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# Jules Wabbes (1919–1974): Creating Total Works of Art in Interiors

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the remarkable success achieved during his lifetime, the Belgian self-made designer and interior architect Jules Wabbes (1919–1974) is still poorly represented whether in museum collections or in interior design history. However, he is now being acknowledged as a multi-talented creator and for his particular vision of interior design and space. Wabbes believed design is a construction of meaning for life, advocating responsible design. The intention of this paper is to: (1) interpret to what extent Wabbes' interiors were based on a personal conception of interiors as total works of art and (2) to reflect on his high-quality furniture as contributing to interior concepts. On the basis of the available writings and mainly on his body of work, our goal is to portray his practice as interior designer. Our research perspective stems from a concept present in all of his works, design quality, and attitudes, from which we can derive the main thesis of this paper: for Jules Wabbes, each piece of furniture or decorative object should hold value in itself in order to be integrated in an ensemble, creating an atmosphere of well-being and fruition of space, in literal and metaphoric terms. On the basis of the simplicity of forms and flawless manufacture, his work exemplifies a feeling of timeless aesthetics. Case studies include Wabbes' own home and two public interiors: Live at School as at Home, and Drugstore Louise.

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## Introduction

Jules Wabbes (18 March 1919 to 29 January 1974) was a prominent figure in the Belgian interior design scene. Also a producer of long-lasting furniture, wood was his medium of choice; his family business was cabinetmaking. From his family he also learned to appreciate quality in everyday objects. During a conversation, Wabbes' wife revealed that "He always lived in an elegant bourgeois environment. I emptied his parents' house after their death and I discovered with pleasure that all objects, even timeworn, had been chosen with care. All had good quality, silverware, tableware, paintings."<sup>1</sup> Marie-Ferran Wabbes confirms his sensibility for objects even from his early youth when he was discovering peculiar attributes of objects, combinations, and settings.<sup>2</sup> An example of this attitude dates to his time as a young student when "he began dealing in second hand goods while he was attending the Collège Jean-Berckmans ... His teacher, a priest, would give him money to buy things in the fleamarket in the Place du Jeu de Balle."<sup>3</sup>

Wabbes soon demonstrated an innate talent for spotting unexpected objects among the most

mundane and miscellaneous stacks. Additionally, his experience in theatrical environments stimulated his interest and inclination for set scenarios and spatial atmospheres. In 1942, Wabbes joined the Comédiens Routiers Belges, a traveling theater company harboring major figures from the Resistance of World War II, who performed in many locations and venues. The Comédiens Routiers brought Wabbes into contact with artists and intellectuals, including the actress and musician Louise Carrey, who played a key role in Wabbes's career as a designer. Louise Carrey and her husband, the French painter Georges Carrey, opened an antiques shop in the Chaussée de Charleroi in 1943. Wabbes worked with them as an interior decorator by request from clients who asked for advice on where to place furniture or objects they had just bought.<sup>4</sup> In 1948, he ran a furniture restoration workshop in the Rue du Métal, in Brussels, with Comédiens Routiers-member Edouard Mahillon, stage designer.

This article aims to demonstrate the vision of Jules Wabbes for interiors and that while designing either public or private interiors, he was a creator of total works of art. Wabbes created total works of art in interiors in the sense that he wanted to be in charge

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of all decisions regarding the space he was designing. He took responsibility for each detail in order to achieve the result he expected. He was in charge of any fundamental decisions regarding materials, such as flooring, walls, ceilings, furniture, or lighting, as well as regarding every decorative element, even to the extent of selecting a specific ashtray. He considered himself responsible for the ensemble. He would not follow any principle or concept he did not agree with or that did not fit his own perspectives on quality, simplicity, sobriety, sensitivity, perfection, timelessness, and beauty. Reading about Wabbes and seeing his body of work gives us an image of a committed creator whose actions were consistent with his personal ideas. This paper will interpret Wabbes' interiors using phenomenology as the main conceptual framework.<sup>5</sup>

Phenomenology as followed by architectural theoreticians and practitioners can be adopted to clarify thinking about architecture and can offer design inspiration.<sup>6</sup> Projects interpreted through the framework of architectural phenomenology reveal the experience of the building in relation to its sensory properties. Place is not a mere location rather place allows individuals to become the protagonists of experiences charged with meaning. Hence, a place has a character given by materials, texture, light, color, shape, volume, and temperature, which conveys the space's quality and favors a individual-environment relation based on conception of space as meaningful place for the inhabitants or users. Phenomenological awareness is, then, very sensitive to detail. Everything works together to create an atmosphere in which materiality and form within the architectonic space invites the individual to react to it, to relate to it in an embodied way (seeing, feeling, smelling, and hearing), and participate in the subjective disclosure of the building.

There is no evidence that Wabbes explicitly considered phenomenology as an inspiration for his projects. But phenomenology is an appropriate filter with which to interpret his work as shown by the primary and secondary sources used in this paper. The primary sources include Wabbes' furniture and

archival materials, such as his sketches, plans, and photographs, some with written notes and very detailed visual information for interiors' or for furniture's construction. An interview with Mme. Wabbes and informal conversations with her about her husband as a person and as a designer contributed to the understanding of his designs. The visit to his home, which is the only interior that remains as he conceived it, was the opportunity of experiencing in locu some of his ideas regarding interiors as space. Other primary sources included interviews and articles about him and his work during his lifetime, particularly those describing special moments when he won prizes. Additionally, there are few writings by Wabbes himself that offered a source of data. Secondary sources are the meticulous studies published in two books<sup>7</sup> by Marie Ferran-Wabbes, an art historian and Wabbes' daughter. These studies helped develop the contextual framework for Wabbes' work, to trace his main creative influences and the critical perspective he took from them.

