

# Pathway-Dependent Coordination Networks: Crystals versus Films

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Cite This: *J. Am. Chem. Soc.* 2021, 143, 16913–16918



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**ABSTRACT:** We demonstrate the formation of both metallo-organic crystals *and* nanoscale films that have entirely different compositions and structures despite using the same set of starting materials. This difference is the result of an unexpected cation exchange process. The reaction of an iron polypyridyl complex with a copper salt by diffusion of one solution into another resulted in iron-to-copper exchange, concurrent ligand rearrangement, and the formation of metal–organic frameworks (MOFs). This observation shows that polypyridyl complexes can be used as expendable precursors for the growth of MOFs. In contrast, alternative depositions of the iron polypyridyl complex with a copper salt by automated spin coating on conductive metal oxides resulted in the formation of electrochromic coatings, and the structure and redox properties of the iron complex were retained. The possibility to form such different networks from the same set of molecular building blocks by “in solution” versus “on surface” coordination chemistry broadens the synthetic space to design functional materials.

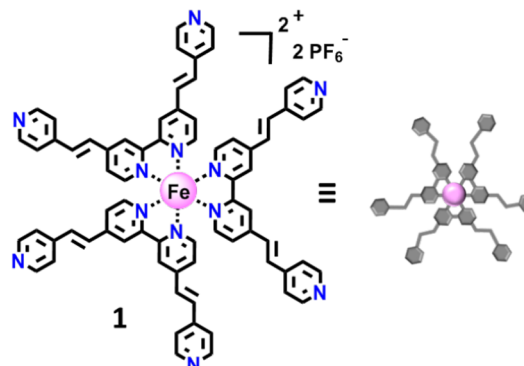
Coordination chemistry has been used to control the shape, size, and topology of supramolecular structures and to limit the possibilities to produce mixtures of multiple sets of structures.<sup>1–3</sup> Early examples of self-assembled architectures are compounds made from cryptands and crown ethers and were studied by Pederson, Lehn, and Cram in the 1960s.<sup>4–6</sup> In the following years, highly complex helicates were introduced and are composed of oligobipyridine strands coordinated to copper cations.<sup>7–10</sup> The coordination chemistry of carboxylic acids and late transition metals has been extensively used for the formation of metal–organic frameworks (MOFs).<sup>11–15</sup> This strong metal–ligand interaction resulted in highly robust and porous materials. Metal–pyridine coordination chemistry has also been used for the generation of self-assembled structures in solution and on surfaces.<sup>16–35</sup> Although the interaction between metals and pyridine is weaker than with carboxylic acids, stable and functional materials can be isolated. Examples include cages,<sup>18–22</sup> MOFs,<sup>23–25</sup> and thin films.<sup>26–35</sup> The control of material properties by external stimuli (e.g., light, voltage) has resulted in diverse functionalities, including memory elements,<sup>16,17</sup> biomedical applications,<sup>21</sup> and electrochromism.<sup>26–35</sup>

Structures and functionalities of supramolecular assemblies formed in solution or on surfaces are difficult to predict. Assemblies formed from the same starting materials can have the same or different molecular arrangements and function.<sup>36–44</sup> Interfacial chemistry has been used to generate assemblies that cannot be formed in solution otherwise.<sup>45</sup> Monolayer chemistry can be applied to control the chirality and morphology of crystals and network interpenetration of MOFs.<sup>40,46,47</sup> In general, the development of defined supramolecular structures with desirable properties occurs with retention of the structural integrity of the molecular building blocks, but the assemblies can have different molecular

arrangements and appearances.<sup>36–47</sup> Synthetic routes that involve changes in the molecular structures prior to assembly of the components are rare,<sup>43,44</sup> and examples of the pathway dependence of such processes are unknown to the best of our knowledge.

