The Mission Inn Hotel and Spa in Riverside, California is an object of dualities. On one hand, it is deeply entrenched in Riverside History, starting out in 1876 as a small boarding house for agricultural workers. On the other hand, the hotel has been renovated and expanded many times, and its website boasts of its modern amenities. Additionally, while the Mission Inn stands as a symbol of local culture, its design has been influenced by a variety of outside aesthetic trends. To what extent, then, is the Mission Inn an example of critical regionalism, or a creative work meant to express and reaffirm local culture? Ideas from works of writers Keith Eggener and Douglass Powell, who have varying viewpoints regarding the concept of critical regionalism, both seem to point to the Mission Inn being a good example of critical regionalist architecture. It is a combination of what might be considered “authentic” historical Californian culture and outside influence from modern global culture and the cultures of various regions that blend together in order to create something unique to the city of Riverside.

According the Keith Eggener in his work “Placing Resistance: A Critique of Critical Regionalism,” an object of critical regionalism, such as a building, is something that should reflect the current needs and mindsets of the people that it seeks to represent. Specifically he quotes author Lewis Mumford, who claims that “Regional forms are those which most closely meet the actual conditions of life and which most fully succeed in making a people feel at home in their environment: they do not merely utilize the soil but they reflect on the current conditions of culture in their region” (Eggener 228). In this manner, the Mission Inn was initially a truly local, regionalist piece of architecture. As I have mentioned earlier, the hotel was originally built to meet the needs of the agricultural workers living in the area. Over time, the Inn’s purpose changed however, from housing local workers to “a grand destination hotel, the type that would attract and retain visitors from the cold east and Midwest who would stay for month at a time” (Lech 7) as Steve Lech and Kim Jarrell Johnson describe in their book, *Riverside’s Mission Inn*. Lech and Johnson also say that the hotel very quickly adapted to serve wealthy outsiders rather than the average local citizen. “The Mission Inn,” they explain, “grew out of the need to house successive waves of very wealthy tourists coming to Riverside” (Lech 7). This is the type of guest that tends to visit the Mission Inn to this day, as both room reservations and the restaurants that operate within the hotel are very pricey. Because of this limited accessibility to the people that, according to Eggener’s interpretation of critical regionalism, the Mission Inn should be designed to serve, it might be argued that the hotel is not a good example of critical regionalism. Rather, one might suggest, it is a structure whose purpose was imposed upon it by the needs of outsiders. However, although the hotel came to mainly serve wealthy out-of-staters, it still had the interests of the local people in mind. The reason that these tourists came, according to Lech and Johnson, was to take part in Riverside’s booming citrus industry, and to enjoy the beauty of Southern California in general. It was a way of exposing outsiders to our culture, rather than having theirs imposed upon us. Additionally, the famous visitors, including U.S presidents have become a point of pride for not just the hotel, but for Riversiders as well. Finally, the cultural significance of the hotel lies beyond its rooms. Regardless of whether or not one is a guest, they are welcome to walk through the hotel's halls and courtyards to read about its rich history and enjoy its unique architecture. Each year in December, they may also take part in a relatively new tradition that has extended throughout the entire downtown area with the hotel at its core: The Riverside Festival of Lights. The owners of the hotel begin decorating the Mission Inn and surrounding buildings month in advance in preparation for the month-long celebration that boasts thousands of attendees from both inside and outside of the Riverside area, most likely stimulating economic stimulus in the area. In this way, although its rooms are targeted at the wealthy, it still fits Eggener definition of critical regionalism by serving the local people.

When it was renovated in the early 1900s, it was built in the mission-revival style. This style was popular in California at the time as a way to break free from the more general American culture. In this way, the early Mission Inn reflects another concept that Eggener mentions, critical regionalism’s role as an “architecture of resistance” (228) This refers to the supposed ability of expressions of regional culture in architecture to oppose a more general, modern “globalization,” or a tendency of all architecture to look alike for the sake of function, that some fear might obscure the cultures of smaller cultural groups. At the same time, Eggener warns against critical regionalist buildings built on false perceptions of a culture that usually come from outside of the region. Indeed, the two people had had the greatest influence on the construction of the hotel, Christopher Miller and his son, Frank Miller, were not natives of California. But, Frank Miller was able to achieve a sense of authenticity by directly basing the hotel’s design on real California missions.

It could be argued that the Mission Inn is not a completely authentic representation of Californian and Riverside culture because it has been changed so many times over the years, and because in addition to the mission-revival style, Frank Miller, the second owner of the hotel introduced styles and decorations from his travels to other countries. It is true that the hotel has been changed many times to reflect contemporary styles and styles from other parts of the county, but writer Douglass Powell might argue that this, too, is a reflection of critical regionalism. In his work “Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape,” Powell mentions that we can’t just look at a region in an isolated way; we need to look at its interactions with other regions and the global community as a whole as well. The changes in the hotel’s appearance were due to an attempt to assimilate the new architectural trends, in with the old mission theme which the hotel kept at its heart. The global collections kept at the hotel may not be authentic to Californian culture, but they are what set the Mission Inn aside as something that is uniquely “Riverside.” Powell also says that “When we talk about a region, we are talking not about a stable, boundaried, autonomous place but about a cultural history, the cumulative, generative effect of the interplay among the various, competing definitions of that region” (Powell 5)--use different quote. This perfectly describes the evolution of the Mission Inn. It is not just a place locked in time, which is something that Powell says can happen to articles of critical regionalism, but rather it is something that is always changing and staying current, and thus staying relevant.

In 1985, the Mission Inn underwent a huge renovation, mainly to preserve the crumbling structure, but also to outfit the hotel with more modern amenities. In fact, the hotel’s website brags its modernity. However, these changes do reflect the needs of the modern guests, and the Mission Inn still stays true to its initial style. It embraces modern improvements while honoring its past.

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