The cultural document that I will be discussing is the Mission Inn Hotel in Riverside, California. It started in 1876 as a small boarding house meant to provide a place to stay for agricultural workers (Johnson, Lech 1), but over the past decades, it have been expanded and re-modeled various times. Some changes were merely for structural regions, while others were made to accommodate additional guests coming from out of state as tourists or to update the hotel with the latest architectural trends. Today, it is a blend 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. By examining the perspectives of writers Keith Eggener, and Douglass Powell regarding the phenomenon of critical regionalism, which refers to any artistic item that is created to reflect the local culture of the region in which it was created, I will evaluate to what extent the Mission Inn is a good example of critical regionalism.

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). Eggener also suggests that culture, and thus cultural regionalism is something that is constantly changing. Thus, one should avoid fixating on one image of a region to the point where it becomes an anachronism or a stereotype. 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, and 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 cultural 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.”

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.