To understand Wabbes' work, it is important to examine the Modernist context abroad and economic and social developments within Belgium. Throughout his creative life (approximately from 1943 to 1973), he attended important events such as Expo 58, Milan Triennale, Italian avant-garde, and international fairs in Europe and United States where he came into contact with many influential people, creative ideas, constructive techniques, and new products. During his travels to San Diego, Washington, and New York, he saw works by Mies van der Rohe, Marcel Breuer, Gordon Bunshaft and Philip Johnson. For example, Wabbes visited Johnson's Glass House in Connecticut and learned about the International Style. Consequently, Wabbes was aware of new achievements, thinking, and technological developments both in Belgium and around the world. He was not immune to those influences, particularly mid-century Modernism principles and the meaning of good design. However he remained faithful to his own creative principles and interior design concepts. Like other modernists, his projects show that beauty does not reside in the ornament but in the materials, in the details, and in the formal solutions. He also

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admired the quality of the material properties and defended the notion that “form follows function.” He saw perfection as a condition for timeless projects. But he did not accept modernism wholeheartedly or without criticism. As this paper intends to show, he filtered modernism through his own vision about interiors. In effect, for Wabbes, experiencing a space was not living in an abstract, minimalistic, unfeeling environment. For him, a space had to make the individual feel comfortable and sheltered in a harmonious interaction with the elements that shape that space. Wabbes blended modern ideals and the principles of good design with a conception of space as a setting for the flow of daily life. In addition to discussing some of his projects, including his last commission from 1971 to 1973 for an important bank, this paper will address in detail three specific cases. The three projects are his own house (1965) as a private interior, and the Live at school as at home (1960) and Drugstore Louise (1962) as public interiors. These three projects are used as examples to support the thesis that he created interiors for individuals to experience a vital relationship with the space they inhabit.

## The 1950s in Belgium and Wabbes’ contribution

The 1950s were a period of the slow recovery from the destruction of the Second World War. In Belgium, as for most European countries, the 1950s were defined an economic recovery, along with technological developments, industrial production, and social-oriented welfare programs with a strong impact on architecture and interior design.<sup>8</sup> This economic growth and industrialization benefited Wabbes professionally by providing an increasing number of commissions for the public and administrative sectors as well as for private housing. The industrialization was stimulated by Belgian policies as described by Coirier,

*As of 1945 the Ministry of Reconstruction entrusted several designers with the task of finding some rational housing solutions. [As*

*part of that process] Decorator Éric Lemesre was tasked to create not “charming and stylish family houses ... but modular and standardized furniture that could be mass-produced thanks to modern mechanical means.”<sup>9</sup>*

Indeed a kind of streamlining production was in progress, with suitable materials such as tubular steel or plywood, meeting the demands of standardized mass-produced furniture, befitting the socially oriented welfare housing programs that demanded low-cost material production. The *Chantiers Nationaux* [National Building Program] was in charge of planning working class housing, and called for rational, modular furniture adapted to the standardization policy of working class’ way of living. Belgian architects and designers responded to these initiatives.

Low-cost furniture, available thanks to mass production, gained momentum with the exhibition *Het Nieuwe Wonen* [New Living] coordinated by *Formes Nouvelles*.<sup>10</sup> The event took place in June 1953 in the Kiel housing complex in the greater Antwerp area. Thirteen model apartments were designed by architects Renaat Braem, Viktor Maeremans and Hendrik Maes, and furnished by contemporary decorators.<sup>11</sup> The goal was to disseminate a concept of living based on particular Modernist notions of beauty and taste, appealing to the public, and to Belgian manufacturers and artisans. At the end of the 1950s the lessons about good living and their associated public exhibitions had to face the changing of the context in which they had arisen:

*Until about 1958, the actors who believed that good living would raise the general cultural standard of a society each had a relatively fixed and independent profile ... Some of the most prominent actors disappeared from view. Nieuwe Vormen [Formes Nouvelles], for example, organised three more exhibitions in 1960 and 1961, but became defunct shortly afterward. Other*

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*actors continued to promote a better home culture after 1958, but the socioeconomic context in which they functioned had clearly changed. While many home-life educators shortly after the war preferred to present their programme against the background of predominantly historical and therefore 'erroneous' architecture and design, towards the end of the 1950s they gradually had to try to find a position within an increasingly international market supply of 'modern' lifestyles.<sup>12</sup>*

Wabbes was not involved in the discussions regarding social housing or social good living and did not design or produce furniture under the National Building Program. Yet, he was furnishing and equipping a large number of offices, thanks to the Belgian modernization of public administrative buildings and designing the decoration and furniture for the major banks in Brussels. As was his practice, Wabbes seemingly made his own choices in his own way within the mainstream policies of the time.

He was known for demanding free choice in the realization of his projects. After exchanging a few ideas with the clients—homeowners or bank principals—he immersed himself in the project looking for the ideal solution. When describing Wabbes' role and actions in each of his commissions, Hubert Peeters states that:

*He brought both his sensitivity and his intellect to the role of creative designer. He was imbued with a desire for the unobtrusive, undying, imperishable, unfailing luxury of well-designed and well-executed work. One of the essential characteristics of his work was the reliability of the joints and muscles of the furniture and its supporting plinth. He supervised the meticulous construction of each piece and also, as an interior designer, the installation of the furniture in a specific setting. In addition he ensured that his furniture was bought by customers who understood and appreciated his work.<sup>13</sup>*

Furthermore, when interviewed by Jean Decharneux, Wabbes said:

