 1989; Palmer 1982). The economic renaissance is reflected in the growth in new businesses in the downtown, bringing new investment, new services, new jobs, restored and refurbished buildings, and a revived sense of identity for the town.

Most importantly, the renaissance is also bringing new residents to Clarksdale who add to the creative talents of long-term residents and thus assist in revitalising the downtown economy, providing a catalyst for economic renewal and for business and community development. Although much is available in the academic literature about 'creative cities' (e.g. Landry 2000) and the 'creative class' (e.g. Florida 2005), the regeneration now underway in downtown Clarksdale is essentially home-grown, with ideas and investments generated by long-term residents and newcomers to town. This has resulted in a number of new businesses established in downtown Clarksdale with names reflecting blues music and culture, for example: Ground Zero Blues Club (see Fig. 2.3), Yazoo Pass Cafe, Holy Moly, the New Roxy, Stone Pony Pizza, Levon's Bar & Grill, Hooker Grocery & Eatery, Bluesberry Café, Our Grandma's House of Pancakes and Bar, Cat Head Delta Blues Music & Folk Art, Hambone Art Gallery, Lambfish Art, Mississippi Saxophone Shop, Delta Cotton Company lofts, the Lofts at the Five and Dime, Blues Hound Flat, Bluestown Inn, Chateau Debris, The Squeeze Box, Delta Debris, Hooker Hotel, Travelers Hotel, Auberge Hostel, Quapaw Canoe Company, Delta Bohemian Tours, and Vincent Productions. Moreover, the Alcazar Hotel and the McWilliams building are slowly undergoing restoration, each of which is prominent in the downtown streetscape, although each has been vacant for several decades. The historic Greyhound Bus Station has also been restored and the Delta Blues Museum extended.

Deserving of special mention, although not located downtown, is the Hopson Commissary and the Shack Up Inn, each of which is located on the (old) Highway 49, just 5 km south of Clarksdale. These two entities—which comprise unique overnight accommodation facilities, food, and music venues—provide strong support to visitation levels in the downtown during Festivals and throughout the year. Of historical interest, Hopson's is the site where mechanisation was first introduced to cotton plantations in 1944, revolutionising the industry and changing forever (and not necessarily for the better) the socio-economic conditions of poor sharecropper communities. Festivals are an integral part of Clarksdale's tourism appeal, especially the annual Juke Joint Festival and the Sunflower River Blues and Gospel Festival which are popular events for both locals and increasing numbers of visitors from other states and from abroad. Other popular events include the Tennessee Williams Festival and the Clarksdale Film Festival, while a dozen or more smaller festivals, mainly blues music-oriented, are now held annually in downtown. During these festivals and events, the cafes, restaurants, galleries, gift shops, and other stores are open for business, as is the Delta Blues Museum.



Fig. 2.3 Ground Zero Blues Club, Clarksdale, Mississippi

Juke Joints—described as ‘cheap rent’ informal venues for eating, drinking, and dancing to a juke box or live music—are a feature of Clarksdale’s blues scene. Principal among them is Red’s Lounge, a rather dilapidated building located on Sunflower Avenue, but certainly a long-established and renowned focus for live blues music (see Fig. 2.4). Other live music venues include Ground Zero Blues Club, New Roxy, Bluesberry Café, Cathead, Hambone Art & Music, Delta Blues Alley Café, Levon’s, Hooker Grocery & Eatery, Grandma’s Sports Bar, and Messenger’s. Live music is also available at a number of downtown restaurants on a regular basis, and out at the Shack Up Inn and at Hopson Commissary on Highway 49.

While blues music is the catalyst for much of the economic regeneration of downtown, Clarksdale’s heritage is steeped in other aspects of Delta culture that contribute to downtown redevelopment. The town has a wealth of arts and related activities which reflect local culture and, importantly, assist in generating local business revenues and employment. Also important, community organisations contribute to this



Fig. 2.4 Red's Lounge in Clarksdale, Mississippi

array of culture-related activities and include Griot Arts, Spring Initiative and Cross-roads Cultural Arts Center, each of which focuses on opportunities to bring arts and culture to young people in the local community, especially young African Americans. Another example is Meraki Coffee Roasters (part of Griot), a community-based non-profit entity with a job-training program that assists young job-seekers in getting work experience.

