

The True Cost of Building an ADU in San Diego

A 2026 Homeowner's Ledger to Navigating Estimates, Overruns, and Hidden Fees

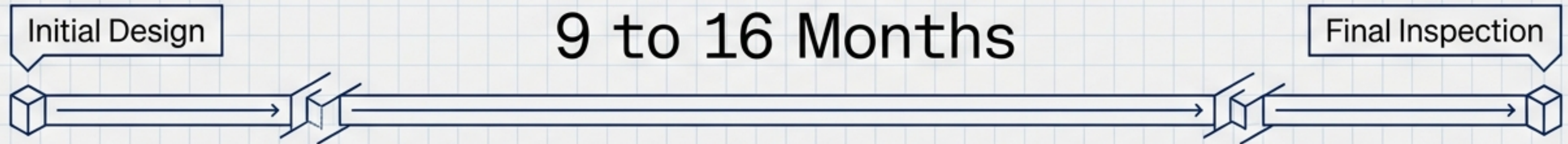
The Myth

ADUs start at \$120,000.

Only applies to internal garage/basement conversions utilizing existing foundations and utility access.

The 2026 Reality

- Total Cost Range: \$180,000 to \$750,000+ for new detached construction.
- **Median Mid-Range Project: \$325,000 to \$450,000** (600–800 sq. ft. unit).