*People will not destroy a piece of furniture that has been well constructed from every angle. It does not necessarily have to be beautiful. It must be strong. In the balance of a shape, you must be able to feel the weight. But strength and weight are not synonymous of heaviness.<sup>14</sup>*

Pursuing his own ideas on quality in design, which did not necessarily mean low-cost, Wabbes created the *Mobilier Universel* [Universal Furniture] company in 1957 to centralize the manufacture and marketing of the furniture he designed (desks, tables, lamps, bookcases, chairs, benches, sofas) as well as to market American, Italian, German, and Finnish furniture. The criteria he used to select the models to market were based on the quality, simplicity, functionality, and perfection of their design. As a creator, rather than a keen manager, the products he designed knew no monetary boundaries, and the quality achieved was internationally recognized, awarding him in 1959 the commission of producing the furniture for the American Embassy in The Hague, a project by Marcel Breuer.<sup>15</sup> However, most of the furniture was not designed by Wabbes but by Edward J. Wormley and chosen by Anita Möller from the Dunbar Furniture Corporation collection. Wabbes produced the Dunbar furniture in his own plant and supervised the making and assembly.

By the end of the 1950s, Wabbes was beginning to represent Belgian design abroad by presenting his works in international exhibitions and gained particularly wide exposure in Italy and the United States. In 1957, with architect André Jacqmain, he designed the Belgian pavilion at the Toronto Trade Fair, and in 1958 they again designed the Belgian pavilion for the World Trade Fair in New York. Also with André Jacqmain and Victor Mulpas, in 1958 Wabbes designed the International Science Pavilion for Brussels World Fair (Expo 58). Wabbes and Jacqmain conceived a fantastic fountain in crystal blocks, displayed at the Belgian Pavilion



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Hall of Honor. In 1961 Wabbes was assigned the interior design of the United States' embassies in Port-au-Prince (Haiti) and Tangier (Morocco). Without a doubt his growing reputation and awards received brought him professional recognition and trust, important commissions and trade opportunities both in Belgium and internationally.

## Examples of Atmospheres Resulting From Total Works of Art

In Wabbes' writings as well as in his works, we find that he designed using the basic principles of a phenomenological approach to space. Wabbes' interiors created atmospheres that stimulated sensations of freedom/relief/hope/peace. In addition, there is the feeling that all things are coherent; that form and use interact in harmony; that things coexist; that the architectonic space is a body that breathes along with those in it. The interiors motivate the experience of material and spiritual elements. They influence the user's life. They create new languages; they report to space and to time: interior and exterior, individual, and collective. According to Peter Zumthor, "Details, when they are successful, are not mere ornamentation. They do not distract or entertain. They lead to an understanding of the whole of which they are an inherent part."<sup>16</sup> The materials used and how they react together, as Zumthor said, make the space work as a large instrument.<sup>17</sup> Everything works together to create an atmosphere that stirs feelings of emotional appropriation and of filling the space with personal meaning. The combination of materials and forms contribute to create diverse atmospheres. Interior space is a territory based on the principle that design and architecture develop a global relationship between the individual and his surroundings. And this is unique. An individual occupying his interiors feels the character of the interior space in the self-sensation of body and mind. Therefore, Wabbes did not hesitate to remove interior walls in order to harmonize the space and create an ambiance of well being to the individual who inhabits it. The same principle of

organizing the space to the use and fruition of it oriented Wabbes' conception of a room's functionality. The rooms he designed were often multifunctional: "The living room served as a dining room, which sometimes communicated with the kitchen, and the office was also a library and a living room."<sup>18</sup> Within the new space he integrated each detail in the entire architectonic form.

Interpreting his actions within interiors he created, we can conclude that for him each interior was a work of art as a unity of many details and thoughts. And the impression of an interior as a total work of art reinforced the feelings of enjoying a space in harmony. On the basis of these creative principles, he developed projects to last beyond the whims of an epoch, which transcended the idiosyncrasies of time, taste and consumption.

Wabbes was commissioned to design a very large number of public interiors including the main auditorium, foyer, and exits of the Belgian National Theater between 1960 and 1961. He also designed ship interiors, such as the suite and conference room for the Belgian King and Queen on the navy ship *Godetia* in 1965. In 1972, he served as the interiors furniture consultant for the Sciences Library of the University of Louvain-La-Neuve (1972), and was responsible for the interiors of many other rooms in that institution. He created the image for the Société Générale de Banque, including the bank's head office, lift halls, count-room, and the strong-room [vault]. This was his last commission, from 1971 to 1973.

*Marie Ferran-Wabbes describes its strong-room (Figure 1): Everything was designed right down to the minutest detail—the counter windows, the coat-stands, the command buttons for the safety deposit boxes, the bronze handles. The walls of dark grey granite, the ceiling with its gilded covering in the shape of fish-scales, the absence of windows, all gave the room a very solemn atmosphere all of its own.<sup>19</sup>*

*The vault suggests confidence and trust. That is so because Wabbes created the space with a very clear concept of the desired final effect and impact.*

**Figure 1. Société Générale de Banque, strong-room. (Photo: Marie Ferran-Wabbes)**



From the image shown in Figure 1, we are faced with a powerful, stable, organized interior that leaves no doubt as to the function of the space in protecting and keeping safe the dearest valuables of the bank's clientele. The vault suggests confidence and trust. That is so because Wabbes created the space with a very clear concept of the desired final effect and impact. The meticulous choice of materials and the attention to each detail both support and exemplify this concept. The ceiling's strong-room was made in gilded coating in the shape of fish-scales. The detail was chosen in order to emphasize the atmosphere of sobriety, privacy, and seriousness of the room. In fact, the gilded coating in the shape of fish-scales, combined with the texture of the grey granite, voids, and furniture creates a scale and a level of detail that contributes to the solemnity of the space.

