

# Supramolecular Chemistry-Concepts and Applications

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**Abstract:** *In this review paper the chronological development of concepts of supramolecular chemistry have been discussed in details with relevant references. The topic discussed molecular self-assembly, molecular recognition, complexation, template directed synthesis, mechanically interlocked molecular architectures, Dynamic Covalent Chemistry, Molecular Imprinting Techniques, concepts of molecular machines and biomimetics. Applications of these concepts in the field of materials technology, efficient catalysis, controlled drug delivery, data storage, processing devices, green chemistry and high-tech devices.*

**Keywords:** Supramolecular chemistry, molecular self-assembly, molecular recognition, template directed synthesis, dynamic covalence, molecular imprinting, molecular machines and biomimetics.

## 1. Introduction

Supramolecular chemistry is one of the new areas of chemistry which deals with secondary interactions rather than covalent bonds in molecules and focuses on the chemical systems made up of a discrete number of assembled molecular subunits or components. The forces responsible for the spatial organization may vary from weak intermolecular forces to strong covalent bonding. The weak intermolecular forces are hydrogen bonding, metal coordination, hydrophobic forces, van der Waals forces, pi-pi interactions and electrostatic effects.

The existence of intermolecular forces was first postulated by Johannes Diderik van der Waals in 1873. Later in 1894, Nobel laureate Hermann Emil Fischer introduced the philosophical roots of supramolecular chemistry by suggesting "lock and key" mechanism for enzyme-substrate interactions, which is the fundamental principle of molecular recognition and 'host-guest' chemistry. In the early twentieth century non-covalent bonds were understood in gradually more detail, with the hydrogen bond being described by Latimer and Rodebush in 1920.

The use of these principles led to the better understanding of protein structures as well as other biological processes. For instance, elucidation of the double helical structure of DNA (by Watson and Crick) occurred when it was realized that there are two separate strands of nucleotides connected through hydrogen bonds. The use of non-covalent bonds is essential to replication because they allow the strands to be separated and used to template new double stranded DNA.

The importance of supramolecular chemistry was established by the research work of Nobel laureates Donald J. Cram, Jean-Marie Lehn, and Charles J. Pedersen in 1987 for Chemistry [1]. The development of selective "host-guest" complexes [2, 3] particularly, in which a host molecule recognizes and selectively binds a certain guest, was cited as an important contribution. Supramolecular chemistry enriched by the research works of James Fraser Stoddart [4-6] with the development of concepts of highly complex self-assembled structures and molecular machinery [7-8]. Again, Itamar Willner developed concepts of bio-sensors and methods of electronic and biological interfacing. Simultaneous development of nanotechnology also had a

strong influence on this subject, with building blocks such as fullerenes [9-12], nanoparticles [13-15], and dendrimers [16-20] becoming involved in synthetic systems.

The subject gradually develops by the research works on molecular self-assembly [21,22], folding [23-28] molecular recognition [29-31], mechanically-interlocked, molecular architectures [32] and dynamic covalent chemistry [33,34]. The study of non-covalent interactions is crucial to understanding many biological processes from cell structure to vision that rely on these forces for structure and function. Biological systems are often the best inspiration for researches in supramolecular chemistry.

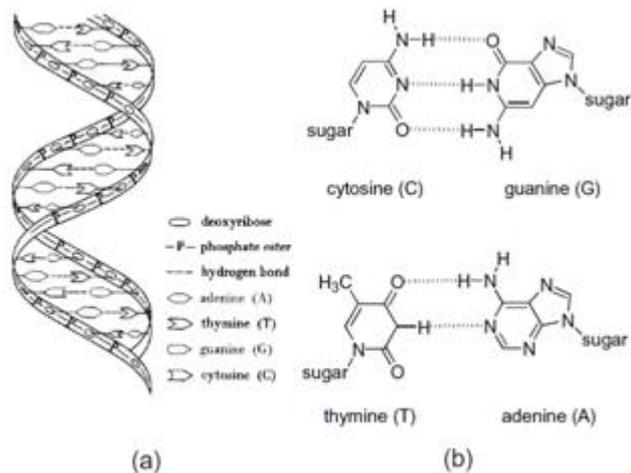
## 2. Basic Concepts and Literatures of Supramolecular Chemistry

Followings are the important concepts developed during last decades which play important role in the understanding and developing several areas of applications.

