The story of Vienna's Ringstrasse has been told for the last 30 years in terms set by Carl Schorske's Fin de siècle Vienna (1980). That analysis created a dominant strand of contemporary scholarship, taking modern cities as the primary grid determining individual identities and analyzing how the public sphere actually impeded the construct of individual identity. Theories about the flâneur in Paris and his modern cousins (from Baudelaire through Benjamin and David Harvey) describe the city, an agent enforcing cultures of memory and monumentality, as something set politically and ideologically over and against the individual subject.

This presentation will argue that this dominant approach to the Ringstrasse does not capture the relationship between the Viennese and their street of monumental buildings. The documents surrounding the design and building of the Ringstrasse do not support Schorske's thesis. I will argue instead that the Ringstrasse project intended to create a space that would foster the evolution of the "Habsburg subject"(my term) -- it would not model what that subject was supposed to be, but rather foster social performances through which subjects could assert their individuality comprehensibly on a public stage not in control of any one class or hegemonic group. The Ringstrasse planners were by no means the utopians that Schorske made them out to be, but a group of city planners concerned with the ethics of community and individual subjectivity rather than with the monumentality of state representation -- they offer a different vision of the civic and public subject.