



~~Designing Your Denver Backyard Guesthouse~~

*The Denver ADU Minefield*

Seven flaws in homeowner assumptions and the rigorous engineering required to build in 2026.

# The cost of underestimation in Denver.

*DELUSIONAL*

*It's basically a big shed, we'll be done by Thanksgiving.*

*SCOPE CREEP*

*Reality: An average overrun of 20% to 30%.*

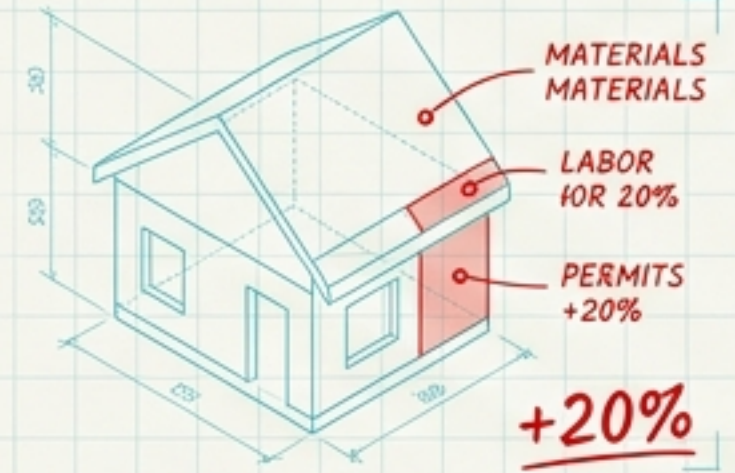
*UNFORESEEN CONDITIONS*

The homeowners who **finish on time and on budget** decide **every detail** before a single shovel hits the dirt. ✓

✓ *Approved* APPROVED

## +\$40,000

Average budget overrun on a standard build.



## +\$44K to +\$66K

The actual cost penalty on a baseline \$220,000 project.