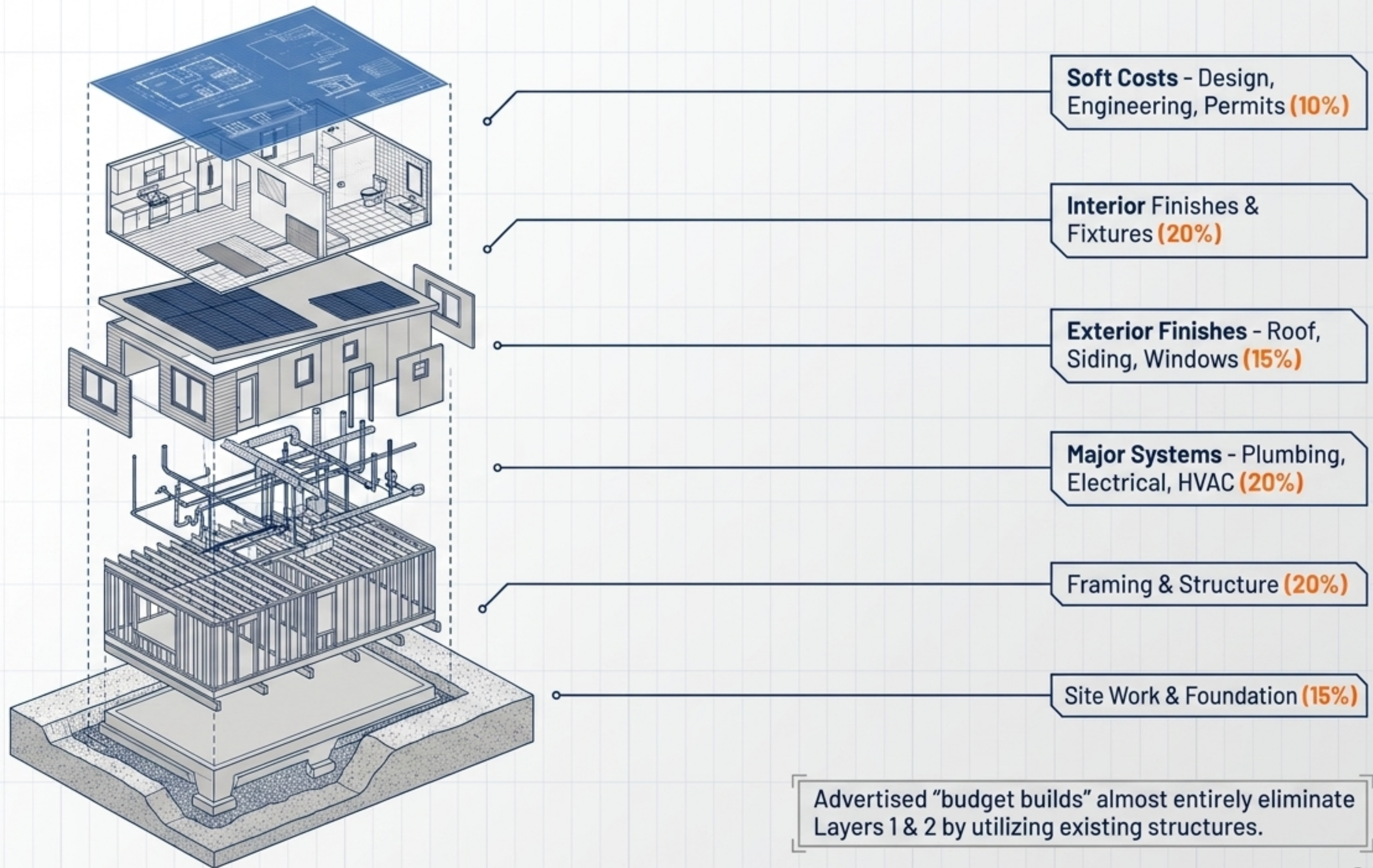


Biggest Surprise Cost: Utility trenching (\$15k–\$30k)

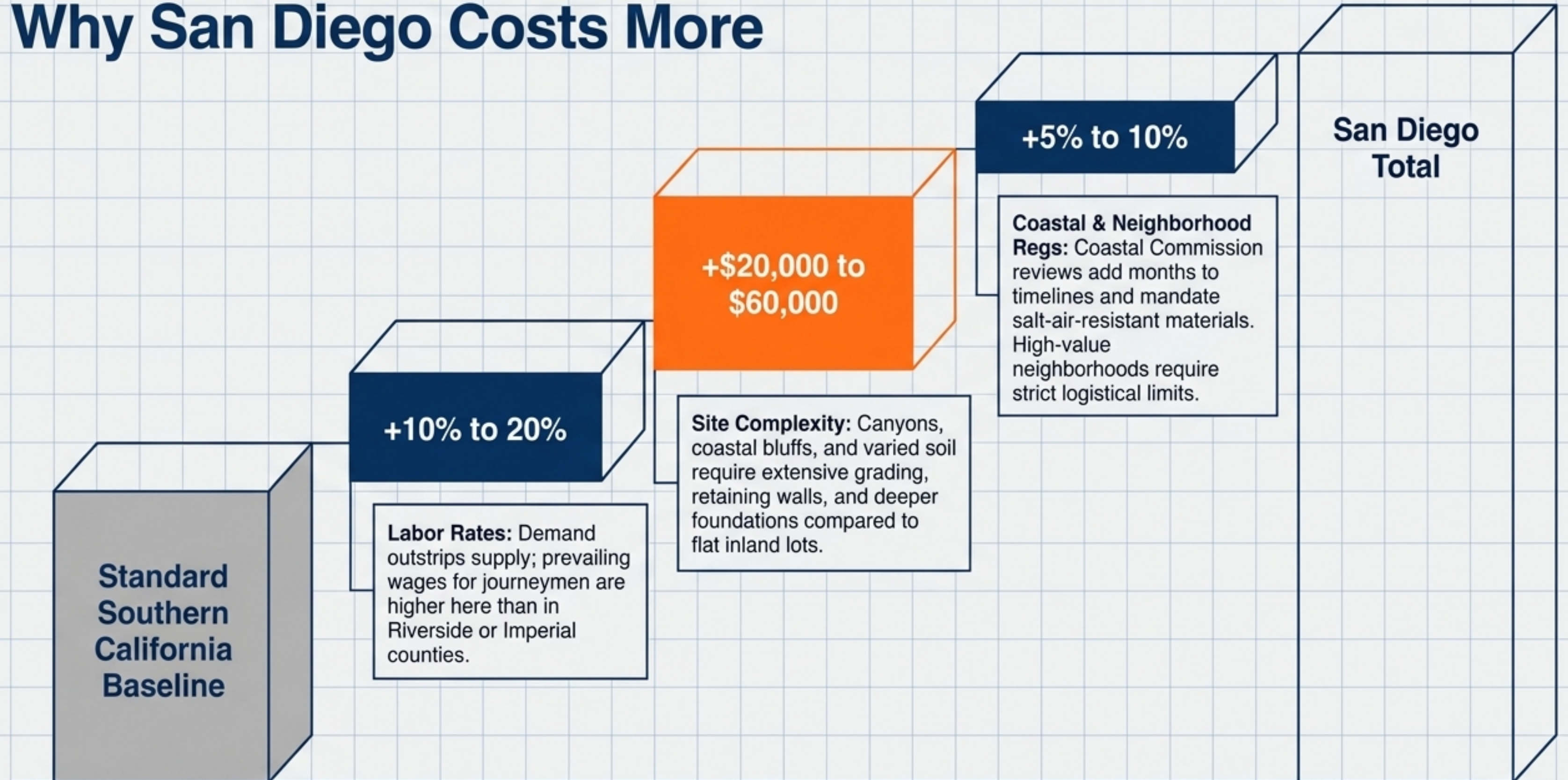
Project Scope Dictates the Baseline Cost Tier