Here we show the formation of two assemblies having strikingly different molecular compositions, although the same starting materials were used (Schemes 1 and 2). Reacting a structurally well-defined iron polypyridyl complex with copper nitrate by diffusion of one solution into another resulted in exchange of the metal cations followed by the formation of MOFs. The initial disassembly of the iron complex is followed

Scheme 1. Iron Polypyridyl Complex 1

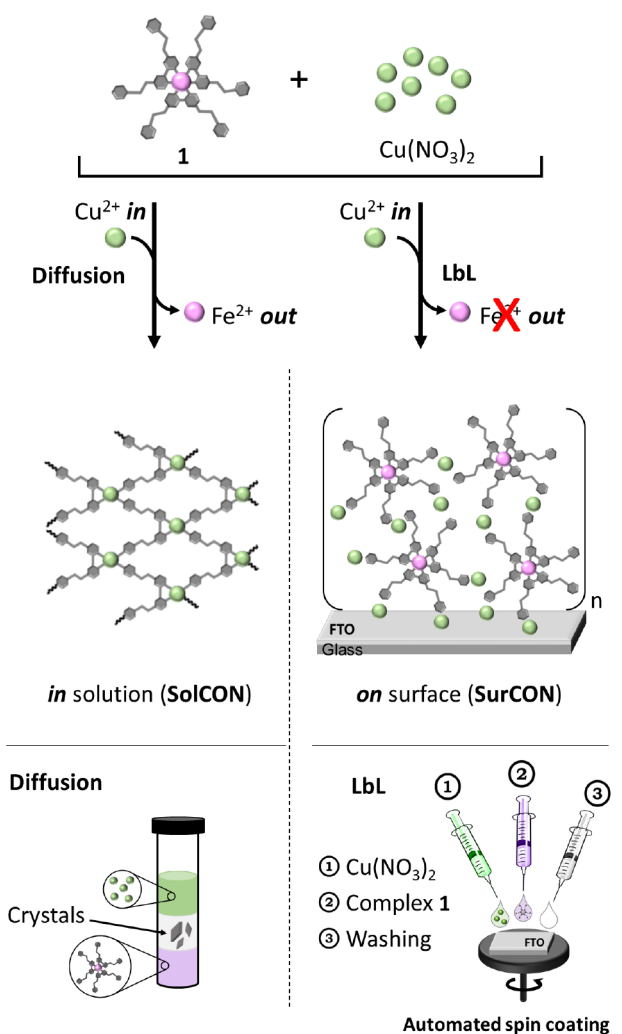


Received: August 3, 2021

Published: October 7, 2021



**Scheme 2. Formation of Divergent Coordination Networks in Solution (SolCON) versus on a Surface (SurCON)<sup>a</sup>**



<sup>a</sup>Water molecules and anions have been omitted for clarity. The diffusion experiment shown is for SolCON-A. For SolCON-B, the solutions with iron complex 1 and the copper salt are the top and bottom layers, respectively. LbL = layer-by-layer.

by the formation of a coordination polymer consisting of the polypyridyl ligand and copper cations. In contrast, alternative spin coating of the same iron polypyridyl complex with copper nitrate on fluorine-doped tin oxide (FTO) resulted in electrochromic coatings. Their electrochromic activity originates from the iron polypyridyl complex. The free pyridine moieties of the polypyridyl ligands are coordinated to the copper cations, forming a dense network of iron complexes. This network stabilizes the iron complexes, as cation exchange was not observed, even after prolonged exposure to a solution containing an excess of copper salt.