The importance given to details to achieve perfection as shown in the interiors of the *Société Générale de Banque* was characteristic of Wabbes' approach to his projects. This attitude is acknowledged by authors who wrote about his work. For example, the author of *Design en Belgique 1945–2000* noted that "rigorous shapes were enhanced by a keen sense of performance and attention to detail."<sup>20</sup> In the *Profil d'un architecte designer*, the author emphasizes that "the extreme material perfection was an exigency

of Wabbes, an absolute."<sup>21</sup> Finally, in Wabbes own words, "a piece of furniture well-designed by all perspectives will never be destroyed."<sup>22</sup>

## Private Interiors: Jules Wabbes House

Wabbes' private-home interiors include the Declercq House, the Olivier House, the Strebelle House, the Lombar House, the Urvater House, and the Villa Colman-Saverys, among many others. However, this paper focuses on his own house for two main reasons. First, except his own house, none of the interiors remained completely intact for *in loco* experience and, second his house summarizes his ideas on private interiors, including organic materials, setting furniture and decorative objects according to a global perspective on comfort and quality in inhabited spaces. Wabbes' home resonates like the Bachelardian childhood house. In his work *The Poetics of Space*,<sup>23</sup> Gaston Bachelard cherished home as the microcosmos giving continuity to the individual life made of fragments and contingencies.<sup>24</sup> The house is primordial and refuge for the most intimate memories, and related sensations. Bachelard described that primordial home in an optimistic tone as the one that remains the place of reverie and inspires the joy of living. So did Jules Wabbes.

On the morning of November 14, 2011 we were received by Mme. Wabbes at her home in Maransart, a countryside village in Brussels. Marie Ferran-Wabbes described the house at the time of its purchase:

*Standing at right angles to the road, the house was delightfully situated, with its façade bathed in sunlight and its thick, rough-cast walls hidden beneath the ivy, which had run riot everywhere. The house was derelict. The garden was full of trees—lime, plane and hazel—and the kitchen garden, with its French-style box-hedges and its square bed of peonies, had apparently been designed by Edmond Galoppin, the landscape architect of the Parc Josaphat, created at the request of Leopold II.<sup>25</sup>*

That was the house the Wabbes' bought in 1965 and whose interior was totally designed by Jules Wabbes. The house was transformed into a home through his creative spirit, his meticulous decisions about the interiors, as well as through the active daily lives of the couple and their four children.

Jules Wabbes breathes in that house as expressed in his wife's words: We asked her several questions. First was, "You are also an artist, namely a writer and an illustrator of children stories, and you let Jules Wabbes take aesthetical, artistic, practical decisions about the most private space, the house where you and your four children lived? Why did you allow him such complete freedom in designing your home?" She responded, first, "When we bought the house in Maransart in 1965, Wabbes told me that this house was the place he was looking for to bring in all those who he loved!"<sup>26</sup> And, she continued,

*The ivy-clad house had been abandoned for many years. He immediately removed the plants that invaded the whole area. He equipped the kitchen, cleaned the parrot's cage; it was very funny to see him take over the places! I was expecting my third child and I was very happy he was taking care of everything! I had albums to finish; I was designing patterns for textiles. I was curious to see what else he would do.*<sup>27</sup>

As we were guided through the house by Madame Wabbes each room prompted a story, an event, or an anecdote. We felt an atmosphere of *joie de vivre* stemming from the narratives related to the past and to the present. The childhood-home of her children remained a place to which they and their children and their children often returned. Each room contained furniture, carpets, lamps, and the objects designed by Wabbes. In the living room with big windows overlooking the garden is the Gérard Philippe table, cupboards, and the unique prototype of the Anna David-Marber Footstool. Besides objects and furniture setting, all other interior decisions for those rooms were defined by Wabbes because of his wife's neutral attitude concerning such matters.

**Figure 2. Present-day kitchen as conceived by Wabbes in the 1960s. (Photo: Jean-Pierre Gabriel)**



The whiteness of the walls, the big blue oven in the kitchen, the floor tiles with a delicate blue flower pattern on a pearly ceramic surface, paintings hanging in a particular geometrical order regarding the door, windows, and other architectural elements, everything was his choosing.

As shown in Figure 2, the kitchen suggests a feeling of gathering in a warm place. Each element was chosen by him. Even the blue embroidered napkins were chosen by Wabbes. Mme. Wabbes noted that he had "ordered 24 dozen from an embroideress" and although the collection is not intact, almost 40 years after his death it is still possible to enjoy his good taste." Figure 2 still depicts the combination of wooden furniture, the sober, geometric lines of the table and cupboard and the traditional iron oven. Together with the gracious floral floor tiles, some decorative elements in clay, the straw from the chairs, the big window overlooking the garden, they all recall the creation of the kitchen archetype. The kitchen as a room with light where anyone can find tasty food, enjoy good conversation and experience other feelings of happiness.

