



## EXPERIENCES FROM THE FIELD

### IN SUPPORT OF THE ELDERLY

An innovative project launched more than 40 years ago remains an exemplary model of political, health and social action in support of the elderly, and a viable alternative to Italy's *residenze sanitarie assistenziali* (RSAs)\*: the residential cohousing center for self-sufficient seniors in the Tuscan town of Lastra a Signa offers an ideal mix of self-sufficiency, community living and interaction with the outside world to those in their "fragile years".

TEXT BY / ANGELA BAGNI / MAYOR OF LASTRA A SIGNA (TUSCANY)

Established in 1979 near Florence, the residential Social Center (CSR) in the town of Lastra a Signa has been a valuable resource for the local community for over 40 years. A public co-housing facility/group condominium, the center enables self-sufficient seniors to live in a home of their own for as long as possible, thanks to the creation of a network of assistance by its administrators, family members and neighbors of the residents, and the non-profit sector.

It is "a facility that [...] fosters group living and activities, with areas [...], structures, and public green spaces", an organization that makes it possible to provide services in an "equitable, efficient, precise and thus inexpensive way", wrote Gavino Maciocco in 1978. Despite being built in the late 1970s, it is a residential model that is still innovative and that continues to evolve today, a place geared around community living in the typical condominium style of the surrounding urban area.

The CSR is suitable for that delicate time in life in which aging people transition away from their productive age, helping them "stay active as they age" (Gavino Maciocco, 1978) by providing opportunities, should they so wish, to devote their time to group activities that are both socially useful and beneficial on a personal level. The facility is a complex that includes not only mini-apartments, but also a kindergarten, an AUSER office (an association for active old age), a public cafeteria, a library, a public nursery

school, and a range of personal services. The area maintains ties with the nearby shopping center, other residential facilities and industrial and commercial activities.

One of the central features of the CSR is its openness to the outside world, based on the principle that "those outside should come in, and those inside should step out". It is a social hub for the community, a venue for social activities open to both residents and outside visitors.

CSR residents live their daily lives in total autonomy and with the same freedom of choice as people who live in their own homes. Each CSR apartment contains a kitchenette and a bathroom, and residents are free to do as they wish throughout the day and night (for example, there is no communal schedule dictated by the need to share a kitchen). New residents furnish their apartments as soon as they have been assigned one, using the previous resident's furnishings whenever feasible.

Over the last forty years the center has shown itself able to keep up with sociodemographic changes both broadly speaking and in relation to the elderly, adapting to changing needs and, above all, offering self-sufficient candidates a viable alternative to living in an RSA. Most importantly, it underscores the possibility, based on a successful real-life example, of developing other inexpensive but more gratifying housing models for seniors.

#### NOTES

\* RSAs are non-hospital residential facilities – a type of nursing home – in Italy for non-self-sufficient elderly individuals who require specific medical care.