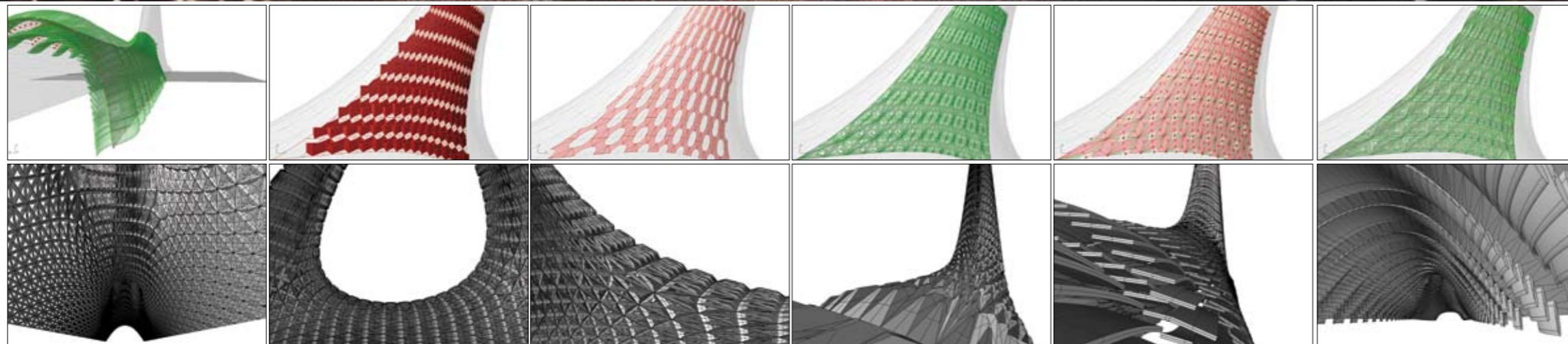


# THE LONG ROAD HOME

## TAKING THE CONCEPT OF THE MEGA CITY TO NEW EXTREMES

While long boulevards have long been a part of a city's topography: Queen Street, Auckland, Willis in Welly, London's Oxford Street or the Champs-Élysées in Paris – you get the idea – an architectural practice based in Rome has devised a concept to make legendary trading route, the "Silk Road" into a 15,000-kilometre transcontinental high street. >>




**O**FL Architecture (fronted by Francesco Lipari) has recently won first prize in the Silk Road Map International Competition to rejuvenate the barren wilderness into an Eco-City linking Asia with Europe. The extraordinary design known as SRME (Silk Road Map Evolution) plans to link Venice to Xian via a railway system running the length of the original Silk Road, much like an ecologically advanced Trans-Siberian Express, that will function on gravitational fields. The other part of the colossal scheme is to line the railway with sustainable "bionic" towers and populated towns or "small urban realities" as the OFL website statement calls them.

A great proportion of the project will be beneath a surface area or outer skin comprised of photovoltaic panels and a revolutionary "green" (as in eco) cement made from titanium dioxide to better reduce atmospheric pollution. A photocatalytic reaction, courtesy of a synthetic chlorophyll, will produce around 500 litres of oxygen a day per 200 square metres.

Air-purifying skin aside, the railway tracks themselves will generate electricity from passing trains via another innovation – the insertion of piezoelectric panels into the tracks.

OFL meanwhile have already been in China this year as part of Italy's Pavilion at the Shanghai Expo. The practice was born of a desire to develop multi-disciplinary relationships between architecture, art and even biology and cinema. It has been highly praised by competitions in Hong Kong and Italy, and is particularly interested in the contemporary city and urban conditions.

It's hoped the gargantuan project will revitalise the ancient road, which has been traversed over the centuries by traders and merchants like Marco Polo, into an economic powerhouse with a spiritual heart, the railway acting as a blood-rich vein, extending its arms from the bigger cities to help the smaller communities that may one day dot the route through the Eurasian hinterlands. Whatever you call it, the SRME gives an entirely new meaning to the concept of urban sprawl. 

KELVIN HAYES

