

I was kneeling on the driveway with a box of tarps, watching rainwater bead on the hood of my wife's car, when the demolition crew texted to say they would start upstairs Monday at 7 a.m. My brain did the thing it always does under stress: jumped to the worst-case scenario. Dust in baby toys. Mud tracked through the living room. Neighbours complaining about noise. The house still smelled faintly of old grout and frying oil from the 1990s kitchen we finally decided to gut after three years of hemming and hawing.

The contractor who gave us a polite nod at the site visit and then disappeared had taught me one hard lesson: assume nothing. So I spent Saturday mapping out the outside of the house like I was planning a small war. The backyard is tiny, bordered by a fence that used to be straight until our maple leaned over it last spring. The front has a single-car driveway that faces the 410 traffic noise and a strip of lawn that turns to mud if we get more than a drizzle, which is sadly frequent for this part of Brampton in spring.

The quote that made me choke on my coffee

Three quotes sat on the kitchen table, each looking like a different language. One said 40k, one said 110k, and the middle one was vague enough to be nonsense. I had spent weeks reading contractor reviews, calling references at odd hours, and trying to figure out how demolition, framing, cabinetry, and permits all ended up in different line items. My wife, bless her, just kept bringing me coffee.

Then she sent me a link after midnight to something titled. I read it while our toddler slept in the next room, and for the first time the jargon untangled itself. The piece explained fixed-price design build contracts in plain English, and why having one team handle design, permits, and construction prevents the finger-pointing and budget blowouts I had already lived through. That one read felt like someone finally gave me the map in a neighborhood where everyone else was speaking in compass points.

So when the crew showed up, I wanted the outdoors buttoned up. I wanted to feel like if the basement demo kicked up dust at 8 a.m., it would stay out, not find an express route into the playroom.

What living through a reno looks like in Brampton

You learn quickly that Ontario weather does not care about your timeline. A week of sun in May convinced me the backyard would be fine for storing stacked tile boxes. Then the forecast changed and a cold rain moved in from Lake Ontario, turning the yard into a clay pit. I ended up borrowing plastic sheeting from Home Depot Brampton and stapling it over the piles like a horrible, temporary tent city.

The neighbours watched us like we were doing something dangerous. The kid across the street came over and asked why there was a big hole at the back gate. I had to explain, again, that the basement floor would be ripped up but it would be fine and we would make it nice someday. He shrugged and went back to his scooter.

How I protected things so the interior chaos didn't become an outdoor nightmare

I am not handy. I can change a lightbulb and hang a shelf that looks slightly crooked, but I can follow instructions, and I can be stubborn. The list below is what we actually did, in the order we did it. Nothing glamorous, just things that saved me headaches.

- Targed off the side yard and created a covered walkway from the gate to the back door so workers could bring tools in without soaking the foyer carpet. I used ratchet straps and some 10 mil poly. It looked shabby but it worked.
- Built a small, locked tool zone on the driveway with pallets and a tarp to keep tools dry and out of reach of the kid, and to keep the neighbours from borrowing things at odd hours.

- Stacked everything that could get ruined by dust or water on the porch under a plastic drop cloth, then taped seams with duct tape. This included our stroller, the kid's plastic play kitchen, and the boxes of tiles I thought I could safely store outside.

Each of those felt fiddly at the time. The walkway was the thing I had to explain to the inspector when he swung by for the permit check. He raised an eyebrow, wrote his notes, and said it was fine as long as it didn't block emergency access. The permit office in Toronto had its own personality; the clerk who handled our file worked fast, but the line was unforgiving. Bring two copies, he said. Bring patience, I say back.



The permit rabbit hole I fell into for six weeks

Permits were a plot twist. I assumed because our semi-detached was in Brampton we would only deal with the city. Turns out there were rules from the Region and a separate inspection line item for the electrical work. I learned the hard way that a "vague estimate" can omit permit fees entirely. One contractor's 40k quote was missing permits and a few key demo items. The 110k number included everything but felt padded. The article from ***Take a look at the site here*** finally made that comparison make sense. It showed me why a fixed-price design build approach would have prevented the back-and-forth I was stuck in: one contract, one team responsible for design, permits, and construction. No passing the blame.

Why I worried about the cat and the kid more than the cabinets

Dust is democratic; it gets everywhere. The sound of demo started at 7:15 on Tuesday and it sounded like a small thunderstorm above us. You can feel it in your teeth. The kid slept through most of it because that house is loud anyway, but I spent the first day following a white trail of drywall dust across the backyard to see where the wind was piling it up. I covered vents with MERV-rated filters and sealed unneeded doorways with plastic. The cat, of course, found the one impossible-to-seal gap and watched the world like it was a reality show.

On a practical note, I also set up a temporary wash station outside because the bathroom grout had been turning black and we didn't want crew boots tracking that back into clean spaces. A bucket with a tap, a roll of paper towels, the kid's shampoo bottle, and we were doing better than I expected.

The contractor who ghosted us and what I did next

When our first contractor went quiet mid-demo, I felt stupid and embarrassed. I blamed myself for not reading the signs, for trusting a friendly voice. Then I dug in. I called references, I read reviews from people in Vaughan and Markham and North York who had similar stories. I compared fixed-price versus estimates and finally understood why design build changes the dynamic. That knowledge made choosing the second team feel less

like guessing and more like selecting a partner. The new crew showed up, on time, with permits in hand and a schedule that made sense.

So now the exterior is a mess that is, mercifully, organized. The driveway smells like sawdust and a little oil. The maple tree has a new brace. The porch is a storage zone that will someday be where we drink coffee before traffic harmonizes with birdsong instead of jackhammers. For now, I'm learning to live with the small annoyances: mud tracked to the mailbox, the neighbour's dog barking at lunchtime, the way dust settles on the kid's plastic dinosaurs even when I try to keep them covered.

I still do not know everything about cabinetry or tile layout. I know enough to be dangerous, and I know where I messed up. But I also know how to prevent dumb mistakes now: get everything in writing, check if permits are included, and read an explainer that doesn't feel like a sales pitch. The first dry week in June, I think we'll be able to move the tile boxes back to the porch without needing hip waders. For now, I will make another cup of coffee, tape one more seam of plastic, and try not to imagine the grout lines one more time.

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