Clarksdale, and the wider Delta, also has its share of writers, painters, and other artists. Playwright Tennessee Williams spent much of his boyhood years living in Clarksdale where his grandfather was rector at St George's Episcopal Church. Williams' plays are embedded with local personalities and places, however thinly disguised, from his early years in Clarksdale. The Tennessee Williams Festival,

which is celebrated each year to honour the playwright's birth date, takes place in the long-established residential heritage area on the northern edge of the downtown, centred around Clark, John and Court Streets. This area includes St George's Episcopal Church, the Clark House, the Cutrer Mansion, and other long-established homes that have connections with Tennessee Williams' early years.

Local galleries in the downtown exhibit the works of painters and other artists with a Delta association. One of Clarksdale's most revered artists is the late Marshall Bouldin III, internationally renowned portrait painter who lived in Clarksdale for most of his eighty-plus years, with his studio located on Friars Point Road on the northern edge of town. Mr. Bouldin's work is represented in galleries nationally and around the world. In recent years, a number of small galleries have established in the downtown, with young Clarksdale artists keen to provide a focus for creative talents and a place where local artists can exhibit.

As recently as 2001, very few culture-related features and activities existed in downtown Clarksdale. At that time, live music was only available on one or two nights a week, if that; today, live music is available every night of the year in numerous venues. Clarksdale has truly built on its cultural heritage and in so doing contributed to the tourism value of downtown and its local businesses, jobs, incomes, and service levels. In short, Clarksdale is rich in Delta culture, especially blues music, reflecting the deep heritage of generations who toiled the Delta soil and endured huge social and economic hardship. Today, the town is building a new outlook, embracing the music and the cultural heritage, and moving towards a new era based on cultural tourism. This is clearly evident in downtown Clarksdale where significant economic regeneration is underway and which, in turn, is indelibly linked to initiatives introduced and supported by local individuals and with community involvement.

2.4 Cultural Tourism and Economic Outcomes in Downtown Clarksdale

Since 2000, around 30 new businesses have established in the downtown, and these developments have also involved the renovation or renewal of a similar number of long-established buildings. Approximately 60% of these new businesses involve long-time residents, while 40% are attributable to newcomers to Clarksdale who have arrived in the past 10–15 years. Overall, around 100 businesses, facilities, and events in the downtown have an association with cultural tourism, some going back many years (Henshall 2019, p. 122 and pp. 201–207). A listing is provided in Table 2.1. With the increase in the number of music festivals and other events, and with the continuing promotion of Clarksdale as a popular place to visit, it is not surprising that tourism is becoming an increasingly popular sector in the Clarksdale economy. The number of visitors and their spending is increasing, year after year (Henshall 2019, p. 94).

Table 2.1 Businesses, events, and buildings in downtown Clarksdale associated with tourism and downtown regeneration, 2019

Type of business	No. of businesses/Events/Entities ^a	Names of business/Event/Entity ^a
Museums	3	Delta Blues Museum, WROX Museum, Tennessee Williams Museum at St George’s Episcopal Church
Juke joints/Clubs/Venues	12	Ground Zero Blues Club, Red’s Lounge, Club 2000, Club Millennium, Delta Blues Alley, Bluesberry Café, Messenger’s Pool Hall, Pete’s Grill, Levon’s Bar & Grill, Holy Moly, Grandma’s Sports Bar, New Roxy
Art galleries/Art shops/Books/Specialty retail	13	Hambone Art Gallery, Lambfish Gallery, Cat Head Delta Blues & Folk Art, Clarksdale Collective LLC, Coahoma Collective, Deak Harp’s Mississippi Saxophone store, Delta Creations, Mag-Pie Gifts & Art, Oak & Ivy, MS Design Maven, Nellie May’s, Southern Expressions, The Latest Craze
Café, Dining	12	Bluesberry Café, Ground Zero Blues Club, Stone Pony Pizza Restaurant and Bar, Yazoo Pass, Levon’s Bar & Grill, Hooker Grocery & Eatery, Our Grandma’s House of Pancakes, Dutch Oven, Meraki Roasting Company, 3 rd Street Bistro. Hopson’s and Shack Up Inn on (old) Highway 49
Music/Recording	8	Cat Head, Vincent Productions/Clarksdale Sound Stage, Blues Town Music, Studio 61, WROX Museum, Delta Blues Museum Stage, Ground Zero Blues Club, Griot Arts (2018 funding for a small facility for students’ use)