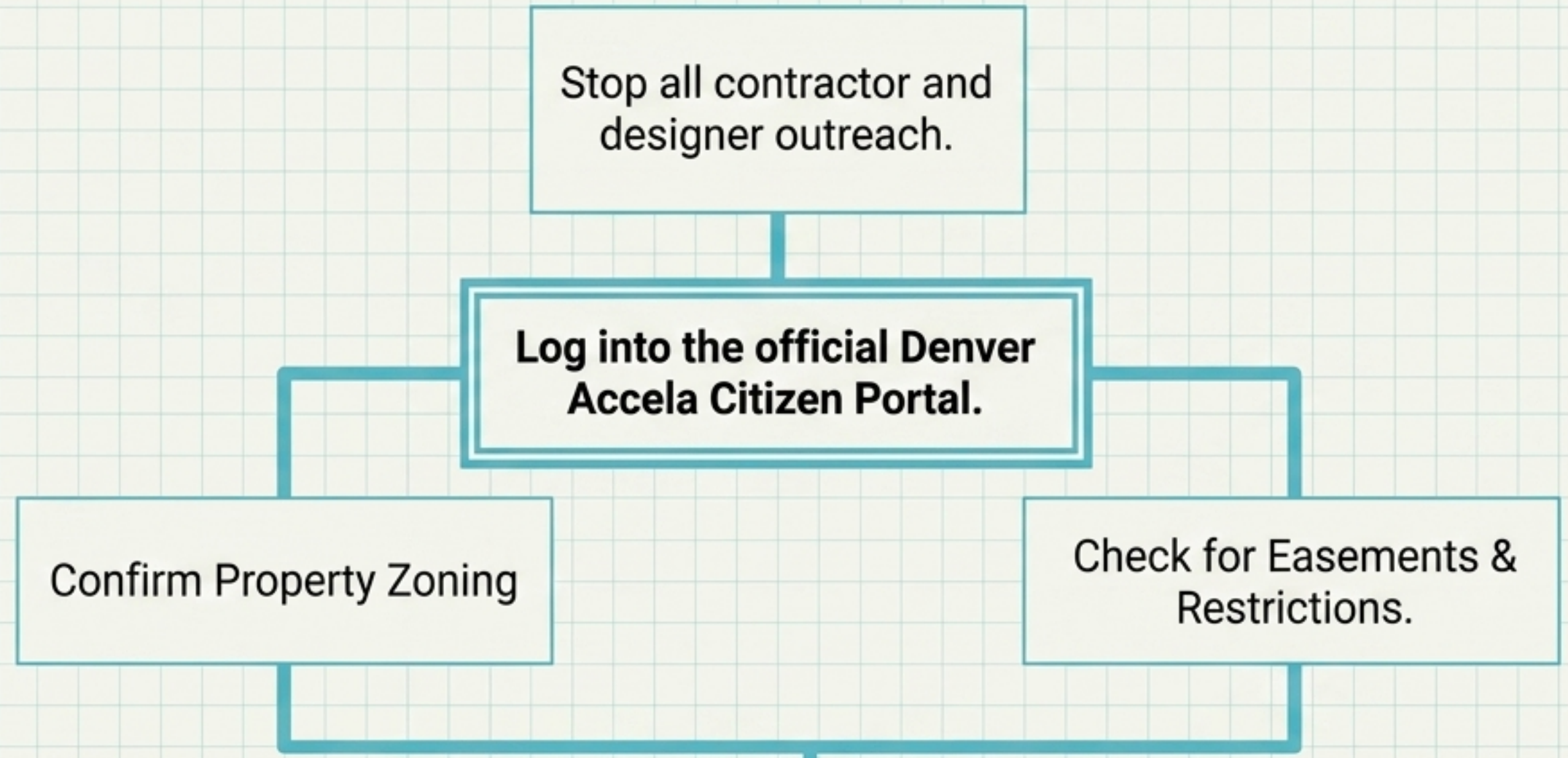


## +8 Weeks

Average schedule delay from initial contractor estimates.



# Ten minutes here saves ten thousand dollars in wasted design fees.



**Skipping this step** and **relying on assumptions** often results in fully drafted plans that are **entirely unbuildable under 2026 Denver zoning codes.**

*Do not proceed to design without Accela clearance.*

# Deconstructing the seven predictable failures.



## The Money

Quotes, baseline estimates, contingencies, and hidden utility fees.



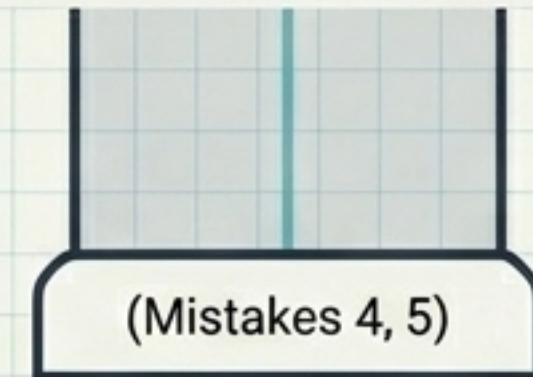
## The Dirt

Expansive bentonite soil mechanics and extreme freeze-thaw climates.



## The Paper

Vague homeowner scopes and DIY permitting bottlenecks.



# Baseline expectations for a 2026 Denver build.

*Higher costs are the new normal!*

Rising skilled trade wages (Denver-Aurora-Lakewood MSA 2025 data) and fixed costs (kitchens/baths) make ADU per-square-foot costs higher than primary residences.

