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THE INDEPENDENT GUIDE TO NEW CONSTRUCTION · AUSTIN, TX

Under Contract

Volume 2 of 3 · Chapters 6–10 of the Playbook.

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What’s Inside

Level 2 — Under Contract

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06. Construction Timeline

From dirt to keys: what happens at each stage, how long it really takes, and where the process most often slips.

The honest timeline

Builders quote optimistic schedules. A production home typically takes six to nine months from permit to closing; weather, inspections, labor, and materials can stretch any stage. Plan your lease, sale, and move around a range, not a date — and never schedule movers off a verbal estimate.

Stage by stage

Pre-construction (2–8 weeks): permits, final selections, and the pre-construction meeting where you confirm every structural choice. Errors are free to fix now and expensive later — bring your paperwork and check it line by line.

Foundation (2–4 weeks): forms, plumbing rough-in beneath the slab, and the pour. In Central Texas clay soils, ask what soil testing and foundation engineering was done for your specific lot.

Framing (3–6 weeks): the skeleton goes up fast and progress feels dramatic. Walk it if allowed — this is when you verify room dimensions and window placements match the plan.

Mechanicals and pre-drywall (3–5 weeks): plumbing, electrical, and HVAC are installed. The pre-drywall walkthrough is the single most important visit of the build: it's your only chance to see inside the walls. This is also the moment for a third-party pre-drywall inspection (Chapter 9).

Drywall through finishes (6–10 weeks): insulation, drywall, texture, paint, cabinets, counters, flooring, fixtures. Selections errors surface here — check installed items against your signed selection sheets while correction is still simple.

Final stretch (2–4 weeks): appliances, final grade and sod, punch-out work, the builder's quality inspection, your orientation walkthrough, and the blue-tape list. Then closing.

Where it slips

The most common delays: permit backlogs before ground ever breaks, weather during foundation and framing, and labor scheduling in the finish trades. A good builder communicates slips early. Radio silence followed by a suddenly moved closing date is a warning sign worth escalating politely and in writing.

> Reporting note: Keep every selection sheet, change order, and email in one folder from day one. Nearly every construction dispute comes down to whose paperwork is better — make sure it's yours.

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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.

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.

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08. Hidden Costs Nobody Talks About

The sticker price on a home works exactly like the sticker price on a car — what you actually pay to drive it off the lot is a different number.

The car-lot number isn't the out-the-door number

A car's sticker price doesn't include tax, title, or the accessories you'll actually want. A new home's advertised price works the same way — it's the price of the house with bare windows, no fence, sod and nothing else in the yard, and a tax bill that hasn't caught up yet. None of that is hidden on purpose. It's just not included, and builders aren't the ones who tell you what it adds up to.

What's Not in the Price	Typical Cost	Why It's Not Included
Window coverings	Several thousand for a whole house	Homes come with bare glass by default.
Fencing	Low four figures for a typical yard	Many builders fence none or only part of the lot.
Landscaping beyond sod	Varies — some HOAs set a deadline	Builders deliver sod and a minimal front bed only.
Refrigerator, washer/dryer	Varies by brand and size	Standard exclusion on most product lines.
Year-two tax jump	Ask the title company to model it	Year one is often assessed on the lot alone.
HOA start-up fee	Flat fee or a % of price, at closing	Capitalization or “community enhancement” fees, buried in the documents.
Utility deposits	Small each, adds up together	Electric, water, trash, internet setup.

The number to actually budget

Add it up and a low-five-figure move-in reserve is realistic for most new homes — more for a larger house. Buyers who spend every dollar getting to closing end up furnishing the new house with debt. Build the reserve into the budget before you shop, not after you're standing in an empty living room.

> Reporting note: The Dare to Compare Workbook includes a move-in cost line for exactly this reason — the cheapest house at contract is not always the cheapest house to actually occupy.

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09. Inspection Guide

Yes, you should inspect a brand-new house. What phase inspections cover, what blue tape means, and what municipal inspections don't do.

Why inspect a new home at all

Municipal inspections verify code minimums, in limited visits, by inspectors covering many sites a day. Code-minimum and defect-free are different standards. New homes routinely have real findings — HVAC ducts never connected, missing insulation, plumbing left untested, flashing errors — that are trivial to fix before drywall and miserable to fix after move-in. An independent inspector works for you, on your schedule, to your standard.

The three-inspection framework

Pre-drywall inspection: after mechanicals, before insulation and drywall. The most valuable inspection you can buy — the only look you will ever get inside the walls. Verifies framing, plumbing, electrical, HVAC, and window flashing while everything is visible and fixable.

Final inspection: before your walkthrough, a full top-to-bottom of the completed home — roof, attic, appliances, systems, drainage, and finish quality. Bring its findings to the builder's walkthrough as your punch list, with documentation.

Eleven-month warranty inspection: one month before the builder's standard one-year workmanship warranty expires, a re-inspection catches everything that settled, cracked, or failed in the first year — while the builder is still obligated to fix it. Widely skipped, consistently worth it.

The blue-tape walkthrough

Before closing, you'll walk the home marking cosmetic defects — chipped tile, paint flaws, scratched glass — with blue tape. Take your time; bring strong light; check every surface, door, drawer, and window. Photograph everything and get the completion commitment in writing. Cosmetic items are dramatically harder to get fixed after you close.

Choosing an inspector

Use a licensed inspector with specific new-construction and phase-inspection experience — inspecting an unfinished house is a different skill than inspecting a resale. Confirm the builder's inspection-access policy before you write the contract (Chapter 4, question 8). A builder that refuses third-party inspections is telling you something.

> Reporting note: Phase inspections on a new build typically cost a few hundred dollars each — among the highest-leverage money in the entire purchase relative to what they can catch.

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10. Understanding Warranties

The 1-2-10 structure, what's actually covered, what voids coverage, and how to file claims that get results.

The standard structure

Most production builders offer a tiered warranty, commonly '1-2-10': one year on workmanship and materials (the broadest coverage — finishes, fit, function), two years on major systems (plumbing, electrical, HVAC distribution), and ten years on major structural elements (typically load-bearing failure, narrowly defined). Read your specific documents — coverage definitions, not marketing labels, control everything.

What surprises people

Appliances aren't covered by the builder — they carry their own manufacturer warranties, which you must register separately. Cosmetic issues are generally only covered if documented at the blue-tape walkthrough. Concrete cracking within stated tolerances, normal settling, caulk shrinkage, and sod survival are usually excluded or time-limited. The ten-year 'structural' coverage is narrower than most buyers assume — it typically covers actual load-bearing failure, not every crack that appears.

What can void or limit coverage

Unpermitted modifications, improper drainage changes (regrading, new beds against the slab), owner-caused damage, and missed maintenance obligations. Warranty documents include a homeowner maintenance list — gutters, caulking, irrigation practices near foundations. In Central Texas clay soils, foundation-watering guidance appears in many warranties, and ignoring it can jeopardize the structural coverage that matters most.

Filing claims that work

Submit in writing, through the official portal or process — phone conversations with a superintendent are not claims. Document with photos and dates. Batch non-urgent items sensibly, but never sit on anything approaching the one-year workmanship deadline: file before the anniversary, because the postmark date matters, not the repair date. Chapter 9's eleven-month inspection exists precisely to feed this deadline.

> Reporting note: Ask whether the warranty is administered by the builder directly or by a third-party warranty company — the claim experience differs meaningfully, and the answer belongs in your builder comparison before you buy, not after.