(continued)

Table 2.1 (continued)

Type of business	No. of businesses/Events/Entities ^a	Names of business/Event/Entity ^a
Accommodation	13	Five & Dime Lofts, Delta Cotton Company Apartments, Riverside Hotel, Uptown Motor Inn, The Clark House Residential Inn, Blues Hound Flat, Bluestown Inn, Squeeze Box, Delta Digs, Hooker Hotel, Holy Moly Eastern Star Executive Suite, Chateau Debris, and Travelers Hotel. (Note: chain hotels/motels are located on State Street, while the popular Shack Up Inn, Shacksdale USA Motel, and The Loft at Hopson’s are located on (old) Highway 49, about 5 km south of Downtown)
Other businesses/Buildings of tourism/Heritage interest	9	Clarksdale Cinema, New Roxy, Greyhound Bus Station, Quapaw Canoe Company, McWilliams Building, Paramount Theater, Alcazar Hotel, Episcopal Church, The Bank function centre (formerly the Bank of Clarksdale 1930 and more recently the Press Register building)
Heritage residential area	~10	The Clark House, Cutrer Mansion (Higher Education), and dwellings/church associated with Tennessee Williams and early townfolk in Clark Street and environs

(continued)

In 2019, Clarksdale is forecast to attract an estimated 158,000 visitors, including overnight and day visitors, who are forecast to generate an estimated US\$58 million in spending in the city as a whole, including downtown and also businesses located on State Street which include hotels, motels, food and beverage, and retail. This spending supports an estimated 830 tourism-related jobs in the city overall. For downtown, visitor-related spending in 2019 is forecast to reach US\$20 million, supporting an estimated 285 direct jobs. A further 200 indirect (or flow-on) jobs due to the employment multiplier effect (which measures jobs created through inter-industry links) are created in the local, state, and national economies. These updated

Table 2.1 (continued)

Type of business	No. of businesses/Events/ Entities ^a	Names of business/Event/Entity ^a
Events	15+	Clarksdale Film & Music Festival (January), Juke Joint Festival (April), Second Street Blues Party (April), Cat Head Mini-Blues Fest (April), Clarksdale Caravan Music Festival (May), Mississippi Saxophone Festival (May), Ground Zero Blues Club Anniversary Party (May), Goat Fest (June), Pinetop Perkins Foundation Masterclass Workshop (June), Sunflower River Blues and Gospel Festival (August), Cathead Mini Blues Fest (August/October), Hambone Blues and Art Festival (October), Deep Delta Blues (October), Tennessee Williams Festival (late September/early October), and smaller events throughout the year
Community groups that promote the arts	6	Griot Arts, Spring Initiative, Crossroads Cultural Arts Centre, Clarksdale Collective, Coahoma Collective, Meraki Roasting Company
Tours	2	Robert Birdsong Tours, Billy Howell's Delta Bohemian Tours

Source Author's Land Use and Activity Survey, 2018 (and updated in 2019)

Note ^aBusinesses may be recorded more than once, according to the type of business. Other shops/businesses (15 or so) typically not directly associated with tourism include clothing, footwear, gifts, hairdressers, clothing alterations, a grocery store, etc. Note Hopson Commissary and the Shack Up Inn are located on Highway 49, as is the neighbouring 'Shacksdale Motel' (a collection of individual shacks); these businesses are directly associated with tourism. Other businesses exist elsewhere outside Downtown Clarksdale and include the popular Ramon's restaurant, The Rancho restaurant and Abe's BBQ, and the national chain motels, hotels, and fast food outlets located on State Street

statistics, prepared on a conservative basis, take into account data published by the Mississippi Development Authority (2018) and updated by the author.