Tier	Size (sq. ft.)	Cost per Sq. Ft.	Total Cost Range
Basic	400 - 600 sq. ft.	\$375 - \$450	\$180,000 - \$250,000
Mid-Range	600 - 800 sq. ft.	\$475 - \$575	\$325,000 - \$450,000
Premium	800 - 1,200 sq. ft.	\$600 - \$700+	\$500,000 - \$750,000+

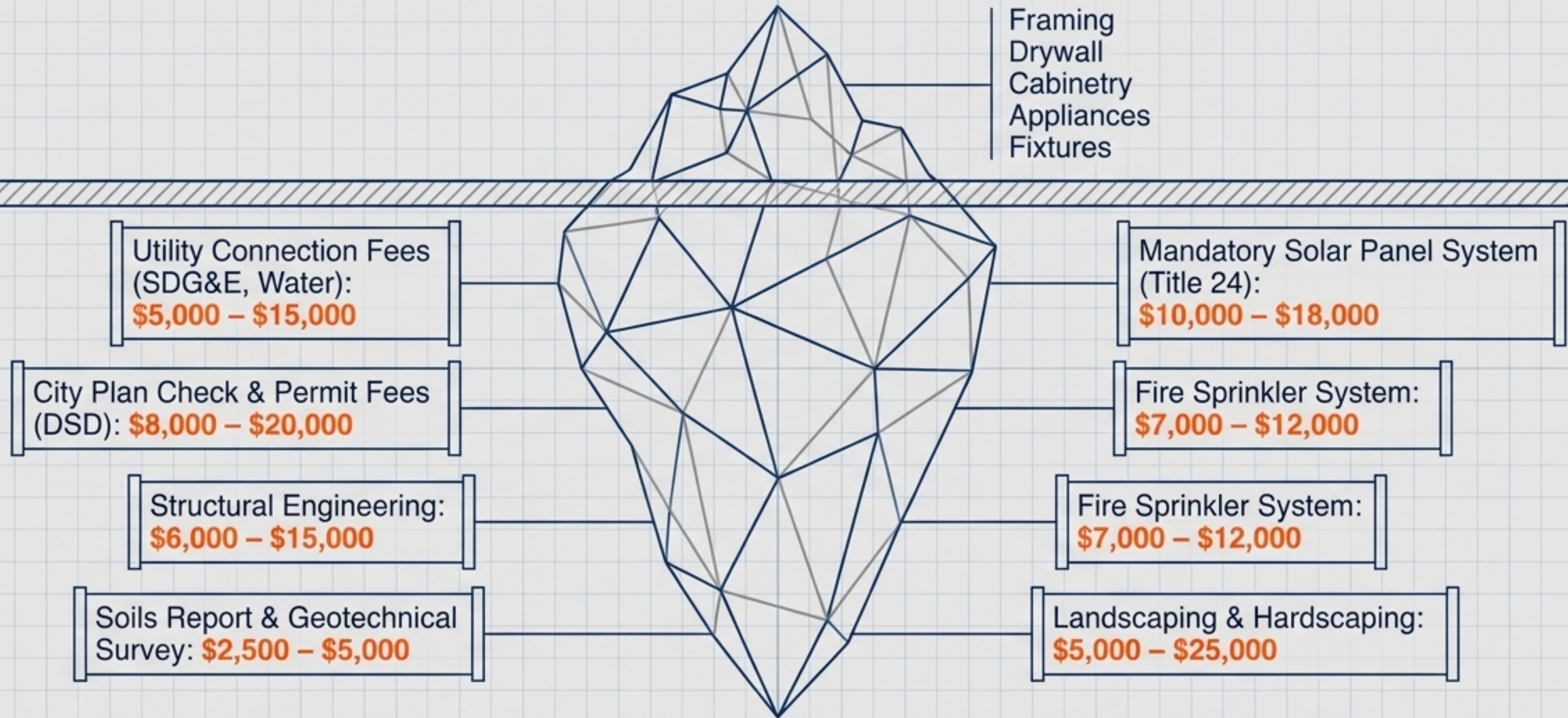
Total cost is a direct function of size, site complexity, and finish quality.



