

Chapter 07: The Design Center Guide

The design center is where budgets die. Which upgrades to buy from the builder, which to do later, and which to skip.

LEVEL 2 · UNDER CONTRACT · CHAPTER 07 OF 16

07. The Design Center Guide

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How the design center works

After contract, you'll select finishes in a showroom where everything is beautiful and nothing has a visible price until asked. Design center revenue is high-margin for builders, and appointments are often time-boxed in a way that discourages comparison shopping. Go in with a written budget and a list — decided before you walk in, with a hard ceiling.

Buy from the builder: things in the walls and slab

Anything structural or buried is worth builder pricing even at a premium, because retrofitting later costs multiples: extra windows, doors, and structural options; rough-in plumbing for a future bath or outdoor kitchen; extra electrical circuits, recessed can locations, and media conduit; higher ceilings; covered patio extensions; insulation upgrades. If it requires opening walls or pouring concrete later, buy it now.

Usually cheaper later

Ceiling fans and most light fixtures, window coverings, closet systems, backsplashes, interior paint colors, garage storage and epoxy floors, water softeners, and most landscaping. These are commodity items with competitive local markets; the builder's markup buys convenience, not value.

The judgment calls

Flooring: builder upgrades are marked up, but replacing floors later means living through demolition — many buyers pay for the main-level flooring they want and defer bedrooms. Countertops and cabinets: expensive either way; changing them later is disruptive enough that upgrading the kitchen now often makes sense. Appliances: builder packages are usually convenience-priced; compare against retail before assuming.

Resale discipline

Neutral, mid-tier upgrades in kitchens, primary baths, and flooring hold value. Highly personal choices — bold tile, niche layouts, single-purpose rooms — rarely return their cost. The resale question for every line item: would the next buyer pay more for this, or just tolerate it?

Reporting note: Ask for the design center price list before your appointment. Some builders resist; persistence is worthwhile. Pricing surprises are the design center's most reliable product.