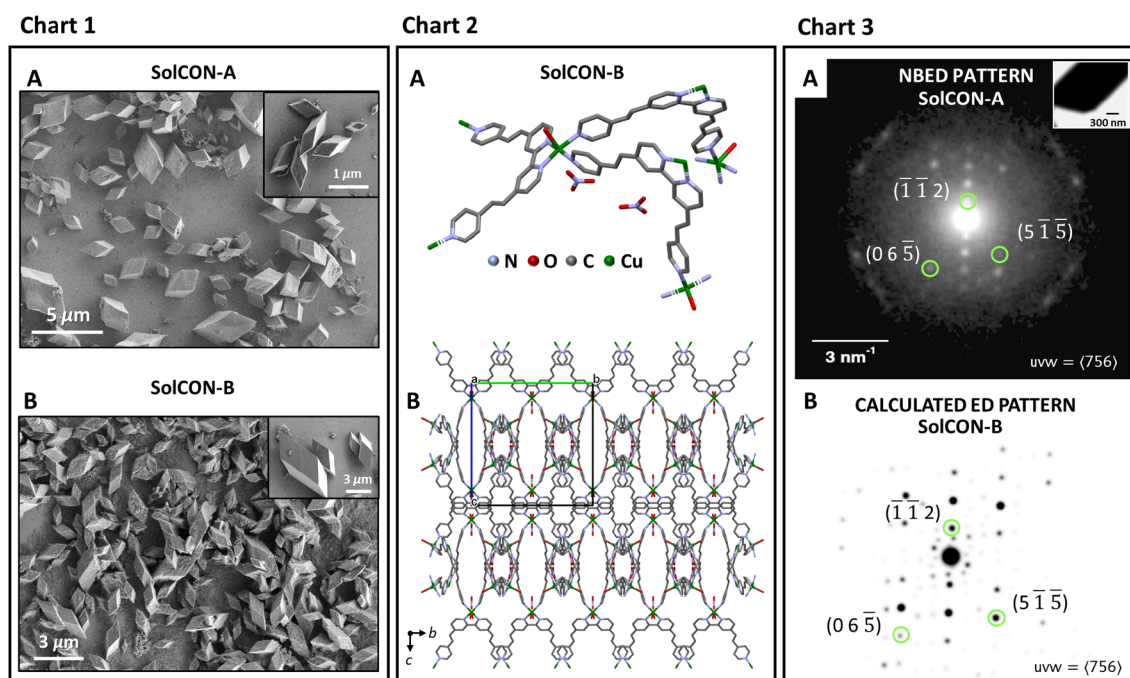
Crystals were obtained by slow diffusion of solutions into one another at room temperature. We used a thin tube ( $\phi = 5$  mm) containing three layers, with the top and bottom layers consisting of solutions of complex 1 or  $\text{Cu}(\text{NO}_3)_2$  and the layer in the center being a cosolvent. During the reaction, the color of the solution changed from purple to colorless. These coordination organic networks (SolCONs) were isolated after 20 days by centrifugation and washed with acetonitrile (ACN) and ethanol. Two different solvent combinations were used

and resulted in the same crystallographic structures and morphologies, but with slightly different dimensions.

SolCON-A was formed by the reaction of complex 1 ( $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2/\text{MeOH}$ , 1:1 v/v) with  $\text{Cu}(\text{NO}_3)_2 \cdot 3\text{H}_2\text{O}$  in ACN in a molar ratio of 1:2.  $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2/\text{MeOH}/\text{ACN}$  (0.5:0.5:1 v/v/v) was used as a cosolvent in the center. SolCON-B was obtained by using ACN as the solvent for complex 1 and *N,N*-dimethylformamide (DMF) as the solvent for  $\text{Cu}(\text{NO}_3)_2 \cdot 3\text{H}_2\text{O}$ . ACN/DMF (1:1 v/v) was used as a cosolvent in the center (Figure 1). Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) analysis revealed the formation of crystals that have the appearance of a parallelepiped (Figure 1, Chart 1). Although these crystals were uniformly shaped, their dimensions varied. For SolCON-A the size distribution was  $2.1 \pm 0.9 \mu\text{m}$  ( $\sim 50$  crystals), and for SolCON-B sizes were between 1 and  $4 \mu\text{m}$  ( $\sim 50$  crystals). In addition, larger crystals of  $38\text{--}70 \mu\text{m}$  ( $\sim 10$  crystals) were also observed for SolCON-B (Figure S1). The different solvent combinations did not affect the overall crystal morphology, as is sometimes observed.<sup>48</sup>

Single-crystal X-ray analysis of SolCON-B showed the formation of a MOF based on copper cations and the ligand of complex 1 (Figure 1, Chart 2). The formation of the framework involved ligand transfer from complex 1 to the copper salt. The three-dimensional framework is formed by mono- and bidentate binding of copper centers to the pyridine moieties of the ligand. The ligands are coordinated in square-pyramidal fashion around the copper centers. The Irving–Williams series indicates that the relative stability of the copper complexes is expected to be larger than that of the iron complex 1.<sup>49</sup> Although structurally different, both coordination complexes have six metal–pyridine bonds. The  $\text{N}_{\text{pyr}}\text{--Cu}^{2+}$  bonds are known to be stronger than  $\text{N}_{\text{pyr}}\text{--Fe}^{2+}$ .<sup>50,51</sup> Two nitrate counteranions are present in the asymmetric unit, and hydrogen bonding is observed between the oxygen atom of  $\text{NO}_3^-$  and hydrogen atoms of the polypyridyl ligand. The nanobeam electron diffraction (NBED) patterns of SolCON-A consist of sharp spots that match with the corresponding zone-axis patterns calculated from the refined structure of SolCON-B, demonstrating that these MOFs have very similar crystallographic structures (Figure 1, Chart 3, and Figure S2). The iron center of complex 1 is coordinately saturated, and therefore, it is highly likely that the metal cation exchange involves ligand dissociation prior to the formation of the MOFs.<sup>52</sup> The vinylpyridyl moieties of complex 1 are not essential for the cation exchange, as shown by the reaction of  $[\text{Fe}(\text{bpy})_3](\text{PF}_6)_2$  (lacking the vinylpyridyl moieties) with  $\text{Cu}(\text{NO}_3)_2$  (40 equiv) in ACN. We observed the disappearance of the typical red color associated with this iron complex within 60 h.<sup>53</sup>