### 2.1 Molecular self-assembly

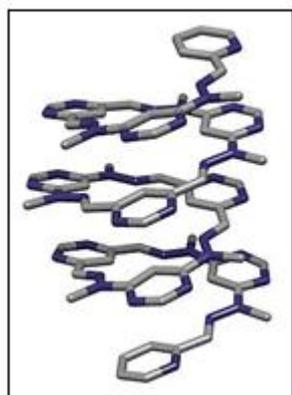
Molecular self-assembly is the process by which molecules adopt a defined arrangement without external influences. There are two types of self-assembly—intermolecular self-assembly and intra-molecular self-assembly. Commonly, the term molecular self-assembly refers to intermolecular self-assembly, while the intramolecular analog is more commonly called folding.

Perhaps the best known intermolecular self-assembling structure in biological systems is naturally occurring DNA, which exists in a double helical form [35-37]. The two single strands are held together by a number of hydrogen bonds, involving acidic hydrogen atoms (hydrogen bonding donor), oxygen (hydrogen bonding acceptor), and nitrogen atoms (hydrogen bonding acceptor) of the purine and pyrimidine bases in order to maintain the double helical structure (**Figure-1a**). In this double helix guanine (G) forms triple hydrogen bonds with cytosine (C) and adenine (A) forms double hydrogen bonds with thymine (T).



**Figure 1:** a) Complementary base pairing in DNA helical structure and b) base pairing in DNA (guanine and cytosine form triple hydrogen bonds; adenine and thymine form double hydrogen bonds).

Guanine selectively interacts with cytosine because the G-C complex is much more stable than G-T complex which would form only one hydrogen bond (**Fig-1b**). Similarly, adenine exclusively forms complex with thymine because adenine would form no hydrogen bonds with cytosine. The X-ray diffraction studies revealed that the hydrogen bonds holding G-C and A-T complexes are about the same length ( $2.9 \pm 0.1 \text{ \AA}$ ).

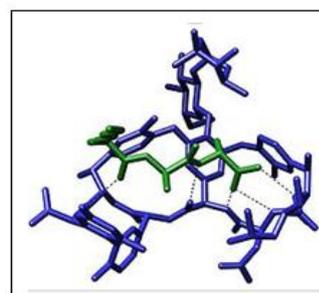


**Figure 2:** Crystal structure of a foldamer reported by Lehn and coworkers [Helv.Chim.Acta., 2003, 86, 1598-1624].

Intra-molecular self-assembly or folding occurs in foldamers and polypeptides. A foldamer is a discrete chain molecule or oligomer that folds into a conformationally ordered state in solution. They are artificial molecules that mimic the ability of proteins, nucleic acids, and polysaccharides to fold into well-defined conformations, such as helices and  $\beta$ -sheets. The structure of a foldamer is stabilized by non-covalent interactions between nonadjacent monomers [38, -40]. Foldamers are studied with the main goal of designing large molecules with predictable structures. The study of foldamers is related to the themes of molecular self-assembly, molecular recognition and host-guest chemistry.

Molecular self-assembly also allows the construction of larger structures such as micelles, membranes, vesicles, liquid crystals, and is important to crystal engineering. Micelle is an aggregate of surfactant molecules dispersed in a liquid colloid.

A typical micelle in aqueous solution forms an aggregate with the hydrophilic "head" regions in contact with surrounding solvent, sequestering the hydrophobic single-tail regions in the micelle centre. This phase is caused by the packing behavior of single-tail lipids in a bi-layer. The difficulty filling all the volume of the interior of a bi-layer, while accommodating the area per head group forced on the molecule by the hydration of the lipid head group, leads to the formation of the micelle. This type of micelle is known as a normal-phase micelle (oil-in-water micelle). Inverse micelles have the head groups at the centre with the tails extending out (water-in-oil micelle). Micelles are approximately spherical in shape. Other phases, including shapes such as ellipsoids, cylinders, and bi-layers, are also possible [41]. The shape and size of a micelle are a function of the molecular geometry of its surfactant molecules and solution conditions such as surfactant concentration, temperature, pH, and ionic strength. The process of forming micelles is known as micellisation and forms part of the phase behavior of many lipids according to their polymorphism. [42,43].

