Discussion Guide for *Palaces For the People* and *United Skates*

The existence of racism in America is something that is impossible to ignore. With the re-emergence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement in the media, Americans are now having conversations amongst each other about institutionalized racism. One form of that racism that we often forget about is that within social infrastructures. *United Skates* provides a perspective on racism within social infrastructures, specifically roller rinks, while also lending its voice to African Americans to show how they utilize roller rinks as a safe space.

**Before The Discussion**

Before beginning the discussion take some time to read Chapter 5 “Common Ground” of *Palaces For the People*. As you read the chapter, ask yourself:

1. How do social infrastructures build community?
2. Can social infrastructures exclude groups? If so, how?
3. What are the effects of excluding groups from social infrastructures?
4. Why are counterpublics necessary?

**Watching the Documentary**

Watch *United Skates* (available on Hulu) and discuss the themes present among the documentary. Pay attention to the themes of coded language, policies, and African American culture.

For a more in-depth discussion, pause during these time stamps and ask the group the following questions or lead them into thinking about these concepts. It is not necessary to pause at each of these time stamps, and you are encouraged to choose the best time stamps to pause at based on the type of discussion you want to lead.

10:15-

10 minutes into the documentary we already see key ideas beginning to take shape. For one, Phelicia makes it clear that skating is necessary to keep her kids calm. She also mentions how even though there “can be a thousand people on the floor, when you’re in the zone, it’s as if it’s just you”. **Make a note on how social infrastructures, like rinks, aid people in alleviating their stresses.** In addition, Pete makes the viewer aware that there is a clear connection between roller skating and the black community and that it manifests itself in different forms throughout the country. **Pay attention to how skating can influence culture among the African American community.**

13:40 –

The last clip made it very apparent that hip hop and rap gained momentum as a direct result of their involvement in roller skating rinks. Ask the group:

- Why was it necessary for hip hop artists and rappers to utilize skating rinks? Why didn’t they just make their own spaces for performances instead of using the rinks?
How did skating rinks facilitate the growth of a new form of black culture? Do you believe that the two became connected in any way as a result of rinks facilitating the growth of hip hop and rap?

19:17-

“If I went to a skating rink and it was all white people, I would automatically say to myself, ‘I’m not supposed to be here.’ So, I’m going to go on Adult Night, which is code language for ‘Black Night’.”

“When roller rinks were forced to integrate, a lot of whites, they just stopped going. So, the rink owners found new ways to segregate us.”

Based on the quotes above, how did coded language play a role in segregating African Americans in roller skating rinks? Even though the act was through bad intentions, did coded language help the African American community in any way? What are the effects of segregation in a shared social infrastructure?

“On the white nights, there’s no security, police, nothing. But on the black nights, cops at the door, security all around.”

Although the documentary does not explicitly share any thoughts of the individuals present that night at the skating rink, what do you believe having police and security present at a social infrastructure would cause? What message does this send?

If Adult Night is supposed to act as a safe space for the African American community, then what would having so much security procedures and police officers present cause?

26:44-

As Skate Depot is closing, what are some of the things that you notice? Was there anything that surprised you?

○ If the group does not know how to respond to this question, guide them into thinking about its connection to the community and questioning why so much police presence was necessary.

Do you foresee any consequences as a result of Skate Depot closing?

Why was it such a big deal that Skate Depot closed? Why do you think the community cared so much?

33:40-

“The cities and municipalities, they want a Home Depot that’s going to create you know, hundreds of thousands of dollars in sales tax. They’re not here to serve the public any longer. It’s all about money now.”

“But we need to keep the business open for the community.”
According to roller skating rink owners, keeping their businesses in the green is really difficult due to the rising costs in land. While their businesses provide various benefits for their communities, municipalities refuse to lend a hand in their financial struggle.

- What is the connection that businesses like roller rinks have built in their communities?
- Do you think that municipalities and local governments should aid struggling businesses? If it depends by circumstances, what type of businesses should local governments help? In what way can they help?

In a different perspective, one roller skater argues that many roller-skating businesses are struggling due to their unwillingness to play certain songs and create a welcoming environment for African Americans by creating an Adult Night. In addition, many roller-skating rinks implemented policies like “no saggy pants”, “no headphones or wires”, “no micro wheels or glass wheels”, and “no hip hop” in their businesses.

- What is the goal of implementing these policies? Do they act as some form of coded language to speak about a certain group?
- Are these businesses aware that the policies they implement largely exclude African Americans?
- What are the consequences of using such policies?