Figure 3 shows a portion of the hallway that leads to the stairs to the first floor and to the kitchen (not shown). The white door on the left opens to the bathroom. The focus of this space is the



*The focus of this space is the Osaka chandelier, which gives importance to a place used for circulation and not for prolonged stays. It exemplifies Wabbes' ability to transform a place of lesser importance in the house into a place of aesthetic interest.*

**Figure 3. Ground-floor with the Osaka chandelier in anodized aluminium. (Photo: Jean-Pierre Gabriel)**



Osaka chandelier, which gives importance to a place used for circulation and not for prolonged stays. It exemplifies Wabbes' ability to transform a place of lesser importance in the house into a place of aesthetic interest. Wabbes manifested a delicate sensibility when dealing with the aesthetical, emotional, and magical qualities of light. The designer is aware that, through form and shape, a lamp influences the perception of light and shadow in the place where it might be placed. Wabbes created many lighting effects. He understood that light grants a particular dimension to settings. Therefore, he created lamps, not for the sake of designing lighting fixtures as objects, but because he was interested in the element of light. Mme. Wabbes confirmed he was very sensitive to daylight, to the sky, to the moon, as well as to the light reflected on ceilings, the golden

light that illuminates a face. In the article co-authored with Etienne Paquay, Marie Wabbes writes that, "He established a precise dialogue between space and furniture, lamps, objects he designed and others he selected. He had the art of restoring harmony by the simple fact of placing things into their place."<sup>28</sup>

Continuing through house and arriving on the first floor, Mme. Wabbes showed us the bedrooms. As depicted in Figure 4, few objects are displayed, and decoration was limited to the essentials to avoid an overcrowding of elements. In each room there was a bed, a table, a chair, a cupboard, and a heater. In each, the carpet or a rug and a window lent the feeling of warmth, comfort, and natural light. Mme. Wabbes assured us that the interiors were exactly as he first conceived them.

Returning to the ground-floor, we entered into the living room (Figure 5). The bookcase in the living room is placed midway between a corner and a door (not shown in the photograph). The black horizontal door on top of the bookcase allows visual rest, hiding some of the decorative elements.

The open shelf displays books that can be read on the sofa, placed near the desk. Also remarkable, the piece stands on a metal support structure, elegantly elevating the wooden piece. This space clearly illustrates Wabbes' concern for choosing and placing furniture within a space with its use in mind. This room has a feeling of comfort, well-being, rest, and pleasure, such as that of calmly enjoying a book.

We commented to Mme. Wabbes that the interiors of the house connected with nature, whether the garden, the old trees, or the landscape in the far horizon through many windows of different dimensions and doors. So we asked her, 'How much did your husband love nature? How much did nature, with its variety of sizes, volumes, colours, shapes, ultimately with all forms in which nature shows itself, inspire his creations?' Mme. Wabbes answered,

*He loved nature immensely. He collected stones, crystals, shells, fossils. He appreciated*



*He established a precise dialogue between space and furniture, lamps, objects he designed and others he selected.*

**Figure 4. Bedroom. All furniture designed by Wabbes. Materials: wood, metal, and leather in Louise Chair, also known as Chair 46. (Photo: Jean-Pierre Gabriel)**



*plants and trees, as well as pebbles or shells picked up by the seaside. He was also sensitive to the beauty of exotic animals. Around him, he kept exotic birds (toucans, parrots), a coati, a monkey, an ocelot, horses and dogs. I think animals were for him the pitch of beauty! Horses, birds, trees, the garden, and also music; he loved to touch things, to pet dogs and horses. Beauty in all its forms was for him a source of inspiration and pleasure.<sup>29</sup>*

The following words of Marie Ferran-Wabbes further contribute to the characterization of Jules Wabbes as a unique individual:

*Wabbes often came up against the incomprehension of others. He was an independent*

**Figure 5. Small bookcase. (Photo: Jean-Pierre Gabriel)**



*character, eccentric, abnormal in all senses of the word. He was difficult to place, unpredictable. His stern air and his elegance concealed a profound originality of thought and behaviour and a great sense of humour. He could appear whimsical, though he was most often serious and preoccupied, a strange mixture of tension, austerity and vitality.<sup>30</sup>*

## Public Interiors

The two examples chosen for this paper illustrate Wabbes' insight in space creation, based on their purpose and users. They show a keen sense of space plasticity and appealing to the senses, through the choice

*Wabbes responded to the modern pedagogies of that time with his school's furniture proposal.*

of simple forms, harmonious proportions, sober lines, a careful selection of materials, and a meticulous attention to the overall resulting atmosphere.

## Live at School as at Home

Responding to the challenge from the 12th Milan Triennale in 1960, whose theme was Home and School [*La Casa e la Scuola*], Wabbes designed a fully-equipped model classroom, displayed in a complete installation portraying the daily use of that equipment.<sup>31</sup> The motto for the presentation of his school furniture was *vivre à l'école comme à la maison* [to live at school as at home], clearly revealing his attention to context and materials in order to bring function, form, and meaning into harmony. It also shows Wabbes' sensibility and concern regarding the users' needs, in this case, students attending primary school, aiming at a smooth transition between home and school.<sup>32</sup>

Figure 6 displays a fully equipped classroom set in a room with space enough to allow different combinations of desks and chairs to implement different teaching methods. Also noteworthy are the

**Figure 6. Multiplex school-desks and chairs, featuring multiple setting, 1960; Wabbes' distinctive grid ceiling system. (Photo: Gian Sinigaglia)**



simplicity of the shelves placed against the wall and the grid system in the ceiling, which allows different directions and gradations of light. Magazines, such as *Il Caminetto* and *Gazet van Antwerpen*, described the theme of Home and School from the Milan Triennale as a challenge to designers and architects to feature new interiors' proposals in school to reflect new, more interactive and dynamic learning methods. Pierluigi Albertoni wrote in *Il Caminetto* that "the pedagogy is changed and, as fairly noted the architect Ludovico Magistretti (from the executive committee from the Triennale), as well the pedagogic space."<sup>33</sup> Wabbes responded to the modern pedagogies of that time with his school's furniture proposal. Marc Callewaert in *Gazet van Antwerpen* emphasized that the Wabbes' classroom shown in Milan supported a pedagogy that values the pupil's personality and participation, enabling him or her to work in a group, engage in drawing activities, and, not only read, but also write and count in a passive ambience.<sup>34</sup>

