

From Spreadsheet Developers to Showstoppers: Arcus Development's Roger Bittenbender on 220 East 9th Street



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Key Points

- **Arcus Bets on Design:** Roger Bittenbender's Arcus Development operates on a "design-first" thesis, using internal architecture to control every detail from site sourcing to execution.
- **220 East 9th Street as Flagship:** The East Village project is a showcase of Arcus's model—trading floor count for ceiling height, red brick modernism, and detailed interiors built to stand out.
- **Disciplined Site Selection:** Arcus targets a tight geography in Manhattan and Brooklyn, avoiding volume plays and waiting for truly exceptional sites before deploying capital.

From Spreadsheet Developers to Showstoppers: Arcus Development's Roger Bittenbender on 220 East 9th Street

In New York City development, it is easy to confuse activity with progress. Deals trade, capital moves, projects launch, and a lot of buildings still end up looking the same. Roger Bittenbender, principal of Arcus Development, has built his firm around a different thesis: architecture comes first, and discipline is the strategy. In a conversation with Traded, Bittenbender broke down how Arcus sources sites, designs in-house, and uses craft and restraint to create buildings that feel timeless from the street and radically distinct once you step inside.

Arcus Development's Core Idea: Design Build, From Day One

Arcus was founded with a clear focus: design-driven mixed-use development, primarily residential, executed through a design-build model where the team designs everything internally. For Bittenbender, that internal design control is not a branding point; it is the operating system. When Arcus looks at a site, they usually already see what should be built there. The goal is not to do more projects. The goal is to do the right ones and build great architecture when the opportunity is real. He oversees the cycle end-to-end, from sourcing to design and through execution.

The Development Cycle That Shaped Arcus: Respect the Process

When Traded asked which part of the cycle most shaped his approach, Bittenbender did not romanticize it. He likes architecture and construction, even while admitting construction can be brutal. But he sees the act of designing and building in New York City as a rare privilege, and one that demands respect for the process.

His guiding constraints are simple:

- Do not take on too much
- Do not do projects you are not genuinely interested in
- Build great stuff when you can

That mindset shows up everywhere in how Arcus filters deals and avoids “project for project’s sake” behavior.

Deal Sourcing Framework: Reduce the Universe, Then Be Ruthless

Arcus stays disciplined by narrowing the map. Bittenbender primarily looks at downtown Manhattan while excluding most of the Financial District, plus a tight set of prime Brooklyn neighborhoods for for-sale product. His Brooklyn focus: North Brooklyn, Williamsburg, Greenpoint, Brooklyn Heights, and prime brownstone Brooklyn corridors where land is scarce and much is landmarked. That scarcity cuts both ways. There are not many shots, and many opportunities that do appear are not spectacular sites. So Arcus stays patient. If the location is not right, he often does not underwrite it at all.

Acquisition Signals: Location and Pricing Decide if It Is Even Worth Time

When evaluating a potential acquisition, Bittenbender reduces the first decision to two variables:

- Location
- Pricing

He rejects the idea that you can answer “price per square foot” in the abstract. A once-in-a-lifetime location can justify a completely different basis than an average site. In practice, location and price usually tell him whether a deal is worth the time to model, diligence, and structure.

Capital Markets Reality: It Is Always Hard, So Reputation Matters

On capital markets, Bittenbender's view is blunt. Raising money is always a challenge. Condos are always a challenge. The cycle changes, but the friction remains. What helps is compounding trust. He has repeat investors who have done well with him, and that history makes it easier to keep building through changing markets.

“We’re Not a Spreadsheet Developer”

When asked what differentiates Arcus, Bittenbender drew a sharp line. Arcus is not a spreadsheet developer. The firm is deeply involved in planning, design, and the details that make a building stand out. They want character. They want uniqueness. They want a building that does not look like every other new development. That ethos shows up in one project again and again during the conversation: 220 East 9th Street.

