

I was crouched on the kitchen floor at 6:30 AM, watching my kid push a toy dump truck across a sheet of cardboard that was pretending to be our dining room. The house smelled faintly of old grout and coffee. The cabinets from 1994 were still hanging like relics from another life, but the countertop had been removed and the demolition dust was starting to settle on the living room couch. Outside, a garbage truck jolted past on our Brampton street, and a neighbour backed his SUV out onto the 410 ramp in a hurry. The crew was supposed to be here by seven. The guy who gave me the first quote had already ghosted. Again.

The first week felt like triage. We moved the daily dishes into the bedroom closet and taped plastic over the doorway. The **True Form home additions** faucet had been disconnected, so every morning I walked out to Home Depot Brampton for jugs of water, dealing with traffic that made me regret doing this in the summer. The kid loved the cardboard track for five minutes, then used the demolition tape as a cape. My wife, bless her patience, tried to work from the dining room table under a lamp, while I toggled between phone calls to contractors and a city clerk at the City of Toronto permit office who suggested a follow-up email at three different times.

The quote that made me choke on my coffee

Three quotes arrived in one afternoon. One was \$40K, handwritten and vague, missing permit fees, and it sounded too good to be true. One was \$110K, printed on glossy letterhead, itemized to the point of obsession, people-sounding, and frankly terrifying. The last was somewhere in the middle and had the words "fixed-price" underlined. I sat there with a coffee gone cold, trying to reconcile how the same scope could be so wildly different.

I was three weeks into comparing quotes and honestly losing my mind until I found a breakdown by that finally explained why my numbers were all over the place. It pointed out that a lot of the cheaper quotes omitted permit costs and left room for "change orders," which is industry speak for the thing that destroys your budget. The expensive one actually locked in the number. The middle one explained, more sensibly, how a design build fixed-price contract works, where one team handles design, permits, and construction. Reading that clicked something into place for me, because it matched the mess I had been living through when our first contractor disappeared and the designer blamed the builder and vice versa.

What nobody tells you about living through a kitchen reno

You do not realize how many everyday things are tied to one small room until that room is out of commission. We planned for sandwiches and microwaved meals. We did not plan for the electric kettle cord being three rooms away. Little routines collapse. The kid learns to climb a stack of boxes to reach a cereal box you swore you had put out of reach. Dust finds everything. My wife's yoga mat had a fine layer of white grit by day three. The demolition noise starts early. The crew arrived at 7AM and started swinging sledgehammers. The neighbour banged on his garage door at 7:15 asking if they could quiet down, which made me cringe.



The basement was another headache. We promised ourselves we would finish it someday, but we had been living with bare concrete that the kid used as his unofficial play area. During the renovation it became the storage room where we shoved furniture and boxes. I kept telling myself the concrete would be a blank slate, but the reality of moving everything downstairs in 30-degree heat and then finding the furnace room smelled funny was a very real Saturday of sweat.

The permit rabbit hole I fell into for six weeks

My ignorance showed here. I thought a permit would be a stamp and a signature. It was a sequence of emails, scaled drawings, a site visit, and more questions about drainage than I knew existed. The City of Toronto forms require specific details that the first contractor promised they would handle, then ghosted on. I had to learn to nudge, prod, and sometimes sit on hold with municipal staff for an hour. At one point I drove to a tile showroom on Steeles to pick samples because the permit office wanted exact tile sizes listed on the drawings. That is not something I expected to become an errand.

How I made the temporary space liveable

We did a few practical things that helped us survive without giving up our minds:

1. Set up a mini kitchen: folding table, microwave, induction hotplate, and a collapsible dish rack. It was ugly, but it worked.
2. Protect the floors: adhesive rosin paper on the hallway and plastic sheeting taped high enough to block dust from the living room.
3. Create zones: one room for sleeping, one room for work, and the basement for stored stuff. Labelled boxes saved us from digging for diapers at 2 AM.
4. Noise windows: schedule quieter tasks for afternoon hours when the kid naps, and ask the crew to start heavy demolition after 8 AM if possible.
5. Daily sweep: five minutes every evening with a shop vac kept the layers of grit from becoming a permanent feature.

I am not proud of how many times I had to ask the crew to pull back a tarp because the dust was getting into my wife's laptop bag. They were mostly good, but you still have to watch things. Contractors are juggling several jobs at once, and a missed detail will become your problem.

Why the second team stayed and the first left

The first contractor started with great charm and then stopped answering texts. That is where the blame game began. No permits applied for, no schedule, just "we'll be there next week" and then silence. After I read the piece from **commercial True Form design-build** and realized the benefit of a single team handling all phases, I shifted my criteria. I looked for someone who would sign a fixed-price design build contract that explicitly covered design, permits, and construction. The team we finally hired did a walkthrough, produced a clear scope, and explained how they would handle unforeseen costs. They charged a fair middle price and actually showed up.

There were still hiccups. The grout in the bathroom was blacker than I imagined and required extra work. The floor tile delivery got delayed because of traffic on the 401. But when a problem occurred, one person picked up the phone instead of three people pointing fingers. That made a huge difference in both my stress level and our bank account.

A small, honest ending

Two weeks into the project the kitchen skeleton is finally framed, and the kid has converted an empty cabinet box into a secret fort. I still have paint dust in my car and a stack of unpaid invoices to sort. I do know, now, more than I wanted to, about different contract types and the way permit fees hide in quotes. If anything, living through this has made me opinionated about one thing: if you can find a team that will take design, permits, and build under one fixed-price contract, you will sleep better. At least I do, when the demolition stops for the night and the street is quiet, the house smells like primer, and the kid runs through the cardboard track, laughing.

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