*The Triennale awarded Wabbes the gold medal for the flexible school furniture that he expressed created for this project. Wabbes' furniture is "light, simple, pleasant to look and to touch [and] the individual desks can be grouped together. They can be arranged in various ways—in twos, in a circle, or in other ways—depending on the children's activities and the wishes of the teacher ... Running along one of the classroom walls, Jules Wabbes had designed a bench of varying height in molded mansonia covered with vinyl which he named 'banquette relax'. The children could sit and read, lie down, rest or lay on it. On the opposite wall was a modular system of bookcases or shelves ... that could be combined in different ways. ... The classroom was also equipped with a L-shaped teacher's desk made up of two units [and] two bookcases for the use of the teacher."*<sup>35</sup>

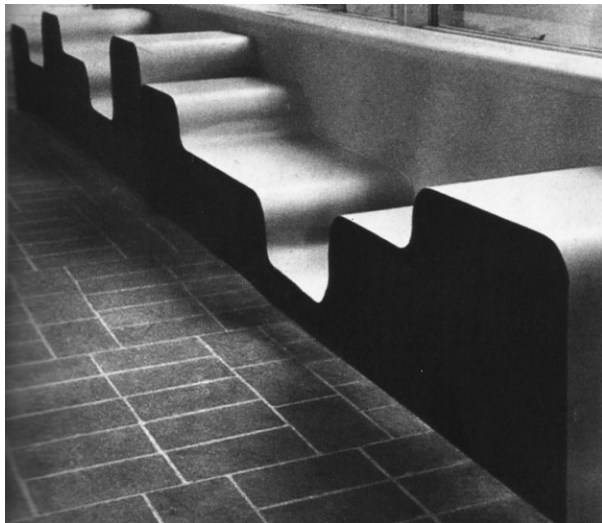
Figures 7 and 8 depict the wall with the inviting organic bench, which harmonizes in form, material, and pedagogical conception with the entire furniture

By using wood, which I consider an irreplaceable material, I got the maximum of guarantees: they allowed me to get in a spirit of simplicity and beauty, a result that seems to flow from the source.

**Figure 7. School-desks and Banquette Relax.**  
(Photo: Gian Sinigaglia)



**Figure 8. Banquette Relax detail and hard-tile flooring.** (Photo: Gian Sinigaglia)



set. Particularly evident is Wabbes' awareness of the innovative educational ideas of the time, and how carefully he was engaged in each project, searching for the perfect match between all parameters, including

pleasure and joy of living in a space. Out of the enthusiasm for this particular space and inspired to create an atmosphere that would allow children to learn, play, and enjoy their time at school. In the initial design, Wabbes "had also intended to have window-boxes for planting and sowing seeds, a mobile greenhouse, jars for forcing growth, a large sink with a draining board, and a pond, hutches, birdcages, a vivarium, a terrarium, and an aquarium where various creatures brought in by children could be kept."<sup>36</sup> But such ideas were not brought to the Triennale and remained in his visionary dreams.

## Drugstore Louise

This project (shown in Figures 9 and 10) earned him the 1963 *Grand Prix du Bois* [Woodwork Grand Prix], awarded by the Brabant Province of Belgium. Regarding the choices for the interior of the restaurant-bar Drugstore Louise, built in Brussels in 1962, Wabbes said that he intended to create a warm, comfortable ambiance,<sup>37</sup> and this he accomplished through the materials employed, of which 95% was wood. (Only one wall remained in stone.) On the sensory effects of wood and for that particular occasion, Wabbes said,

*All this ensemble of wood emphasized the real beauty of the shelves, tables and counter. They were executed in massive wenge [a dark colored wood that is the product of *Milletia laurentii*], with surfaces exclusively of wood. The collage of the wooden pieces allows a variety of luminosity and colours similar to the most beautiful abstract drawing, and besides its beauty, it offers a remarkable long-lasting quality, resistant to the use. By using wood, which I consider an irreplaceable material, I got the maximum of guarantees: they allowed me to get in a spirit of simplicity and beauty, a result that seems to flow from the source.<sup>38</sup>*

Drugstore Louise was an excellent example of wood use for different purposes: furniture, floors, ceilings.



*Wabbes worked with the past, the present and the future, not being limited by any period. He looked at the past without nostalgia, built the present with enthusiasm, and believed in the future with hope.*

**Figure 9. View of the bar. (Photo: H. Kessels)**



**Figure 10. View of the dining room. (Photo: H. Kessels)**



The wooden grid ceiling had the dual effect of performing as an acoustic and lighting filter. The technique employed, namely the combined use of end-grain wood and glued wooden slats, was not a purpose on its own but an opportunity to afford pleasant sensations to the touch and to create a delicate visual effect; both the back of a piece as the visible front should be perfect, as flawless embroideries with undistinguishable back and front.

As the photographs show, the interior is an open multifunctional space with built-in furniture, minimal decoration, and ornamentation. This is heightened by

the sober use of materials and harmonious integration of forms, such as smoothness of the feet of the tables and counter seats, and the geometric linear relationship in the walls, floor, ceiling, counter, tables, and seats, which is intensified by the rhythm created by the vertical / horizontal proportions. The images also illustrate Wabbes' deliberate choices of materials and use of the elements and principles of design, to accomplish his vision and aims for this particular space. These interiors also show that he was aware of and influenced by other modern designs from the first half of the 20th century, especially those of the Scandinavians. However, he adopted the concepts, finishes, and materials because they clearly agreed with his sense of space and design intentions. Wabbes was striving to achieve the "spirit of simplicity and beauty." He was always faithful to his beliefs and did not compromise with fashion or clients' whims. For example his Drugstore Louise does not exist anymore, but it was a well-known place in Brussels to meet and socialize.