To demonstrate the differences between bulk crystallization and on-surface chemistry, a thin film (SurCON) was prepared by layer-by-layer (LbL) deposition of solutions containing complex 1 and  $\text{Cu}(\text{NO}_3)_2$  (Figure 2). With this approach, complex 1 retains its structure and electrochromic properties. SurCON was assembled on FTO on glass ( $2 \text{ cm} \times 2 \text{ cm}$ ) using automated spin coating and solutions of  $\text{Cu}(\text{NO}_3)_2 \cdot 3\text{H}_2\text{O}$  (4.0 mM in ACN) and complex 1 (0.6 mM in  $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2/\text{MeOH}$ , 1:1 v/v). This deposition sequence was repeated 18 times. The SurCON was coated with a thin layer of platinum and milled using a focused ion beam (FIB) microscope (Figure 2, Chart 1). The transmission electron microscopy (TEM) image of a cross section of SurCON shows a homogeneous film having a thickness of  $\sim 178$  nm. Energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy



**Figure 1.** Characterization of SolCON-A and SolCON-B. Chart 1: (A, B) Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) images. Insets: Zoom-in. Chart 2: (A) X-ray analysis of SolCON-B (CCDC 2095187) showing the coordination environment of the polypyridyl ligand with the copper cations. Hydrogen atoms have been omitted for clarity. (B) Structural packing of SolCON-B. The view along the crystallographic *a* axis is shown. Chart 3: (A) Experimental nanobeam electron diffraction (NBED) pattern of SolCON-A. (B) Electron diffraction (ED) pattern calculated from the single-crystal X-ray structure of SolCON-B. The green circles indicate specific Miller planes of the matching zone-axis pattern.

(EDS) mapping clearly indicates the uniform distribution of both the iron and copper cations.

UV–vis spectra recorded for different numbers of deposition cycles showed the broad metal-to-ligand charge transfer (MLCT) bands related to complex **1** at  $\lambda_{\text{max}1} \approx 458$  nm and  $\lambda_{\text{max}2} \approx 596$  nm (Figure 2, Chart 2A). An intense  $\pi$ – $\pi^*$  transition band of the ligand was also present at  $\lambda_{\text{max}} \approx 333$  nm. Plotting the absorption intensity ( $\lambda_{\text{max}} \approx 596$  nm) versus the number of deposition cycles indicated linear growth with retention of complex **1**.

X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) data for SurCON confirmed the presence of iron complex **1** and copper cations as cross-linkers (Figure 2, Chart 2B). Two characteristic bands for  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  are present at 708 eV ( $2p_{3/2}$ ) and 720 eV ( $2p_{1/2}$ ).<sup>34,54</sup> The  $N_{\text{pyr}}/\text{Fe}$  ratio of 11.9 is in excellent agreement with the expected ratio for complex **1** ( $N_{\text{pyr}}/\text{Fe} = 12$ ). The bands for  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$  are observed at 935 eV ( $2p_{3/2}$ ) and 955 eV ( $2p_{1/2}$ ) along with the satellite bands at 941–945 and 962–965 eV.<sup>54</sup> The observed Cu/Fe ratio ( $\sim 2.7$ ) indicates the formation of a fully formed network (Cu/Fe = 3) in which the copper centers are bound by two pyridine groups.