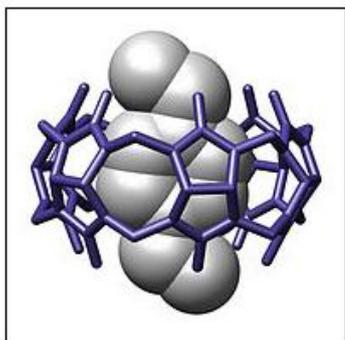


**Figure 3:** Crystal structure of a short peptide L-Lys-D-Ala-D-Ala (bacterial cell wall precursor) bound to the antibiotic vancomycin in through hydrogen bonds [Knox, James R.; Pratt, R. F. (1990)].

Liquid crystals (LCs) are the state of matter that has properties between those of conventional liquid and those of solid crystal. For instance, a liquid crystal may flow like a liquid, but its molecules may be oriented in a crystal-like way. There are many different types of liquid-crystal phases, which can be distinguished by their different optical properties (such as birefringence). When viewed under a microscope using a polarized light source, different liquid crystal phases will appear to have distinct textures. The contrasting areas in the textures correspond to domains where the liquid-crystal molecules are oriented in different directions. Within a domain, however, the molecules are well ordered. LC materials may not always be in a liquid-crystal phase [44-46].

Liquid crystals can be divided into thermotropic, lyotropic and metallotropic phases. Thermotropic and lyotropic liquid crystals consist of organic molecules. Thermotropic LCs exhibit a phase transition into the liquid-crystal phase as temperature is changed. Lyotropic LCs exhibit phase transitions as a function of both temperature and concentration of the liquid-crystal molecules in a solvent (typically water). Metallotropic LCs are composed of both organic and inorganic molecules; their liquid-crystal transition depends not only on temperature and

concentration, but also on the inorganic-organic composition ratio [47-49].

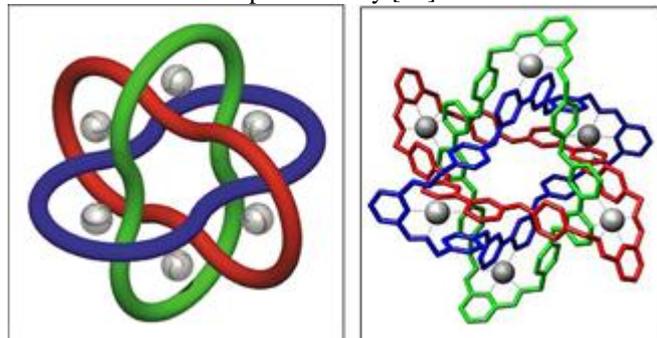


**Figure 4:** Crystal structure of Host-Guest Complex with a p-xylylenediammonium bound within a cucurbit[6]uril [By Freeman in Acta Crystallogr B, 1984]

Examples of liquid crystals can be found both in the natural world and in technological applications. Most contemporary electronic displays use liquid crystals. Lyotropic liquid-crystalline phases are abundant in living systems. For example, many proteins and cell membranes are liquid crystals. Other well-known examples of liquid crystals are solutions of soap and various related detergents. [50-51].

## 2.2 Molecular Recognition and Complexation

Molecular recognition is the specific binding of a guest molecule to a complementary host molecule to form a host-guest complex. Often, the definition of which species is the "host" and which is the "guest" is arbitrary. The molecules are able to identify each other using non-covalent interactions. Key applications of this field are the construction of molecular sensors and catalysis [52-54]. The specific interaction between host and guest molecules occurs through non-covalent bonding such as hydrogen bonding, metal coordination, hydrophobic forces, van der Waals forces,  $\pi$ - $\pi$  interactions, halogen bonding, electrostatic and/or electromagnetic [55] effects. In addition to these *direct* interactions as well solvent can play a dominant *indirect* role in driving molecular recognition in solution [56]. The host and guest involved in molecular recognition exhibit molecular complementarity [57].