The Geography Premium: Why San Diego Costs More



The Hidden Cost Iceberg



Architectural Ledger

The **Trenching Surprise**: Connecting new sewer/water lines across a property can add **\$15,000** to **\$30,000** alone.

2026 Real-World Project Benchmarks



Clairemont (The Conversion)

Type: 400 sq. ft. Studio Garage Conversion.

Challenges: Reinforcing existing foundation.

Finishes: Builder-grade, mini-split HVAC.

Final All-In Cost:
\$145,000



North Park (The Median)

Type: 650 sq. ft. Detached 1-Bedroom.

Challenges: 40 feet of trenching for new sewer/water.

Finishes: Mid-range (Quartz, LVP).

Final All-In Cost:
\$360,000



Carlsbad (The Premium)

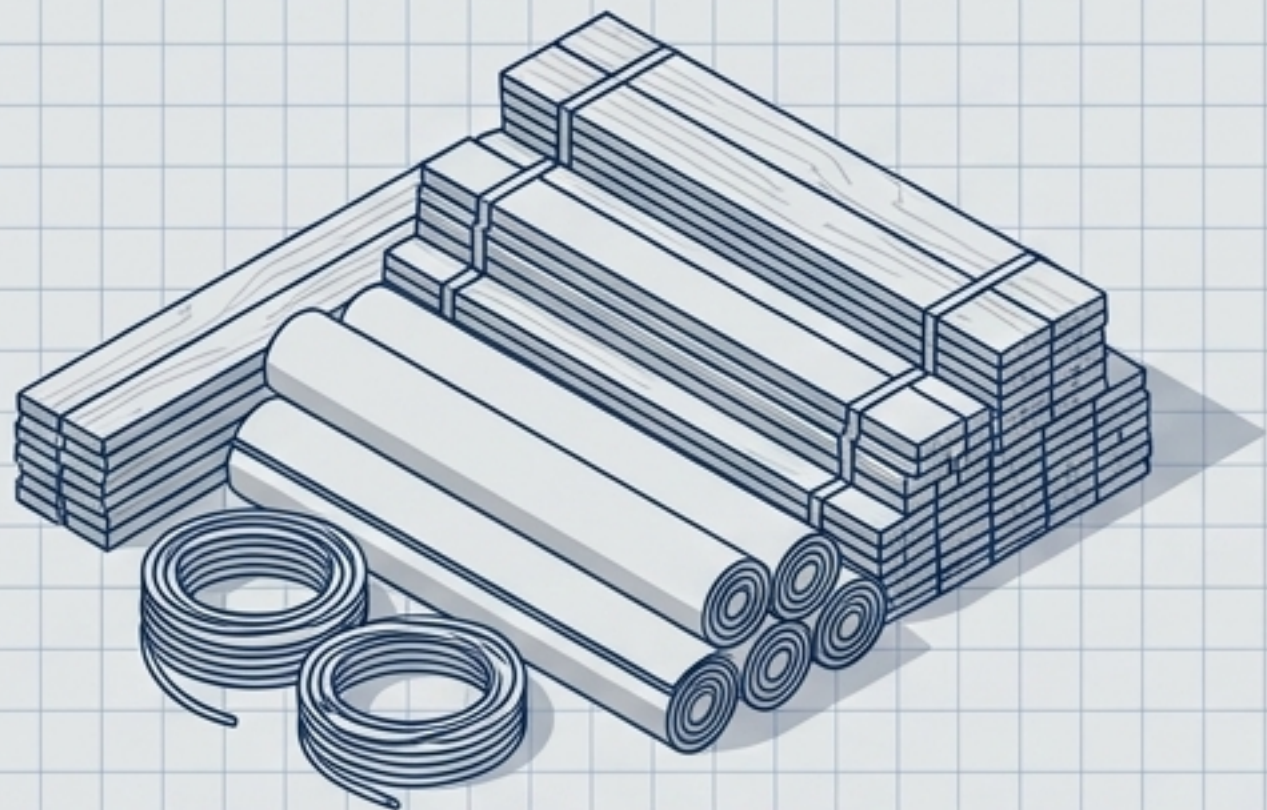
Type: 1,100 sq. ft. Two-Story over New Garage.

Challenges: Sloped lot requiring stepped foundation; extensive engineering.