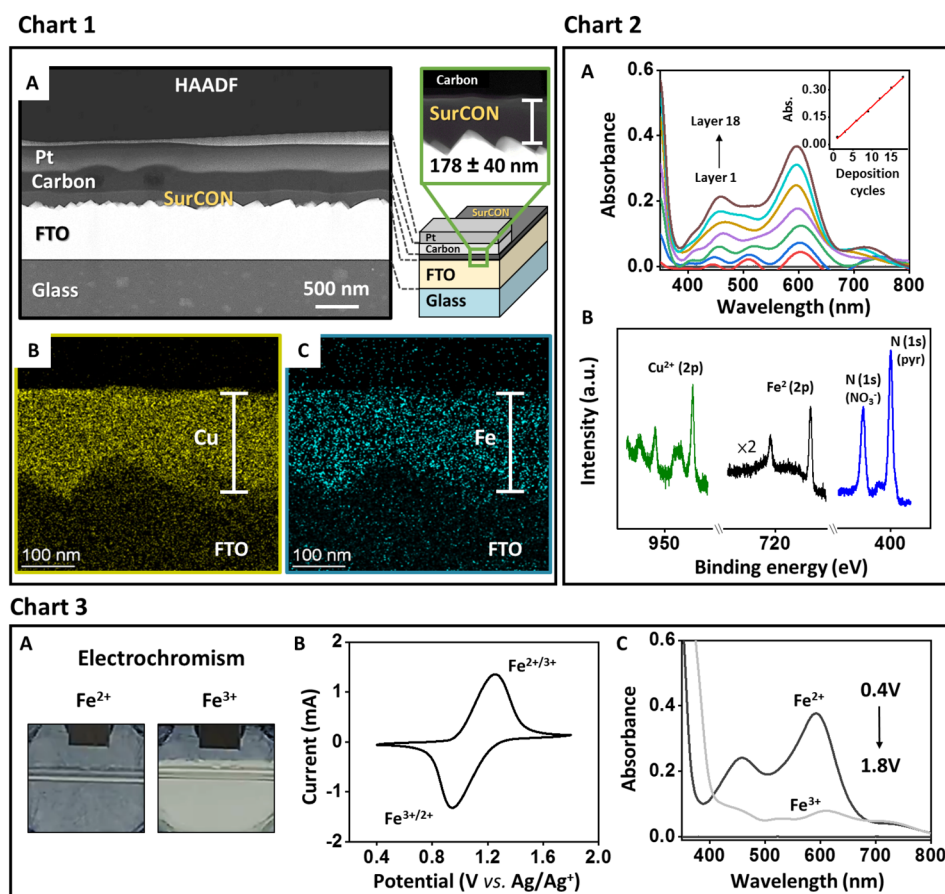
Electrochemical measurements unambiguously confirmed the presence of the electrochromic complex **1** (Figure 2, Chart 3). Cyclic voltammograms (CVs) showed reversible one-electron redox processes as expected for the  $\text{Fe}^{2+/3+}$  couple with a half-wave potential ( $E_{1/2}$ ) of 1.1 V and a peak-to-peak separation of 310 mV at a scan rate of 100 mV/s. The color of the SurCON changed from gray (at 0.4 V) to colorless (at 1.8 V) upon oxidation of  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  to  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$ . This reversible process could be monitored using spectroelectrochemical (SEC) measurements (Figure S3). The changes in the oxidation states were accompanied by variations in the absorption intensities of the MLCT bands. The time required to reach

90% of the maximum transmittance ( $\Delta T \sim 40\%$ ) was  $\sim 2.1$  s. The switching stability was indicated by 250 redox cycles with  $>80\%$  retention of the initial  $\Delta T$ . The coloration efficiency (CE) was  $148 \text{ cm}^2/\text{C}$ . SurCON is densely packed, as indicated by the molecular density of  $\sim 1.1 \times 10^{16}$  molecules/ $\text{cm}^2$  for a charge density ( $Q$ ) of  $1.77 \text{ mC}/\text{cm}^2$ . Exponential and linear dependences of the anodic and cathodic peak currents on the scan rate and square root of the scan rate, respectively, were observed, indicating a redox process controlled by diffusion. The calculated diffusion coefficients ( $D_f$ )  $\approx 3.37 \times 10^{-9} \text{ cm}^2 \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$  (oxidation) and  $\sim 3.64 \times 10^{-9} \text{ cm}^2 \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$  (reduction) are similar and derived from the Randles–Sevcik equation. SurCON is remarkably stable, as no cation exchange was observable by UV–vis spectroscopy and electrochemical measurements. Immersion of SurCON in a solution containing  $\text{Cu}(\text{NO}_3)_2 \cdot 3\text{H}_2\text{O}$  (4.0 mM in ACN) for 3 days did not result in ligand transfer (Figure S4). Clearly, the formation of a network containing both the copper salt and complex **1** enhances its stability.