**Figure 5:** a) Schematic of a molecular Borromean ring, b) Crystal structure reported by Stoddart JF et al (2002).

Molecular recognition plays an important role in biological systems and is observed in between receptor-ligand, antigen-antibody, DNA-protein, sugar-lectin, RNA-

ribosome, etc. An important example of molecular recognition is the antibiotic vancomycin in that selectively binds with the peptides with terminal D-alanyl-D-alanine in bacterial cells through five hydrogen bonds. The vancomycin is lethal to the bacteria since once it has bound to these particular peptides they are unable to be used to construct the bacteria's cell wall. Recent work suggests that molecular recognition elements can be synthetically produced at the nano-scale, [58] circumventing the need for naturally-occurring molecular recognition elements for the development of sensing tools for small molecules.

## 2.3 Template-directed synthesis

Molecular recognition and self-assembly may be used with reactive species in order to pre-organize a system for a chemical reaction (to form one or more covalent bonds). It may be considered a special case of supramolecular catalysis. Non-covalent bonds between the reactants and a "template" hold the reactive sites of the reactants close together, facilitating the desired chemistry. This technique is particularly useful for situations where the desired reaction conformation is thermodynamically or kinetically unlikely, e.g., in the preparation of large macrocycles. This pre-organization also serves purposes such as minimizing side reactions, lowering the activation energy of the reaction, and producing desired stereochemistry. After the reaction has taken place, the template may remain in place, be forcibly removed, or may be "automatically" decomplexed on account of the different recognition properties of the reaction product. The template may be as simple as a single metal ion or may be extremely complex. Template directed synthesis of a genetic polymer in a model protocell is shown by Bravo J. A., et. al, and Mansy SS et. al [59, 60]. Lot of literatures available on template directed synthesis of specific compounds.

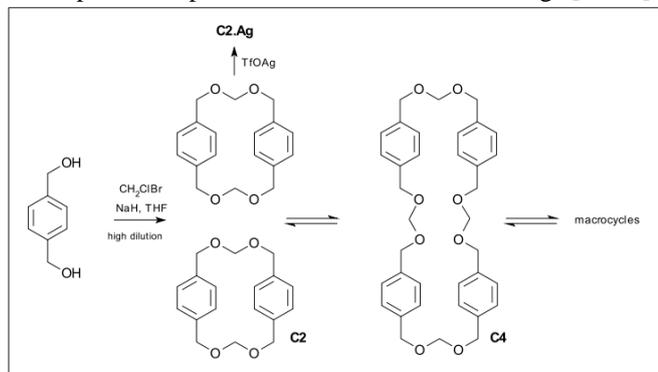
## 2.4 Mechanically-interlocked molecular architectures

Mechanically-interlocked molecular architectures consist of molecules that are linked only as a consequence of their topology. Some non-covalent interactions may exist between the different components but covalent bonds do not. Supramolecular chemistry and template-directed synthesis in particular, is key to the efficient synthesis of the compounds. Examples of mechanically-interlocked molecular architectures include catenanes, rotaxanes, molecular knots, molecular Borromean rings and ravels [61].

Molecular Borromean rings are an example of a mechanically-interlocked molecular architecture in which three macrocycles are interlocked in such a way that breaking any macrocycle allows the others to disassociate. They are the smallest examples of Borromean rings. The synthesis of molecular Borromean rings was reported in 2004 by J. Fraser Stoddart et. al. [62]. The so-called Borromean ring is made up of three interpenetrated macrocycles formed from the reaction between 2,6-diformylpyridine and diamine compounds, complexed with zinc.

## 2.5 Dynamic Covalent Chemistry

Dynamic covalent chemistry deals with the synthesis of large complex molecules from simple one. Here only one product is captured from a reversible reaction under thermodynamic reaction control and out of many products. The concept of dynamic covalent chemistry was further demonstrated in the development of specific molecular Borromean rings [63-65].



