Source: *The Straits Times*, pB1
Date: 24 December 2025

All I want for Christmas is the same old thing

The environmental cost of festive decorations in Singapore extends beyond just the electricity bill, say the writers. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

What if the most sustainable – and meaningful – Christmas tradition is learning to treasure what already exists?

Robyn Tan, Justin Lee and Liang Kaixin

As the year draws to a close, cities around the world are lighting up for the holiday season. In Singapore, Orchard Road has once again been transformed into a dazzling stretch of decorations for the festive season.

The annual light-up, "Christmas on A Great Street", celebrates SG60 this year with Merli, the mythical Merlion mascot, complete with garlands and bows.

Every year, the 3.1km stretch is transformed with a dazzling new theme, from Disney's Magical Moments in 2018 to a "firefly garden" last year. It is visually stunning and undeniably effective at drawing millions of visitors and driving consumption.

But we must also confront the carbon footprint that our collective demand for "newness" incurs.

CARBON FOOTPRINT

While exact figures on the carbon footprint of festive decorations in Singapore are hard to come by, the environmental cost extends beyond just the electricity bill. We must consider the "embodied carbon" – the energy consumed to extract materials, manufacture and transport these intricate structures.

Research from the UK's Carbon Trust suggests that a 2m-tall artificial tree needs to be used for at least 10 years to have a lower carbon footprint than a natural tree that is burned after use.

When applied to the scale of Orchard Road – where massive, custom-moulded structures are fabricated and shipped only to be deemed obsolete after two months – the carbon maths becomes worrying. Even if the plastic is eventually "recycled", the energy required to melt and remake it annually negates the benefits.

As we grapple with a climate crisis, we need to rethink our expectations of our Christmas street displays as well as the trees and baubles we put up in our own homes. Ultimately, it is down to what we choose to value. If we prioritise the fleeting thrill of seeking what's new and novel, we have to accept the waste that comes with it.

Over the years, the organisers of the annual Orchard Road Christmas display have made commendable strides in being more eco-friendly, such as using energy-efficient LED lights, installing solar panels to power specific set pieces, and using wire mesh instead of single-use plastics.

They have also said that the Christmas decorations are reused for Chinese New Year and even Valentine's Day, repurposed to decorate community spaces and even donated to charities.

In fact, the association reused most of the LED lights and cement stone counterweights in 2023, reducing up to 100 tonnes of carbon emissions, which is equivalent to an estimated 4,000 trees saved.

These are useful efforts to mitigate the environmental impact, but the fundamental logic remains: Build, display, dismantle and, often, dispose.

We must ask: Do we always have to desire "newness" in our mass festive decorations in the first place?

FROM DECORATION TO MONUMENT

A look at the approach by Manchester might hold a lesson. For more than a decade, the city in the north-west of England has a tradition of re-using the same giant, slightly bug-eyed Santa Claus mascot, nicknamed "Zippy", due to his resemblance to a cheeky puppet character from the long-running British children's TV show, Rainbow.

In 2019, the original Zippy was retired, as his usual spot at the town hall had to undergo multi-year refurbishment.

When we (Robyn and Justin) lived in Manchester for a few years, we saw Zippy become the single, enduring icon that heralded the start of the Christmas season.

When the city retired him, people didn't just move on, they mourned. Responding to this collective nostalgia, the city created a new Zippy for 2025, made from 100 per cent recycled aluminium and using low-energy LED lights, marrying an iconography of permanence with modern sustainable engineering.

Manchester's approach suggests that the most eco-friendly resource we have might be nostalgia.

Drawing from the late humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's distinction between abstract "space" and meaningful "place", environmental psychology views nostalgia as a powerful emotional catalyst in this transformation, infusing physical settings with personal and collective memories.

By celebrating the return of a beloved icon, Manchester avoids the carbon cost of making a new build from scratch, while simultaneously creating a sense of stability and comforting familiarity in a constantly changing world.

We don't need a giant Santa like Zippy, but we do need an anchor for our memories. Perhaps Merli, the mascot for SG60, shouldn't just be a one-off cameo.

Imagine if the same centrepiece returned to the intersection of Orchard and Scotts roads every December. Children would grow up taking photos with the same icon their parents did, and the wear and tear on the statue wouldn't be seen as defects, but as a patina of history. It could shift the focus from "What is the theme this year?" to "Merli is back, it must be Christmas".

A SHIFT AT HOME, TOO

The same could be said for our decorations at home.

When visiting our German friends in Renningen, a town near Stuttgart, we watched in awe as they embraced a time-honoured family tradition by unpacking a box of Christmas ornaments passed down through generations, reused every year such that they had become cherished family heirlooms.

In contrast, many of our friends in Singapore buy cheap festive decorations and discard them every year after Christmas. It's a convenient option given our space-constrained homes.

But when we treat our decorations like fast fashion, swapping them out year after year, we don't just contribute to the climate crisis, the ritual is ultimately devoid of meaning.

Instead of chasing novelty, why not use the same (old) ornaments on our trees each year? In time, they would, like what our German friends experienced, become cherished for years to come.

We could also create a rustic and eco-friendly festive ambiance, tapping into a new trend we're seeing: "Natural" Christmas decorations, using natural materials, like rattan, orange slices and cinnamon sticks. Focusing on the ephemeral can be a pleasing alternative to the permanent – decorations that can return to the earth rather than lie in a landfill.

For decades, the festive economy here has been driven by overconsumption – an endless pursuit towards what's new and novel. As we grapple with a climate crisis, we need to rethink our expectations of our Christmas street displays as well as the trees and baubles we put up in our own homes.

Ultimately, it is down to what we choose to value. If we prioritise the fleeting thrill of seeking what's new and novel, we have to accept the waste that comes with it.

But if we can learn to find delight in the return of the familiar – to see the "same old thing" not as boring, but as a cherished tradition – we might just find that a sustainable Christmas is the greatest gift we can offer to the next generation: a planet that is not just consumed for a season, but preserved for a lifetime.

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