Border and boundary are two commonly confusing words, as they may seem similar. However, although both are considered edges, semantically, and applied to the context of public and private space in an urban context, they are different from each other, being permeability the main element which distinguishes them.

A boundary is a limit, an impermeable wall that can't be crossed, which is often associated to the idea of restriction. Although it may be interpreted as a negative fact, they are sometimes necessary to separate two opposite realities, such as private from public. Nevertheless, some boundaries could be replaced by a concatenation of borders, which could fade out a much emphasized limit.

On the other hand, a border is a line that separates two things, indicating the junction of two realities, communities... Borders are permeable, porous, allowing a selective exchange between both sides. They often get established by cultural or social rules and are usually identified as a filter. Talking about public space, privacy depth is often achieved by the generation of a series of borders or filters which absorb and buffer those opposite realities, as transition spaces.

Both elements don't need necessarily to be physical, as they also exist as immaterial facts, such as ideas, manners, preconceptions, wishes, fears or feelings. Those realities affect differently according to the each individual, as which is a border for one person can become a boundary for another, or couldn't even exist for someone else.

Although there are many examples, and depending on the context any element could become a border of a boundary, but we commonly find: change of pavements or levels, walls, fences, closed areas, height of buildings, changes on density (from narrow streets to an open area...), steps, building transitions from street to private space, transport infrastructure (highways, tramlines, big roads), and channels or rivers, landforms (valleys, cliffs, hills...), dramatic building typology changes (industry vs housing, rowhousing vs apartment towers...) , neighbourhoods with different social levels, big difference in urban tissues, discontinuities, open fields or natural areas, green elements on urban design (bushes and low vegetation, aligned trees ...).
Favela Sao Paulo

Sao Paulo is a place in which two opposite realities face to each other. There is a physical limit where city of rich people end, and favelas start, but also an immaterial and social border and boundary. Visually, it’s the border that marks out the end of planned city and the spontaneous development. While for poor people, that line means the transition between their lives and the well-being situation, for people who leave in the city center, it represents the end of the city, a limit that they wouldn’t overstep.

Architectural barrier

Our cities are formed by a series of layers and limits: public and private, covered and open air, green and grey… A step can mean a border for a standard pedestrian, a visual reference which highlights the difference between road and sidewalk, while for a disabled pedestrian can mean a border they can’t transgress, difficulting their routines, displacements and lives. The change of texture in materials instead of levels is each time more present in urban design and could help to solve this problem.

Farnsworth House – Mies van der Rohe

In Farnsworth House, Mies van der Rohe designed in a really smart way the transition between exterior and interior as a monumental promenade. Not only marking it, but emphasizing it, putting the house on a pedestal, as the stylobate of the greek temples, by placing an intermediate platform that makes the visitor realize of it, starting to experience the weightlessness of this light platforms that almost don’t touch the floor. Although the materiality of the house almost links directly the inside and the outside, the gesture of elevating it generates a filter which also contributes towards privacy.
REFERENCES


SENNET R., Urban edge conditions.