**Figure 6:** Formation tetramer of cyclic ether

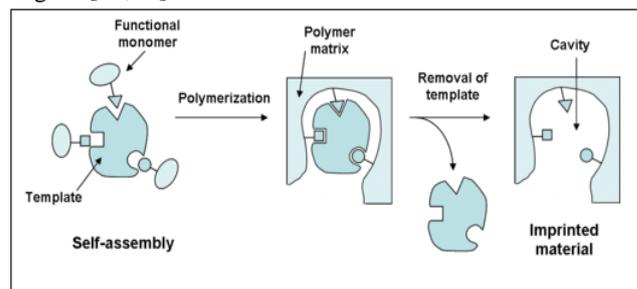
The idea of rapid equilibration allows the coexistence of a huge variety of different species among which one can select molecules with desired chemical, pharmaceutical and biological properties. The concept is demonstrated in an illustrative example involving cyclophane having  $C_2$  can be prepared by the irreversible highly diluted reaction of a diol with chlorobromo methane in the presence of sodium hydride.

The dimer however is part of series of equilibria between polyacetal macro cycles of different size brought about by acid catalyzed (triflic acid) trans-acetalization [66]. Regardless of the starting material,  $C_2$ ,  $C_4$  or a high molar mass product, the equilibrium will eventually produce an identical product distribution. In this system it is also possible to amplify the presence of  $C_2$  in the mixture when the catalyst is silver triflate because the silver ion fits ideally and irreversibly in its cavity.

## 2.6 Molecular Imprinting Techniques

Molecular imprinting is a method by which a host is constructed from small molecules using a suitable molecular species as a template. Molecularly imprinted materials are prepared using a template molecule and functional monomers that assemble around the template and subsequently get crosslinked to each other. The functional monomers, which self-assemble around the template molecule by interaction between functional groups on both the template and monomers, are polymerized to form an imprinted matrix (commonly known in the scientific community as a molecular imprinted polymer, i.e. MIP). Then the template molecule is removed from the matrix under certain conditions, leaving behind a cavity complementary in size and shape to the template. The obtained cavity can work as a selective binding site for a specific template molecule. Molecular imprinting is a technique to create template-shaped cavities in polymer matrices with memory of the template molecule to be used in molecular

recognition. The technique is demonstrated in the following diagram [67,68].



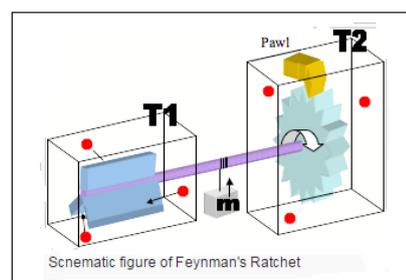
**Figure 7:** A Model work on molecular imprinting technique

Figure-7 shows a method of synthesizing molecularly imprinted polymers by copolymerization of template and functional monomers followed by template removal. This technique is based on the system used by enzymes for substrate recognition, which is called the "lock and key" model. The active binding site of an enzyme has a unique geometric structure that is particularly suitable for a substrate. A substrate that has a corresponding shape to the site is recognized by selectively binding to the enzyme, while an incorrectly shaped molecule that does not fit the binding site is not recognized.

## 2.7 Concepts of Molecular Machines

The idea of molecular machine (also called nanomachine) has biological applications. It is defined as any discrete number of molecular components that produce quasi-mechanical movements (output) in response to specific stimuli (input) [69, 70]. The expression is often more generally applied to molecules that simply mimic functions that occur at the macroscopic level. The term is also common in nanotechnology where a number of highly complex molecular machines have been proposed that are aimed at the goal of constructing a molecular assembler. Molecular machines can be divided into two broad categories; synthetic and biological.

Molecular systems capable of shifting a chemical or mechanical process away from equilibrium represent a potentially important branch of chemistry and nanotechnology. As the gradient generated from this process is able to perform useful work these types of systems, by definition, are examples of molecular machinery.



**Figure 8:** Model for molecular machinery.

Molecular machines are molecules or molecular assemblies that can perform functions such as linear or rotational movement, switching, and entrapment. These devices exist

at the boundary between supramolecular chemistry and nanotechnology, and prototypes have been demonstrated using supramolecular concepts [71].

