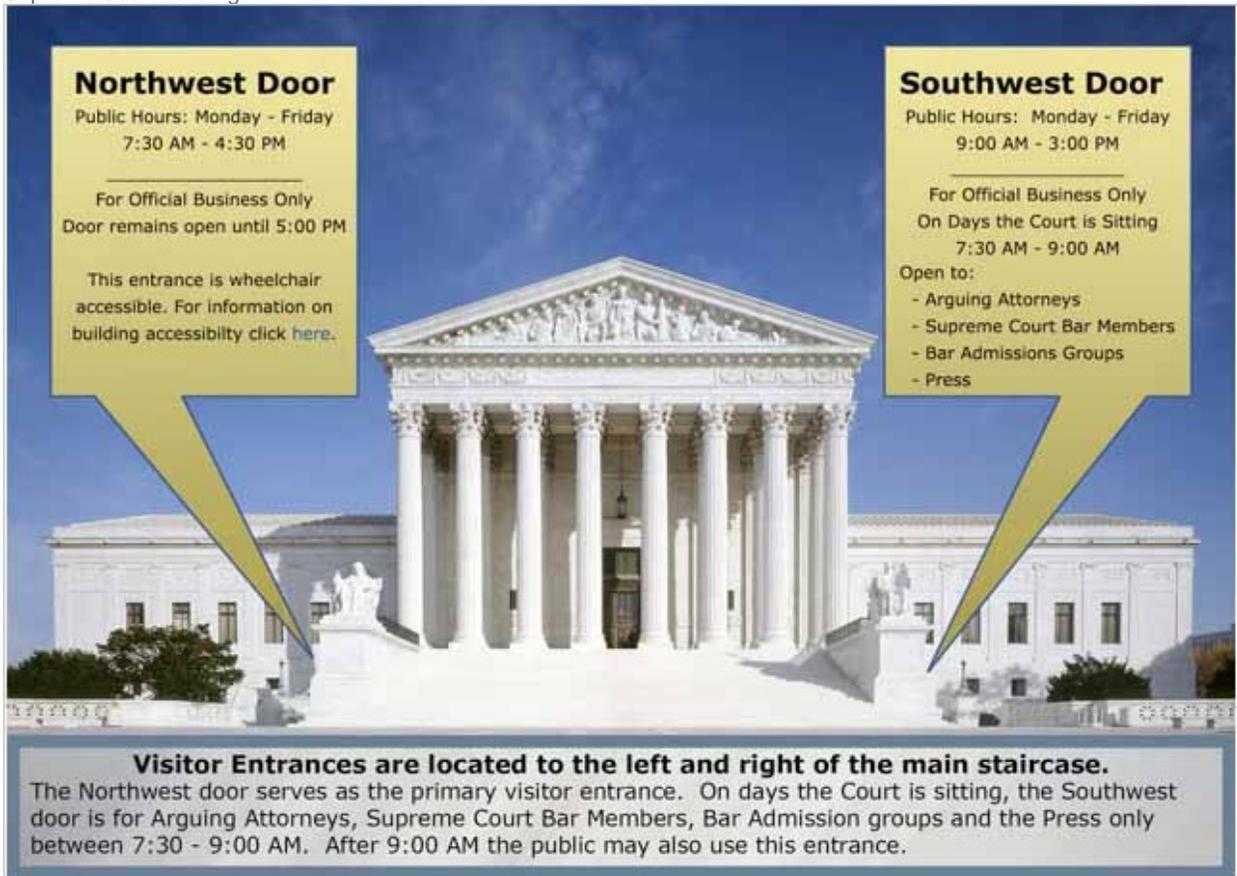




Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

Leina'ala Fruean of Hawaii, on Monday embraced Leon K. Siu after she became the last visitor to the front door at the Supreme Court building.



A photograph on the Supreme Court's Web site shows that visitors may now go to the left or the right, but not to the center.

May 3, 2010

Step Away From the Courthouse Doors

By ADAM LIPTAK

WASHINGTON — In a decision ripe with symbolism about access to justice in the age of terror, the Supreme Court announced on Monday that visitors to its courthouse will no longer be allowed to enter through the front door.

And it is not just any front door. For decades, people with cases before the court, their lawyers and those who just came to see the arguments have climbed the grand steps arrayed in front of the courthouse's marble columns, passed under the inscribed words "Equal Justice Under the Law" and walked through a passage flanked by [two six-ton bronze doors](#) that show historic scenes in the development of the law.

Starting Tuesday, visitors will be directed instead to ground-level side entrances under the stairs that will lead them to what an announcement from the court called "a secure, reinforced area to screen for weapons, explosives, and chemical and biological hazards."

Justice [Stephen G. Breyer](#) issued an unusual [statement](#), joined by Justice [Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#), expressing regret about the court's decision.

"Writers and artists regularly use the steps to represent the ideal that anyone in this country may obtain meaningful justice through application to this court," Justice Breyer wrote. "And the steps appear in countless photographs commemorating famous arguments or other moments of historical importance."

Indeed, on his nomination to the Supreme Court in 2005, [John G. Roberts Jr.](#), now the chief justice of the United States, reflected on his own experiences as a Supreme Court advocate.

"I always got a lump in my throat whenever I walked up those marble steps to argue a case before the court," Judge Roberts [said](#). "And I don't think it was just from the nerves."

In his statement on Monday, Justice Breyer suggested that security concerns did not warrant the closing the front entrance.

"To my knowledge, and I have spoken to numerous jurists and architects worldwide," he said, "no other Supreme Court in the world — including those, such as Israel's, that face security concerns equal to or greater than ours — has closed its main entrance to the public."

Visitors, once screened, will still be allowed to leave through the front door. But the symbolic statement of forbidding entry, Justice Breyer said, was a momentous one. "This court's main entrance and front steps," he wrote, "are not only a means to, but also a metaphor for, access to the court itself."

Mike Sacks, a third-year law student at Georgetown who [tries to attend](#) all of the major arguments, commented on the developments on his blog, [First One @ One First](#).

"For those who line up at the Court for each of its public sessions, this process marks — quite literally — a rite of passage from sidewalk to sacred space," Mr. Sacks wrote. "To deny these men and women this dramatic piece of their pilgrimage is quite mistaken."

Justice Breyer wrote that “the main entrances to numerous other prominent public buildings in America remain open.”

“I thus remain hopeful,” he said, “that, sometime in the future, technological advances, a Congressional appropriation, or the dissipation of the current security risks will enable us to restore the Supreme Court’s main entrance as a symbol of dignified openness and meaningful access to equal justice under the law.”