In this clip, Phelicia shows viewers a firsthand account of what happens to black skaters when they are faced with exclusionary policies. By all accounts, Phelicia and her family did everything right. They paid the entrance fee and were not causing any disruptions, but they had wheels that were very small. The family also noticed that another skater, who happened to be white, was wearing the same wheels but had not been reprimanded.

- Phelicia claimed that the wheels did not cause any damage to the floors when the worker said that the owner did not allow small wheels because they damaged the floors. This issue appears to be easily resolved by communicating the reality with the owner. Is it really that simple? Is there a disconnect between the African American community and owners?
- Many African Americans have coined the phrase “_____ while black” to speak about their experiences of doing actions that make others question their motives. In this instance we see the reality of skating while black. What are some of the things that African Americans face inside roller skating rinks and why is it so detrimental?

“We keep the price of admission at $5 so that everyone can afford it.”

“Over time, the heads of the rival gangs made a pact that the roller-skating rink would be declared neutral territory.”
“Everyone got a pass to skate.”

Gang activity among communities of color in cities is rampant, but according to the documentary, skating rinks provided an outlet for black people to escape gang activity. It did not matter if you were in a rival gang, at the rink all animosity ceased.

- In previous clips, we saw that skating rinks helped the community by reducing stress among individuals. In this clip, we saw how the community benefitted from the creation of a safe space. Do you believe there were more ways that the community benefitted from the pact between the rival gangs? If so, how?

“People just want the opportunity to rent the space at a fair price.”

“The municipalities want to generate as much revenue by putting big box stores in place of businesses that would actually help the community.”

Although it is evident from the documentary that roller skating rinks benefit communities by providing safe spaces, educating youth on social matters, and creating a larger culture in music, many struggle financially due to rising costs in rent. Despite their benefits, municipalities and local governments refuse to lend a hand to these struggling businesses. However, many local governments aid business chains.

- In terms of the benefits of social infrastructures, why is it important that roller rinks stay open?
- Who benefits from roller skating rinks closing?

1:22:20-

In order to still feel connected to the skating community, many black skaters have to travel long distances to national skate parties, which were described to be like a huge Adult Night. In addition, many of the skaters felt this was necessary to do in order to maintain cultural generational ties in an era where three rinks close every month in America. During the clip, skaters best reflected this idea with these quotes:

“You’re not attached to a tradition that ties generations together. You’re not having that connection that people had before you.”

“It’s about preserving the culture.”

- How does roller skating present itself as an activity that brings together different generations? What is lost when roller skating rinks close down in communities?
- National skate parties connect individuals that would have otherwise never connected, in this manner, how do roller rinks operate as a national social infrastructure and why could it be beneficial for local governments to invest in them?

Discussion Questions

After watching the documentary and reading Palaces For The People, ask your group the questions below. You do not have to go in order or answer all the questions.
1. What were some major themes that you noticed in the documentary? Can you connect them in any way to *Palaces For The People*?

2. In *Palaces For The People*, we were introduced to the idea of a secondary group at the beginning of the chapter. How can roller rinks form secondary groups within communities and do they have any importance?

3. “Attractive places, after all, are only one element of good social infrastructure, programming, which can be inclusive or exclusive, welcoming or forbidding is also important.”
   
   Roller skating rinks, similarly to swimming pools, have the potential to host inclusive programming. How would you design this inclusive programming? What would change from existing programming like Adult Nights?

4. “Swimming with others in a pool means accepting them as part of the same community precisely because the interaction is so intimate and sociable. Conversely, excluding someone or some group from a pool effectively defines them as social others.”

   How are the policies implemented in roller rinks that use coded language an example of exclusion? Who, then, are rendered as the “social others”? What are the consequences of being defined as the “social others”?

5. “Racism was obviously not the only factor in this building boom, but it played a role in the demise of public social infrastructures that supported collective life.”

   As swimming pools were ordered to desegregate, many families began to construct their own private inground pools. Similarly, roller rinks were forced to desegregate and although you cannot construct private roller rinks, rinks took many steps to challenge desegregation. What evidence do you have for racism playing a role in the demise of roller skating rinks, which supported collective life?

6. Political theorists Nany Fraser and Michael Warner defined counterpublics as “special places and institutions where [oppressed people] can make sense of and plan resources to their situation, free from surveillance from the dominant group”. They also argue that because of their insularity “they are essentially tools for civic engagement in unequal societies, because they give marginalized groups the private forum they need before engaging other groups.”

   How are roller rinks an example of counterpublics? What are the parts or features in counterpublics that are present in roller skating rinks?