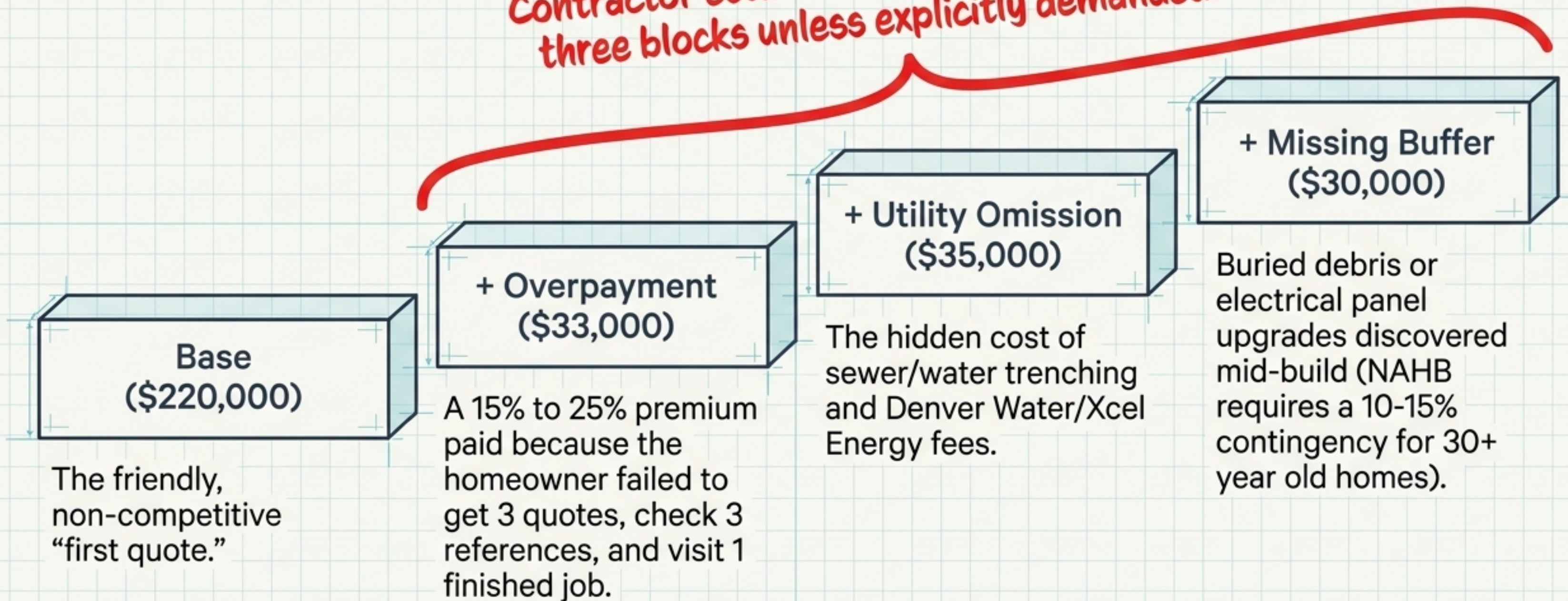
## The Denver ADU Project Spectrum

Platt Park Studio	Highland Carriage House	Berkeley Bungalow
480 sq. ft. ← <i>Small does not equal cheap</i>	550 sq. ft.	650 sq. ft.
Straightforward rectangular build, standard finishes (rental focus).	Second-story unit over new garage, significant structural engineering.	Slab-on-grade, high-end finishes, vaulted ceilings, custom cabinetry.
<b>\$215,000</b>	<b>\$235,000</b>	<b>\$260,000</b>