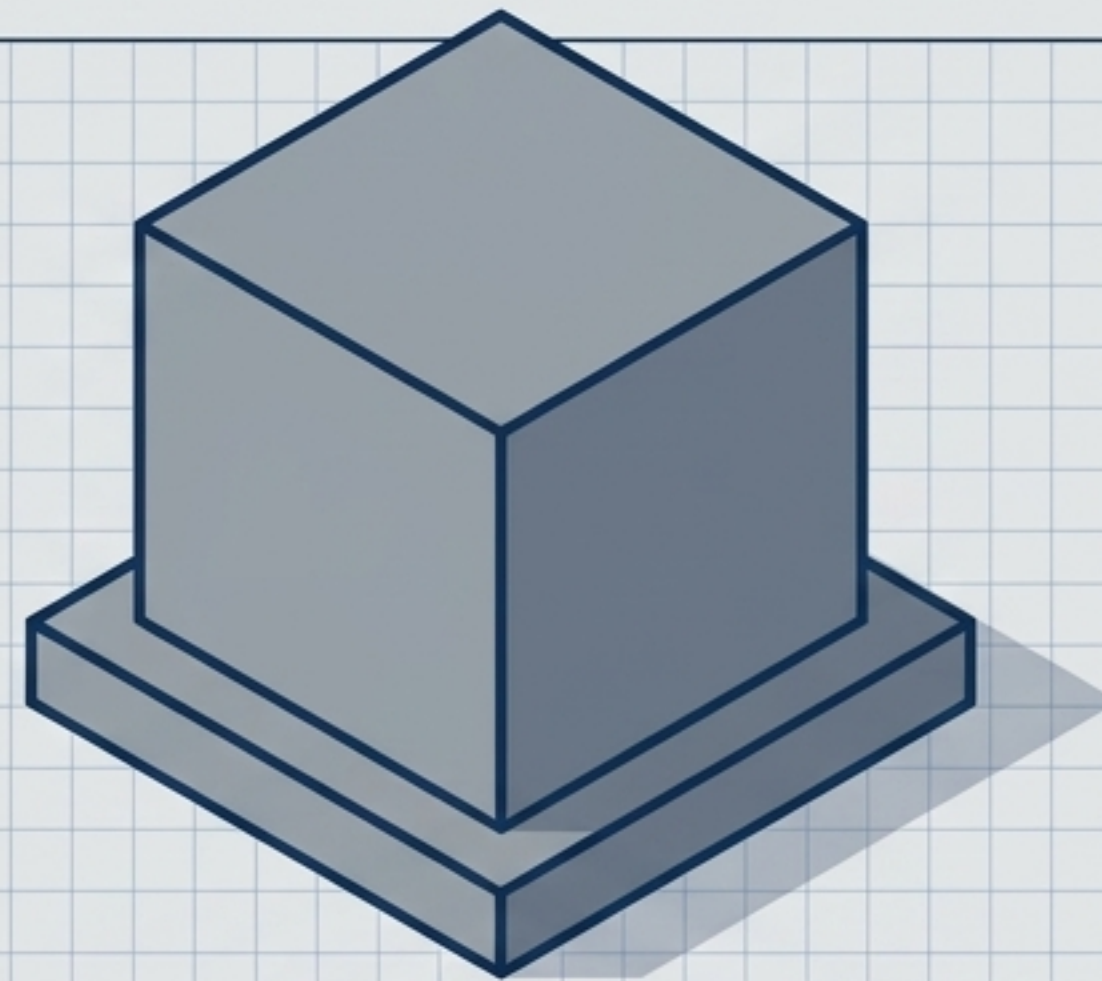
Finishes: Premium (Custom cabinets, bifold doors, solar array).