## 2.8 Biomimetics

Biomimetics or biomimicry is the knowledge borrowed from natural models or systems to solve real life or scientific problems. The terms biomimetics and biomimicry come from Ancient Greek: *bios* (life), and *mīmēsis* (imitation). Living organisms have evolved well-adapted structures and materials over geological time through natural selection. Biomimetics has given rise to new technologies inspired by biological solutions at macro and nanoscales. Humans have looked at nature for answers to problems throughout our existence. Nature has solved engineering problems such as self-healing abilities, environmental exposure tolerance and resistance, hydrophobicity, self-assembly, and harnessing solar energy. Many synthetic supramolecular systems are designed to copy functions of biological systems. Examples include photo-electrochemical systems, catalytic systems, protein design and self-replication [72].

Biomimetics could in principle be applied in many fields like aviation technology (following birds and bats), nanosurface (following shark skin), tread design of tires (following toe pads of tree frogs), thermal collectors and clothing (following polar bear), solar power collection (mimicking the arrangements of leaves) etc. Some examples of biomimetic applications at various stages of development from prototypes to technologies that might become commercially usable have been described by Bharat Bhushan [73].

## 3. Applications

### 3.1 Development of New Materials

In the development of new materials supramolecular chemistry and molecular self-assembly processes have been applied very much. Large structures can be readily accessed using bottom-up synthesis as they are composed of small molecules requiring fewer steps to synthesize. Thus most of the bottom-up approaches to nanotechnology are based on supramolecular chemistry [74, 75].

### 3.2 Efficient Catalysis

A major application of supramolecular chemistry is the design and understanding of catalysts and catalysis [76-78]. Non-covalent interactions are extremely important in catalysis, binding reactants into conformations suitable for reaction and lowering the transition state energy of reaction. Template-directed synthesis is a special case of supramolecular catalysis. Encapsulation systems such as micelles and dendrimers [79] are also used in catalysis to create microenvironments suitable for reactions (or steps in reactions) to progress that is not possible to use on a macroscopic scale.

### 3.3 Medicinal

Supramolecular chemistry is also important to the development of new pharmaceutical therapies by understanding the interactions at a drug binding site. The area of drug delivery has also made critical advances as a result of supramolecular chemistry providing encapsulation and targeted release mechanisms [80,81]. In addition, supramolecular systems have been designed to disrupt protein-protein interactions [82,83] that are important to cellular function [84].

### 3.4 Processing and Data Storage

Supramolecular chemistry has been used to demonstrate computation functions on a molecular scale. In many cases, photonic or chemical signals have been used in these components, but electrical interfacing of these units has also been shown by supramolecular signal transduction devices [85,86]. Data storage has been accomplished by the use of molecular switches with photochromic [87,88] and photoisomerizable units [89,90], by electrochromic and redox-switchable units [91,92], and even by molecular motion. Synthetic molecular logic gates have been demonstrated on a conceptual level. Even full-scale computations have been achieved by semi-synthetic DNA computers. [93]

### 3.5 Green Chemistry

Research in supramolecular chemistry also has application in green chemistry where reactions have been developed which proceed in the solid state directed by non-covalent bonding. Such procedures are highly desirable since they reduce the need for solvents during the production of chemicals [94,95].

### 3.6 High-Tech Devices

Supramolecular chemistry is often pursued to develop new functions that cannot appear from a single molecule. These functions also include magnetic properties, light responsiveness, self-healing polymers, synthetic ion channels, molecular sensors, etc. Supramolecular research has been applied to develop high-tech sensors, processes to treat radioactive waste and contrast agents for CAT-scans [96,98].

## 4. Conclusions

Intensive researches in supramolecular chemistry enable us to synthesize materials with very specific properties for specific applications. It opens up the new era of most effective catalyst synthesis for the catalytic reactions. It enables us template directed drug synthesis which reduces the side products; molecular encapsulation as well as drug delivery to specific organs. High-tech devices as well as data storage can be developed by using molecular switches with photochromic and photoisomerizable units, by electrochromic and redox-switchable units and even by molecular motion are one step ahead to automation. Researches in supramolecular chemistry also enable us

green synthesis of several materials avoiding the uses of several hazardous chemicals.

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