# How a \$220,000 quote cascades into a \$318,000 final cost.

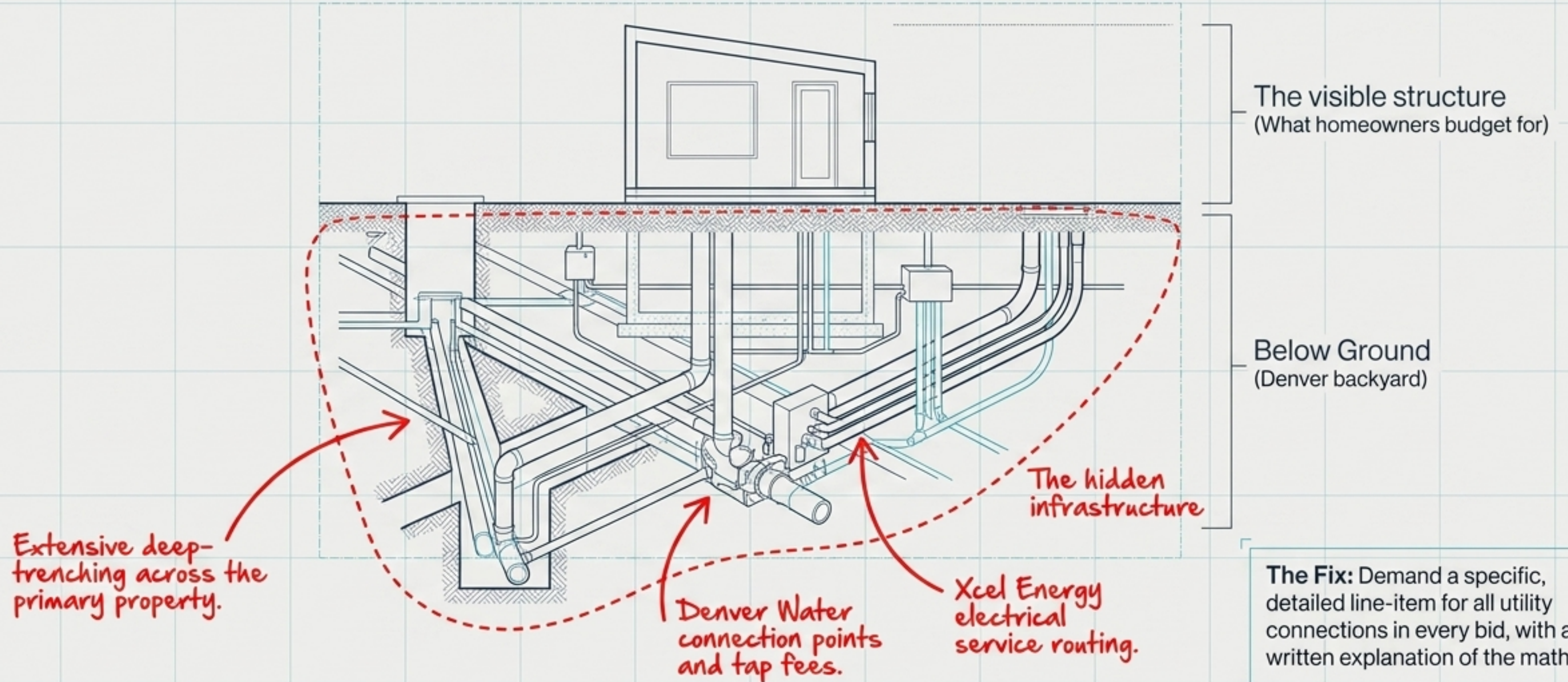
## Budget Waterfall

*Contractor estimates rarely include the top three blocks unless explicitly demanded.*