Final All-In Cost:
\$680,000

The Cost-Per-Square-Foot Fallacy



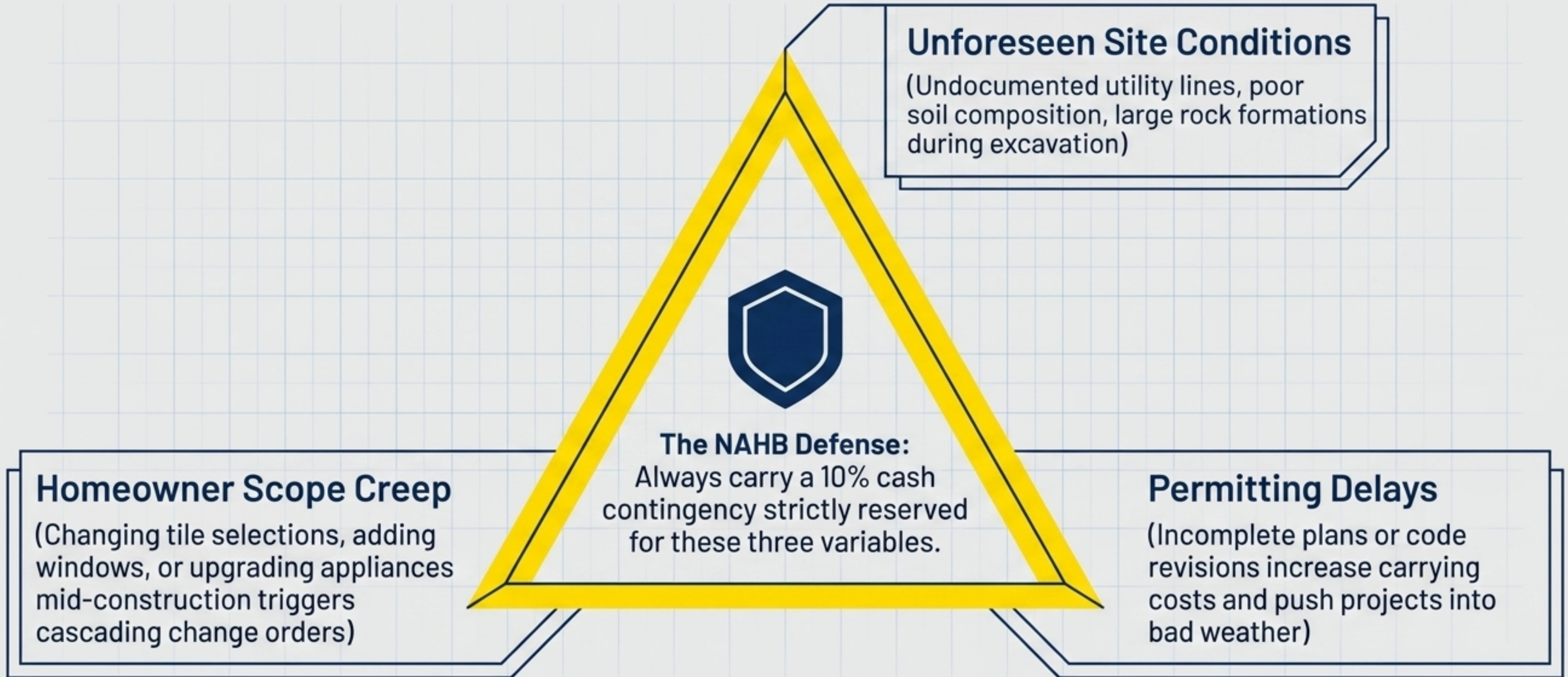
Variable Costs scale with size. A 400 sq. ft. unit uses half the flooring of an 800 sq. ft. unit.



Fixed Costs do not scale. Soft costs (design, engineering, permits) remain ~\$40,000. Utility hookups remain ~\$25,000. That is \$65,000 incurred regardless of unit size.

The Renology Take: Homeowners wrongly anchor to a flat \$500/sq. ft. metric. Because **massive fixed costs** are distributed over less area, smaller ADUs will always have a **disproportionately higher cost per square foot**.

The Anatomy of a Budget Blowout



The Ironclad Quote Checklist

The Amateur Quote (Red Flags)

- Generic 'allowances' for finishes.
- Excludes or vague on utility trenching.
- Excludes city plan check and permit fees.
- Loose timelines without milestones.

The Ironclad 2026 Quote (Mandatory Inclusions)

- Fixed-price soft costs (**All design, engineering, architecture**).
- Specified material model numbers for all fixtures.
- Explicit site preparation limits (**demolition, grading, concrete/rebar specs**).
- All HVAC, electrical, and plumbing explicitly **including trenching distances**.
- Project timeline tied to financial milestones.

Data Sources & 2026 Methodology

- California Department of Industrial Relations: Prevailing Wage Determinations (2026)
- City of San Diego Development Services Department: Permit Fee Schedule (2026)
- Remodeling Magazine: Cost vs. Value Report (2026)

- National Association of Home Builders (NAHB): Construction Cost Survey (Q4 2025)
- Zillow Rental Market Trends: San Diego Metro (Q1 2026)
- Renology Project of the Day (POTD) Network: San Diego Aggregate Data (2023–2026)