In conclusion, the reactions demonstrated here are two examples of coordination-based polymerization processes: (i) metal–ligand exchange followed by crystallization versus (ii) on-surface deposition. The composition of the assemblies is controlled by the applied method. We have shown that iron polypyridyl complexes can be used as sacrificial precursors for the formation of MOFs by slow diffusion of solutions. The on-surface polymerization is much faster, which prevents the metal–ligand exchange.

Fast mixing of solutions of iron complex **1** and  $\text{Cu}(\text{NO}_3)_2 \cdot 3\text{H}_2\text{O}$  resulted in a network without metal cation exchange, as shown by XPS, SEM, and EDS measurements (Figure S5). These observations suggest the formation of a kinetic product, whereas a thermodynamically favorable product is obtained by





**Figure 2.** Characterization and electrochromic properties of SurCON. Chart 1: (A) High-angle annular dark-field scanning transmission electron microscopy (HAADF-STEM) image showing a cross section of a SurCON sample. (B, C) EDS elemental map showing the distribution of iron and copper metals. Scale bar: 100 nm. Chart 2: (A) Ex situ absorption spectra recorded during the formation of the film. FTO/glass was used for the baseline (black). Inset: Absorbance of the metal-to-ligand charge transfer (MLCT) band ( $\lambda_{\text{max}} = 596 \text{ nm}$ ) vs the number of deposition cycles. (B) X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) spectra. Chart 3: (A) Photographs of the colored (0.4 V,  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$ ) and bleached (1.8 V,  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$ ) states using an electrolyte solution of 0.1 M TBAPF<sub>6</sub> in ACN. Additional details are shown in Figure S3. (B) Cyclic voltammograms (CVs) recorded at a scan rate of 100 mV/s. (C) Absorption spectra showing the reduced (gray) and oxidized (light gray) states. FTO/glass was used for the baseline (black).

slow diffusion of the solvents. Reacting a palladium salt (instead of a copper salt) with the iron polypyridyl complex in solution (by diffusion or fast mixing; Figure S6) did not result in metal–ligand exchange.<sup>55</sup>

On-surface polymerization was observed by us with palladium salts for the formation of electrochromic coatings without metal cation exchange.<sup>16,17,32,34,35,56</sup> Forming such coatings with copper rather than palladium salts is advantageous because of the lower toxicity and cost. The use of the same complex **1** resulted in similar properties (i.e., coloration efficiencies, maximum transmittance, and switching times) regardless of the applied salts.<sup>32,34,35,56</sup> Others have reported the formation of related coordination structures based on terpyridine iron complexes and copper salts in solution and on surfaces.<sup>29,36,37</sup> No exchange of the iron and copper cations has been reported. The previous finding with palladium chemistry and the above-mentioned reports<sup>36,37</sup> by Constable, Housecroft, Gupta, Mondal, and Zharnikov highlight that our example of divergent coordination chemistry is rare and can offer new opportunities in the molecular engineering of functional materials.

## ■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

### SI Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/jacs.1c08087>.

Experimental details, materials, and methods; crystal data and structure refinement for SolCON-B; NBED of SolCON-A; spectroelectrochemical and electrochemical characterization of SurCON; characterization of the network formed from PdCl<sub>2</sub>(PhCN)<sub>2</sub> and iron complex **1** (PDF)

### Accession Codes

CCDC 2095187 contains the supplementary crystallographic data for this paper. These data can be obtained free of charge via [www.ccdc.cam.ac.uk/data\\_request/cif](http://www.ccdc.cam.ac.uk/data_request/cif), or by emailing [data\\_request@ccdc.cam.ac.uk](mailto:data_request@ccdc.cam.ac.uk), or by contacting The Cambridge Crystallographic Data Centre, 12 Union Road, Cambridge CB2 1EZ, U.K.; fax: +44 1223 336033.

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## Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported by the Helen and Martin Kimmel Center for Molecular Design and the Israel Science Foundation (ISF). M.E.v.d.B. is the holder of the Bruce A. Pearlman Professional Chair in Synthetic Organic Chemistry. We thank Dr. Tatyana Bendikov for XPS measurements, and Dr. Olga Brontvein and Dr. Ifat Kaplan-Ashiri for electron microscopy imaging.

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