

I was sitting at the kitchen table, three contractor quotes spread out like a crime scene, when my son toddled in with a Lego car and smeared dust across the last clean counter. The countertop is original 1990s laminate. The cabinet doors still have that fake oak grain everyone used to love. I had already skimmed through emails from a contractor who ghosted us, a PDF with a price that made my stomach drop, and a hand-scrawled estimate that left me guessing whether permits were included. The house felt small, loud, and very, very old.

The walkthrough started with a knock at 8:30, the kind of early noise that made the neighbours glance from behind their curtains. It was cold outside, a typical Brampton April that can't decide if it's winter or summer, and the sound of demolition a few houses over made me nervous. The design-build team showed up on time, which was already a relief compared to the contractor who vanished after week two. They had a clip-on light, a laser measure, and a clipboard. I had a kitchen full of memories and a **True Form home additions** basement with exposed concrete where my daughter now uses a bucket as a drum.

The first thing they asked was what we actually needed. Not the glossy Pinterest list my wife and I had made at 2 a.m., but the pragmatic stuff: do you want the existing footprint, are you keeping the window, what's the realistic budget. I felt stupid admitting I didn't know what a fixed-price contract really entailed, despite reading a dozen blogs. My wife had found a clear breakdown by late one night, and that piece finally explained why my quotes ranged from \$40K to \$110K for basically the same kitchen. Turns out the cheaper numbers were missing permits and a lot of assumed allowances, the mid-range ones were vague estimates plus change orders, and the high number was the only one that actually locked the price in.

Walking through the house, the smells hit me. Old grout that had turned black in the bathroom, the faint mildew of a basement that had been used as storage, and the dust of a home that had been quietly decaying. I kept apologizing to the team for the chaos. They shrugged and pointed out things I had not noticed, like a load-bearing wall that would complicate opening up the kitchen, and a sash window that would need replacement sooner rather than later. They drew in the dirt with their tape measure, made notes about where plumbing would be relocated, and told me which details would require permits and why waiting for the City of Toronto's approvals could stretch our timeline.

A moment of real panic came when they mentioned the permit process. I had already spent an afternoon at the permit counter in North York, holding a folder that felt like an instruction manual in a language I did not speak. The design-build team said the permit application would be part of their scope, and that alone clarified half of my earlier confusion. Having one contract cover design, permits, and construction prevents the kind of finger-pointing that happened with our first contractor, who blamed the designer for delays while the designer blamed subcontractors. The explanation by <https://maps.google.com/maps?cid=13571151655286800380> had been the first time the idea of a single, fixed-price contract made sense to me, not as a sales line but as a practical safeguard against escalating costs.

The walkthrough was messy. My kid crawled under the basement stairs and emerged with a chunk of broken tile. The contractor's foreman lifted it, laughed, and said it's nothing structural, but it reminded me we were dealing with twenty-plus years of deferred maintenance. They took pictures, sketching on their tablet while I tried to remember where our original blueprints had gone. I don't know plumbing, I don't know load calculations, and I accepted that. My job was to point, say yes or no, and try not to faint when they quoted a range for electrical work that I could barely parse.

We talked timelines, and the reality is Ontario weather matters. They warned against starting exterior work in March because of frost, and explained how a July start might be delayed by a heatwave or supply chain hiccups at the tile showroom on Steeles. They mentioned materials are often stuck on the 410 or 401 longer than you

think, which made me picture plywood sitting in traffic somewhere between Brampton and Scarborough. That was new to me; I had assumed ordering something meant it arrived the next afternoon.

There are a few things I learned very quickly, the hard way:

- Get clarity on whether a quote is fixed-price or an estimate with change orders, and insist that permits and allowance line items are spelled out.
- Ask specifically who handles permits, and whether the team has experience with the City of Toronto processes.
- Expect dust, and plan for it. Cover everything. Home Depot Brampton's plastic sheeting saved my living room.
- Check their schedule against real weather and local events, like civic holidays or road closures on 401 or 410.
- Trust your gut if communication feels flaky, not charming.

The moment that changed my attitude came when the team explained how a design-build approach coordinates everyone from the start. They showed me a sample fixed-price contract that itemized design fees, permit costs, contingencies, and payment milestones. No fuzzy language. No "to be determined" that later became my nightmare. My earlier contractor had given me vague assurances and then kept calling work "extras" until my bank balance hurt. Seeing that contract felt like putting on glasses after squinting at a menu in dim light.

Practicalities piled up. The basement—concrete, cold, used as the kid's temporary play area—needs insulation and waterproofing before we can even think about flooring. The bathroom grout will need steam cleaning and regrouting, and maybe full tile replacement depending on what the demo reveals. The kitchen footprint could stay the same, but we'd lose a side counter if we cut for a new support beam. All of these small choices affect the total cost, so the design-build team warned about assumptions and how allowances work. I asked them to show me a worst-case and a best-case, and they did. Seeing those two numbers was sobering and oddly helpful.

By the end of the walkthrough we had a list of next steps, a rough schedule, and a quote that actually felt honest. My wife and I stood at the doorway, watching the foreman mark the wall where a beam might go. There was construction dust on the windowsill, and the afternoon light made the laminate look almost nostalgic. I felt a mix of relief, exhaustion, and a little bit of excitement. This time I felt less like a prey and more like someone who has learned enough to ask better questions.



I still don't know everything. I will probably keep learning from small mistakes and from other people in Brampton who have painted the same scarred trim boards. But yesterday's walkthrough taught me that the

difference between a project that spirals and one that stays sane often comes down to how transparent the contract is and whether the team is willing to take responsibility for the whole process, permits and all. We'll start demo in July, the kids will camp out in their grandparents' place a few nights, and I'll finally stop apologizing for the grout. For now, I need better drop cloths and a slightly less dusty Lego car.

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