Patrick Collison's aesthetics stack: beauty, communities, renewal, innovation

Recommended Reading from Tech Founders

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By Recommended Reading from Tech Founders • August 14, 2026

A high-signal set of four non-commercial reading leads from Patrick Collison, plus one attribution-caveated short-form venture-market recommendation surfaced in a 20VC discussion.

The main signal

In a conversation about whether aesthetics connects to ethics and the good life, Patrick Collison surfaced four concrete resources: a book on shared standards of beauty, an essay on idea communities, a history of quiet renewal, and a René Girard essay on imitation and innovation. [1] Read together, they form a useful sequence for evaluating cultural work: the object itself, the community that carries it, the long arc of renewal, and the social mechanics of novelty.

Source conversation: Patrick Collison at ZOË 2026

Beauty

- **Type:** Book
- **Creator:** Stefan Sagmeister is the name associated with the book in the conversation; full bibliographic details were not given.
- **Link:** Not supplied in the source conversation.
- **Recommended by:** Patrick Collison
- **Key takeaway:** Collison calls it a "great book" and says it marshals evidence that people broadly agree about what is beautiful, while experts increasingly favor disharmony and discordance. [1]
- **Why it matters:** It offers a more substantive starting point than "beauty is subjective": examine where broad human agreement holds, and where expert taste deliberately departs from it.

Idea Machines

- **Type:** Essay
- **Creator:** Nadia; the conversation does not give her surname.
- **Link:** Not supplied in the source conversation.
- **Recommended by:** Patrick Collison
- **Key takeaway:** Collison says Nadia "really gets" how idea communities work in open source and other domains, and that the essay applies to how ideas are incarnated in art. [1]
- **Why it matters:** This is a useful lens for assessing ideas as ecosystems rather than isolated insights: who gives them a community, infrastructure, and a path into practice?

The Brown Decades

- **Type:** Book
- **Creator:** Lewis Mumford
- **Link:** Not supplied in the source conversation.
- **Recommended by:** Patrick Collison
- **Key takeaway:** Mumford's account covers the United States from 1860 to 1890, a period he viewed as drab and "brown," yet Collison highlights its quiet renewal, including the Brooklyn Bridge and Central Park. [1]
- **Why it matters:** It is a corrective to judging a period only by its visible surface or online discourse; important cultural renewal can be accumulating before it becomes legible as a movement. [1]

"Innovation and Repetition"

- **Type:** Essay
- **Creator:** René Girard
- **Link:** Not supplied in the source conversation.
- **Recommended by:** Patrick Collison
- **Key takeaway:** Collison explicitly recommends the essay for its treatment of the relationship between imitation and innovation, including the historical fact that innovation was once associated with heresy. [1]
- **Why it matters:** It supplies a compact way to interrogate novelty: not whether something looks unprecedented, but how imitation, convention, and social permission shape what can count as innovation.

A secondary short-form lead from 20VC

Descriptive title: Dave Samuels's X post on Air Table's blended exit
Type: X post
Creator: Dave Samuels of Freestyle; the panelist qualifies the name with "I think."
Link: Not supplied in the episode.
Recommended by: An unnamed 20VC panelist.

A panelist called it "one of the tweets of the week," citing Air Table's $6 billion blended exit and the lesson that investors should sell along the way and be thoughtful about selling in good times. The discussion immediately supplied the counterweight: power-law returns mean the few positions sold too early can contain most of the value. [2] Use it as a debate prompt about liquidity timing, not as a universal sell rule. The surrounding discussion is available in the 20VC episode.

Sources

1. Patrick Collison: New Aesthetics, New Life | ZOË 2026
2. Canva Slahes Growth | Talent Exodus at Google | Revolut's $50B CEO Package | Musk's $55B Terrafab