

One of Creative Concern's award-winning designs for their work with Manchester Friends of the Earth encouraging people to cycle



More champagne sir?

Is there more to environmental awards than an exercise in greenwash, asks **Simon Birch**

I love corporate dos, what with their free booze, fancy little canapés and swanky settings which, in this case, was the medieval Guildhall located in heart of London's financial district. But this wasn't any old corporate bash, these were the first Green Awards, held in November 2006. The awards were a public slap on the back for those advertising and PR professionals who publicise environmental campaigns for business and local government. "We wanted to recognise and reward outstanding creative work

that communicates sustainability," says Iain Patton from Satellite Marketing Communications, the small London-based PR agency that organised the awards. And what a bizarre night it turned out to be, with small, dynamic ethical businesses such as Green Energy and Greenfibres rubbing shoulders with corporate heavyweights such as M&S and Procter & Gamble. But to be honest, being surrounded by so many corporate suits at what was supposed to be an environmental event still brings out the cynic in me. Especially when two of the sponsors of the event were GE, supplier to the arms trade, and ASDA/Wal-Mart, which is being targeted by campaigners for alleged sweat-shop abuses in South East Asia.

Greenwash?

So was the event little more than one big greenwash opportunity for the businesses involved, or do these events have a genuine role to play in promoting the importance of environmental sustainability? "There's no doubt that there was some degree of greenwash taking place on the part of businesses wanting to have a green spin as part of their wider PR campaign strategy," believes Darren Johnson, a Green Party member of the London Assembly who attended the event. "That said it was also a really important night for the public sector and I wanted to show my support for the number of London-based environmental initiatives that were up for awards."

In reply to the accusations of greenwash, Iain Patton says that we should be taking a more conciliatory approach.

"We need to work with companies as it's all about sharing knowledge, collaboration and education," says Patton. "If we can help to change a company such as ASDA, the impact within the retail sector would be immense."

Iain, however, added a somewhat more practical reason for involving the likes of ASDA and GE. "If we didn't have sponsorship from these sort of companies then we simply couldn't have afforded to put on the event."

Anything goes

Steve Connor, who heads up Creative Concern, a Manchester-

based environmental-driven PR company, takes the view that as we live in a market-based economy then we should be prepared to work with anybody - within reason: "By working with companies such as ASDA and GE events like the Green Awards do open themselves to accusations of greenwash," says Connor. "But unless the company involved has been accused of something really awful such as human rights abuses or some dreadful pollution incident, then we shouldn't be too squeamish about who we work with."

The reality is that events such as the Green Awards are just one of an increasing number of environmental awards and shows: in June there'll be the second Ethical Living Awards sponsored by the Observer, whilst in September we have the Eco-living show to be held in London's Docklands and sponsored by, of all media players, the Daily Telegraph.

What we're seeing here is just another example of the kind of unprecedented publicity that environmental issues have been given over the past two years. Look at what's happened in just the past few weeks: ITV's evening news has broadcast its 'Big Melt' show live from Antarctica; the Sun has had its own Green Week, complete with a page three model painted green; and M&S has just announced a multi-million pound package of green initiatives.

The result is that we're now moving in uncharted territory where we've got to be prepared to think about things in a different way. Sure, we can take the view that some of the current corporate born-again environmentalism smacks of greenwash (hello Tesco), but if we're to stop environmental meltdown then big business has to be part of the solution. This doesn't mean that we should roll over and drop our critical guard, we've just got to proceed with a little more pragmatism.

"The urgency of the threat posed by climate change means that we've got to tackle the problem by any means possible," says Connor. "If an alliance with a corporate partner might achieve a positive outcome then we should probably go for it. We've got no time to be prissy any more."