



## Hotel sector 'should use design to differentiate'

**A** LEADING expert on the hotel industry has warned that Northern Ireland hotels face challenges if they are to maintain the growth levels that have been witnessed since 1995.

At a conference in Belfast yesterday, Michael Williamson, director of ASM Horwath, said that while the results for 2006 were the best on record, the north's hotels market was still an immature one and faced strong competition if it is to sustain recent growth.

Douglas Wallace Architects, the leading Belfast firm of architects, designers and project managers, organised the seminar to explore the contribution of hotel design to the Northern Ireland tourism.

"While the performance of the hotel sector in 2006 was the best on record, the Northern Ireland market must differentiate itself by offering innovative design solutions which improve the experience for the consumer," Mr Williamson said.

"Our research has shown that between 2003 and 2006, the profit per room has increased by 69 per cent. In addition, the profit per available room is above the 'all-Ireland' average and is close to the performance of Dublin hotels.

"The luxury and first class end of the market has experienced major growth with an increase of 353 per cent between 1995 and 2006. Coupled with the dominance of branded hotels, which represent over 50 per cent of hotel stock in Northern Ireland, hotel owners face increasing challenges in competing for business.

"There is still a reliance on business tourism and hotel design is largely traditional. In order to compete, hotel owners need to offer the same comforts that people enjoy at home such as wireless internet access, adjustable lighting and stand-alone showers... as well as

unique design concepts."

Janice Gault, chief executive of the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation, said the hotel market in Northern Ireland was becoming polarised with luxury properties at one end and budget offerings at the other.

"The Northern Ireland hotel market is in a strong position to grow further but it is only through design that we can offer something different to experienced travellers who demand more than just a bed for the night, whether they are staying in five-star luxury or somewhere less opulent," she said.