The DeVos Communication Center demonstrates the creativity that exists within the communication arts field. But it also demonstrates the importance that socialization and collaboration play in education. Faculty offices, classrooms, and public spaces are all furnished with Herman Miller systems, seating, and Modern Classics, helping to create the Center's stimulating and social attitude.
Calvin College is a private liberal arts college in Grand Rapids with a student enrollment of 4,300. Like so many colleges, it has experienced growth, and the construction activity on campus proves that. In 1999, work was begun on a new facility that would house the Communication Arts and Sciences (CAS) Department. CAS is one of the fastest growing majors at Calvin, and the college saw the opportunity to build on the department’s reputation with a facility that would reflect the forward-thinking, technology-rich character of communication arts.

But it also offered an opportunity to innovate and reflect new ways of thinking about learning and teaching. “We wanted social space on every floor,” says Quentin Schultze, a professor in the CAS department. All three floors include lounge areas that encourage faculty and students to sit down and talk. The interior offers many areas that facilitate casual conversations. “We wanted to avoid the uncomfortable student visit to the faculty office, but not avoid the interaction,” says Schultze.

Schultze goes on: “We’re educating citizens, not just students. What students learn, in large part, comes from other students. What faculty learns, in large part, comes from students. We wanted to support this collaboration.”

Campus architect Frank Gorman led a team that would turn these ideas into reality. A building committee included Gorman, administration, staff, and students, making certain that the wishes and needs of all groups would be considered. The group also benchmarked other schools to analyze what they felt worked well—or not so well.

Creating a facility that would appeal to students and faculty was important to everyone. So this was to be a building that nurtured a creative spirit.

To demonstrate that Calvin had a state-of-the-art CAS department, Gorman choose Herman Miller as the sole furniture provider. “Its products speak to the forward thinking, innovative attitude we wanted to communicate in this facility,” Bill Strough and Jill Smith from WorkSquared in Grand Rapids teamed up with Gorman to design and specify the furnishings. Products in a mix of colors and forms lend visual richness to the interiors. “No two rooms are alike,” says Strough. “It’s not a one-classroom-fits-all approach.”
Faculty offices are a mix of products. The CAS department works in Resolve and Ethospace 120-degree configurations. Individual workstations are small—intentionally—with more space dedicated to team and meeting areas. Gorman believes the faculty office space “physically demonstrates the creativity of the department and its goals. It's an upbeat, open, creative, and workable area for the group.”

“The furniture contributes to the aesthetic delight of the building,” says Schultze. The blending of class space and social space creates a more residential, homey feel. “It's become a place that draws students from all over campus, not only the CAS majors.” And while some of the novelty has worn off—the Center has been occupied since 2002—the “comfortableness remains,” says Schultze.

The learning and teaching that happens within the DeVos Communication Center is about communication in many forms. The design and furnishings within the Center help to promote that communication. Social and collaborative spaces throughout the facility support the socialization component of education and the importance of human connection. “I learn a lot sitting in the social areas and listening to students,” says Schultze. “Education is not all about what at individual does. If that's all it is, then we might as well close up the academy.”