Clarksdale's expanding visitor market is evidenced by the increase in downtown business numbers and the growth in tax receipts derived from accommodation and restaurant revenues. Even a moderate growth rate in visitor numbers averaging around 5% annually would see a total of around 210,000 visitors in Clarksdale by 2025. This forecast represents an increase of 52,000 visitors or 33% on present visitor numbers, and these visitors would be mainly involved with downtown tourism, linked to blues and Delta culture, as well as people visiting friends and relatives in Clarksdale or visiting on business. Total revenues generated by visitors to downtown would be expected to reach around US\$27 million a year by 2025 (in constant 2019 prices), and this potential growth is estimated on a conservative basis.

The tourism-related jobs comprise venue operators, musicians, café and restaurant chefs, kitchen hands and wait staff, store owners and sales staff, gallery owners and artists, and cleaners and maintenance workers. Furthermore, many individuals involved in the promotion and development of downtown Clarksdale as a tourism focus centred around culture and arts are actually involved in such diverse areas as building construction and restoration, health care, legal services, and retailing. In addition to street- and venue-based activities, downtown employment opportunities in construction trades are evident, with a potential to significantly expand and enhance this particular sector by increasing the skill levels of local tradespeople and their availability. In this regard, numerous buildings in downtown are in need of repair and restoration, and local comment indicates that the number of experienced tradespersons in Clarksdale is in short supply. Employment opportunities in this sector could therefore be expanded where encouragement is provided through targeted training programs to those interested in establishing a career in building construction and restoration.

The economic revival of downtown—through cultural heritage and especially blues music—is reflected in the number and variety of new businesses that have established there in just the past 10–15 years or so. In early 2001, the only 'fine dining' restaurant was Madidi and it augmented the downtown's only diner, Delta Amusement. Soon after Madidi commenced operation, Ground Zero Blues Club, a popular blues music venue and eatery, was established in a former cotton-classing building. By 2019, eight new cafes and restaurants have established downtown. Similarly, in 2001 no art galleries were to be found downtown; today, two or three galleries and the Cat Head blues music and folk art store promote Delta art, as do the several specialty arts-related retail shops in downtown (Henshall 2019).

In regard to visitor accommodation, the only establishment located in downtown in 2001 was the 1960s Uptown Motor Inn located in East Second Street, and the much older Riverside Hotel in Sunflower Avenue. The Riverside Hotel was a former hospital for African Americans which was converted to a hotel in 1944; it is steeped in blues heritage. Today, quality accommodation is now available at The Clark House Residential Inn, the Lofts at the Five and Dime, the Delta Cotton Company apartments above Ground Zero, The Travelers Hotel, Auberge Hostel, Chateau Debris, and in several small apartments that include, among others, the unique Hooker Hotel,

Delta Digs, The Squeeze Box, Blues Hound Flat, and Bluestown Inn. In addition, a unique Delta accommodation experience is available 5 km south of town, accessed from Highway 49, at the Shack Up Inn where visitor accommodation is provided in original sharecropper shacks and in the original cotton bins, updated with the addition of running water, electricity, and air-conditioning. The Hopson Commissary, located across from the Shack Up Inn, is a venue with some overnight accommodation incorporated into the original plantation commissary. Across the road—which is the original Highway 49—is the ‘Shacksdale Motel on Highway 49’, where 15 or so individual shacks with traditional ‘shack’ fixtures and fittings are also available as visitor accommodation.

Overall, some 60 downtown buildings, businesses, events, and cultural activities in downtown Clarksdale are associated with Delta culture, with around 75% having been established since 2000.