Case Study: 220 East 9th Street and the Value of Design Decisions

Bittenbender described 220 East 9th as a pure example of how Arcus creates value through design and programming. The site had constraints. It was not especially deep. Arcus used zoning fluency to unlock a major outcome: delivering a six-story building instead of seven, which dramatically increased ceiling heights while preserving sellable square footage. The design intent was equally specific. A classic, modern reinterpretation of a red brick building, paired with interiors that feel one of a kind. Interior moves included highly detailed execution, such as board-formed concrete ceilings, exposed building systems, and a level of architectural character that most buyers do not see in typical new development. If there is a single “wow” factor people consistently react to, Bittenbender says it is the height and presence of the ceilings, especially the board form concrete, executed at a level that is rarely done correctly.

Operations: No Algorithm, Just Diligence

Construction remains hard, and Arcus does not pretend there is a hack. Bittenbender's view is that cost and timeline control come down to presence and follow-through. Dedicated people on each job, working it every day, with constant follow-up. If you are present, you can solve problems. If you are not, you lose control. For contractor selection, he values continuity with trusted partners, citing ongoing work with Caldwell Wingate. But he also emphasized that you are only as good as your subs, and every job brings new players who require management, pressure, and fast problem-solving.

The Mistakes Developers Make: Spending Money in the Wrong Places

One of Arcus's biggest intentional advantages is knowing where to spend. Bittenbender warned that architects or designers can default to expensive materials, but expensive does not automatically mean good design. The better skill is choosing beautiful materials at a reasonable cost and deploying them thoughtfully. He also stays involved in engineering decisions, structural and MEP, because understanding how a building is assembled helps reduce unforced errors. Still, he was candid that mistakes happen on every job. The goal is to learn, avoid repeating them, and stay present.

What Defines an Arcus Product: Character, Uniqueness, and Street Presence

Arcus wants a building you cannot confuse with anything else. Bittenbender pointed to varied floor plans as part of that ethos. 220 East 9th Street includes 18 different floor plans, a complexity that makes the process harder, but creates one-of-a-kind outcomes for residents. He also cares deeply about the street read. He wants someone walking by to wonder if the building is new or if it has always been part of the city, using materials and construction cues that echo the best 19th and early 20th-century New York buildings. For 220 East 9th Street, that begins with the facade, intended to outlive everything else. Arcus studied brick selection and assembly to hold up against classic red brick architecture, then layered in modern interventions like a marquee element and planted features, including facade trellising and a planted cornice.

East 9th Street: The Center of Downtown, With Two Cities at Once

Traded asked what makes the specific block compelling. Bittenbender described the location as a rare center point of downtown life. West enough to feel like NoHo or Greenwich Village, while still plugged into everything the East Village offers. Strong transportation access. A map location that makes sense for buyers coming from West Village, NoHo, and SoHo, who want the neighborhood energy without pushing too far east.

Risk: Every Development Is a Risk, But Some Define the Firm

For Bittenbender, development itself is the risk: the money, the guarantees, the obligations to investors and lenders. But he highlighted 150 Wooster as a defining moment as a defining moment: acquiring a major site with community opposition, a hard contract, and a special permit path after a previous owner failed. Arcus took the risk, won over the community, and delivered a building the neighborhood came to appreciate. Big risk, big reward, and a project that strengthened the firm's conviction in its approach.

- **Rapid Fire: The Arcus Mindset in One Page**
- **A core team expectation:** communication and follow-through
- **A mistake he tries not to repeat:** overcomplicating things
- **What separates good from great:** access to capital
- **One word for Roger:** dedicated
- **One word for Arcus:** creative
- **Favorite part of projects:** design, then the satisfaction of seeing it built

True North

When Traded closed by asking what drives him daily, Bittenbender returned to architecture. The ability to do excellent architecture in New York is an honor, and his true north is to be the best person he can be and keep a positive attitude even when things get rough. That combination, discipline in deals and obsession with design, is what Arcus is building on.