## Conclusion

Wabbes worked with the past, the present and the future, not being limited by any period. He looked at the past without nostalgia, built the present with enthusiasm, and believed in the future with hope. In tune with Modernism, he admired rationalism, geometry, efficiency, quality and sophistication. He also employed modern materials and new techniques and tools, profiting from industrial design facilities. But he had clear personal ideas about meaning in design that deviated from Modernism. He actually challenged Modernism's boundaries of techniques, methods, and processes, in order to achieve his own standards of quality, simplicity, harmony, austerity, and honesty. For that purpose he maintained a rigorous technical, formal, and aesthetical approach regarding all of his creations. He took care of the space as a total work of art, putting into it his effort of construction and the truth of his commitment with the projects. He was faithful to his own principles, to his temperament, and to his love for nature and organic materials. He gave importance to the eye,



to the intellect, to logic, and also to the touch, to the light, shadow, smell, or temperature. The phenomenological approach is a framework that demonstrates Wabbes' vision for designing interiors as a concrete place, which unfolds as a character and an atmosphere for the individual that experiences it. With a complex personality and an original mind, Jules Wabbes was not always consensual, rather he was deeply sensitive and remained true to his vision. He left a body of work that commands attention and offers a legacy to the field of Interior Design.

Interior design history owes him a merited space that gives tribute to his contributions to mid-century Modernism but also reveals his personal signature. The fact that he was also a furniture designer further contributes to his unique interiors as "Wabbes" works. Finally each piece of furniture that shows unique manufacturing methods, technical solutions, materials, textures, shape, or touch also deserves consideration in the gallery of the history of furniture.

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- <sup>1</sup>Mme.Wabbes. Interview by the author. Personal interview. Maransart, Brussels, November 14, 2011.
- <sup>2</sup>Marie Ferran-Wabbes, Jules Wabbes (Ghent: Borgerhoff & Lamberigts Inc., 2010), 20–25.
- <sup>3</sup>Marie Ferran-Wabbes, Jules Wabbes, 20.
- <sup>4</sup>Marie Ferran-Wabbes, Jules Wabbes, 24.
- <sup>5</sup>About phenomenology as conceptual framework, see Fátima Pombo, Wouter Bervoets, Hilde Heynen, "The Inhabitation as a process. Theoretical frameworks for analyzing interiors," *IDEA Journal Interior Economies* (2011), 112–121.
- <sup>6</sup>From the tradition of theoretical studies about phenomenology and experiencing space like the ones of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: PUF, 1945), Gaston