# The \$35,000 afterthought buried in your backyard.

The Underground Wealth Diagram



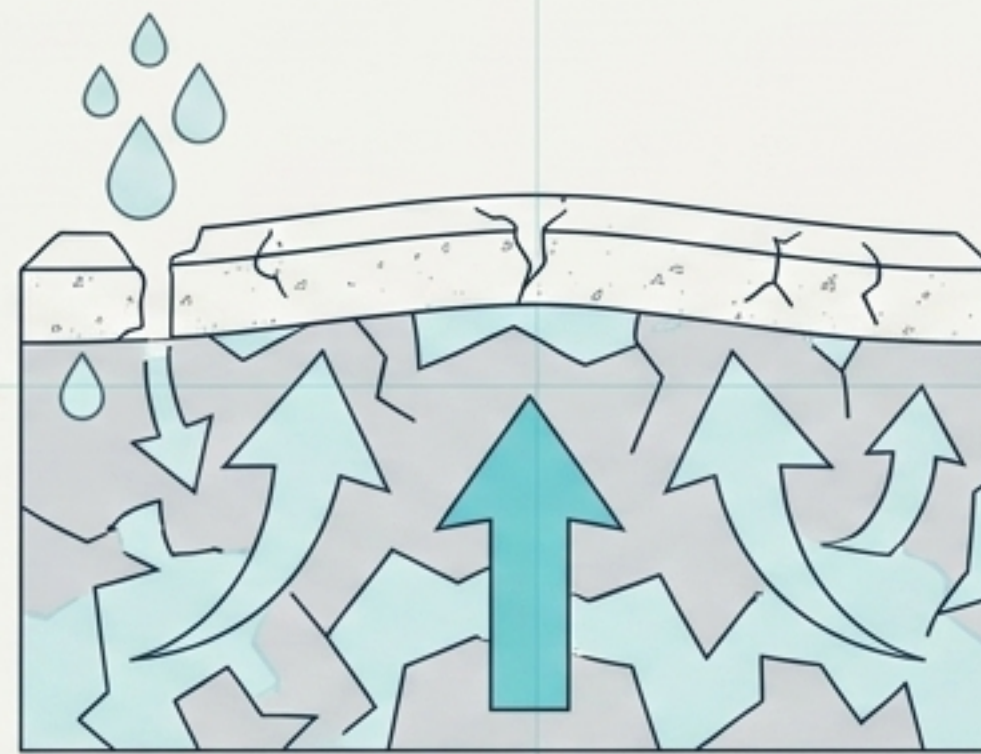
# Engineering for expansive clay and high-altitude radiation.

## The Bentonite Swell Mechanism



Standard Soil

Not applicable  
in Denver



Bentonite Clay

**The Fix:** Mandatory geotechnical soil report and custom-engineered foundation.

### Climate Callout Box

**Threat:** Intense freeze-thaw cycles and high-altitude UV radiation.

**Effect:** Shreds cheap siding and paint within 5 to 7 years.

**The Fix:** Specify climate-grade materials like James Hardie ColorPlus siding and Benjamin Moore Aura Exterior acrylic latex.

# Vague language is an open invitation for expensive change orders.

## Anatomy of a Bulletproof Scope

### Homeowner Scope

- Install kitchen cabinets.
- Tile bathroom floor.

**Result:** Contractor installs the cheapest compliant option; every homeowner request becomes a surcharge.

### Pro Scope - Approved

- Install [Make/Model] faucet.
- Grout color: [Specific hex/name].
- Waterproofing: Schluter system model #[Number].
- Insulation: Minimum R-value of [X].

**Takeaway:** Specify everything before signing the contract.

# The bureaucratic friction from design to occupancy.

~~The Myth: Contractor says we'll be done in 6 months.~~

## The Schedule Reality (9 to 14 Months)

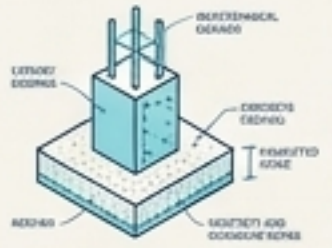




**The Fix:** Hire a design-build firm or contractor with an in-house permit specialist who has established relationships with city officials (from Sloan's Lake to Washington Park). DIY permitting is a path to expensive delays.

# The Meta-Mistake: An ADU is not a kitchen remodel.

The homeowners who succeed treat the project exactly like building a new 3,000 sq. ft. home, just scaled down. Pre-construction planning turns the build into an assembly process, not a series of discoveries.

## The Mindset Matrix

	<del>The Remodel Mindset</del>	The Custom Home Mindset
<b>Foundation</b>	<del>Existing structure.</del> UNSTABLE CRACKS? OLD CODE	Geotechnical engineering & engineered concrete. 
<b>Systems Complexity</b>	<del>Tapping into existing lines.</del> OVERLOADED NO CAPACITY LEAKS!	Dedicated sewer line, new electrical service, independent HVAC. 
<b>Code Rigor</b>	<del>Interior inspections.</del> FAILED PERMIT REJECTED RED TAGS	Full structural, energy efficiency, and safety code compliance. 
<b>Planning Rigor</b>	<del>Figure out finishes later.</del> CHANGE ORDERS DELAYS OVER BUDGET!	Painfully specific scope executed before shovels hit the ground. 