2.5 Creative People and Downtown’s Regeneration

With this important regeneration of downtown Clarksdale—reflected in growth in visitor numbers and associated expenditures, an increase in overnight accommodation, dining and hospitality opportunities, venues, and retail shopping—one may well ask: how has all of this transpired in downtown over a period of just 15 or so years? The response lies in identifying the important contributions of ‘creative individuals’. How are such individuals identified and how do they contribute to our ‘creative cities’ and, in this case, to downtown Clarksdale?

Landry (2000, p. 3) sees the importance of creativity in what he defines as the ‘creative city’, highlighting that “successful cities seemed to have some things in common—visionary individuals, creative organizations and a political culture sharing a clarity of purpose”. Landry’s case studies show how “key actors in those places that have exhibited growth share certain qualities: open-mindedness and a willingness to take risks; a clear focus on long-term aims with an understanding of strategy; a capacity to work with local distinctiveness and to find a strength in apparent weakness; and a willingness to listen and learn” (Landry 2000, p. 4). In respect to ‘culture’, Landry (2000, p. 7) highlights this as the “panoply of resources that show that a place is unique and distinctive” and that “creativity is not only about a continuous invention of the new, but also how to deal appropriately with the old”. This latter observation is particularly relevant in Clarksdale’s case, with its roots in generations of blues music and Delta culture.

Florida (2005, p. 1) is an exponent of what he identifies as the ‘creative class’ and its contributions to cities and to economic development, stating that “creativity has become the principal driving force in the growth and development of cities, regions and nations” (Florida 2005, p. 1). Florida’s work assists in our understanding of creative people as drivers of the economic development in our cities and the need to attract these individuals. However, a ‘circular issue’ arises: are creative people responsible for making cities attractive places for investment and growth, or are

creative people simply attracted to cities that have those features and hence attract these so-called ‘creatives’ in any event. In Clarksdale’s case, the downtown and its strong pre-existing legacy associated Delta heritage and culture, including blues music, is what attracts the ‘creative’ individuals to live there and thus contribute to local development.

Another researcher on the topic of creative cities, Australian Mike Berry, highlights the situation where “a particular city or region may acquire a reputation for particular creative products or events—such as a music or performing arts festival—that contributes a ‘milieu’ which acts as an attractor for associated economic activities and skilled workers/performers, which further adds to the city’s reputation and enhances its milieu, attracting further like developments—and so on, in a virtuous growth circle” (Berry 2003, p. 99).

The fact that Clarksdale’s residents and newcomers are now building on cultural tourism reflects the opportunities that have emerged from the rich underlay of cultural resources that pre-exist current residents. It also reflects the situation in which ‘creative people’ have risen to the challenge of developing these opportunities through their own enterprise and, in so doing, they contribute to the enjoyment of the wider community, extending well beyond Clarksdale and reaching places across the globe.

In regard to the origin of those individuals establishing new businesses and assisting in the running of new events and the like in Clarksdale, approximately 60% are long-time residents, while 40% are newcomers who have arrived in the past 10–15 years. These contributors to downtown’s regeneration include musicians, artists, chefs, venue and restaurant owners/managers, tour operators, and those in property development, finance, IT, accountancy, law, education, and marketing, as well as individuals as diverse as a sea-freight mariner, a photographer, and a recording studio owner (Henshall 2019).

While blues music and Delta culture are significant factors in attracting new residents to Clarksdale, it is also true that Southern hospitality and friendship in general is important in forming a positive view of the town in the eyes of visitors. As Solé (2011, p. 156), a New York-based photographer who has published a photographic essay on the Delta and has visited Clarksdale, explains: “I was drawn to the people I met in the Delta. (They) allowed me to slip into their midst as if they had known me forever; we could swap stories and laughter, sorrow and silence. This happened not just once or twice; it happened every day in every town”.

2.6 Conclusion

Downtown Clarksdale has been successful in regenerating its economy, essentially through local efforts aimed at building on the resources at hand, focusing on Delta culture, tied-in with Southern hospitality. The resourcefulness of local people has been of utmost importance in fostering this downtown revival, including the efforts of both long-time residents and the many newcomers from other parts of the nation,

including a number coming from abroad to contribute to, and enjoy, the experience. Strong community support is also essential, especially where the creativity of individuals can be captured, whether they are involved in the so-called creative industries, such as music, literature, and art in Clarksdale's case, or in a supporting role as individuals with enthusiasm and foresight, and lending support with expertise in such diverse areas as law, property and construction, trades, hospitality, and public administration.