## Notes

- Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'Espace* (Paris: PUF, 1958), Otto Bollnow, *Mensch und Raum* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1963) or Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci, Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), Thomas Thiis-Evenson, *Archetypes in Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), we encounter other insights investing in the translation of phenomenological themes into the practice of designing. Among many others we are referring to Peter Zumthor, *Architektur Denken* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1999), Peter Zumthor, *Atmosphären* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006), Steven Holl, *Intertwining* (NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), Steven Holl, *Architecture Spoken* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin. Architecture and the Senses* (New York: John Wiley, 2005), Juhani Pallasmaa and Peter B. Mackeith, *Encounters: Architectural Essays*, (Chicago: IPG, 2005), Alberto Pérez-Gómez et al., *Questions of Perception. Phenomenology of Architecture* (San Francisco: William Stout Publishers, 2008).
- <sup>7</sup>Marie Ferran-Wabbes, Jules Wabbes (Ghent: Borgerhoff & Lamberigts Inc., 2010); Marie Ferran-Wabbes, and Iwan Strauven (Eds.) *Jules Wabbes: Furniture Designer* (Brussels: Bozar Architecture/A+, 2012).
- <sup>8</sup>Mil De Kooning and Iwan Strauven "Het fifties-meubel in België," in *Het Mechelse meubel 1500–2000. Van houtsnijwerk tot design. Hedendaags Design*. Alfred Hendrickx en het fifties-meubel in België. Ed. Mil De Kooning, Fredie Floré, and Iwan Strauven, (Antwerpen: Openbaar Kunstbezit in Vlaanderen, 2000), 9–51.
- <sup>9</sup>Lise Coirier, *Design en Belgique, 1945–2000* (Bruxelles: Ed. Racine, 2004), 12.
- <sup>10</sup>À Temps Modernes, *Meubles Modernes* [For Modern Times, Modern Furniture]. 1950 marked the birth of an association called *Formes Nouvelles*, created by Éric Lemesre, Willy Van Der Meeren, Axel Lemesre and Marcel-Louis Baugniet, in cooperation with the Centre des Métiers d'Art in Brabant and its chairman Paul Mariamé. Its mission was to consider social housing from an architecture and interior decoration point of view. (...) Since 1953 the *Formes Nouvelles* became a cooperative and opened a gallery called *Form*, located at Avenue de la Toison d'Or in Brussels. The gallery served to permanently enhance the prestige of handicrafts and industrial objects by many designers. In 1955, the art critic and chairman of *Formes Nouvelles* Léon-Louis Sossset issued the manifesto paper *À Temps Modernes, Meubles Modernes*. He was supported by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Middle Classes to promote tasteful contemporary furniture manufactured in Belgium' in Lise Coirier, *Design en Belgique. 1945-2000* (Bruxelles: Ed. Racine, 2004), 26–27.
- <sup>11</sup>Lise Coirier, *Design en Belgique. 1945–2000*, 28.
- <sup>12</sup>Fredie Floré, *Lessen in Modern Wonen. Bronnenboek over Woon tentoonstellingen in België 1945–1958. Lessons in Modern Living. Source book on Housing Exhibitions in Belgium 1945–1958*, (Ghent: WZW Editions and productions, 2004), 18. See also Fredie Floré, *Lessen in goed wonen. Woonvoorlichting in België 1945–1958* (Leuven: Universitaire Pers Leuven, 2010).
- <sup>13</sup>Hubert Peeters in Jules Wabbes, Marie Ferran-Wabbes, 15. We may also learn from this book that Jules Wabbes 'made no aesthetic concessions to please his clients. Detailed plans were drawn up for each project following his suggestion, and modifications were often made during the course of the work.' Floré, 2004, 57.
- <sup>14</sup>Jules Wabbes. Interview by Jean Decharneux. Personal interview for *B-Revue*, April, 1962, unpagd.
- <sup>15</sup>The only information about possible meetings between Jules Wabbes and Marcel Breuer appears in Jules Wabbes by Marie Ferran-Wabbes, page 45: '(...) in The Hague where he met Marcel Breuer on 21 April 1959'. Wijnand Galema and Fransje Hooimeijer describe in detail the story of the Embassy since the approved plans by the Foreign Buildings Office (FBO) of State Department in Washington until the announced dismantling of the building, probably in 2013. The interior furniture was replaced long ago. 'The choice for Mobilier Universel (...) had for sure to do with the quality of Wabbes as a designer. His furniture shows similarities with the design of Dunbar: simple, solid, timeless and most of all made of wood'. In Wijnand Galema and Fransje Hooimeijer, *Bouwen aan diplomatie. De Amerikaanse ambassade in Den Haag, Marcel Breuer, 1956–1959* (Den Haag: Gemeent Den Haag, 2008).
- <sup>16</sup>Peter Zumthor, *Pensar la Arquitectura*, (Barcelona: GG, 2009), 15.
- <sup>17</sup>Peter Zumthor, *Atmospheres: architectural environments, surrounding objects* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006), 29.
- <sup>18</sup>Marie Ferran-Wabbes, Jules Wabbes, 57.
- <sup>19</sup>Marie Ferran-Wabbes, Jules Wabbes, 63.
- <sup>20</sup>Lise Coirier *Design en Belgique. 1945–2000*, 32.
- <sup>21</sup>Etienne Paquay, Marie Wabbes, "Jules Wabbes (1919–1974). Architecte d'intérieur. Profil d'un architecte designer," *A+. Architecture. Urbanisme. Design. Arts Plastiques* 142, n° 5 (1996), 57.
- <sup>22</sup>Jules Wabbes. Interview by Jean Decharneux. Personal interview for *B-Revue*, April, 1962, unpagd. Quoted in Etienne Paquay, Marie Wabbes, "Jules Wabbes (1919–1974). Architecte d'intérieur. Profil d'un architecte designer," *A+. Architecture. Urbanisme. Design. Arts Plastiques* 142, n° 5 (1996), 59.
- <sup>23</sup>Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 1969.
- <sup>24</sup>About the meaning of 'to be at home' see also Joseph Rykwert, "House and Home" in *Home. A place in the world*, ed. Arien Mack (New York: NYU Press, 1993) and Maurizio Vitta, *Dell'abitare. Corpi, spazi, oggetti, immagini* (Torino: Einaudi, 2008) among many other inspiring works.
- <sup>25</sup>Marie Ferran-Wabbes, Jules Wabbes, 54.
- <sup>26</sup>Mme. Wabbes. Interview by the author. Personal interview. Maransart, Brussels, November 14, 2011.
- <sup>27</sup>Mme. Wabbes. Interview by the author. Personal interview. Maransart, Brussels, November 14, 2011.
- <sup>28</sup>Etienne Paquay, Marie Wabbes, "Jules Wabbes (1919–1974). Architecte d'intérieur. Profil d'un architecte designer," *A+*.

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- <sup>29</sup>Mme. Wabbes. Interview by the author. Personal interview. Maransart, Brussels, November 14, 2011.
- <sup>30</sup>Marie Ferran-Wabbes, Jules Wabbes, 64.
- <sup>31</sup>The organization of the Belgian section was entrusted to the artist Serge Vandercom, who requested the collaboration of the architect André Constant and Jules Wabbes.
- <sup>32</sup>The Wabbes' school furniture presented and awarded at the 12th Milan Triennale was widespread subject matter in the international press. See Pierluigi Albertoni, "La casa e la scuola alla XII Triennale," *Il Caminetto* Settembre (1960), 51. Marc Callewaert, "Kunst und Kultur. Twaalfde triennale van Milaan. Het huis en de school," *Gazet van Antwerpen* September (1960), 9.
- <sup>33</sup>Pierluigi Albertoni, "La Casa e la scuola alla XII Triennale," *Il Caminetto* Settembre, (1960), 51.
- <sup>34</sup>Marc Callewaert, "Twaalfde triennale van Milaan. Het huis en de school," *Gazet van Antwerpen* September (1960), 9.
- <sup>35</sup>Marie Ferran-Wabbes, Jules Wabbes, 49–51.
- <sup>36</sup>Marie Ferran-Wabbes, Jules Wabbes, 51.
- <sup>37</sup>Jules Wabbes, "Drugstore Louise," *Le Courier du Bois* Avril, n° 8, (1963): unpagged.
- <sup>38</sup>Jules Wabbes, "Drugstore Louise," *Le Courier du Bois* Avril, n° 8, (1963): unpagged. For an approach to different wood work techniques by Jules Wabbes see Frederick Hossey, 'Histoire d'un fonctionnaliste sensible. Jules Wabbes parmi nous', *Bello. Regards sur la Wallonie*, Mai (1988), 54–55.

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