While Clarksdale presents as a special case in the context of culture, creative people and downtown regeneration, the lessons associated with this downtown revival are transferable to other communities where a particular feature or characteristic can be identified as the focus around which revitalisation efforts can be structured and promoted. The lessons from the downtown economic regeneration experience in Clarksdale are summarised in Henshall (2019), with the underlying reality that 'small steps in regeneration efforts can be winners'. These ten lessons include:

Lesson 1: Identify the importance of a particular asset, theme, or other feature upon which economic and community development can be pursued

Lesson 2: Support and encourage the 'champions' and 'creative people'

Lesson 3: Get organised and generate community support

Lesson 4: Ensure everyone is reading from the same page

Lesson 5: Prepare a Plan and build a database

Lesson 6: Facilitate the availability of supporting facilities and services

Lesson 7: Hold festivals and other events

Lesson 8: Recognise the importance of 'comprehensiveness': it's not just about 'downtown'

Lesson 9: Encourage building renewal and refurbishment

Lesson 10: Encourage the growth and viability of existing and new businesses.

These lessons reflect on positive achievements and conditions in the downtown, such as building on and promoting particular assets, including culture and heritage, and the important role of 'creative people' in such development.

A number of issues remain. In particular, an important area for action is the need to improve education levels and to enhance workforce skills in the community. This is important if the resident labour force is to be sufficiently educated and skilled to move into new employment opportunities that emerge in tourism, hospitality and other activities, and in trades and services created by downtown regeneration. An improved educational system that provides quality schooling opportunities will also assist in attracting young families to take up residence and also assist in retaining existing families.

Importantly, these benefits associated with downtown regeneration, especially the job opportunities, need to be available to all in the community who may seek them. As a priority, information about achievements in these areas—ranging from increased levels of downtown development and jobs, to improved outcomes in education and workforce skills—needs to be conveyed back to the community. This will help to engender further community support and, most importantly, assist in adding to the numbers of 'home-grown creative people' who can continue the efforts to revitalise

their community, just as recent and ongoing efforts in downtown Clarksdale are demonstrating.

References

- Berry M (2003) Innovation by design: the economic drivers of dynamic regions. lab.3000 report 01, RMIT University, Melbourne, October
- Cobb JC (1992) The most southern place on Earth—the Mississippi Delta and the roots of regional identity. Oxford University Press, New York
- Delta Center for Culture and Learning (2014) Mississippi Delta national heritage area management plan. Delta State University
- Florida R (2005) Cities and the creative class. Routledge, New York
- Fodor's Travel (2018) <https://www.fodors.com/news/photos/12-best-american-music-cities-that-arent-nashville>. Accessed 17 May 2018
- Gioia T (2008) Delta blues—the life and times of the Mississippi Masters who revolutionized American music. WW Norton & Company, New York
- Guralnick P (1989) Searching for Robert Johnson—the life and legend of the “King of the Delta Blues Singers”. Plume, New York
- Henshall J (2019) Downtown revitalisation and delta blues in Clarksdale, Mississippi: lessons for small cities and towns. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-981-13-2107-8>
- Landry C (2000) The creative city—a toolkit for urban innovators. Comedia and Earthscan, London
- Lomax A (1993) The land where the blues began. The New Press, New York
- Mississippi Development Authority (Tourism Division) (2018) Fiscal year 2017 economic impact report for tourism in Mississippi. Jackson, Mississippi
- Palmer R (1982) Deep blues—a musical and cultural history from the Mississippi Delta to Chicago's South side to the world. Penguin Books, New York
- Rooster Records and Delta Blues Museum (1995) Mississippi Blues musicians. Clarksdale, MS
- Solé M (2011) New delta rising. University of Mississippi